

Submission to National Health and Medical Research
Council

ATSE SUBMISSION TO NHMRC CONSULTATION ON OPTIONS TO REACH GENDER EQUITY IN THE INVESTIGATOR GRANTS SCHEME

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The Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering (ATSE) is a Learned Academy of independent, non-political experts helping Australians understand and use technology to solve complex problems. Bringing together Australia's leading thinkers in applied science, technology and engineering, ATSE provides impartial, practical and evidence-based advice on how to achieve sustainable solutions and advance prosperity.

ATSE is committed to gender equity in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Our [Women in STEM Decadal Plan](#) – developed together with the Australian Academy of Science – outlines a vision for achieving gender equity in STEM, this includes improving retention of women in STEM through their career progression. ATSE supports active inclusion of women and other underrepresented groups in the STEM sector through the [Elevate: Boosting Women in STEM](#) program and [Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit](#) pilot program. Elevate addresses gender inequities in STEM by providing scholarships for women in STEM, fostering more women-led industry-academia collaborations in applied research and business, growing professional skills of women in STEM and by propelling women into leadership. The Toolkit, developed in response to the Women in STEM Decadal Plan findings, provides reference guides for STEM-focused businesses to embed diversity and inclusion in their recruitment, retention, and reach.

ATSE welcomes the opportunity to respond to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)'s consultation on *Options to Reach Gender Equity in the Investigator Grant Scheme*. ATSE has previously contributed to this consultation through attendance at a peak body roundtable in July 2022. This submission engages with consultation survey questions 3, 4, 5, 8, and 11, concerning non-binary inclusion, gender disparities in the investigator grant scheme, and selection of the proposed options. ATSE makes the following recommendations to improve gender equity in NHMRC grant allocation:

Recommendation 1: Reserve at least 40% of Investigator Grants at each grant level for female researchers, 40% for male researchers, and 20% unspecified.

Recommendation 2: Require institutions applying for NHMRC funding to ensure a 40:40:20 ratio for gender of Chief Investigators, at each level, by 2030.

Model selection

Primarily, the core issue is that there is not enough funding for the number of fundable project proposals. This necessitates that many outstanding researchers with meritorious research ideas will miss out on funding, regardless of gender. In many of ATSE's previous submissions to the Australian Government, increased investment in research and development has been recommended as a matter of urgency (e.g. ATSE 2022a; ATSE 2022b; ATSE 2022c). Unless the underlying funding issue is addressed, Australia will continue to miss out on the benefits of proposed research. However, addressing this is outside the scope of the NHMRC discussion paper.

Restricting the options to those presented in the discussion paper, Options 3 and 4 represent the most sensible pathways to reducing the gender gap in NHMRC Investigator Grant allocation. ATSE would

support the implementation of either of these models, with Option 3 (equal number of grants awarded, by gender) is preferred due to differentials in the cost of doing research. If Option 4 (equal funding, by gender) is selected, then further modelling would be required on the impact of gender disparities and cost differentials in different sub-disciplines. However, if Option 3 is implemented, the NHMRC should also continue to monitor total funding by gender per level and investigate the causes of any persistent inequities. For example, if more women researchers are part-time, they will receive less funding overall even if the grant numbers are the same. This could indicate a need for further action in future.

Either of these models could be improved by modifying them to be based on a 40:40:20 framework (at least 40% male, 40% female, 20% unspecified) at each level. This would provide a small amount of elasticity for either male or female grant outcomes at each level to be between 40 – 60% in any given year.

A 40:40:20 model would also be inclusive of non-binary and gender diverse researchers. This would allow for inclusion of non-binary and gender diverse researchers within the 20% of unspecified grants, without the pitfalls of bundling non-binary researchers with women, which would not only be inaccurate but could also be construed as ‘othering’ both female and non-binary researchers.

ATSE also agrees with the implementation of blind peer review, as foreshadowed by the NHMRC CEO (Kelso, 2022). While this may not be a perfect way of ensuring anonymity, it will reduce the potential to introduce gender bias at this stage.

While it is imperative that the gender disparity in senior-level funding is addressed, the framing of this to researchers and the public needs to be carefully considered. Structural Priority funding has been an important interim solution to lessen funding inequities for women and Indigenous researchers. However, affirmative action may be misinterpreted as conveying an unfair advantage to women, and projects labelled as “near miss” may be misinterpreted as being below standard. It is critical that public communication of the new funding model clearly identifies that this intervention is a modest attempt to counterbalance the systemic advantages accrued by male researchers.

Recommendation 1: Reserve at least 40% of Investigator Grants at each grant level for female researchers, 40% for male researchers, and 20% unspecified.

Alternative options for enhancing gender equity

Focusing on the gender gap in grant outcomes, as noted by the discussion paper, the driving factor is the deficit of senior level women researchers. An intervention to equalise grant outcomes will go some way to stemming the outflow of women from health and medical research. However, further solutions are required to address this multi-faceted problem. This is a matter of urgency as women leaving research represent a significant loss of talent and loss of investment in their training.

As identified by [ATSE’s Elevate program consultation](#), broader social and cultural issues create systemic barriers to gender equity in STEM (ATSE, 2022d). Women’s greater share of caring responsibilities is a key issue that prevents women from workforce participation and facilitates the disproportionate advancement of men. While this is beyond the scope of changing the funding allocation model, perspectives from women who have left research careers due to systemic issues must be considered in future efforts to achieve gender equity in medical research grant outcomes.

There is scope for the NHMRC to leverage its funding allocations to incentivise institutions in improving their own gender equity. For example, the NHMRC could reward institutional credentials for gender equity such as Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) [Employer of Choice for Gender Equality](#) certification, Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) Athena Swan Bronze or Silver award, and

adoption of best practice policies and actions arising from Association of Australian Medical Research Institutes (AAMRI)'s Gender Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy or Universities Australia's Educating for Equality resources. This could be implemented by having a pool of funding accessible only to institutions that can demonstrate active gender equity strategies.

A further lever for attaining gender equity in grant outcomes is requiring institutions applying for NHMRC funding to provide an approximately equal number of applications with male and female Chief Investigators, per level, using the 40:40:20 framework as described above. Equalising this ratio for senior researchers would address the main contributor to the disparity in grant outcomes. Institutions would then need to actively manage gender disparities in promotion and retention to meet this requirement. To allow institutions time to prepare, ATSE recommends flagging that this will become a requirement by 2030.

Recommendation 2: Require institutions applying for NHMRC funding to ensure a 40:40:20 ratio for gender of Chief Investigators, at each level, by 2030.

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