

Medical Research Future Fund: Request for Stakeholder Input

This request seeks information from your organisation on its members' experiences applying for, assessing and receiving MRFF competitive grants in 2020 via the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and Business Grants Hub (BGH).

We seek your advice as part of a review of MRFF arrangements, which will be used to continue improving MRFF business processes.

The questions below provide a framework with which to approach your members for comment. Your submitted response to the Department of Health should comprise one consolidated response to each question that is representative of the overall experiences of your membership base.

If your feedback relates to your experiences with Grant Opportunities administered by a particular grant hub (NHMRC or BGH), please specify this in your responses.

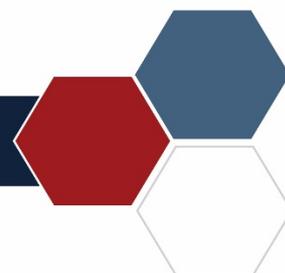
Question 1. Your Organisation

i. *Please identify the name of your organisation:*

Innovative Research Universities (IRU)

ii. *Please indicate the number of members from whom you received feedback to inform this response:*

Seven (7). Our membership is Charles Darwin University, Flinders University, Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, Murdoch University and Western Sydney University.



Question 2. Outcomes and Objectives

Opportunities to obtain MRFF funding are defined in Grant Opportunity Guidelines, which describe the scope of the research funded by the MRFF under a Grant Opportunity (the objectives) and the intended outcomes of that research.

Q2a. As an applicant, when you read the objective and outcome statements was it clear to you whether your project was “in scope”?

Q2b. Did the intended outcomes of the research align with the stated objectives?

Q2b. Is there any additional information about the outcomes and objectives that you would find useful?

Q2c. Is there an opportunity to improve clarity regarding partnerships and co-investment? If yes, please explain.

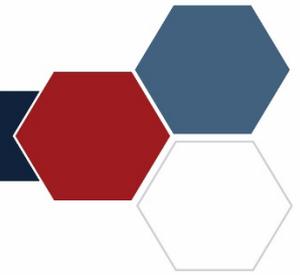
Q2d. What strategies can be adopted to support research that facilitates rapid translation of research findings into outcomes?

2a + b. Generally, yes. There is an opportunity, however, to introduce the objectives and outcomes sections earlier in the guidelines. The use of sub-headings would also help with guideline usability.

2c. More can be done to share with the sector how MRFF awarded grants meet assessment criteria such as community engagement, partnerships and co-funding. This will assist in answering questions such as ‘are co-contributions (cash or in-kind) a material success factor and what quantum (or percentage) does a co-contribution need to be?’ These are important considerations for the sector to understand given the MRFF prioritises such factors: ‘partnerships and co-investment are encouraged in order to maximise impact of investment’.

While a section is present in the guidelines about the value placed on partnerships, it does not feature in the criteria/sections of the actual application. Furthermore, there is no opportunity to include in-kind or cash contributions in the budget for both RGMS/Sapphire applications.

2d. Partnerships with community groups, consumers, and end-users are key to ensuring rapid translation of research findings. There is an opportunity to strengthen this emphasis in the guidelines as a key requirement, including how outcomes will be translated. Related, we suggest that the definition of eligible expenditure should include costs often associated with translation. For example: patent costs where commercially relevant and knowledge dissemination/communication expenses (e.g. webinars, training materials, other health promotion collateral).



Question 3. Grant Amount and Grant Period

MRFF Grant Opportunity Guidelines define the maximum grant period under a Grant Opportunity, the quantum of available funding, and the minimum/maximum grant value an applicant is able to request.

Q3a. Is it useful to have a minimum grant value?

Q3b. What factors should be considered when setting a minimum and/or maximum grant value?

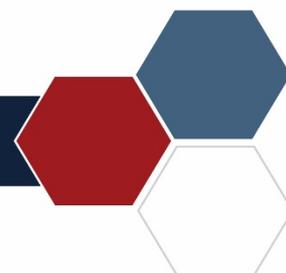
Q3c. What factors should be considered when setting the grant period?

Q3 a + b. Overall, yes. Grant values provide an indication of the scale of work that is required for outcomes to be achieved.

Factors that should be considered include the overall funding allotment being made available for a scheme. With MRFF annual allocations set to increase again in 20/21, we encourage the Department of Health to consider both the optimal number of schemes to be launched in any 12-month period and the amount of funding available for each scheme. Without MRFF grants data being made available, it is hard to know what success rates look like for individual schemes and whether it varies according to funding available. There is a risk, for example, that the success rate for modestly funded schemes could be unproductively low resulting in inefficiencies for the sector.

Q3c. As the MRFF is a major government funder of health and medical research in Australia, it is important for the MRFF to consider how it is supporting the sustainability of the research workforce. For example, we encourage the MRFF to consider funding research fellowships.

Finally, there has been some mismatch between rapid calls for grants with quick turnaround, only then to result in a protracted assessment period (e.g. COVID Communication Strategies and Approaches).



Question 4. Eligibility

MRFF Grant Opportunity Guidelines define which individuals and organisations are eligible to apply for and receive MRFF funding, and policies on eligible and ineligible activities and expenditure.

Q4a. Please provide feedback on the eligibility criteria for applying for and/or receiving MRFF grants.

Q4b. Please provide feedback on budget components and eligible expenses.

Whilst instructions are generally clear, one of the issues in using two different platforms for MRFF applications (business.gov/Sapphire), is that eligibility can vary. For example, business.gov typically permit institutional overheads and salary on-costs in application budgets. Whilst Sapphire applications do not allow these inclusions. There is also a discrepancy between eligibility of Chief investigators (CIs) depending on whether the grant is submitted through Sapphire (RGMS) or the business portal. For Sapphire, a person can only be named as a CI once on one project. For the business portal a person can be involved in multiple applications as a key researcher, so long as they aren't CIA. Such differences have led to confusion amongst applicants whom are accustomed to uniform guidance from schemes from the same funding body.

NHMRC and BGH administered grants

4a) Guidelines would benefit from improved clarity regarding joint applications/consortia approaches, particularly where partners are in receipt-of and responsible for expense of MRFF funds. Eligibility criteria for individuals are less clear for investigators, particularly where there are schemes which straddle NHMRC. The ability of the CIA to also be an AI (or CIA on multiple grants) would benefit from clarity.

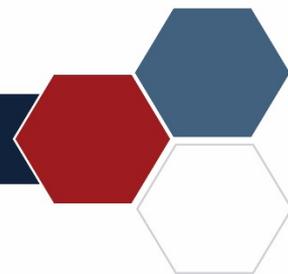
4b) Budget components would benefit from being able to include the cash co-investment, when applicable, from partners.

NHMRC administered grants only

4b) MRFF grants provided through the NHMRC provides unsustainably low levels of funding for salaries, creating financial difficulties. Funding through all MRFF grants should provide for CI salaries. These are a legitimate research expense and their exclusion leads research organisations severely underfunded for the research they are being tasked with. The ability for AI's to draw salary should be considered on the basis that they contribute to the project as co-investigators.

BGH only

4b) Clarity on accounting for cash and in-kind components from partners would be beneficial.

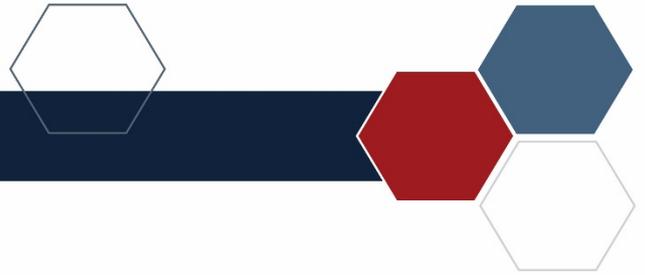


Question 5. Applying for Grants

MRFF Grant Opportunity Guidelines contain instructions about how to submit an application online via the relevant grant hub.

Q5. Please provide feedback on the instructions about how to complete and submit applications.

- We recognise that the MRFF is a dynamic fund. However, more can be done to alert the medical and health research sector about future grant opportunities. More notice of grant opportunities enables the sector to better plan, organise and facilitate partnerships with end-users, service delivery institutions and key stakeholders. This in turn supports better designed projects, enhancing the likelihood of impact being achieved leading to improved health outcomes.
- Grant opportunities being open for a longer period will support quality applications, strengthened through well considered partnerships and collaborations. Multiple IRU members have now received feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders that the tight timeframes to respond to MRFF grant opportunities are placing undue pressure on their organisations to fast track collaboration discussions. Other recommendations include ensuring that major grant releases do not coincide with the December/January holiday season, as the NHMRC have done.
- Whilst partnerships are encouraged, often there is no place to attach a letter of support or outline the role of partners in an MRFF application.
- Page limits don't always align with the weight of criteria. For example, the NHMRC applications have more pages available to 'project methodology' but yet the highest weighting in assessment is given to project impact which has a reduced page allowance.
- Grants via BGH provide little instruction on the format and content of an application, and this would benefit from greater instruction.
- There have been many inconsistencies and errors in the template for RGMS/Sapphire submissions, and it is still unclear for researchers and research offices how you intend the Part E section laid out. There are also inconsistencies as to the inclusion of statements on whether the research has a component relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



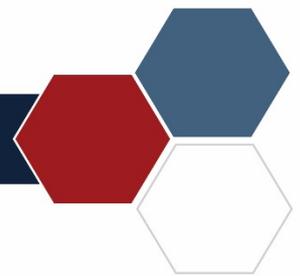
Question 6. Assessment

MRFF competitive Grant Opportunity Guidelines contain information about the assessment criteria for that Grant Opportunity and how applications will be assessed.

Q6a. In your experience as an applicant to MRFF competitive Grant Opportunities in 2020, please provide feedback on:

- *how well the assessment criteria align with the objectives and outcomes of the Grant Opportunity*
- *your understanding of how the information requested in applications is used to inform their assessment*
- *your understanding of the characteristics of competitive (is successful) applications.*

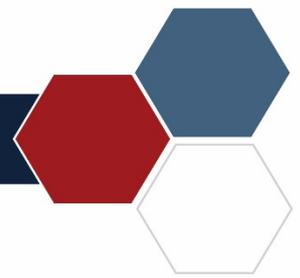
- NHMRC's approach in summarising results of its grant application rounds is a useful resource. We recommend that MRFF assesses the feasibility of replicating the NHMRC approach, as well as publishing guidance notes on critical success factors and observations from grant rounds. For example, NHMRC has provided guidance on how it assesses Research Impact as part of the Track record.
- Assessment processes are sometimes difficult for new grant applicants to understand. As such, we encourage further opportunities for early/mid-career researchers to serve on grant review panels.
- There is ambiguity that exists for the assessment criterion *Overall Value and Risk*, and feedback from assessment panel members suggest that it has minimal value in discriminating value between applications.
- Consistency of information provided in the guidelines across grant opportunities would be a significant improvement.
- We recommend that the MRFF provides an overview of what makes a successful grant for all schemes, as you did for the Frontier program.
- Our understanding of successful applications is that they are often awarded to large groups who are already successful.
- There does seem to be a good deal of overlap in requirements on different criteria and other sections of the application for BGH submissions e.g. section E and section G. Plus the requirement to attach a more detailed research proposal. It would be good to streamline the questions and cut down on overlap.



Q6b. In your experience as an assessor of applications to MRFF competitive Grant Opportunities in 2020, please provide feedback on:

- *how well the assessment criteria align with the objectives and outcomes of the Grant Opportunity*
- *whether the information provided in applications is sufficient to inform your assessment of projects*
- *whether the information provided in the Scoring Matrix and the Rating Scale for Overall Value and Risk enables you to distinguish more competitive applications from those that are less competitive or not competitive.*

- The information provided in the Scoring Matrix has been useful to guide decisions on applications.
- IRU members have expressed concerns that assessment panels lack diversity. For example, feedback received suggests that often panels have no allied health representation.
- Some reviewers for NHMRC Investigator grants were confused as they were told not to assess the MRFF two-page submission for their allocated grant reviews. At a later date they were then sent different two-page summaries from applicants and asked to provide a simple yes or no as to whether it fit the criteria for an MRFF grant. This appears to be an area that could be streamlined for grant review panels.

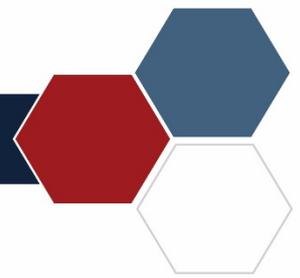


Question 7. Outcomes

MRFF Grant Opportunity Guidelines describe how funding decisions are made and announced, how MRFF grants are managed, and your obligations as a grantee if you are successful in obtaining funding.

Q7. Please provide feedback on your experiences as an MRFF grantee, for example in understanding and then meeting your obligations.

- There is a general trend that successful grants are announced initially via Minister for Health media releases. In some instances, this is the first time grant applicants and University Research Offices learn of results.
- Outcome data should be updated, and data should be provided showing funding by institution, gender, and career stage. Related, a searchable web-based database of all previously funded grants would be a positive development, similar to the ARC.
- Closer coordination of grant announcements between the administering grant body and research offices is recommended, enabling multiple benefits including enabling university communication units to better promote the Commonwealth Governments investment in medical and health research.
- The feedback provided to unsuccessful MRFF applicants would benefit from the inclusion of qualitative feedback. Without this feedback it makes it hard for applicants to determine whether to revise the application for a future round or to move on to different opportunities.
- When announcements are delayed, applicants should be communicated with to inform them of a revised expected timeline. This allows for future planning.



Question 8. Additional Comments

Q8. Please provide any other feedback on your experiences as an MRFF applicant, assessor and/or grantee.

- The sizable MRFF investment to support medical and health research is much appreciated and valued.
- The in-direct costs of undertaking MRFF supported research are not covered by MRFF funds awarded. For universities, MRFF funding are typically treated as Category 1 income, the same as NHMRC and ARC competitive grant funding. With research block grants (RBGs) not forecasted to increase, the research block grant per dollar of Category 1 research income will fall. If you consider the RBGs to cover the indirect costs of research, then they will do so less in future. The IRU encourages the Department of Health to work with other key government stakeholders such as the NHMRC, ARC and the Department of Education to develop a whole of government approach to the issue of funding indirect research costs (MRFF 2016-2021 Strategy, p. 7).
- In light of the MRFF scheme being dynamic, prior awareness of future MRFF schemes give an advantage to those that have this information (e.g. institutions that are represented on Expert Advisory Panels). As these panels are often dominated by a small number, typically urban based institutions, other organisations are disadvantaged. To counter this disadvantage, more information about future funding priorities must be publicly released to the sector – in advance – to ensure a level playing field.
- Related to the above point, concern remains that funds being awarded are disproportionately concentrated to a small number of large universities based in Melbourne and Sydney. The release of the results data and analysis mentioned above, will also assist the Department of Health and key stakeholders in monitoring patterns of MRFF fund distribution across Australia, including supporting rural and regional health priorities.
- The sector would benefit from understanding the rationale of why some grants go through the NHMRC and others through the BGH.
- We encourage the MRFF to develop a more dynamic, current method of providing information on planned initiatives. For example, the MRFF snapshot was a positive development, however, it provided little information about future grant releases, priorities and timing.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.