



Australian Government

National Health and Medical Research Council

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# Understanding the key changes to the Investigator Grants 2021

Pru Glasson  
Director, Investigator Grants Section



# NHMRC's grant program (from 2019)

Investigator Grants	Synergy Grants	Ideas Grants	Strategic and leveraging grants
Support the research program of outstanding investigators at all career stages	Support outstanding multidisciplinary teams to work together to answer major questions that cannot be answered by a single investigator	Support innovative research projects addressing a specific question	Research that responds to national priorities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centres of Research Excellence</li> <li>• Partnership Projects</li> <li>• Development Grants</li> <li>• Targeted Calls for Research</li> <li>• International schemes</li> <li>• Clinical Trials and Cohort Studies Grants</li> </ul>
Salary + research support package (5 yr)	Research costs (\$5 million over 5 yr)	Research costs	Research costs
One per investigator*	One per investigator*	Two per investigator*	No caps

\* Researchers may hold one Investigator Grant or up to two Ideas Grants

# Funded rates for major schemes in 2019 (2020)

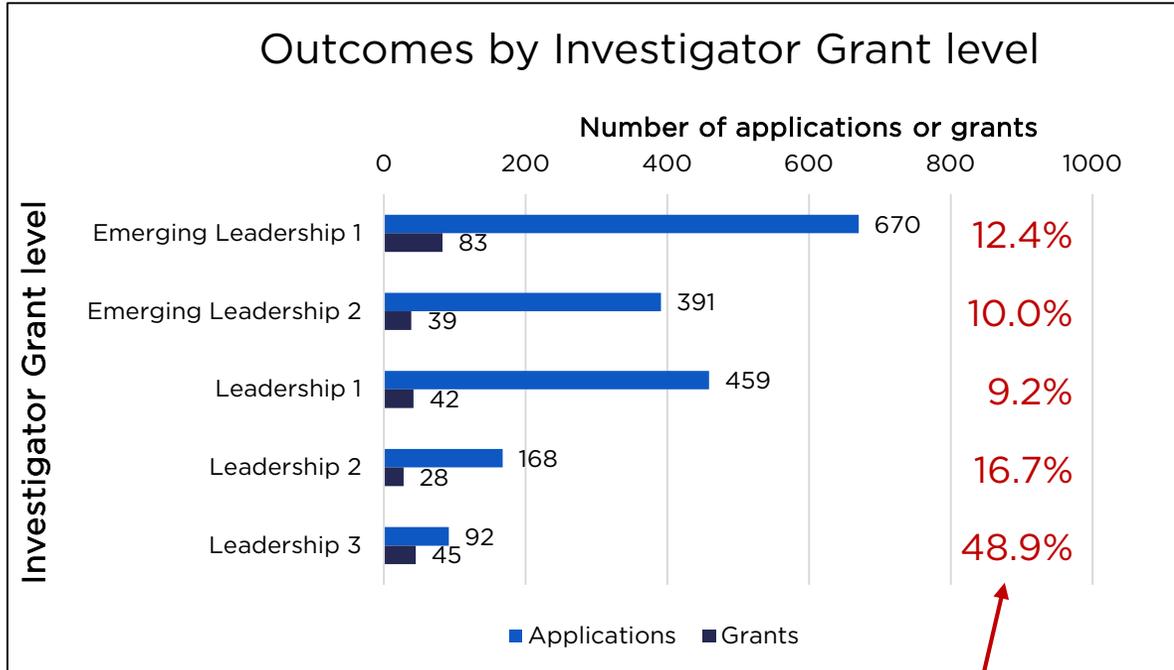
Scheme	Number of applications	Number funded	Funded rate	Total value
Investigator Grants	1857 1780	246 237	13.2% 13.3%	\$365,873,457 \$367,475,145
Synergy Grants	64	10	15.6%	\$50,000,000
Ideas Grants	2651 2995	294 283	11.1% 9.8%	\$241,744,094 \$259,722,563
Clinical Trials & Cohort Studies Grants	570 436	31	5.4%	\$74,534,045
Centres of Research Excellence	85 74	15 14	17.6% 18.9%	\$37,404,469 \$35,000,000
Development Grants	95 102	19 18	20.0% 17.6%	\$14,648,895 \$14,978,660
Partnership Projects: three calls*	64 80	35	54.7%	\$33,058,095
Postgraduate Scholarships	211 219	69 64	32.7% 29.2%	\$7,173,973 \$6,872,519

Total request in 2019: ~\$7.8 billion for ~\$850 million budget

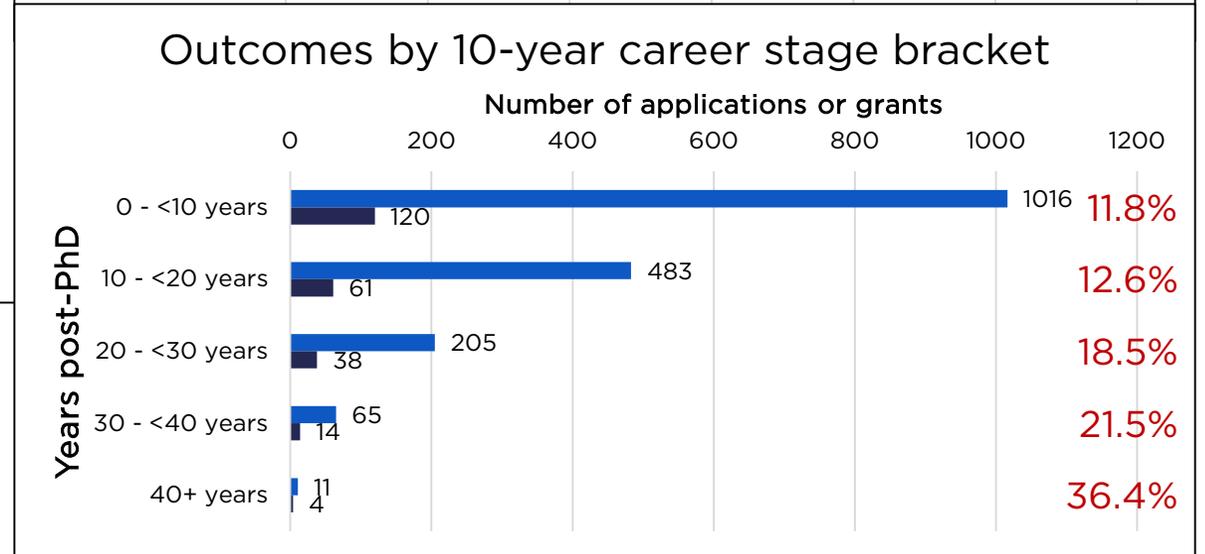
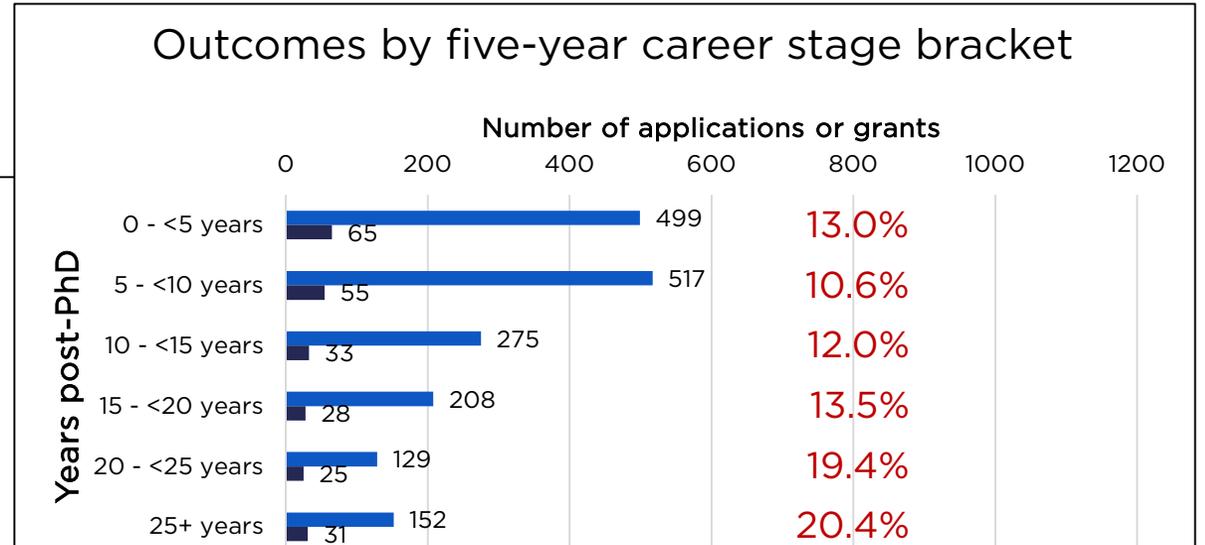
# Investigator Grant funding framework

- Investigator Grants are funded as three competitions with their own budgets (EL1, EL2 and Leadership).
- The three budgets were based on the historical distribution of funds across the former Fellowship schemes, adjusted for policy changes.
- With two rounds completed, we formed a Working Group of Research Committee to advise on funding framework, especially across career stages.
- Outcomes were considered at October 2020 Research Committee meeting.
- Research Committee advised:
  - Key issue is applicants applying at levels below their experience (esp. L1)
  - Strengthen guidance to applicants and peer reviewers
  - Concern about unintended consequences if change framework – monitor, review.

# Investigator Grant outcomes in 2020



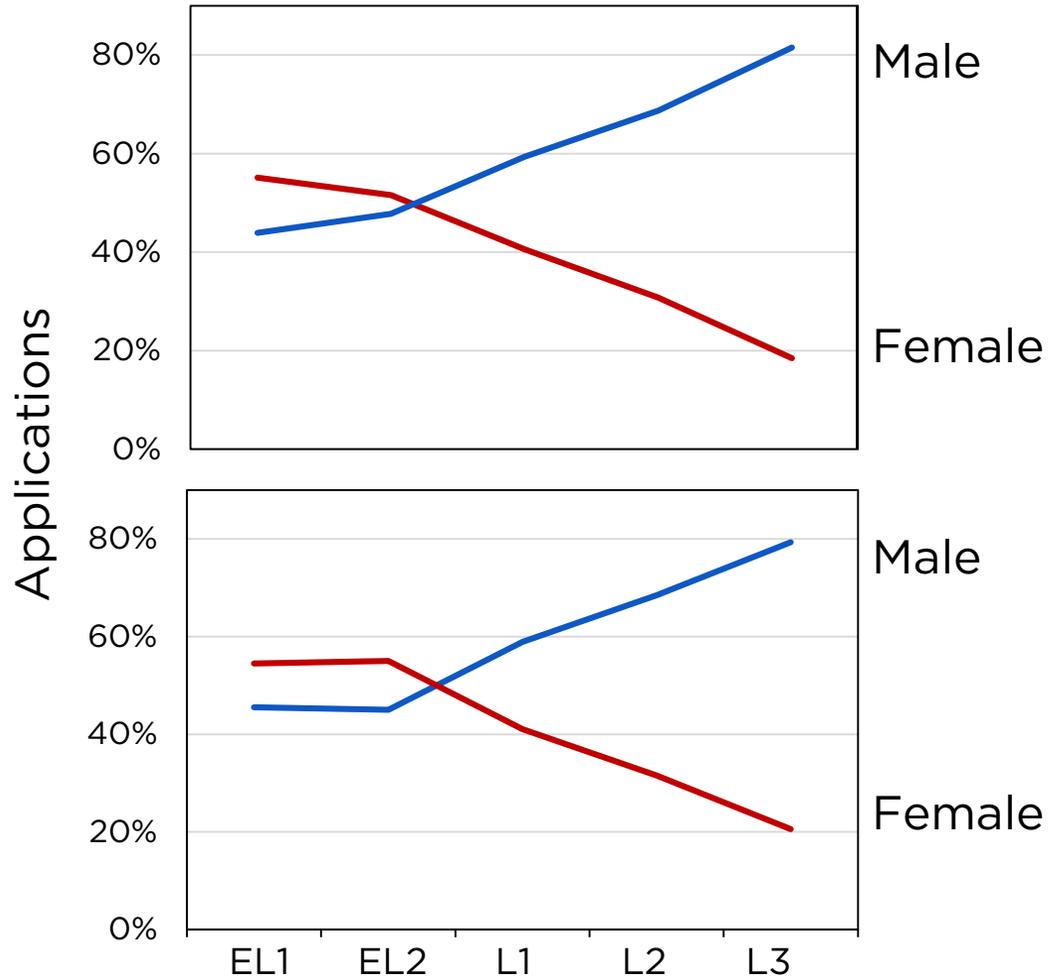
Funded rate



NB. Data are provisional only. Years post-PhD not adjusted for career disruption

# Investigator Grant outcomes by gender

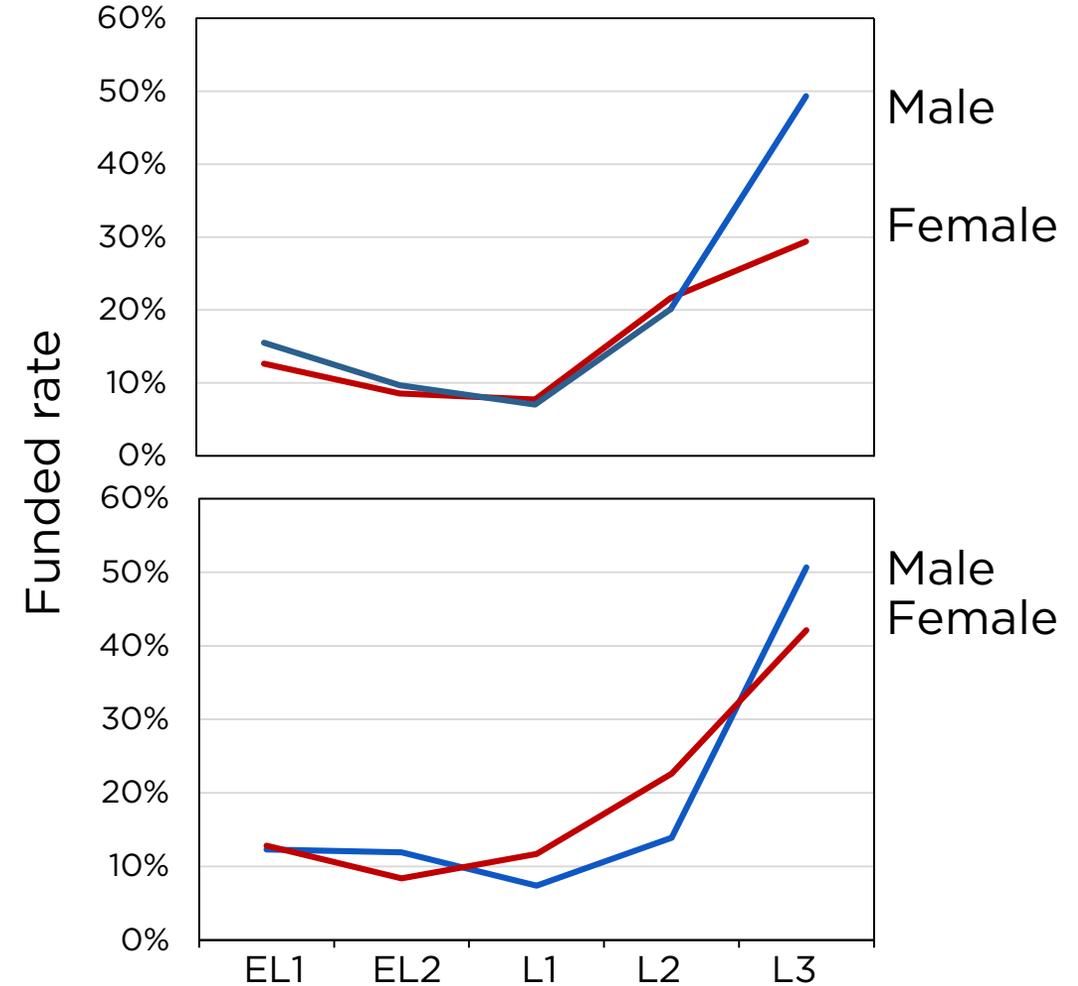
Application numbers



2019

2020

Funded rates



# Changes to NHMRC grant program for 2021

- Investigator Grants (open - min data due 3 March) (see *Key Changes factsheet*)
  - Changed application period for Investigator Grants 2021
  - Applicant Category and Level Justification
  - Revised Relative to Opportunity policy (including career context)
  - Application-centric peer review
  - Encouraged use of Gender Neutral Language
  - Peer Review Mentors
- Changed application period for Clinical Trials and Cohort Studies 2020 and 2021
- Synergy Grants (open - min data due 24 March) - additional funding
- Ideas Grants - opening 10 March

# Applicant Category and Level Justification

- All applicants now required to provide a justification for the selected Category and Level of Investigator Grant.
- NHMRC expects that applicants will apply at an appropriate Level to help achieve parity and fairness for all Investigator Grant applicants.
- The SoEs 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.
- The SoEs are not eligibility requirements, however all eligibility requirements outlined within the Guidelines will apply (e.g. you must be less than 10 years post-PhD (including career disruptions) to apply for an EL)
- This will be considered by peer reviewers when reviewing an applicants Track Record, relative to opportunity
- Refer to the Statements of Expectations at Appendix D of the Guidelines for information on the requirements

# Applicant Category and Level Justification Cont.

- Applicants will need to use the new 'level justification' field within the application form to explain why they have applied at their selected level, particularly if their application level seems incongruous with the SoEs overall, including their years post-PhD and/or their academic level.
- This justification will also support assessment where applicants fall outside the broad benchmarks.
- When determining which level to select, NHMRC has not prescribed whether the academic level or years post-PhD should be weighted more heavily.
- It is recommended that these factors are considered on balance by applicants and peer reviewers, along with the rest of the descriptors within the SoEs, and a judgement made about which level is best fit.

# NHMRC's Relative to Opportunity Policy – Clarification

- Two elements:
  - *Career Disruption*: account for career breaks of  $\geq 90$  days FTE due to pregnancy, illness/injury or carer responsibilities for eligibility and track record assessment
  - *Relative to Opportunity*: consider other circumstances that might have affected research productivity for track record assessment.
- 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 via the relative to opportunity statements.
- Further information Section 5.8.3 of Appendix H

# NHMRC's Relative to Opportunity Policy Investigator Grants Pilot

- 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.

# Career Context Summary

- Refer to section 5.8.3 and the **examples** provided in Appendix H(i) of the Guide to Applicants in the grant guidelines.
  - › Example 4: Researcher impacted by COVID-19
- Keep it positive
- Keep it factual
- Provide specific information, don't be vague
  - Due to restrictions imposed by [specify the jurisdiction applying the restrictions] in response to the pandemic, my organisation's research laboratories in [specify location] were closed between X and Y dates.'
  - 'Between X and Y dates I have needed to spend approximately four hours per day helping my seven year old child with their schooling'.
- Put on the peer reviewer's glasses
- Do not:
  - › include formal Career Disruption claims - they are covered separately in the Career Disruption section
  - › Provide evidence of research outcomes/output - they are covered separately in Track Record
  - › Provide sensitive/confidential details

# Investigator Grants 2020: high-scoring applications

- Followed applicant guidance correctly
- Clear evidence of upward career trajectory
- Used tangible examples to illustrate impact of past research
- Strong statements for top five publications
- Proposed a program of research, not disparate projects
- Clear statements on how proposed research is a progression from current activities
- Limited use of jargon/discipline-specific terminology

# Investigator Grants 2020: low-scoring applications

- Application was poorly constructed or poorly written
- Did not follow instructions in applicant guidance
- Fewer publications than expected relative to opportunity and career disruptions
- Did not effectively convey significance and impact of top five publications
- Did not correctly address the impact criteria, e.g.
  - nominating findings or papers as impact, rather than change resulting from that knowledge
  - poorly articulated or evidenced claims of significance, reach or contribution
  - excessive repetition across sub-criteria
- No cohesive outline of 5-year research program – did not demonstrate new knowledge to be gained or progression from current activities
- Research outcomes poorly defined

# NHMRC's grant program – general advice for applicants

- Remember the purpose of NHMRC funding
- Obtain user accounts for GrantConnect and Sapphire
- Read the Guidelines for Applicants and the Peer Review Guidelines
- Weekly FAQs!
- Learn about research quality and integrity
- Participate in peer review
- Seek advice from mentors, colleagues and your RAO
  - Understand the purpose of each scheme and the assessment criteria
  - Understand the eligibility criteria and capping rules
  - Understand the competition
  - Think like a reviewer



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**Thank you**

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