



GENDER EQUITY IN FOCUS AS RESEARCH LEADERS PREPARE TO APPLY FOR 2023 NHMRC INVESTIGATOR GRANTS

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When researchers submit applications for the Leadership levels of the 2023 National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Investigator Grants in a few weeks, it will be in the knowledge that, for the first time, the scheme aims to award an equal number of these grants to women and men.

Writing in the *Medical Journal of Australia* today, NHMRC's Chief Executive Officer, Professor Anne Kelso, argues that the change is needed to address longstanding systemic disadvantage experienced by women in the health and medical research sector.

"Although women have enrolled in health and science degrees and completed postgraduate study in large numbers for decades, these numbers are still not reflected at the highest levels of the research sector," Professor Kelso writes.

"Men continue to predominate among senior researchers and academic leaders in universities, medical research institutes and hospitals. Men continue to apply for and receive more NHMRC grants and total funding than women."

Professor Kelso observes that on average, funded rates - grants as a proportion of applications - have been close to parity for women and men since 2017.

"Yet the impact of women's attrition persists," she writes.

"This is seen most starkly in the large Investigator Grant scheme, a career stage-based scheme where women predominate at the earliest postdoctoral stage (Emerging Leadership Level 1) but make up only about 20% of the most senior applicants (Leadership Level 3).

"The direct consequence of this imbalance is that about 35% more grants and 67% more total funding were awarded to men than women in the first three years of the scheme (2019-2021), despite funding of additional women through NHMRC's structural priority budget.

"NHMRC's view is that these disparities cannot be resolved through individual adjustments of track record scores but require systemic intervention."

On 12 October 2022, the Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Mark Butler MP, and the Minister for Finance and Minister for Women, Senator the Hon Katy Gallagher, announced that NHMRC would implement a new targeted measure to address gender disparities at the Leadership levels of the Investigator Grant scheme.

"NHMRC will run separate competitions for women and men with the aim of awarding equal numbers of Leadership grants to the two groups," Professor Kelso writes.

"Structural priority funding will continue to be used to support additional women at Emerging Leadership levels if required to meet gender equity targets. Non-binary researchers will be eligible for support in both measures.

"On the advice of NHMRC's Research Committee, the structural priority budget was increased to 20% of funds available for Investigator Grants in 2022. However, no intervention was required at Emerging Leadership Level 1 and little at Emerging Leadership Level 2 to achieve comparable numbers of grants and overall funding to women and men.

"This is encouraging progress that we hope will lead to higher numbers of women applying at the next level when these grants have run their course.

"A significant gender gap nevertheless remained at Leadership levels; although the additional structural priority funding helped to bridge this gap, it was insufficient to achieve similar grant numbers and overall funding for women and men in the 2022 round.

"The new funding framework will ensure that this goal is reached in 2023."

Why now?

"The impact of COVID-19 is one reason that intervention to reduce gender inequities in NHMRC's grant program is critical now," Professor Kelso writes.

"The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequities in the STEM workforce, with women especially disadvantaged by lockdowns, overseeing children's schooling at home, caring for other family members, and being more likely to be in precarious employment. Women have been disproportionately represented among the thousands who have lost jobs from universities. The effects on the shape of the Australian research workforce are likely to be significant and long lasting.

"The new funding framework will ensure that more women have the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of human health through their research.

"More women will be able to advance their careers. More women will be the visible face of our national research effort, encouraging the next generation of women and men to pursue this most significant and rewarding of career paths," Professor Kelso concludes.

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