



Victorian Cardiovascular Research Network



NSW Cardiovascular Research Network



Queensland Cardiovascular Research Network



South Australian Cardiovascular Research Network



Heart Foundation

Joint submission to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) regarding the proposed updates to the Investigator Grant eligibility

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Preamble

Since the inception of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Investigator Grant scheme, Emerging Leadership (EL) fellowships have been specifically available for Early- and Mid-Career Researchers (EMCRs) who are within 10 years post-PhD. On 6 Nov 2024, the NHMRC announced a [proposal](#) to change the EL eligibility criteria of the Investigator Grant scheme to no longer require applicants to be ≤10-years post-PhD pass date (taking into consideration career disruptions) at the time of applying for an EL1/EL2 fellowship.

In solidarity as a consortium of leading EMCR Committees and Funders for cardiovascular disease research, we submit the following open and joint response to highlight our major concerns with this proposed change.

Research funding for EMCRs is already insufficient to meet the workforce needs

The [2024 Australian Health and Medical Research Workforce audit](#) suggests that EMCRs (within 10 years post-PhD) comprise the largest portion (45%) of the entire health and medical research workforce. However, funding success rates for EL1/EL2 investigator grants are **insufficient to meet this workforce demand** (Fig 1).

If EL applicants had the same funding success rate as Leadership applicants, we estimate that an **additional 153 EMCRs** would have received Investigator Grant fellowships between 2019 and 2024 (average of ≈25 extra per year).

The NHMRC's proposal to remove the 10 year post-PhD requirement for applicants of the EL1/EL2 category of the Investigator Grant scheme stands to **further reduce funding opportunities** specifically targeted for EMCRs.

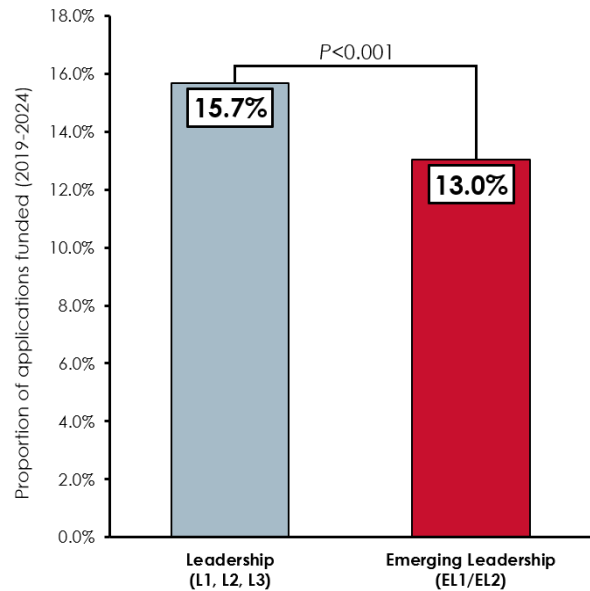


Fig 1. Investigator Grant funding success rates (2019-2024), by Level of Applicant

Insufficient EMCR funding is contributing to career instability, low employment satisfaction, and poor workforce retention

A stable academic postdoctoral position is viewed by many as [almost impossible](#) to attain. Data from the [2024 Australian Health and Medical Research Workforce audit](#) supports this sentiment, with 47% of postdoctoral fellows indicating that they left research at one point over the past 5 years, and only 34% remained in traditional academic research at the time of survey completion.

Low research funding for EMCRs is a key driver of [poor workforce culture](#) and [low job satisfaction](#), which contributes to [poor workforce retention](#) in the cardiovascular disease research sector. To overcome these system-wide issues, [greater investment](#) in funding specifically for EMCRs is needed. The proposal to remove the 10-year post-PhD requirement for EL investigator grants may widen these funding gaps for EMCRs and compound existing workforce sustainability issues.



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This proposed change may widen inequity gaps in funding for EMCRs

Currently, the NHMRC allows applications from researchers beyond 10 years post-PhD who have evidence of career disruption due to pregnancy, illness/injury and/or carer responsibilities. We acknowledge the challenges and burden facing EMCRs with career disruptions due to other reasons (e.g. post-PhD employment in industry, non-academic roles, or teaching/clinical commitments). However, removing the requirement for EL applicants to be within 10 years post-PhD will not address these systemic issues. There are concerns that this change may lead to a situation where EMCRs are competing for funds against a greater proportion of applicants who are beyond 10 years post-PhD, and possibly holding more senior research positions (e.g. Associate Professor and Professor).

Evidence and consultation to support this proposed change is lacking

It is unclear whether this proposal was informed from rigorous consultations with peak EMCR groups to ensure it adequately represents the views, opinions, and needs of the wider EMCR community. In the evidence provided by the NHMRC ([Appendix C](#)), it is argued that researchers will continue to apply for funding in their appropriate level after removing the current eligibility requirement for EL applicants to be within 10 years post-PhD. Unfortunately, this cannot be guaranteed, and removing this condition will likely increase 'gaming' of the system, whereby researchers may apply 'down' a category for improved funding success.

We urge the NHMRC — our largest national public funder of research — to re-consider this proposed change

To ensure continued opportunities for EMCRs, we urge the NHMRC to re-consider their proposal to remove the current 10-years post-PhD eligibility requirement of EL1/EL2 applicants.

We acknowledge the difficulties with the current eligibility framework in determining the eligibility of EL1/EL2 applicants with career disruptions. Rather than removing this hard requirement of applicants to be within 10 years for EL1/EL2 Investigator Grants, the NHMRC could consider adopting one (or all) of the following alternatives:

1. Introduce a **new EL3 category** to allow applications from researchers who are within 15 years post-PhD, in line with other fellowship schemes (e.g. Heart Foundation Future Leader Fellowship)
2. **Exclude** applications from **Professors** in the EL1/EL2 category
3. Improve the current mechanisms by which researchers can claim career disruption

As a united voice of EMCRs in the cardiovascular research sector, we call on the NHMRC to reconsider this proposal to ensure continued funding support specifically for EMCRs – the life blood, beating heart, and future of the Australian research workforce.

Submission prepared by the following working group members:

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