



Appendix C: Removing the Emerging Leadership (EL) eligibility barrier

NHMRC public consultation

NHMRC is proposing to remove the 10-year post-PhD pass date eligibility threshold (the Barrier) from the Investigator Grant scheme. The Barrier prevents applicants whose post-PhD pass date is more than 10 years prior to the application close date (adjusted pro-rata where there are valid career disruptions) from applying at either of the 2 Emerging Leadership (EL) Levels (EL1 and EL2). The Barrier was implemented to ensure funds were quarantined for early career researchers, and thereby help to ensure the Investigator Grant scheme achieves its objective to provide funding for the 'highest-performing researchers at all career stages'. However, the Barrier significantly increases the complexity of NHMRC's eligibility framework, placing additional burden on applicants who have experienced career disruptions (CDs), disproportionately impacting female applicants, and increases burden on Research Administration Officers (RAOs).

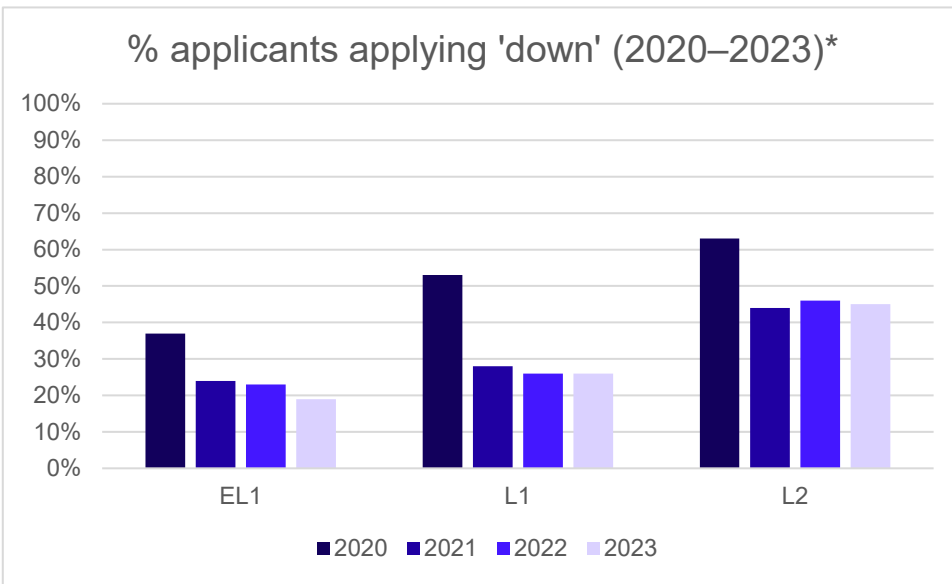
The [Statements of Expectations](#) describe the typical research experience and academic level expected at each Investigator Grant Level, and are used as a guide by applicants when selecting their most appropriate Category and Level. The policy provides specific advice on the number of years post-PhD and academic level typically expected for applicants at each Level. The *Statements of Expectations* were updated for the Investigator Grant 2021 round to provide further guidance to applicants regarding applying at the most appropriate Level, commensurate with their experience, profile and academic level. Applicant behaviour, and trends in application funded rates, indicate that, since the introduction of the revised *Statements of Expectations* (2021), the Barrier is no longer essential to achieve the scheme's objectives.

Analysis of applicant behaviour (2019–2023) has identified that, since the strengthening of the *Statements of Expectations* in 2021, more applicants now apply at their most appropriate Level, based on their years' post-PhD (adjusted for any career disruptions). Where applicants apply 'down' to a Level with less experienced applicants, they have the lowest funded rate at that Level. Their funded rate is lower than those of applicants who apply 'as expected' (i.e. their PhD pass date falls within the typical years post-PhD for their selected Level). Their funded rate is also **less than half** of applicants who apply 'up' into the same Level (i.e. an applicant whose post-PhD years is lower than the suggested typical range of years post-PhD for that Level, e.g. a Leadership 1 applicant who is 8 years post-PhD pass date, where the typical range of years post-PhD is 10–15 years).

The analysis found that at each Level where it is possible:

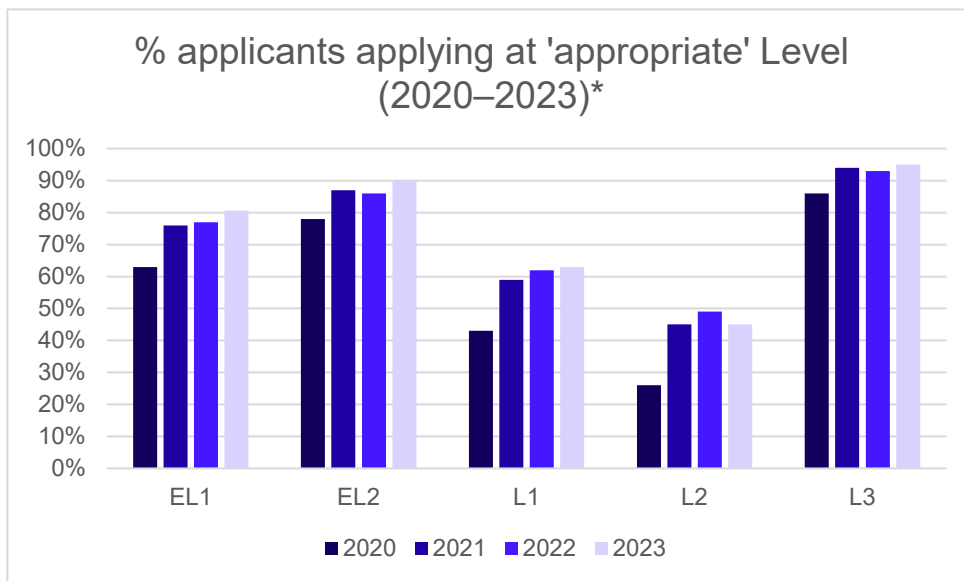
- the number of applicants who apply 'down' a Level decreased in 2021 following the introduction of revised Statements of Expectations, and has remained lower (see **Figure 1**)
- the number of applicants who applied at their expected Level (i.e. their PhD pass date falls within the typical years post-PhD for their selected Level), increased in 2021 and remained higher (see **Figure 2**)
- for the period 2020–2023, where applicants apply 'down', their funded rate is less than half of less inexperienced applicants who apply 'up' into the same Level (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 1: Investigator Grant applicants applying 'down', 2020–2023



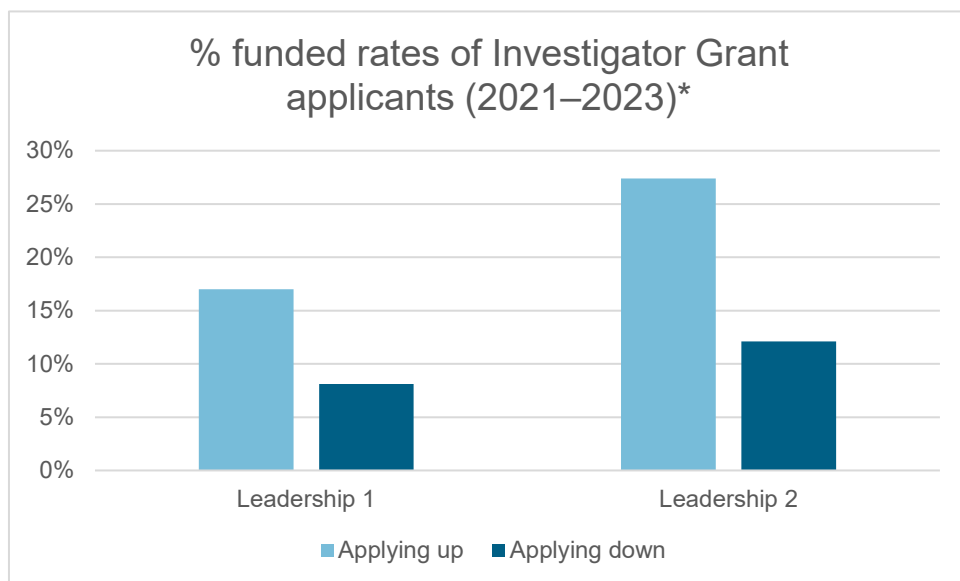
* Adjusted for career disruptions

Figure 2: Investigator Grant applicants applying at the 'appropriate' Level, 2020–2023



* Adjusted for career disruptions

Figure 3: Fund rates of Investigator Grant, 2021–2023



* Adjusted for career disruptions

In summary, NHMRC's analysis found that since the introduction of revised *Statements of Expectations*:

- more applicants apply at their most appropriate Level (in relation to their years post-PhD)
- fewer applicants apply 'down'
- where applicants apply 'down' they have a substantially lower funded rate when compared with applicants applying 'up' to the same Level.

To help continue these positive outcomes and support the removal of the Barrier, NHMRC introduced a rubric for the Investigator Grant 2024 Guidelines that provides advice to peer reviewers on adjusting their scores where they feel applicants have applied at an inappropriate Level. This advice will continue to help reinforce the positive applicant and peer reviewer behaviour highlighted in the analysis above, continuing to prevent 'gaming' by applicants and ensure NHMRC continues to fund the highest performing researchers at all career stages.

It is for these reasons, and the additional burden that the Barrier places on applicants, RAOs, and particularly those applicants with career disruptions, NHMRC is proposing to remove the Barrier from the Investigator Grant scheme.

Should the Barrier be removed, the *Statements of Expectations* will continue to give guidance to applicants and peer reviewers on the typical range of years post-PhD for applicants at each Level of the award. NHMRC will continue to monitor applicant behaviour and outcomes to ensure there are no unintended consequences of this policy change.