

# Targeted Call for Research: Improving health of people with intellectual disability 2021 Peer Review Guidelines

<b>Opening date:</b>	20 October 2021
<b>Closing date and time:</b>	5.00pm ACT local time on 15 December 2021
<b>Commonwealth policy entity:</b>	National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) is responsible for managing the Australian Government's investment in health and medical research in a manner consistent with Commonwealth legislation, guidelines and policies. NHMRC has a responsibility to ensure taxpayers' funds are invested appropriately to support the best health and medical research. Expert peer review assists us in fulfilling this responsibility.

This guide outlines the overarching principles and obligations under which the 2021 Targeted Call for Research: Improving health of people with intellectual disability (IHPID TCR) peer review process operates, including:

- obligations in accordance with legislation, guidelines and policies
- how to disclose interests and manage conflicts, and
- standards and best practice for the conduct of peer review.

NHMRC will publicly notify the sector of any change in peer review process via its communications, such as through NHMRC's website and newsletters.

This guide should be read in conjunction with the:

- 2021 IHPID TCR Grant Guidelines, available on [GrantConnect](#), which set out the rules, objectives and other considerations relevant to NHMRC funding.
- [Policy on the Disclosure of Interests requirements for prospective and appointed NHMRC committee members](#) (Section 39 Committees). This Policy outlines peer reviewers' responsibilities in order to ensure all disclosures of interests are addressed in a rigorous and transparent way throughout the period of a peer reviewer's participation in NHMRC Committees.

## 2 KEY CHANGES

NHMRC recognises the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australia's health and medical research community and has updated assessment processes to reflect these impacts.

Peer reviewers must follow these updated processes:

- In track record assessment, peer reviewers must consider COVID-19 related circumstances, as outlined by applicants, as part of career disruptions or other relative to opportunity considerations under the provisions of NHMRC's Relative to Opportunity Policy.
- Peer reviewers should note that applicants have been advised that they may include information on any potential significant and long term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their proposed research, and proposals for managing such risks, as part of their research risk management plan within the grant proposal.
- Peer reviewers are not to let the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the proposed research affect the assessment of the research proposal of an application (e.g. the feasibility of accessing certain patient or population groups with social distancing restrictions in place).
- Peer reviewers must note that changes to the research proposal of a funded application, necessitated by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. the commencement of a project needs to be delayed by six months until COVID-19 restrictions are eased) will be considered through NHMRC's Postaward management and grant variations processes. Such considerations do not form part of the peer review assessment of the proposal, particularly given that the long term impacts of the pandemic are still unknown.

Peer reviewers should note the following significant changes for the 2021 IHPID TCR grant opportunity:

- Revised NHMRC Relative to Opportunity Policy (Appendix H) – The Policy has been revised by categorising and updating reference to Relative to Opportunity circumstances typically considered during

peer review, including disability, illness and unemployment (noting that applicants can nominate any circumstance impacting productivity).

### 3 PRINCIPLES, CONDUCT AND OBLIGATIONS DURING PEER REVIEW

The peer review process requires all applications to be reviewed by individuals with appropriate expertise. This carries an obligation on the part of peer reviewers to act in good faith, in the best interests of NHMRC and the research community and in accordance with NHMRC policies (outlined below).

#### 3.1 NHMRC's Principles of Peer Review

NHMRC's Principles of Peer Review (the Principles) are high-level, guiding statements that underpin all NHMRC's peer review processes, and include:

- **Fairness.** Peer review processes are fair and seen to be fair by all.
- **Transparency.** Applies to all stages of peer review.
- **Independence.** Peer reviewers provide independent advice. There is also independent oversight of peer review processes by independent Chairs and Observers.
- **Appropriateness and balance.** There is appropriate experience, expertise and representation of peer reviewers assessing applications.
- **Research community participation.** Persons holding taxpayer-funded grants should willingly make themselves available to participate in peer review processes, whenever possible, in accordance with the obligations in the Funding Agreement.
- **Confidentiality.** Participants respect that confidentiality is important to the fairness and robustness of peer review.
- **Impartiality.** Peer review is objective and impartial, with appropriate processes in place to manage disclosures of interest.
- **Quality and excellence.** NHMRC will continue to introduce evidence-based improvements into its processes to achieve the highest quality decision-making through peer review.

Additional details underpinning the Principles can be found at [Appendix A](#).

#### 3.2 The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research

The [Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research](#) (the Code) requires researchers participating in peer review do so in a way that is 'fair, rigorous and timely and maintains the confidentiality of the content'.

The Code is supported by additional supplementary guidance, including [Peer Review: A guide supporting the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research](#).

#### 3.3 Disclosures of Interest

##### 3.3.1 What is an interest?

NHMRC is committed to ensuring that interests of any kind are dealt with consistently, transparently and with rigour, in accordance with sections 16A and 16B of the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Rule 2014* (made under the subsection 29(2) of the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Rule 2013* (PGPA Act)).

In particular, under section 29 of the PGPA Act, "an official of a Commonwealth entity who has a material personal interest that relates to the affairs of the entity must disclose details of the interest". This obligation is ongoing and not limited to a particular point in time.

For the purposes of this document, the terms "material personal interest" and "interest" are regarded as interchangeable and whilst the term "interest/s" has been used for ease of reading, this policy includes guidance on each.

### 3.3.2 What is a Conflict of Interest (Col)?

A Col exists when there is a divergence between professional responsibilities (as a peer reviewer) and personal interests. Such conflicts have the potential to lead to biased advice affecting objectivity and impartiality. By managing any conflict, NHMRC maintains the integrity of its processes in the assessment of scientific and technical merit of the application.

For NHMRC peer review purposes, interests may fall into the broad domains of:

- Involvement with the application under review
- Working relationships
- Professional relationships and associations
- Social relationships or associations
- Collaborations
- Teaching or supervisory relationships
- Financial relationships or interests
- Other relevant interests or relationships

For further information, peer reviewers should consult the NHMRC [Policy on the Disclosure of Interests Requirements for Prospective and Appointed NHMRC Committee Members](#) (Section 39 Committees).

Researchers frequently have a Col that cannot be avoided. Decision making processes in research often need expert advice, and the pool of experts in a field can be so small that all the experts have some link with the matter under consideration. An individual researcher should therefore expect to be conflicted from time to time, be ready to acknowledge the conflict and make disclosures as appropriate.

An outline of potential Col situations and guidance is provided for peer reviewers at [Appendix B](#).

### 3.3.3 Disclosure of Interests in the Peer Review Process

Peer reviewers must identify and disclose interests they may have with any of the Chief Investigators (CIs) and Associate Investigators (AIs) on applications they will be reviewing. After appointment as a peer reviewer, but before assessing any applications, peer reviewers are required to disclose their interests in writing. While interests must be disclosed at the beginning of the peer review process, new or previously unrecognised interests must be disclosed at any stage of the peer review process. Declarations must include details that substantiate when collaborations occurred (i.e. month and year). NHMRC will use these details to verify and determine the level of conflict. Any peer reviewer who has an interest that is determined by NHMRC to be a 'high' Col will not be able to participate in the review of that application. However, they can provide scientific advice at the request of the Chair or NHMRC.

### 3.3.4 Failure to disclose an interest

A failure to disclose an interest without a reasonable excuse will result in the termination of the peer reviewer's appointment under section 44B of the NHMRC Act (section 44B also covers failure to comply with section 29 of the PGPA Act).

It is important for peer reviewers to inform NHMRC of any circumstances which may constitute an interest, at any point during the peer review process. Accordingly, peer reviewers are encouraged to consult the secretariat if they are uncertain about any disclosure of interest matter.

## 3.4 Freedom of Information (Fol)

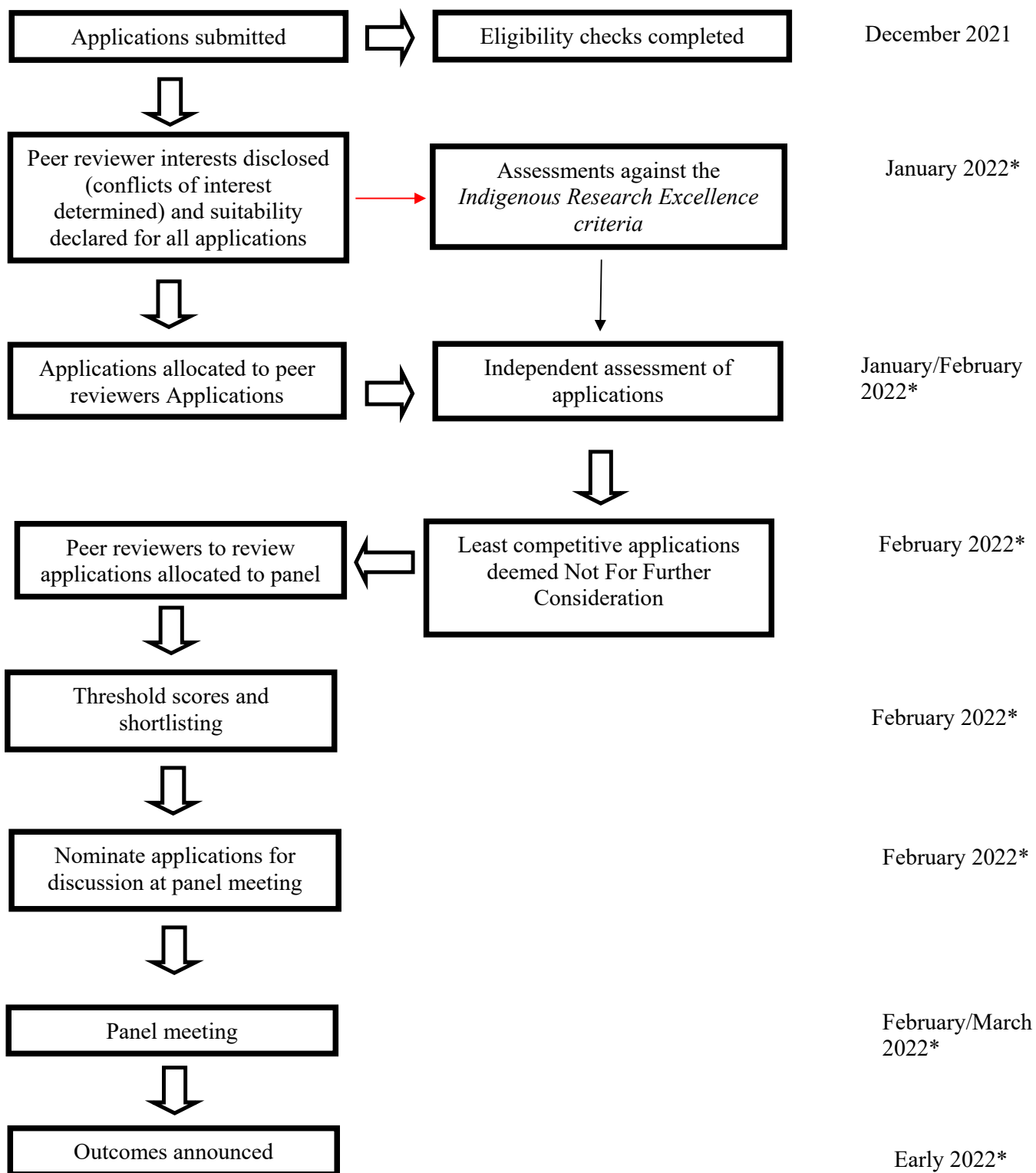
NHMRC is subject to the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* which provides a statutory right for an individual to seek access to documents. If documents that deal with peer review fall within the scope of a request, the Fol process includes consultation and exemptions. NHMRC endeavours to protect the identity of peer reviewers assigned to a particular application.

## 3.5 Complaints

NHMRC deals with any complaints, objections and requests for clarification on the peer review process. NHMRC may contact peer reviewers and/or Chairs involved to obtain additional information on particular application/s. Further information about the NHMRC complaints process can be found on the [NHMRC website](#).

## 4 2021 IHPID TCR PEER REVIEW PROCESS

### 4.1 Overview of the 2021 IHPID TCR peer review process



\*Dates are indicative

<b>Date*</b>	<b>Activity</b>
15 Dec 2021	Deadline for 2021 IHPID TCR application submission
Dec 2021	Application eligibility review and confirmation
Jan 2022	Peer reviewers disclose interests and suitability against applications
Jan /Feb 2022	Assessments against the <i>Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria</i> /external assessments/other assessments obtained
Jan /Feb 2022	Allocation of applications to peer reviewers
Feb 2022	Peer reviewers review applications and submit scores against 2021 IHPID TCR assessment criteria for each allocated application
March 2022	Panel meeting
Early 2022	Notification of outcomes*

\*Date is indicative and subject to change.

Further information on the steps outlined in this process is provided in section 4.3 *Reviewing 2021 IHPID TCR applications*.

## 4.2 Roles and responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of those participating in the 2021 IHPID TCR peer review process are identified in the table below.

**2021 IHPID TCR Peer Review Participants Table**

<b>Roles</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
<b>Chair</b>	<p>The Chair's role is to ensure NHMRC's procedures are adhered to and that fair and equitable consideration is given to every application being discussed at the panel meeting.</p> <p>Chairs do not assess applications but manage the process of peer review in accordance with this Guide.</p> <p>Prior to the panel meeting Chairs need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• familiarise themselves with this document and other material as identified by NHMRC staff</li> <li>• identify and advise NHMRC of all interests they have with applications assigned to their panel, and</li> <li>• familiarise themselves with ALL the applications assigned to their panel, excluding those for which they have been determined to have a high Col.</li> <li>• assist peer reviewers with their duties and in understanding what is expected of them</li> </ul> <p>During the panel meeting Chairs will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• take appropriate action for each Col</li> <li>• keep discussions on time and focused</li> <li>• ensure NHMRC procedures are followed</li> <li>• promote good engagement by peer reviewers in all discussions</li> <li>• ensure that all peer reviewers consider 'relative to opportunity', including career disruptions, when discussing applications</li> <li>• ensure that any discussion and assessment is based on the 2021 IHPID TCR assessment criteria and associated category descriptors</li> </ul>



	<p><u>(Appendices C and D).</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ensure the panel consistently considers the assessment against the <i>Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria</i> for applications with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health focus</li> <li>ensure peer reviewers are satisfied with the consistency and appropriateness of discussions for each application</li> <li>record and notify NHMRC of any requests for clarification or advice, and</li> <li>approve Meeting Attendance Record sheets.</li> </ul> <p>Chairs may need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>fulfil the duties and responsibilities of a peer reviewer where required (e.g. to meet quorum requirements of the panel when assessing particular applications) – in such an instance a substitute Chair will be identified for relevant applications.</li> </ul>
<b>Assistant Chair</b>	<p>Prior to the panel meeting Assistant Chairs need to :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>familiarise themselves with this document and other material as identified by NHMRC staff</li> <li>identify and advise NHMRC of all interests they may have with applications to be reviewed by the panel</li> <li>familiarise themselves with all applications being considered by the panel.</li> </ul> <p>During the panel meeting Assistant Chairs will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>note the strengths and weaknesses of the application while discussion by the panel is underway</li> <li>record budget changes and panel justification for adjusting the proposed budgets</li> <li>ensure that budget discussions are consistent for all applications and inform the Chair if inconsistencies arise</li> <li>act as Chair for applications where the Chair is unavailable or has a Col</li> <li>fulfil the duties and responsibilities of a panel member where required (e.g. to meet quorum requirements of the panel when assessing particular applications).</li> </ul>
<b>Peer reviewers</b>	<p>Prior to the panel meeting, peer reviewers need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>familiarise themselves with this Guide and other material as identified by NHMRC staff</li> <li>identify and advise NHMRC of all interests they have with applications assigned to them</li> <li>provide a fair and impartial assessment against the <b>2021 IHPID TCR</b> assessment criteria and associated category descriptors (<u>Appendices C and D</u>) for each non-conflicted application assigned, in a timely manner</li> <li>assess track record by taking into consideration research achievements 'relative to opportunity', including any career disruptions, where applicable</li> <li>consider the assessment against the <i>Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria</i> (<u>Appendix E</u>) provided for applications with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health focus</li> <li>review scores/comments from all peer reviewers for all applications assigned to them, and</li> <li>advise NHMRC of any applications they choose to nominate for</li> </ul>

	<p>discussion by exception at the panel meeting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provide written summaries for each application assigned to them.</li> </ul> <p>During the panel meeting, peer reviewers will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• disclose interests they have with other peer reviewers</li> <li>• prepare for and participate in the discussion for each application where they do not have a high Col.</li> <li>• Score each application using the grant management system (Sapphire)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Primary Spokesperson (1SP)</b></p>	<p>Prior to the panel meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assess the allocated applications against the <b>2021 IHPID TCR</b> assessment criteria and associated category descriptors (<u>Appendices C and D</u>).</li> <li>• assess track record by taking into consideration research achievements 'relative to opportunity', including any career disruptions, where applicable</li> <li>• prepare speaking notes to present the application at the panel meeting</li> <li>• rigorously assess the proposed budget to ensure that requests for Direct Research Costs (DRCs) are appropriate for the project and fully justified.</li> </ul> <p>At the panel meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lead the discussion using prepared notes</li> <li>• announce final scores for applications based on discussions</li> <li>• <b>support</b> the secondary spokesperson (2SP) in discussion about the appropriateness or otherwise, of the requested budget as required with reference to the individual elements of the budget ensuring PSPs, DRCs and equipment requests are appropriate for the project and fully justified.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Secondary Spokesperson (2SP)</b></p>	<p>Prior to the panel meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assess the allocated applications against the <b>2021 IHPID TCR</b> assessment criteria and associated category descriptors (<u>Appendices C and D</u>).</li> <li>• assess track record by taking into consideration research achievements 'relative to opportunity', including any career disruptions, where applicable</li> <li>• prepare speaking notes to present the application at the panel meeting</li> <li>• rigorously assess the proposed budget to ensure that the DRCs are appropriate for the project and fully justified</li> <li>• prepare a recommendation for the panel to either: leave the requested budget intact, propose modifying the budget, or seek advice from the panel regarding specific budget requests.</li> </ul> <p>At the panel meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• add to the 1SP comments using prepared notes</li> <li>• announce final scores for applications based on discussions</li> <li>• discuss the appropriateness or otherwise, of the requested budget as required with reference to the individual elements of the budget ensuring the requested DRCs are appropriate for the project and fully justified.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Community/consumer reviewer</b></p>	<p>Prior to the panel meeting, community/consumer reviewers need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• familiarise themselves with this Guide and other material as identified by NHMRC staff, and</li> <li>• identify and advise NHMRC of all interests they have with applications assigned to their panel.</li> <li>• prepare to discuss strengths and weaknesses of how community and consumer involvement and engagement is included in the design, conduct and dissemination of outcomes of the research proposed. They will also give their perspective on the impact of the application in fulfilling the TCR's intended outcomes (please refer to <a href="#">Appendix G</a>).</li> </ul> <p>During the panel meeting, community/consumer reviewers will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• participate in the review of applications by providing expert advice while taking into consideration the 2021 IHPID TCR assessment criteria and associated category descriptors (<a href="#">Appendices C and D</a>).</li> </ul>
<p><b>NHMRC Staff</b></p>	<p>Under direction from the CEO, NHMRC staff will be responsible for overall administration of the peer review process and for the conduct of specific activities.</p> <p>Prior to the panel meeting, NHMRC staff will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• invite individuals to participate in the 2021 IHPID TCR scheme peer review process as required</li> <li>• determine whether disclosed interests pose a conflict and the level of that conflict.</li> <li>• act as the first point of contact for peer reviewers</li> <li>• provide briefings to peer reviewers</li> <li>• determine eligibility of applications</li> <li>• assign applications and peer reviewers to the appropriate panel/ to the appropriate peer reviewers, and</li> <li>• prepare provisional ranked lists for peer reviewers' consideration.</li> <li>• review peer reviewer written summaries for inappropriate comments.</li> </ul> <p>At the panel meeting NHMRC staff will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support the operation of NHMRC's grant management system</li> <li>• assist the Chair in running the discussions</li> <li>• fulfil the role of Chair/Assistant Chair where required (e.g. where the Chair/Assistant Chair is deemed to have a high conflict of interest with an application).</li> <li>• implement appropriate management plans for peer reviewers with 'high' interests or conflicts with applications and ensure that all participants (including community observers) are aware of disclosed interests</li> <li>• ensure that all peer reviewers are provided with the necessary information to review each application, and assisting and advising on the peer review process as required</li> <li>• maintain scoring records for each application</li> <li>• act as the first point of contact for peer reviewers and community observers, and</li> <li>• seek feedback from participants in the peer review process on improvements for future processes.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Indigenous health research peer reviewers</b></p>	<p>Indigenous health research peer reviewers will review how well each application addresses NHMRC's <i>Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria</i> (<a href="#">Appendix E</a>).</p> <p>Indigenous health research external peer reviewers will not participate in scoring. They will act as external experts and provide guiding comments to the peer reviewers relating to the <i>Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria</i>.</p> <p>If required, IHRP members will advise NHMRC if an application allocated to the IHRP does not relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.</p>
<p><b>Community Observers</b></p>	<p>NHMRC invites respected members of the general community to observe whether NHMRC policy and procedures are being adhered to during the peer review process. Observers assist NHMRC in ensuring that the assessment of all applications is fair, equitable and impartial.</p> <p>Observers will be briefed on the processes and procedures of the peer review of 2021 IHPID TCR applications. They will not participate in the review of any application.</p> <p>At the panel meeting, observers will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify and advise NHMRC of all conflict of interests they have with applications to be discussed</li> <li>• monitor the procedural aspects of the meeting, and</li> <li>• provide feedback to NHMRC on the consistency of peer review processes and policies.</li> </ul> <p>Observers may raise issues of a general nature for advice or action as appropriate with NHMRC staff.</p> <p>Observers are subject to the same disclosure of interest requirements as peer reviewers. Where a high Col exists, the observer will not observe discussions of the respective application(s).</p>

### 4.3 Reviewing 2021 IHPID TCR applications

All 2021 IHPID TCR applications are assessed against the 2021 IHPID TCR *Assessment Criteria* and the associated *Category Descriptors* at [Appendices C and D](#). Applications that are accepted by NHMRC as relating to the improvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health (see section 3.3.1) are also assessed against the *Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria* as set out at [Appendix E](#).

#### 4.3.1 Identification of applications with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health focus

Applications relating specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health will be identified by information provided in the application. Researchers with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health expertise will check whether these applications have at least 20% of their research effort and/or capacity building focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

For applications confirmed as relating specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, NHMRC will endeavour to obtain at least one external assessment against the *Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria* ([Appendix E](#)) from an assessor with expertise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. For further information on assessing applications that have a focus on the health of Indigenous Australians, see *Guidance for Assessing applications against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria* at [Appendix F](#).

The assessment against the *Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria* will be considered by peer reviewers when scoring the assessment criteria at [Appendix C](#).

### 4.3.2 Receipt and initial processing of applications

NHMRC staff will verify that 2021 IHPID TCR applications meet eligibility criteria. Applicants will be advised if their application is ineligible. However, in some instances these applications will remain in the peer review process until their ineligibility is confirmed. Eligibility rulings may be made at any point in the peer review process.

### 4.3.3 Disclosure of interests and peer reviewer suitability

Peer reviewers will be provided with a summary of each application and disclose their interests within NHMRC's grant management system, in accordance with the guidelines provided at Section 3.3 and [Appendix B](#).

Some peer reviewers may have a disclosure of interest for which they require a decision. In this case, NHMRC will assess the information provided by the peer reviewer and provide a ruling on the level of Col.

Peer reviewers are also required to select their level of suitability for applications, based on the information available to them in the application summary.

### 4.3.4 Establishment of panels and assignment of applications to panels/ Assignment of applications to peer reviewers

Taking into account Cols and peer reviewer suitability, NHMRC staff will assign applications and peer reviewers. It is expected each panel will be assigned an approximately equal number of applications. However this is subject to change, depending on the number and peer review area of applications. It is expected there will be only one panel of peer reviewers, however the number of panels formed will depend on the total number and type of applications received.

Application allocation is informed by the proposed field of research and other key words entered into NHMRC's grant management system by applicants and peer reviewers.

### 4.3.5 Briefing

NHMRC will provide peer reviewers briefing material with further details on their duties and responsibilities in the 2021 IHPID TCR peer review process. This will be made available to peer reviewers prior to assessing applications. Further information may be provided as necessary throughout the peer review process.

### 4.3.6 Assessment of applications

Peer reviewers will be given access to applications (where no high Col exists) and will be required to assess and enter their scores in NHMRC's grant management system. Peer reviewers will assess all applications assigned to them against the assessment criteria, using the category descriptors, taking into account career disruptions and other 'relative to opportunity' considerations ([Appendix H](#)), where applicable.

To ensure they provide independent scores, peer reviewers are not to discuss applications with other peer reviewers, except at the panel meeting.

Peer reviewers must ensure scores are completed by the nominated due date. If peer reviewers are unable to meet this requirement, they must contact NHMRC promptly to discuss alternative arrangements.

Peer reviewers' scores will be used to create provisional ranked lists of applications for each panel/ from which funding recommendations will be based. The rating will be determined using each peer reviewer's score for each of the assessment criteria. The rating, as calculated arithmetically to three decimal places, will take account of the weighting of each criterion.

Based on the calculated ratings, applications will be deemed a category level as follows:

Rating range	Deemed category
1.001 - 1.500	1

1.501 - 2.500	2
2.501 - 3.500	3
3.501 - 4.500	4
4.501 - 5.500	5
5.501 - 6.500	6
6.501 - 7.000	7

#### 4.3.6.1 Relative to opportunity and career disruption

Peer reviewers must take into account productivity relative to opportunity and, where applicable, career disruption considerations in the assessment of all applications. This reflects NHMRC's policy that assessment processes should accurately assess an applicant's track record and associated productivity relative to stage of career, including consideration as to whether productivity and contribution are commensurate with the opportunities available to the applicant. To assist peer reviewers with their assessment, further details regarding relative to opportunity and career disruptions are provided at [Appendix H](#).

#### 4.3.6.2 Mitigating unconscious gender bias in peer review

NHMRC is committed to addressing gender equality to promote fairness, transparency, equality and diversity in health and medical research. Fostering gender equality in peer review is a strategic objective, underpinned by NHMRC's *Gender Equality Strategy 2018–2021*.

Consistent with international practice and to ensure that NHMRC grant applications continue to receive objective and impartial assessments, NHMRC is raising peer reviewers' awareness of unconscious bias in the assessment process.

This is also consistent with the NHMRC document [Peer Review: A guide supporting the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research](#), which states that peer reviewers should be aware of how their own biases (conscious or unconscious) could affect the peer review process, including in relation to gender, ethnicity, nationality, institutional employer and research discipline).

#### Peer reviewer participation in the online Harvard Implicit Association Test for gender and science

In support of the objective, NHMRC encourages peer reviewers to complete the online Harvard Implicit Association Test (IAT) for gender and science. The IAT for gender and science, used by several research funding agencies nationally and internationally, is designed to help participants identify any implicit associations they may have between gender and participation in a science career.

By completing the test, peer reviewers gain a better understanding and increased awareness of how unconscious attitudes may affect their decisions, which prepares them to carry out their duties to the high standards of fairness and rigour expected by NHMRC. Peer reviewers should continue to follow all peer review principles and processes outlined in these guidelines, ensuring that each application is accurately reviewed against the assessment criteria ([Appendix C](#)). NHMRC does not have access to, nor does it seek, peer reviewers' information and results for the IAT for gender and science in the peer review process.

Peer reviewers must also familiarise themselves with any additional materials provided by NHMRC about unconscious bias awareness and implicit associations for gender and science during the peer review process.

#### Use of gender-neutral language

To reduce unconscious gender bias, NHMRC has strongly advised applicants to use gender-neutral language. This will limit the opportunity for unconscious gender bias to affect the assessment process.

NHMRC also encourages peer reviewers to use gender-neutral language in the assessment of applications. This means that during panel discussions or when preparing written material peer reviewers should:

- avoid the use of gendered pronouns such as he/she or her/his, and instead use gender-neutral alternatives such as CIA/CIB, CI last-name or plural pronouns (they/their) when referring to applicants.
- avoid the use of first names, and
- use gender-neutral nouns where appropriate e.g. parental leave rather than maternity/paternity leave.

The use of gender-neutral language in applications is encouraged, but does not form part of the assessment criteria and therefore should not influence your scoring of applications. Peer reviewers are required to consider the proposal on its merits, taking relative to opportunity considerations into account.

Where gender dimensions are important for the research being proposed, applicants have been advised they should be included in the application. Please refer to scheme-specific category descriptors for information on whether gender dimensions are to be considered as a part of assessment.

#### **4.3.6.3 Industry-relevant experience**

Peer reviewers are to recognise an applicant's industry-relevant experience and outputs. To assist peer reviewers with their assessment, the *Guide to Evaluating Industry-Relevant Experience* is provided at [Appendix I](#).

#### **4.3.6.4 Use of Impact Factors and other metrics**

Peer reviewers are to take into account their expert knowledge of their field of research, as well as the citation and publication practices of that field, when assessing the publication component of an applicant's track record. Track record assessment takes into account the overall impact, quality and contribution to the field of the published journal articles from the grant applicant, not just the standing of the journal in which those articles are published.

It is not appropriate to use publication metrics such as Journal Impact Factors.

The [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#) (DoRA) makes recommendations for improving the evaluation of research assessment. NHMRC is a signatory to DoRA and adheres to the recommendations outlined in DoRA for its peer review processes.

#### **4.3.6.5 Enhancing reproducibility and applicability of research outcomes**

Peer reviewers are required to consider the general strengths and weaknesses of the experimental design of the proposal to ensure robust and unbiased results. Assessment of the experimental design should include consideration of the following, as appropriate:

- scientific premise of the proposed research (i.e. how rigorous were previous experimental designs that form the basis for this proposal)
- techniques to be used
- details for appropriate blinding (during allocation, assessment and analysis)
- strategies for randomisation
- details and justification for control groups
- effect size and power calculations to determine the number of samples/subjects in the study (where appropriate)
- consideration of relevant experimental variables, and
- sex and gender elements of the research to maximise impact and any other considerations relevant to the field of research necessary to assess the rigour of the proposed design.

#### **4.3.6.6 Research Integrity Issues**

The peer review process can sometimes identify possible research integrity issues with applicants (e.g. concerns about possible plagiarism, inconsistencies in the presentation of data, inaccuracies in the presentation of track record information) or the behaviour of other peer reviewers. NHMRC has established specific processes for addressing research integrity concerns that arise in peer review. Peer reviewers must not discuss their concerns with other peer reviewers as this may jeopardise the fair assessment of an application. Instead, these issues should be raised with NHMRC separately from the peer review process. Advice about how to raise concerns and a description of how this process is managed are provided on the [NHMRC website](#).

Applications that are the subject of a research misconduct allegation will continue to progress through NHMRC peer review processes while any investigations are ongoing. NHMRC liaises with the institution regarding the outcome of any investigation and, if necessary, will take action under the *NHMRC Research Integrity and Misconduct Policy* available on the [NHMRC website](#).

#### **4.3.6.7 Contact between peer reviewers and applicants**

Peer reviewers must not contact applicants about their application under review. If this occurs, the peer reviewer may be removed from the process, and there is the potential for exclusion from future NHMRC peer review.

Where an applicant contacts a peer reviewer, the relevant application may be excluded from consideration.

In either case, contact between applicants and peer reviewers may raise concerns about research integrity and NHMRC may refer such concerns to the relevant Administering Institution.

#### **4.3.7 Panel meetings**

It is expected that 2021 IHPID TCR panel meeting will occur via videoconference.

The panel meeting is not expected to exceed two days. This will be confirmed closer to the date.

##### **4.3.7.1 Discussion of applications at panel meeting**

The least competitive applications within the provisional ranked list of applications will form a Not For Further Consideration (NFFC) list and will be provided to respective panel members before the panel meeting. Each peer reviewer has the opportunity to rescue one application from the NFFC list if they believe an application warrants full review at the panel meeting. Once the NFFC list has been finalised, NHMRC staff will release a running order for the panel meeting. Applications not on the NFFC list will proceed to full review.

An application will be excluded from NFFC for the following reasons:

- NHMRC has not received a score and an assessment for all criteria from both spokespersons
- If a spokesperson has a high Col after the initial assessment has been undertaken
- The application may be excluded if it relates to an NHMRC strategic priority, as determined by NHMRC, and achieves a notional score of 4.001 or higher.

##### **4.3.7.2 Panel meeting process**

The purpose of the panel meeting is not for individual peer reviewers to regress their scores to the panel mean. It is an opportunity to discuss divergent opinions or aspects of an application that a peer reviewer may have overlooked and adjust their scores as necessary. Peer reviewers should be able to justify how their scores align with the category descriptors.

The process for the panel meeting is as follows:

###### **Declaration of inter-relationships**

Suggested time limit: 30 minutes

When panel members (including the Chair and secretariat) meet face-to-face for the first time, each panel member will be invited to briefly describe their expertise and previous peer review experience. During their introductions, members will be asked to declare any relationships with other panel members including:

- current and previous collaborations
- former student/teacher/mentoring relationships
- common employment/institutional relationships
- other relationships that may, or be perceived to, impair fair and impartial assessment.



### **Chair to announce the application**

Suggested time limit: 2 minutes

The Chair will announce the application to be discussed including the title, Administering Institution/s and the CIs.

The Chair will identify any panel members who have a previously identified Col with the application. Those members with a high Col will be asked to leave the room/temporarily blocked from the videoconference by the secretariat (the videoconference connection will remain active).

The Chair will invite panel members to disclose any late interests with the application. If a panel member discloses a new interest, or wishes to discuss any concerns related to an existing Col, the matter will be discussed with the panel. It is up to the remaining panel members to determine if the new interest constitutes a high Col and if the declaring panel member should leave the room/ be temporarily blocked from the videoconference by the secretariat. The details of the late interest will be recorded by NHMRC. As this decision making can take extra time, it is important that all interests are disclosed and decided upon well in advance of the meeting, where possible.

If an interest is disclosed at the panel meeting by a SP and it is determined to be a high Col, a new SP will be assigned to the application and the scores from the initial SP will be discarded. Discussion of the application will be moved to a later time where possible to give the new SP time to prepare.

Once highly conflicted members have left the room (those with a low Col remain in the panel room)/ been temporarily blocked from the videoconference by the secretariat, the Chair will announce the category of funding the application relates to (e.g., NHMRC and/or Cancer Australia). The Chair will then identify the 1SP and 2SP and announce the Spokesperson scores for each of the four assessment criteria.

### **1SP and 2SP to comment on the application**

Suggested time limit: 5 minutes (1SP) and 3 minutes (2SP) and 4 minutes (Community Representative)

The Primary and Secondary Spokespersons will:

- discuss the application's strengths and weaknesses against the assessment criteria, referring to the Category Descriptors
- 2SP only to add anything not addressed by the 1SP, or explain why they disagree with the 1SP, if applicable, and
- not make reference to the budget at this stage.

The Consumer/Community reviewer will:

- discuss strengths and weaknesses of the proposed research focusing their perspective as community members or consumers of the proposed research.

### **Full panel discussion**

Suggested time limit: 5 minutes

The Chair will open discussion to the panel. Panel members have an opportunity to ask questions of both Spokespersons, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the application and ensure that relevant considerations are taken into account.

The Chair must ensure adequate review of the application occurs, that all members have a fair opportunity to comment and that no member exerts undue influence over others.

### **Scoring by panel members**

Suggested time limit: 3 minutes

Following the panel's discussion, the Chair will ask the Primary and Secondary Spokespersons to confirm their

criterion scores noting that these may change as a result of the panel discussion.

The Chair will then ask if any member intends to score two or more away from the 1SP or 2SP criterion scores. If so, the panel member must declare this and provide a brief justification, which will be recorded by the secretariat.

All panel members in the room/videoconference, excluding the Chair, must independently score the application through e-scoring in NHMRC's grant management system. All scoring panel members will provide scores against the four assessment criteria using the seven-point scale outlined in the *2021 IHPID TCR Category Descriptors (Appendix D)*, as a reference. While the category descriptors provide panel members with some benchmarks for appropriately scoring each application, it is not essential that all descriptors relating to a given score are met. Panel members should consider this and ensure the entire seven-point scale is considered when scoring applications.

At the completion of scoring, the panel secretariat will announce the following results:

1. Rating - the rating will be determined by including each panel member's score for each of the assessment criteria. The rating, as calculated arithmetically to three decimal places and will take account of the weighting of each criterion.

2. Category - this will be deemed, based on the calculated rating, as follows:

<b>Rating range</b>	<b>Deemed category</b>
1.001 - 1.500	1
1.501 - 2.500	2
2.501 - 3.500	3
3.501 - 4.500	4
4.501 - 5.500	5
5.501 - 6.500	6
6.501 - 7.000	7

Where panel members have concerns regarding the final score, the Chair should invite further discussion. If the panel collectively determines that reassessment is warranted, members will be invited to independently rescore that application. Panel members should not aim to achieve a consensus score, nor take into consideration the potential overall ranking or funding outcome of an application.

#### **Discussion by exception of proposed budget**

Suggested time limit: 5 minutes

Budget discussions should not commence until the NHMRC secretariat has announced the rating and category. Once the category has been announced, the secretariat will advise if the application may progress to budget discussion.

Budget discussions occur only where the 2SP has made a recommendation to discuss the budget. The Chair will facilitate the budget discussion to ensure applications are considered fairly and equitably. The 2SP will lead the budget discussion and comment on the appropriateness of the outlined costs and provide recommendations. The other SPs should be prepared to assist, if required. Other panel members may also provide relevant comments. Where the panel deems the proposed budget exceeds that required to accomplish the research objectives, appropriate reductions may be recommended and reasons recorded by the NHMRC secretariat.

NHMRC will record budget recommendations as agreed by the panel. NHMRC will check the budget recommendations to ensure the budgets have been recorded correctly and approved by the Chair.

NHMRC research staff may amend the budget recommended by the panel for any application, if necessary. NHMRC reserves the right to recommend funding levels which are less than those requested in the application and a duration of funding which differs from that requested.

#### **4.3.8 Quorum/Minimum number of assessments**

A quorum is regarded as 50 percent plus one of the appointed panel members. If there is an uneven number of panel members, a majority is the next full number after 50 percent (e.g. seven in the case of 13 members).

NHMRC will endeavour to identify, prior to panel meetings, those applications that do not have a scoring quorum and obtain a suitably qualified member from another panel to participate in panel discussion and to score that application.

However, in situations where a number of members have a high Col with an application and a suitably qualified member(s) cannot be recruited from another panel, the scoring quorum cannot be less than one-third of the panel membership present at the meeting.

#### **4.3.9 Principles for setting conditions of funding for NHMRC grants**

Setting a condition of funding (CoF) on a grant through the peer review process is, and should be, a rare event. When this does occur, the panel/peer reviewers or NHMRC will use the principles set out below to decide the CoF. These principles aim to achieve a consistent approach, minimise the number of conditions set and ensure conditions are unambiguous and able to be assessed.

CoFs relate to the award of funding, the continuation of funding or the level of funding. They do not relate to conditions which affect either eligibility to apply or subsequent peer review.

The principles are:

- NHMRC seeks to minimise the administrative burden on researchers and Administering Institutions.
- CoFs must not relate to the competitiveness of an application (e.g. project requires more community engagement); these issues should be considered during peer review and be reflected in the scores for the application.
- Any CoFs must be clear and measurable, so that the condition can be readily assessed as having been met.

#### **4.3.10 Documentation**

Peer reviewers may be required to retain personal notes that they made during the peer review process for a certain period, and if so, these must be held securely and in accordance with reviewers' obligations of confidentiality. NHMRC will notify peer reviewers of any such requirements prior to the peer review process.

#### **4.3.11 Funding Recommendation**

After the panel meeting, application scores from all peer reviewers are used to create a ranked list. This final ranked list will be used to prepare funding recommendations to NHMRC's Research Committee and Council for advice to the CEO, who will then make recommendations to the Minister for Health.

#### **4.3.12 Notification of Outcomes**

NHMRC will notify applicants and their Administering Institution's Research Administration Officer of grant application outcomes.

Feedback will be provided to all applicants in the form of an Application Assessment Summary. The Application Assessment Summary will contain numerical information on the competitiveness of the application that will be drawn from the scores given by peer reviewers.

## Appendix A - Understanding the Principles of Peer Review

### Fairness

- Peer review processes are designed to ensure that peer review is fair and seen to be fair by all involved.
- Peer reviewers have an obligation to ensure that each application is judged consistently and objectively on its own merits, against published assessment criteria. Peer reviewers must not introduce irrelevant issues into the assessment of an application.
- Applications will be subject to scrutiny and evaluation by individuals who have appropriate knowledge of the fields covered in the application.
- Peer reviewers should ensure that their assessments are accurate and that all statements are capable of being verified.
- Complaints processes are outlined on the [NHMRC website](#). All complaints to NHMRC relating to the peer review process are dealt with independently and impartially.

### Transparency

- NHMRC will publish key dates, all relevant material for applicants and peer reviewers, and grant announcements on its website and/or via [GrantConnect](#).
- NHMRC publicly recognises the contribution of participants in the peer review process, through publishing their names on the NHMRC website.<sup>1</sup>

### Independence

- The order of merit determined by peer reviewers is not altered by NHMRC. However, additional applications may be funded 'below the funding line' in priority or strategic areas.
- Chairs are independent and are not involved in the peer review of any application. Chairs act to ensure that NHMRC's processes are followed for each scheme, including adherence to the principles of this Guide.

### Appropriateness and balance

- Peer reviewers are selected to meet the scheme's objectives and to ensure adequate expertise to assess the applications received.
- NHMRC endeavours to ensure that peer reviewers are selected with regard to an appropriate representation of gender, geography and large and small institutions.

### Confidentiality

- NHMRC provides a process by which applications are considered by peer reviewers in-confidence. In addition NHMRC is bound by the provisions of the *Privacy Act 1988* in relation to its collections and use of personal information, and by the commercial confidentiality requirements under section 80 of the NHMRC Act.
- Peer reviewers are to treat applications in-confidence and must not disclose any matter regarding applications under review to people who are not part of the process.
- Any information or documents made available to peer reviewers in the peer review process are confidential and must not be used other than to fulfil their role.
- NHMRC is subject to the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* which provides a statutory right for an individual to seek access to documents. If documents that deal with peer review fall within the scope of a

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<sup>1</sup> Such information will be in a form that prevents applicants determining which particular experts were involved in the review of their application.

request, there is a process for consultation and there are exemptions from release. NHMRC will endeavour to protect the identity of peer reviewers assigned to a particular application.

### **Impartiality**

- Peer reviewers must disclose all interests and matters that may, or may be perceived to, affect objectivity in considering particular applications.
- Peer reviewers must disclose relationships with other members of the panel, and interests with applications being reviewed, including:
  - research collaborations
  - student, teacher or mentoring relationships
  - employment arrangements
  - any other relationship that may, or may be seen to, undermine fair and impartial judgement.
- Disclosures of interest are managed to ensure that no one with a high conflict is involved in the assessment of relevant applications.

### **Quality and Excellence**

- NHMRC will continue to introduce evidence-based improvements into its peer review processes.
- Any significant change will be developed in consultation with the research community and may involve piloting new processes.
- NHMRC will strive to introduce new technologies that are demonstrated to maximise the benefits of peer review and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the process while minimising individual workloads.
- NHMRC will undertake post-scheme assessment of all its schemes with feedback from the sector.
- NHMRC will provide advice, training and feedback for peer reviewers new to NHMRC peer review.
- Where NHMRC finds peer reviewers to be substandard in their performance, NHMRC may provide such feedback directly to the peer reviewer or their institution.

## Appendix B - Guidance for Declaring and Assessing Disclosures of Interest

Conflicts of interest frequently are regarded as a positive indicator that peer reviewers are recognised leaders who:

- have expert advice or skills
- have been given professional opportunities
- have received government funding, and
- are supported by the companies working to raise the standard of individual and public health throughout Australia.

A disclosure of interest does not mean that a peer reviewer has engaged in an inappropriate activity. It is a collaboration or relationship which may, or could be perceived to, impact impartial peer review and thus needs to be disclosed and transparently managed (where necessary) to safeguard the integrity of the peer review process. It is the peer reviewer's responsibility to disclose all interests. Failure to do so without a reasonable excuse may result in the peer reviewer being removed from the peer review process in accordance with subsection 44B(3) of the NHMRC Act.

In determining if an interest is a conflict, peer reviewers should give consideration to the following values that underpin the robust nature of peer review:

- **Excellence through expert peer review:** The benefits of peer reviewers' expert advice need to be balanced with the risk of real and or perceived interests affecting an impartial review.
- **Significance:** Not all interests are equal. The type of interest needs to be considered in terms of its significance and time when it occurred.
- **Integrity through disclosure:** Peer review rests on the integrity of peer reviewers to disclose any interests and contribute to transparently managing any real or perceived conflicts in a rigorous way. The peer review system cannot be effective without trusting peer reviewers' integrity.

In determining if an interest is a 'High', 'Low', or 'No' Col, the responsibility is on the peer reviewer to consider the specific circumstances of the situation. This includes:

- the interest's significance
- its impact on the impartiality of the reviewer, and
- maintaining the integrity of the peer review process.

Once a peer reviewer discloses an interest they can provide an explanation of the interest in NHMRC's grant management system to enable a judgement of its significance. Wherever possible, peer reviewers are encouraged to provide sufficient detail in the explanation such as date (month and year) of collaborations. Disclosures of interest are to be documented for conflicts of interest with both CIs and AIs.

The written declaration of interest is retained for auditing purposes by NHMRC. The details below provide general examples and are not to be regarded as a prescriptive checklist.

# HIGH Conflict of Interest

Situation		Example
<b>Associated with Application and/or Chief Investigator (CI)</b>	✓	Peer reviewer is a CI or AI on the application under review.
	✓	Peer reviewer has had discussions/significant input into the study design or research proposal of this application.
<b>Collaborations</b>	✓	Peer reviewer has collaborated, in a significant way, on publications within the last three calendar years (co-authorship), or on pending current-round applications, existing NHMRC grants or other grants.
	✓	There is an in/direct association/collaboration between the peer reviewer and a member of the CI team, such that the peer reviewer may have, or may be perceived to have, a vested interest in this research.
<b>Working relationships</b>	✓	Peer reviewer has the same employer, is part of the same organisation, or is negotiating for employment at the applicant's institution, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• in the same research field at an independent Medical Research Institute.</li> <li>• in the same Department or School of a university.</li> <li>• in the same Department of a hospital.</li> </ul>
	✓	Peer reviewer is in a position of influence within an organisation, or has a pecuniary interest, e.g. Dean of Faculty or School/Institute Directors.
	✓	Peer reviewer would benefit if the proposal was successful as an associate on the same scientific advisory committee, review board, exam board, trial committee, Data and Safety Monitoring Board etc. for example, a board of the hospital in which the research would be conducted.
<b>Professional relationships and interests</b>	✓	Peer reviewer's organisation is affiliated or associated with organisations that may have, or may be perceived to have, a vested interest in the research. for example, a pharmaceutical company, which has provided drugs for testing and therefore has a vested interest in the outcome.
<b>Social relationship and / or interests</b>	✓	The peer reviewer has a known personal/social/perceived relationship with a CI on the application.
<b>Teaching or supervisory relationship</b>	✓	Peer reviewer has taught or supervised the applicant for either undergraduate or postgraduate studies, or co-supervised a CI, within the last three years.
<b>Direct financial interest in the application</b>	✓	Peer reviewer has the potential for financial gain if the application is successful, such as, benefits from: payments from resulting patents, supply of goods and services, access to facilities, and provision of cells/animals as part of the collaboration.
	✓	Peer reviewer receives research funding or other support from a company and the research proposal may involve collaboration/association with that company.
<b>Other interests or situations</b>	✓	Peer reviewer has had an ongoing scientific disagreement and/or dispute with the applicant/s. This may still be ruled as a high Col if the events in question occurred beyond the last three years.
	✓	The peer reviewer feels that there are other interests or

		situations not covered above that could influence/or be perceived to influence, the peer review process.
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# LOW Conflict of Interest

Situation		Example
<b>Collaborations</b>	✓	Peer reviewer and a CI on the application have collaborated more than three years ago.
	✓	Within the last three years the peer reviewer has published with the CI as part of a multi-author collaborative team (i.e. ≥10 authors) where the peer reviewer did not interact or collaborate with the CI directly.
	✓	A co-worker is planning future collaborations with a CI.
	✓	Peer reviewer and a named AI on the application are actively collaborating or have previously collaborated within the last three years.
	✓	Without financial gain or exchange, a peer reviewer and a contributor of the research team have shared cells/animals/reagents/specialist expertise (biostatistician) etc. but have no other connection to each other.
	✓	Collaboration between a peer reviewer's colleague/research group and a CI, where the peer reviewer did not participate or have a perceived interest in the collaboration.
	✓	Peer reviewer is considering/planning/or has planned a future collaboration with a CI on the application but has no current collaborations or joint applications.
<b>Working relationships</b>	✓	Peer reviewer has the same employer, is part of the same organisation or is negotiating employment at the applicant's institution
	✓	Peer reviewer and a CI work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• at the same institution and do not know each other.</li> <li>• in the same Faculty or College of a university but in different Schools or Departments and do not know each other.</li> <li>• in the same organisation, but the peer reviewer or applicant holds an honorary appointment.</li> </ul>
	✓	Peer reviewer and a CI work for two organisations that are affiliated but there is no direct association/collaboration.
	✓	Peer reviewer and a CI are on the same scientific advisory committee, review board, exam board, trial committee, Data and Safety Monitoring Board etc., but otherwise have no association that would constitute a High decision.
<b>Professional relationships and interests</b>	✓	Peer reviewer's organisation is affiliated with the CI's organisation.
	✓	Where two organisations are affiliated but there is no direct association/collaboration between the CI and peer reviewer and there is no other link that would constitute a 'High' decision.
		When the peer reviewer's institution has an indirect affiliation/association with the organisation(s) that may have, or may be perceived to have, a vested interest in this research.
<b>Social relationship and / or interests</b>	✓	Peer reviewer's partner or an immediate family member has a known personal/social (non-work)/perceived relationship with a CI on the application, but the peer reviewer themselves does not have any link with the CI that would be perceived or constitute a 'High' decision.
<b>Teaching or supervisory relationship</b>	✓	Peer reviewer taught or supervised the applicant for either undergraduate or postgraduate studies, or co-supervised a CI, or the peer reviewer's research was supervised by a CI, more than three years ago.
<b>Financial interest in the application</b>	✓	Peer reviewer has an associated patent pending, supplied goods and services, improved access to facilities, or provided cells/animals etc. to a named CI for either undergraduate or postgraduate studies.

	✓	Peer reviewer has intellectual property that is being commercialised by an affiliated institution. Peer reviewer has previously provided and/or received cells/animals to/from a CI on the application, but has no other financial interests directly relating to this application that would constitute a 'High' decision.
	✓	Peer reviewer receives research funding or other support from a company, and the research proposal may impact upon the company.
<b>Other interests or situations</b>	✓	Peer reviewer may be, or may be perceived to be biased in their review of the application. For example, peer reviewer is a lobbyist on an issue related to the application.

## Appendix C - 2021 IHPID TCR Assessment Criteria

Applications will be assessed against the assessment criteria listed below and the category descriptors at [Appendix D](#):

1. Scientific quality and relevance to the objectives and expected outcomes of the TCR (60%)
2. Record of achievement of the team in areas/disciplines relevant to this TCR – relative to opportunity (40%).

Applications are also assessed relative to opportunity, taking into consideration any career disruptions, where applicable (see [Appendix H](#)).

Assessment of applications by peer reviewers will include incorporation of consumer and/or community involvement in the proposed research.

It is recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants often make additional valuable contributions to policy development, clinical/public health leadership and/or service delivery, community activities and linkages, and are often representatives on key committees. If applicable, these contributions will be considered when assessing research output and track record.

## Appendix D - 2021 TCR: IHPID Category Descriptors

Category	<i>Scientific Quality and Relevance to the Objectives and Expected Outcomes of the TCR (60%)</i>	<i>Record of Achievement of the Team in Areas/Disciplines Relevant to this TCR – relative to opportunity (40%)</i>
<p><b>7</b> <b>Outstanding</b></p>	<p>The <b>research proposal</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is <b>highly relevant</b> to the call</li> <li>• is <b>without question, highly feasible</b></li> <li>• has objectives that are <b>well-defined, highly coherent</b> and <b>strongly developed</b></li> <li>• has a <b>near flawless</b> design</li> <li>• has <b>very comprehensive</b> strategies for performance measures/milestones and how grant funds and other resources will be shared, deployed, and redeployed</li> <li>• will provide very <b>high quality</b> evidence that addresses the expected outcomes of the call</li> <li>• is <b>highly competitive</b> with the best comparable research proposals internationally</li> <li>• is <b>highly likely</b> to be translated into, or inform changes in, policy or health practice</li> <li>• will <b>almost certainly</b> result in highly influential publications</li> <li>• is <b>highly integrated</b> with consumer and/or community representatives in every aspect of the project</li> </ul>	<p>The <b>applicant team</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has a track record that is <b>directly relevant</b> to the proposed research both in terms of depth and breadth</li> <li>• has <b>all</b> the required skills and expertise to achieve the expected outcomes</li> <li>• has a <b>multi-site national team</b>, with an <b>outstanding</b> nationwide approach that is collaborative and multidisciplinary</li> <li>• is <b>highly networked</b> with international alliances to exchange knowledge and skills</li> </ul>
<p><b>6</b> <b>Excellent</b></p>	<p>The <b>research proposal</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is <b>very relevant</b> to the call</li> <li>• is <b>highly feasible</b></li> <li>• has objectives that are <b>clear, logical</b> and <b>well developed</b></li> <li>• is <b>excellent</b> in design</li> <li>• has <b>comprehensive</b> strategies for performance measures/milestones and how grant funds and other resources will be shared, deployed, and redeployed</li> </ul>	<p>The <b>applicant team</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has a track record that is <b>highly relevant</b> to the proposed research in terms of depth and breadth</li> <li>• has <b>all</b> the required skills and expertise to achieve the expected outcomes</li> <li>• has a <b>multi-site national team</b>, with an <b>excellent</b> nationwide approach that is collaborative and multidisciplinary</li> <li>• is <b>well networked</b> with international alliances to exchange</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• will provide <b>high quality</b> evidence that addresses the expected outcomes of the TCR</li> <li>• is very <b>likely</b> to be competitive with strong comparable research proposals internationally</li> <li>• is very <b>likely</b> to be translated into, or inform changes in, policy or health practice</li> <li>• is <b>very likely</b> to result in highly influential publications</li> <li>• is <b>well integrated</b> with consumer and/or community representatives in most aspects of the project</li> </ul>	<p>knowledge and skills</p>
<p><b>5</b> <b>Very Good</b></p>	<p>The <b>research proposal</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is <b>relevant</b> to the call</li> <li>• is <b>likely to be feasible</b></li> <li>• has objectives that are <b>clear</b> and <b>logical</b></li> <li>• raises a <b>few minor concerns</b> with respect to the study design</li> <li>• has <b>clear</b> strategies for performance measures/milestones and how grant funds and other resources will be shared, deployed, and redeployed</li> <li>• will provide <b>some high quality</b> evidence that addresses the expected outcomes of the TCR</li> <li>• may <b>not be highly competitive</b> with comparable research proposals internationally</li> <li>• may be translated into, or inform changes in, policy or health practice</li> <li>• may result in <b>several</b> influential publications</li> <li>• is <b>integrated</b> with consumer and/or community representatives in some aspects of the project</li> </ul>	<p>The <b>applicant team</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has a track record that is <b>very relevant</b> to the proposed research in terms of depth and breadth</li> <li>• has <b>most of</b> the required skills and expertise to achieve the expected outcomes</li> <li>• has a <b>multi-site national team</b>, with a <b>very good</b> nationwide approach that is collaborative and multidisciplinary</li> <li>• is <b>networked</b> with international alliances to exchange knowledge and skills</li> </ul>

<p><b>4</b> <i>Good</i></p>	<p>The <b>research proposal</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is somewhat <b>relevant</b> to the call</li> <li>• raises <b>some concerns</b> regarding feasibility</li> <li>• has objectives that are <b>clear</b></li> <li>• raises <b>some concerns</b> regarding the study design</li> <li>• has <b>some</b> strategies for performance measures/milestones and how grant funds and other resources will be shared, deployed, and redeployed</li> <li>• will provide <b>some evidence</b> that addresses the expected outcomes of the TCR</li> <li>• is <b>not likely to be competitive</b> with similar research proposals internationally</li> <li>• may be translated into, or inform changes in, policy or health practice</li> <li>• may result in <b>some</b> strong or influential publications</li> <li>• is <b>somewhat integrated</b> with consumer and/or community representatives in minor aspects of the project</li> </ul>	<p>The <b>applicant team</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has a track record that is <b>consistent</b> with the proposed research in terms of depth and breadth</li> <li>• has <b>some</b> of the required skills and expertise to achieve the expected outcomes</li> <li>• has a <b>multi-site national team</b>, with a nation-wide approach that is collaborative and multidisciplinary</li> <li>• is <b>somewhat networked</b> with international alliances to exchange knowledge and skills</li> </ul>
<p><b>3</b> <i>Marginal</i></p>	<p>The <b>research proposal</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is <b>not particularly relevant</b> to the call</li> <li>• raises <b>several concerns</b> regarding feasibility</li> <li>• is <b>somewhat unclear</b> in its objectives</li> <li>• raises <b>several concerns</b> regarding the study design</li> <li>• has <b>superficial</b> consideration of strategies for performance measures/milestones and how grant funds and other resources will be shared, deployed, and redeployed</li> <li>• may provide <b>limited</b> evidence that addresses the expected outcomes of the TCR</li> <li>• is <b>not competitive</b> nationally or internationally</li> <li>• is <b>unlikely</b> to be translated into, or inform changes in, policy or health practice</li> <li>• may result in some <b>modestly</b> influential publications</li> <li>• is <b>marginally integrated</b> with consumer and/or community representatives in the project</li> </ul>	<p>The <b>applicant team</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has a <b>limited</b> track record in the field of the proposed research</li> <li>• has <b>minimal</b> skills and expertise required to achieve the expected outcomes</li> <li>• <b>does not have a multi-site national team</b>, or a nation-wide approach that is collaborative and multidisciplinary</li> <li>• is <b>marginally networked</b> with international alliances to exchange knowledge and skills</li> </ul>

<p><b>2</b> <i>Unsatisfactory</i></p>	<p>The <b>research proposal</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• raises <b>several major concerns</b> regarding feasibility</li> <li>• is <b>unclear</b> in its' objectives</li> <li>• raises <b>several major concerns</b> regarding the study design</li> <li>• has <b>no</b> shared budget, <b>some</b> evidence of shared resources, <b>no</b> consideration of how grant funds and other resources will be shared, deployed, and redeployed</li> <li>• is <b>poorly relevant</b> to the call</li> <li>• is <b>not competitive</b> nationally or internationally</li> <li>• <b>unlikely</b> to provide evidence that addresses the expected outcomes of the TCR</li> <li>• is <b>very unlikely</b> to be translated into, or inform changes in, policy or health practice</li> <li>• <b>unlikely</b> to result in influential publications</li> <li>• is <b>poorly integrated</b> with consumer and/or community representatives in the project</li> </ul>	<p>The <b>applicant team</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• has a track record which <b>does not relate well</b> to the proposed research</li> <li>• is <b>deficient in many</b> of the required skills and expertise to achieve the expected outcomes</li> <li>• <b>does not have a multi-site national team</b>, or a nation-wide approach that is collaborative and multidisciplinary</li> <li>• is <b>poorly networked</b> with international alliances to exchange knowledge and skills</li> </ul>
<p><b>1</b> <i>Poor</i></p>	<p>The <b>research proposal</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contains a research plan that <b>does not seem to be feasible</b> and is <b>unlikely</b> to be successfully completed</li> <li>• is <b>very unclear</b> in its objectives.</li> <li>• contains a study design that is <b>not adequate</b></li> <li>• has <b>no</b> shared budget, <b>no</b> evidence of shared resources, <b>no</b> consideration of how grant funds and other resources will be shared, deployed, and redeployed</li> <li>• is <b>not relevant</b> to the call</li> <li>• is <b>not competitive</b> nationally or internationally</li> <li>• is <b>very unlikely</b> to provide evidence that addresses the expected outcomes of the TCR</li> <li>• has <b>no potential</b> to be translated into, or inform changes in, policy or health practice</li> <li>• is <b>very unlikely</b> to result in influential publications</li> <li>• <b>does not involve</b> consumers and/or communities</li> </ul>	<p>The <b>applicant team</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• does <b>not have a relevant</b> track record in the field of the proposed research</li> <li>• is <b>deficient in most</b> of the required skills and expertise to achieve the expected outcomes</li> <li>• <b>does not have a multi-site national team</b>, or nation-wide approach that is collaborative and multidisciplinary</li> <li>• is <b>not networked</b> with international alliances</li> </ul>

## Appendix E - Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria

To qualify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, at least 20% of the research effort and/or capacity building must relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

Qualifying applications must address the NHMRC *Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria* as follows:

- Community engagement - the proposal demonstrates how the research and potential outcomes are a priority for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with relevant community engagement by individuals, communities and/or organisations in conceptualisation, development and approval, data collection and management, analysis, report writing and dissemination of results.
- Benefit - the potential health benefit of the project is demonstrated by addressing an important public health issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This benefit can have a single focus or affect several areas, such as knowledge, finance and policy or quality of life. The benefit may be direct and immediate, or it can be indirect, gradual and considered.
- Sustainability and transferability - the proposal demonstrates how the results of the project have the potential to lead to achievable and effective contributions to health gain for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, beyond the life of the project. This may be through sustainability in the project setting and/or transferability to other settings such as evidence based practice and/or policy. In considering this issue, the proposal should address the relationship between costs and benefits.
- Building capability - the proposal demonstrates how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and researchers will develop relevant capabilities through partnerships and participation in the project.

Peer reviewers will consider these in their overall assessment of the application, when scoring the *Assessment Criteria* set out in [Appendix C](#).



## **Appendix F – Guidance for assessing applications against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria**

Peer reviewers should consider the following when assessing applications that have a focus on the health of Indigenous Australians. The points below should be explicit throughout the application and not just addressed separately within the Indigenous criteria section.

### **Community Engagement**

- Does the proposal clearly demonstrate a thorough and culturally appropriate level of engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or health services prior to submission of the application?
- Is there clear evidence that the level of engagement throughout the project will ensure the feasibility of the proposed study?
- Has the application demonstrated evidence that any of the methods, objectives or key elements of the proposed work have been formed, influenced or defined by the community?
- Were the Indigenous community instrumental in identifying and inviting further research into the health issue and will the research outcomes directly benefit the 'named' communities?
- Is there a history of working together with the 'named' communities e.g. co-development of the grant, involvement in pilot studies or how the 'named' communities will have input/control over the research process and outcomes across the life of the project?

### **Benefit**

- Does the proposal clearly outline the potential health benefits (both intermediate and long term, direct and indirect) to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?
- Does the proposal demonstrate that the benefit(s) of the project have been determined or guided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities or organisations themselves?

### **Sustainability and Transferability**

- Does the proposal:
  - Provide a convincing argument that the outcomes will have a positive impact on the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which can be maintained after the study has been completed?
  - Have relevance to other Indigenous communities?
  - Clearly plan for and articulate a clear approach to knowledge translation and exchange?
  - Demonstrate that the findings are likely to be taken up in health services and/or policy?
- Will the outcomes from the study make a lasting contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their wellbeing?

### **Building Capability**

- Does the proposal outline how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and/or communities will benefit from capability development?
- Does the proposal outline how researchers and individuals/groups associated with the research project will develop capabilities that allow them to have a greater understanding/engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

## Appendix G – Peer Review Guidance for Community/Consumer Representatives

The purpose of community/consumer representation is to convey the perspectives of people with an intellectual disability, their families and carers, in accessing and utilising preventative health services to the wider peer review panel (PRP). This informed by their knowledge and lived experience.

As detailed in the *2021 TCR: IHPID Grant Opportunity Guidelines*, NHMRC strongly encourages community and consumer involvement and engagement to be included in the design, conduct and dissemination of outcomes of the research proposed. This includes members of the community with intellectual disability or as carers / advocates for people with intellectual disability.

The following questions are provided as guidance only, to assist in framing your report to the PRP.

Community/consumer representative are not required to specifically address each question in their verbal report.

Consumer and community involvement activities (involvement activities):

- Has there been community/consumer involvement into the development of this project?
- If yes, has this involvement been appropriate to understand the needs of the community/consumer?
- Is the type of ongoing community/consumer involvement clearly described, including the matters on which they will be consulted and the mechanisms by which this consultation will occur? Is the proposed research feasible?

Support for community and consumer involvement activities:

- Does the team have relevant experience in working with communities and consumers?
- Does the research propose to involve consumers and/or the community in the research team (such as consumer input to advisory committees, planned activities or specific roles for community members) ?
- Has consideration been given to the time and resources required to involve and support the involvement of community/consumer representative in the research?

Research impact on consumers and community:

- Does the proposed research address the objectives of the call in a way that is relevant to the needs of consumers and the community?
- Has the researcher indicated when the potential benefits of the research be achieved? How important are the benefit(s)?
- Will the outcomes of the proposed research make a difference in improving health services or health policy that will lead to improved health outcomes for individuals?

## Appendix H – NHMRC Relative to Opportunity Policy

### Purpose

NHMRC's goal is to support the highest quality research that will lead to improvements in health over the short or long term. Peer review by independent experts is used to identify well-designed feasible projects that address a significant question and are undertaken by researchers with demonstrated capacity to perform high quality research.

In most NHMRC grant schemes, peer reviewers are asked to assess the track record of the applicants as well as the proposed research. However, NHMRC recognises that not all research careers are the same and therefore peer reviewers are asked to assess track records "relative to opportunity", taking into account circumstances that have affected the applicant's research productivity.

The purpose of this document is to outline NHMRC's Relative to Opportunity Policy with respect to:

- peer review of applicant track records
- eligibility to apply for Emerging Leadership Investigator Grants.

### Policy approach

NHMRC considers Relative to Opportunity to mean that peer reviewers should assess an applicant's track record of research productivity and professional contribution in the context of their career stage and circumstances, by taking into consideration whether the applicant's productivity and contribution are commensurate with the opportunities available to them.

The policy has two components:

- **Career Disruption** – a prolonged interruption to the ability to work due to pregnancy, illness/injury and/or carer responsibilities. Career Disruptions are taken into account in track record assessment and in determining an applicant's eligibility to hold an Emerging Leadership Investigator Grant (in terms of years since they received their PhD).
- **Other Relative to Opportunity considerations** – any other personal or professional circumstances affecting research productivity. These circumstances are taken into account in track record assessment.

In addition to *NHMRC's Principles of Peer Review*, particularly fairness and transparency, the following principles support this objective:

- **Research opportunity:** Researchers' outputs and outcomes should reflect their opportunities to advance their career and the research they conduct.
- **Fair access:** Researchers should have access to the funding available through NHMRC's grant program consistent with their experience and career stage.
- **Career diversity:** Researchers with career paths that include time spent outside academia should not be disadvantaged. NHMRC recognises that time spent in other sectors, such as industry, may enhance research outcomes for both individuals and teams.

NHMRC expects that peer reviewers will give clear and explicit attention to these principles to identify the highest quality research and researchers. NHMRC recognises that life circumstances can be varied and therefore it is not possible to implement a formulaic approach to applying Relative to Opportunity considerations during peer review.

### Consideration of career circumstances during peer review of grant applications

Under the Relative to Opportunity policy, researchers' career circumstances are considered during track record assessment. This aims to take into account salient research opportunity considerations over the course of a research career and is not intended to address minor changes to life circumstances.

Circumstances considered during peer review include, but are not limited to:

## Research

- research role(s) and responsibilities, career stage, and amount of time spent as an active researcher

## Resources and facilities

- available resources and facilities, including:
  - the extent to which any additional research personnel and/or collaborators contribute to the applicant's research program
  - situations where research is being conducted in remote or isolated communities

## Professional responsibilities

- clinical, administrative and/or teaching workload
- time employed in other sectors
- building relationships of trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities over long periods

## Personal circumstances

- disability (including mental health conditions and psychosocial disability) or illness
- caring responsibilities that do not interrupt the applicant's career for an extended period (that would meet the definition of a Career Disruption) but still affect research productivity
- for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants, community obligations including 'sorry business'
- any other personal circumstances

## Other circumstances

- relocation of an applicant and their research laboratory or clinical practice setting
- periods of unemployment
- calamities, such as pandemics, bushfires or cyclones.

Relative to Opportunity considerations do not include:

- minor (or short-term) changes that occur during the normal course of conducting research, e.g. broken equipment or delayed ethics approval
- minor (or short-term) medical conditions
- recreational leave or general administrative activities related to research, such as preparation of grant applications and publications or committee-related activities.