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Australian Academy of Science EMCR Forum submission on Removing the Emerging Leadership (EL) eligibility barrier from the Investigator Grant Scheme

The Australian Academy of Science's Early- and Mid-Career Researcher¹ (EMCR) Forum welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *NHMRC public consultation on proposed updates to the Investigator and Synergy Grant assessment framework*, specifically regarding removing the Emerging Leadership (EL) eligibility barrier from the Investigator Grant scheme.

The EMCR Forum represents over 6,000 of Australia's early- to mid-career researchers across science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine, and thus offers a unique perspective from current EMCRs who may potentially be impacted by the proposed changes.

The EMCR Forum:

- Strongly supports the NHMRC's underlying objective to decrease the burden on applicants who experience career disruptions.
- Is unconvinced how the proposed change outlined in Appendix C will, in practice, decrease the burden of reporting career disruptions for EMCR applicants. Insufficient detail has been provided to understand how the proposed changes would reduce burden on applicants who have experienced career disruptions.
- Raises concerns that removal of the EL eligibility barrier will lead to increasing reliance and burden on assessors to make quick judgements on career disruptions and level appropriateness of applicants. Without semi-standardised processes utilised by research offices, the proposed change risks research excellence and progress towards improving equity of the scheme.

The Australian Health and Medical Research Workforce Audit (2024)² report highlights that 50% of this workforce are aged under 44 years, and 45% are less than 10 years post-graduation. This cohort needs to be nurtured for Australia to continue our leadership in health and medical research. Further, gender disparity at all levels, but widening at senior levels, in the health and medical research sector was highlighted, with systemic issues in funding and career progression contributing to the decline in participation of women in this workforce. The EMCR Forum are concerned that the proposed removal of the EL eligibility barrier may inadvertently damage our future research excellence and productivity as well as worsen gender inequity in health and medical research.

The EL eligibility barrier is important to meet the scheme's objective to support EMCRs, by ensuring clarity on the target level of the grant and avoiding senior researchers applying at an inappropriate level. The guidance states that *"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'."* Removing the EL eligibility barrier may encourage more senior researchers to apply for EL grants, thereby negatively impacting the scheme's objective. Furthermore, peer reviewers for Investigator Grants already assess

¹An EMCR is an individual between 0 and 15 years (0-5 for early career, 5-15 for mid-career) of graduating from a PhD or equivalent (discounting career interruptions) who actively engages in research, either as a researcher or in a role that substantially supports the delivery of research and that requires substantial research training and experience. This includes researchers in academia, industry, government, public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors. Researchers without a higher degree but with equivalent professional experience may identify as EMCR, typically in circumstances of non-traditional career pathways and/or of belonging to underrepresented intersectionalities.

² Department of Health and Aged Care 2024. The Australian Health and Medical Research Workforce Audit. Accessed 28 Nov 2024 <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/mrff-the-australian-health-and-medical-research-workforce-audit?language=en>

productivity relative to opportunity and, where applicable, career disruption considerations. Removing the EL eligibility barrier may place additional burden on peer-reviewers to make quick judgements on the level appropriateness of applicants.

We are unconvinced how removing the EL eligibility barrier would reduce burden for applicants who have experienced career disruptions as they will need to continue to report their career disruptions to align with the Investigator Grant guidelines and Statement of Expectations. The NHMRC should consider other approaches to reducing the burden for applicants who have experienced career disruptions, and potential continuing disruptions. For instance, the NHMRC only allows absence of work for parental leave, but this does not consider the full impact of being a primary carer for a young child. Whereas the ARC recognises up to two-years for being the primary carer of a dependent child, inclusive of parental leave, for each dependent child. In addition to looking at the ARC, we encourage the NHMRC to examine and be informed by exemplar international schemes including Europe (e.g. Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowships, EMBO Postdoctoral Fellowships, ERC Starting Grants), UK (e.g. Wellcome Early-Career Awards), and USA (e.g. Helen Hay Whitney Fellowships, NIH F32).

This submission was prepared on behalf of the EMCR Forum by the Executive team. As executive members of the EMCR Forum we celebrate the contribution of EMCRs, communicate the issues they face across hierarchical and sector silos, and advocate for improved working conditions for EMCRs across the country.

To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission, please contact the EMCR Forum at emcr@science.org.au.