



Key Changes - Investigator Grants 2021

This document outlines key changes to the Investigator Grant scheme for 2021 in response to feedback from the sector and experience in previous rounds.

Feedback is sought from peer reviewers at the conclusion of each Investigator Grant round and is received from applicants throughout the round. This feedback contributes to a detailed policy analysis to determine whether the new grant program is achieving its objectives and whether any adjustments are required.

For the 2021 round of Investigator Grants, the key changes listed below are intended to clarify NHMRC policy and to provide a more robust and fair peer review of applications.

APPLICATION

Application Period

As previously advised, the application period for Investigator Grants 2021 has been pushed back due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the research sector.

This change has given researchers an extra four months to plan applications. However, it will mean that outcomes from the Investigator Grants 2021 round will not be known prior to submission of applications to the 2021 Ideas or Synergy Grant rounds.

Indicative dates for the 2021 round are at Table 1. Dates for the 2022 round have not yet been decided.

Table 1. Indicative key dates for Investigator Grants 2021.

Activity	Date
Applications open	03 February 2021
Minimum data	17.00 ACT Local Time, 03 March 2021
Applications close	17.00 ACT Local Time, 31 March 2021
Peer reviewer suitability and conflict of interest declarations due	Mid-April 2021
Peer reviewers complete assessments	Late May – Mid-June 2021
Anticipated notification of outcomes under embargo*	August 2021

* Date is indicative and subject to change.



Application Form

It is expected that applications will be submitted in Sapphire for the first time for the Investigator Grant scheme. Information on how to submit applications in Sapphire will be available in the Guide to Applicants Appendix of the Grant Guidelines when the scheme opens.

Researchers are strongly encouraged to start planning their applications early. It is recommended that new users register for a Sapphire account in advance of the opening date to update their profile and become familiar with the system. Information on how to do this is available from the [Sapphire landing page](#) or on the [Sapphire Internet Page](#).

Applicant Category and Level Justification

To ensure researchers are funded across all career stages, applications are separated into three competitions: Emerging Leadership Level 1, Emerging Leadership Level 2 and Leadership (consisting of Levels 1, 2 and 3 combined). Each competition is allocated a separate budget. As application numbers differ across leadership levels, funded rates also differ across these levels.

With two rounds of Investigator Grants now completed, NHMRC consulted Research Committee about the suitability of the scheme's funding framework. One objective of the consultation was to consider the issue that funded rates were lowest for early and mid-career researchers applying to the scheme in 2019 and 2020 ("the squeeze in the middle").

Data reviewed by the Office of NHMRC and Research Committee suggest that many applicants are applying at a lower level than expected based on their research experience. Research Committee recommended that guidance to applicants and peer reviewers on level selection should be strengthened.

Applicants will now be required to provide a justification for their selected Category and Level of Investigator Grant. This applicant justification will be considered by peer reviewers when reviewing an applicant's Track Record relative to opportunity and must be reviewed by the Administering Institution prior to submission of the application to ensure that the level selected aligns with the applicant's career stage (relative to opportunity) and the Statements of Expectations in the Grant Guidelines.

The Statements of Expectations have been revised to assist applicants by including the typical research experience (number of years post-PhD) and academic level expected of applicants at each Investigator Grant level. Applicants should consider the revised Statements of Expectations and apply at a level commensurate with their experience, profile and academic level ([Appendix A](#)).

Recognising the diversity of the sector and the many different settings in which researchers are employed, NHMRC recognises that individuals can achieve academic promotion for a range of reasons unrelated to their research career (e.g. teaching and learning, administration, community engagement). Investigator Grant Levels are not strictly correlated with academic levels. The required justification will support assessment where applicants fall outside the broad benchmarks.



Relative to Opportunity Policy

A revised Relative to Opportunity policy is being trialled for track record assessment in the 2021 Investigator Grant round. It incorporates a new 'Career Context' concept (in lieu of the previous 'Relative to Opportunity' category) and requires all applicants to provide:

- A career context summary describing their individual circumstances and opportunities for research and how these have positively and/or negatively impacted research productivity
- Additional structured information on their career stage, career history, career disruptions and research inactive periods.

This broadened scope is intended to ensure that each applicant's track record and associated productivity are considered in the context of their specific career circumstances, strengthening support for NHMRC's objective that all applicants are assessed relative to opportunity.

The revised policy includes reference to calamities such as pandemics and bushfires, and personal situations such as disability and unemployment.

In recognition of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australia's health and medical research community, all applicants will have the opportunity to outline the effects of the pandemic on their research productivity.

Use of Gender Neutral Language

NHMRC is committed to gender equality in health and medical research. Fostering gender equality in peer review is a strategic objective, underpinned by [NHMRC's Gender Equality Strategy 2018–2021](#).

To support this objective, NHMRC is strongly encouraging the use of gender-neutral language in applications to all its schemes. This means that, wherever possible and appropriate, applicants should avoid the use of words that reveal their gender or the gender of team members. These words include (but are not limited to) her, him, she, he, Mr, Ms, Mrs and Miss, as well as first names and terms such as 'maternity leave'.

This aims to de-emphasise gender in the assessment of grant applications and reduce the potential impact of unconscious gender bias.



PEER REVIEW

Peer Review Mentors

Peer Review Mentors will be appointed in 2021 to replace the role of Chairs. Mentors will assist with peer reviewer training prior to commencement of assessments and will be available to provide one-on-one mentoring to peer reviewers during the assessment phase. Like the role of previous Chairs, Mentor advice will focus primarily on effective peer review process. They will not discuss matters relating to the scientific (or other) merits of specific applications.

Application-Centric Peer Review

Investigator Grant peer review is planning to move to an “application-centric” model for the 2021 round. Each application will be allocated to the five ‘best fit’ independent peer reviewers based on their conflict of interest and suitability declarations. NHMRC anticipates this change will improve peer reviewer suitability for assigned applications, providing a more robust and fair peer review.

As in 2020, each peer reviewer will be asked to review approximately 30 applications and to provide brief written comments.

Review of Applicant Category and Level Justification

For the 2021 round of Investigator Grants, applicants will provide a justification for their selected Category and Level of Investigator Grant as part of their application. Peer reviewers are to take this justification into consideration when reviewing applicant Track Record relative to opportunity.

This justification will assist reviewers in benchmarking applications by ensuring applicants have selected the appropriate Category and Level of grant commensurate with their experience, profile and academic level.

Use of Gender Neutral Language

In addition to advising applicants to use gender-neutral language, NHMRC also encourages peer reviewers to use gender-neutral language in the assessment of applications. In their written feedback, peer reviewers will be advised to avoid the use of gendered pronouns, first names or gendered nouns (e.g. use ‘parental’ leave instead of ‘maternity/paternity’ leave). The use of gender-neutral language in applications does not form part of the assessment criteria and therefore should not influence the scoring of applications. Where gender dimensions are important for the research being proposed, applicants are advised they should be included in the application.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This factsheet should be read in conjunction with the following documents that will all be made available when the round opens:

- Investigator Grants 2021 Guidelines ([GrantConnect](#))
- [Investigator Grants 2021 Peer Review Guidelines](#) (NHMRC website)
- Key Characteristics of Investigator Grant Applications ([GrantConnect](#))

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Statements of Expectations



Appendix A: Statements of Expectations

The following *Statements of Expectations* describe the typical research experience and academic level expected at each Investigator Grant Level, and are to be used as a guide for applicants when selecting the Category and Level of their Investigator Grant application.

All applicants are required to provide a justification of the selected Category and Level in the application form.

NHMRC expects that applicants will apply at an appropriate Level to help achieve parity and fairness for all Investigator Grant applicants.

Recognising the diversity of the sector and the many different settings in which researchers are employed, NHMRC recognises that individuals can achieve academic promotion for a range of reasons unrelated to their research career (e.g. teaching and learning, administration, community engagement). Investigator Grant Levels are not strictly correlated with academic levels. The required justification will support assessment where applicants fall outside the broad benchmarks.

Peer reviewers will consider this justification when assessing an applicant's track record relative to opportunity.

Applicants who have previously held an NHMRC Fellowship or Investigator Grant are expected to apply at a Level commensurate with their previous or currently held Fellowships, factoring in the career progression that those grants support. Applicants are reminded that previous NHMRC Fellowships or Investigator Grants held affect eligibility to apply at some Investigator Grant Levels. Applicants who have never received an NHMRC Fellowship or Investigator Grant should refer to these expectations and apply at a Level commensurate with their experience and profile.

The descriptors provide a broad benchmark and it is not essential that all elements be met.

Leadership Level 3 (L3)

It is expected that L3 Investigator Grant recipients will typically be more than **20 years post-PhD** (or equivalent) and appointable at **Academic Level E**, and be leading international authorities in their research area with demonstrated:

- significant original contributions of major importance that have had a positive impact on health and medical research, the health system, economy and/or the health of the population
- experience in leading a major independent research program(s) involving national and international collaborative networks
- national and international contributions through leadership in their scientific discipline (e.g. in research policy and on advisory committees)
- extensive supervision, mentoring and promotion of early and mid-career researchers
- significant leadership roles within their department, centre, institution or organisation, that extend beyond their research.



Leadership Level 2 (L2)

It is expected that L2 Investigator Grant recipients will typically be between **15 and 20 years post-PhD** (or equivalent) and appointable at **Academic Level D or E (or equivalent)**, and be leading national and rising international authorities in their research area with demonstrated:

- substantial and original contributions that are of major benefit to health and medical research, the health system, economy and/or the health of the population
- experience in leading an independent research program(s) involving national collaborative networks
- national and possibly international contributions to their scientific discipline (e.g. research advisory boards, peer review)
- supervision, mentoring and promotion of early and mid-career researchers
- leadership roles within their department, centre, institution or organisation that extend beyond their research.

Leadership Level 1 (L1)

It is expected that L1 Investigator Grant recipients will typically be between **10 and 15 years post-PhD** (or equivalent), and appointable at **Academic Level C or D (or equivalent)** and be national authorities in their research area with demonstrated:

- original contributions that are of major benefit to health and medical research, the health system, economy and/or the health of the population
- ability to independently conceive and direct research programs, coordinate a team of researchers and generate national collaborations
- national contributions to their scientific discipline (e.g. public advocacy, peer review, research advisory boards or professional societies)
- supervision, mentoring and promotion of early and mid-career researchers
- contribution(s) within their department, centre, institute or organisation that extend beyond their research e.g. membership of regulatory or management committees.

Emerging Leadership Level 2 (EL2)

It is expected that EL2 Investigator Grant recipients will typically be between **5 and 10 years post-PhD** (or equivalent), and be appointable at **Academic Level B (or equivalent)**, and be recognised for their expertise in their research area with demonstrated:

- original contributions of influence in their field of expertise
- ability to contribute to the conception and direction of research projects, while developing independence
- experience in supervising a small research team
- national contributions to their scientific discipline (e.g. public advocacy, community leadership, peer review and professional societies)
- contributions within their department, centre, institution or organisation e.g. organising journal clubs, seminar series etc.

It is also expected that Emerging Leadership applicants will be working within a larger team under the mentorship of more senior researchers.



Emerging Leadership Level 1 (EL1)

It is expected that EL1 Investigator Grant recipients will typically be between **0 and 5 years post-PhD (or equivalent)** and will be beginning to gain recognition in their research area with demonstrated:

- original contribution(s) in their field of expertise
- ability to contribute to the conception of research projects
- scientific contributions within their region, state or territory (e.g. community leadership, state level contribution to a professional society)
- limited but developing supervision of research staff and students
- contributions within their department, centre, institution or organisation e.g. organising journal clubs, seminar series etc.

It is also expected that Emerging Leadership applicants will be working within a larger team under the mentorship of more senior researchers.