

## **MND Australia Review criteria and scoring guide – grants commencing 2026**

### **Innovator Grants**

The objective of the Innovator Grant program is to support innovative research projects ranging from discovery to implementation.

Although applicants at all levels are permitted to apply, the program is ***intended to provide particular opportunities for early and mid-career researchers***. It is strongly preferred that senior researchers (Level E) encourage more junior researchers from their research teams to apply. It is still expected however, that the Principal Investigator (PI) will have the necessary leadership and skills to achieve the proposed project aims.

The program is not intended to support research where a clinical trial or cohort study is the primary objective.

### **The Postdoctoral Fellowship and PhD Scholarship Top-up programs**

MND Australia's Postdoctoral Fellowships aim to encourage young researchers to focus their interest on classical forms of MND. The program is targeted at postdoctoral scientists with a track record in MND or areas of neuroscience related to MND or who will bring novel, cutting edge skills to MND research. Applicants must have no more than five years research experience from the date their doctoral thesis was passed.

The PhD Scholarship Top-Up scheme is targeted at providing additional incentive for outstanding PhD students working in MND research.

There is a strong focus on the capability and future potential of the applicant for these programs.

### **Review criteria**

For all programs, applications will be scored against each of the four review criteria. "Capability" and "leadership" are intended to identify current and future high-flyers, and it is fully appreciated that many early and mid-career researchers may have had limited opportunity to demonstrate these attributes:

- 1) Research Quality** - 'Research Quality' is the quality of the project aims and the proposed research plan. Given the focus on innovation, it is expected that the research proposals will include some element of risk; applicants should demonstrate an appreciation of those risks and incorporate strategies to address any uncertainties as part of their proposed research plan. With innovation and creativity as prime objectives, the scheme is not intended to fund research that has already been performed or to validate findings already established in other disease areas. Although preliminary results and pilot studies are not mandatory, applications should present a well-supported hypothesis. Such support can include preliminary data or be based on other studies. In the case of care research, benefits to the quality of life or quality of care of people living with MND should be well-described.
- 2) Innovation & Creativity** - 'Innovation & Creativity' measure the degree to which the ***research seeks to challenge and shift current paradigms and/or has a major impact on a health research*** area through one or more studies that creatively:
  - develop or use novel research concepts, approaches, methodologies, technologies or interventions,

- propose a reinterpretation, refinement, improvement or new application of existing theoretical concepts, approaches, methodologies, technologies or interventions, or
- integrate and adapt concepts, approaches, methodologies, technologies or interventions from other research fields or disciplines for a new purpose or in a new way.
- considers how research outcomes will be implemented in the case of care research

The scheme is ***not intended to fund the incremental progression*** of a research project that has already been performed or to validate ***or undertake minor variations of findings already established in other models or disease areas***. Applicants should clearly explain their point of difference from current concepts, approaches, methodologies, technologies or interventions in order to sufficiently demonstrate innovation and creativity in their proposed research.

**3) Significance** - 'Significance' is the extent to which the outcomes and outputs will result in advances that provide insight into the causes, management, cure or alleviation of MND. ***The potential benefit and relevance of the research to people living with MND should be very clearly delineated.***

**4) Capability** - 'Capability' is the appropriateness of the applicant team and its expertise, the resources and access to additional personnel necessary to achieve the project aims. Capability is a combination of traditional track record elements together with the ability of the PI and their team and resources to accomplish the proposed project.

Traditional track record elements include number and quality of publications, grants held, or conference invitations. Capability will be assessed relative to opportunity. Relative to opportunity takes into account career disruptions as well as different career paths and entry points. Further information on Relative to Opportunity can be found below. Applicants should be encouraged to present their productivity metrics in terms of their leadership contribution (see below) as well as the relevant impact of the research outputs on MND or related fields of research.

For care research, partnering with health services to improve MND care delivery should be a key consideration.

Further assessment includes demonstration of their ability to lead the project, the overall technical capability of the team and the availability of key resources.

### **Leadership**

Relative to opportunity (including career stage) and to their field of research, the applicant demonstrates performance in:

- supervision, mentoring, training and/or career development of staff and/or students within and/or beyond their research group
- experience and contribution to the peer review of publications and grant applications, nationally and/or internationally
- contribution to community engagement, public advocacy, government advisory boards or committees, professional societies at a local, national and/or international level
- non-research contribution(s) to department, centre, institute or organisation e.g. leadership or membership of committee
- conception and direction of a research project or program

- building and maintaining collaborative networks necessary to achieve research outcomes within and/or beyond their institution.

## **Score Weighting**

### ***Innovator Grants***

To reflect our strong focus on funding only the best and most innovative research, scores for each category will be weighted as following when calculating a final overall score;

- Research Quality - 40%
- Innovation and creativity - 30%
- Significance - 20%
- Capability - 10%

### ***Postdoctoral Fellowships and PhD Scholarship Top-ups***

To reflect our strong focus on supporting the most promising up and coming researchers, scores for each category will be weighted as following when calculating a final overall score;

- Research Quality - 20%
- Innovation and creativity - 20%
- Significance - 20%
- Capability - 40%

## **Scoring**

- Each criterion will be scored as follows:
- **7 Exceptional**
- **6 Outstanding**
- **5 Excellent**
- **4 Very Good**
- **3 Good**
- **2 Satisfactory**
- **1 Weak or limited**

CATEGORY	Research Quality	Innovation & Creativity	Significance	Capability
7 Exceptional	<p>The project aims and proposed research plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are supported by an extremely well justified hypothesis/rationale;</li> <li>are focused, well-defined, extremely coherent and have a flawless study design and approach;</li> <li>would be extremely competitive with the best, similar research proposals internationally;</li> <li>have extremely well identified and managed scientific and technical risks;</li> <li>in the case of care research, demonstrate extremely well the immediate and/or long-term benefits to the quality of life or quality of care of people living with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>For the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the planned research demonstrates extremely innovative project aims, which will result in an extremely substantial shift in the current paradigm, and/or lead to an extremely substantial breakthrough or impact in MND knowledge, treatment or care;</li> <li>in the case of care research, the research has an extremely well-articulated implementation plan.</li> </ul>	<p>The planned research, relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>will address an issue of critical importance to people living with MND;</li> <li>will result in extremely significant outcomes in the science, knowledge, or practice in MND;</li> <li>will lead to extremely significant research outputs (intellectual property, publications, products, services, policy change, improved care delivery etc.);</li> <li>has an extremely well-articulated path to how the research will impact the lives of people with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>The CIA demonstrates a very strong capability to lead the team in achieving the project aims. The CI applicant team overall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has exceptional capability to execute the project and deliver outcomes;</li> <li>has access to exceptional technical resources, infrastructure, equipment and facilities and if required, has access to additional support personnel (Associate Investigators) necessary for the project;</li> <li>has an extremely appropriate balance of integrated expertise, experience and training that specifically targets all aspects of the proposed research, in terms of both depth and breadth;</li> <li>In the case of care research, the research has an extremely well-articulated plan to partner with health services to improve MND care delivery.</li> </ul>

CATEGORY	Research Quality	Innovation & Creativity	Significance	Capability
6 Outstanding	<p>The project aims and proposed research plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are supported by a very well justified hypothesis/rationale;</li> <li>are focused, well-defined, very highly coherent and have an outstanding study design and approach with a minor weakness;</li> <li>would be very highly competitive with the best, similar research proposals internationally;</li> <li>have very well identified and managed scientific and technical risks with only a few minor weaknesses;</li> <li>in the case of care research, demonstrate well the immediate or long-term benefits to the quality of life or quality of care of people living with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>Relative to the MND research field,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the planned research demonstrates very highly innovative project aims, which will result in a very substantial shift in the current paradigm, and/or lead to a very substantial breakthrough or impact in MND knowledge, treatment or care;</li> <li>in the case of care research, the research has a well-articulated implementation plan.</li> </ul>	<p>The planned research, relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>will address an issue that is of very high importance to people living with MND;</li> <li>will result in very highly significant outcomes in the science, knowledge or practice in MND;</li> <li>will lead to very highly significant research outputs (intellectual property, publications, products, services, policy change, improved care delivery etc.);</li> <li>has a very well-articulated path to how the research will impact the lives of people with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>The CIA demonstrates a strong capability to lead the team in achieving the project aims. The CI applicant team overall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has outstanding capability to execute the project and deliver outcomes;</li> <li>has access to outstanding technical resources, infrastructure, equipment and facilities and if required, has access to additional support personnel (Associate Investigators) necessary for the project;</li> <li>has a very highly appropriate balance of integrated expertise, experience and training that is targeted towards all aspects of the proposed research, in terms of both depth and breadth;</li> <li>In the case of care research, the research has a well-articulated plan to partner with health services to improve MND care delivery.</li> </ul>

CATEGORY	Research Quality	Innovation & Creativity	Significance	Capability
5 Excellent	<p>The project aims and proposed research plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are supported by a well justified hypothesis/rationale;</li> <li>are focused, well-defined, highly coherent and have an excellent study design and approach with a few minor weaknesses;</li> <li>would be competitive with the best, similar research proposals internationally;</li> <li>have well identified and managed scientific and technical risks with a few minor concerns;</li> <li>in the case of care research, demonstrate well identified benefits to the quality of life or quality of care of people living with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>Relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the planned research demonstrates highly innovative project aims, which will result in a substantial shift in the current paradigm, and/or lead to a substantial breakthrough or impact in MND knowledge, treatment or care;</li> <li>in the case of care research, the research has an articulated implementation plan.</li> </ul>	<p>The planned research, relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>will address an issue of considerable importance to people living with MND;</li> <li>will result in highly significant outcomes in the science, knowledge or practice in MND;</li> <li>will lead to highly significant research outputs (intellectual property, publications, products, services, policy change, improved care delivery etc.);</li> <li>has a well-articulated path to how the research will impact the lives of people with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>The CIA demonstrates good capability to lead the team in achieving the project aims. The CI applicant team overall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has excellent capability to execute the project and deliver outcomes;</li> <li>has access to excellent technical resources, infrastructure, equipment and facilities and if required, has access to additional support personnel (Associate Investigators) necessary for the project;</li> <li>has a highly appropriate balance of integrated expertise, experience and training necessary for all aspects of the proposed research, both in terms of both depth and breadth;</li> <li>In the case of care research, the research articulates a plan to partner with health services to improve MND care delivery.</li> </ul>

CATEGORY	Research Quality	Innovation & Creativity	Significance	Capability
4 Very good	<p>The project aims and proposed research plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are supported by a well justified hypothesis/rationale;</li> <li>are focused, well-developed, coherent and have a very good study design and approach with several minor concerns;</li> <li>would be likely to be competitive with high quality, similar research proposals internationally;</li> <li>have identified and managed scientific and technical risks, with several minor concerns;</li> <li>in the case of care research, demonstrate probable benefits to the quality of life or quality of care of people living with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>Relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the planned research demonstrates innovative project aims, which will result in a moderate shift in the current paradigm, and/or lead to a moderate breakthrough or impact in MND knowledge, treatment or care;</li> <li>in the case of care research, the research identifies an implementation plan.</li> </ul>	<p>The planned research, relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>will address an issue of importance to people living with MND ;</li> <li>will result in significant outcomes in the science, knowledge or practice in MND;</li> <li>will lead to significant research outputs (intellectual property, publications, products, services, policy change, improved care delivery etc.);</li> <li>has an articulated path to how the research will impact the lives of people with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>The CIA demonstrates capability to lead the team in achieving the project aims. The CI applicant team overall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has very good capability to execute the project and deliver outcomes;</li> <li>has access to very good technical resources, infrastructure, equipment and facilities and if required, has access to additional support personnel (Associate Investigators) necessary for the project;</li> <li>has an appropriate balance of integrated expertise, experience and training necessary for all aspects of the proposed research, in terms of both depth and breadth;</li> <li>In the case of care research, the research identifies a plan to partner with health services to improve MND care delivery.</li> </ul>



CATEGORY	Research Quality	Innovation & Creativity	Significance	Capability
3 Good	<p>The project aims and proposed research plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are supported by a sound hypothesis/rationale;</li> <li>are logical, generally clear in the study design and approach with more than a few minor concerns;</li> <li>would be somewhat competitive with high quality, similar research proposals internationally;</li> <li>have identified and managed scientific and technical risks, with some major concerns;</li> <li>in the case of care research, demonstrate possible benefits to the quality of life or quality of care of people living with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>Relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the planned research demonstrates some innovative project aims, which will likely result in some shift in the current paradigm, and/or lead to some breakthrough or impact in MND knowledge, treatment or care;</li> <li>in the case of care research, the research states an intention to plan implementation.</li> </ul>	<p>The planned research, relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>will address an issue of some importance to people living with MND;</li> <li>will result in moderately significant outcomes in the science, knowledge or practice in MND;</li> <li>will lead to moderately significant research outputs (intellectual property, publications, products, services, policy change, improved care delivery etc.);</li> <li>has a moderately-articulated path to how the research will impact the lives of people with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>The CIA demonstrates some capability to lead the team in achieving the project aims.</p> <p>The CI applicant team overall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has good capability to execute the project and deliver outcomes;</li> <li>has access to good technical resources, infrastructure, equipment and facilities and if required, has access to additional support personnel (Associate Investigators) necessary for the project;</li> <li>has expertise, experience and training that is essential, integrated and balanced for most aspects of the proposed research, in terms of both depth and breadth, with some major concerns;</li> <li>In the case of care research, the research states an intention to partner with health services to improve MND care delivery.</li> </ul>

CATEGORY	Research Quality	Innovation & Creativity	Significance	Capability
2 Satisfactory	<p>The project aims and proposed research plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are supported by a satisfactory hypothesis/rationale;</li> <li>are satisfactory in the study design and approach, but may lack clarity in some aspects and may contain some major weaknesses;</li> <li>would be marginally competitive with high quality, similar research proposals internationally;</li> <li>have identified and managed scientific and technical risks, but there are several major concerns;</li> <li>in the case of care research, lack clarity on the benefits to the quality of life or quality of care of people living with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>Relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the planned research demonstrates somewhat innovative project aims, which will result in a minor shift in the current paradigm, and/or lead to a minor breakthrough or impact in MND knowledge, treatment or care;</li> <li>in the case of care research, the research indicates an implementation plan.</li> </ul>	<p>The planned research, relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>will address an issue of marginal importance to people living with MND;</li> <li>may result in outcomes in the science, knowledge or practice in MND;</li> <li>may lead to research outputs (intellectual property, publications, products, services, policy change, improved care delivery etc.);</li> <li>has considered a path to how the research will impact the lives of people with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>The CIA demonstrates some capability to lead the team in achieving the project aims.</p> <p>The CI applicant team overall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has some capability to execute the project and deliver outcomes;</li> <li>has access to some of the necessary technical resources, infrastructure, equipment and facilities and if required, may have access to additional support personnel (Associate Investigators) relevant to the project, and raises some notable concerns;</li> <li>has some but not all of the expertise, experience and training essential to the proposed research in terms of depth and breadth, and raises several major concerns;</li> <li>In the case of care research, the research indicates consideration of a plan to partner with health services to improve MND care delivery.</li> </ul>

CATEGORY	Research Quality	Innovation & Creativity	Significance	Capability
1 Marginal to Poor	<p>The project aims and proposed research plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are underpinned by a weak hypothesis/rationale;</li> <li>have significant flaws in the study design and approach and may contain several major weaknesses;</li> <li>are unlikely to be competitive with similar research proposals internationally;</li> <li>have not satisfactorily identified and managed scientific and technical risks;</li> <li>in the case of care research, will not benefit the quality of life or quality of care of people living with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>Relative to the MND research field:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the planned research does not demonstrate innovative project aims, and is unlikely to cause a shift in the current paradigm, or lead to a breakthrough or impact MND knowledge, treatment or care;</li> <li>in the case of care research, the research does not identify an implementation plan.</li> </ul>	<p>The planned research, relative to the MND research field</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>will address an issue of some concern to people living with MND;</li> <li>unlikely to result in outcomes in the science, knowledge or practice in MND;</li> <li>unlikely to lead to research outputs (intellectual property, publications, products, services, policy change, improved care delivery etc.);</li> <li>has not considered a path to how the research will impact the lives of people with MND.</li> </ul>	<p>The CIA does not demonstrate capability to lead the team in achieving the project aims. The CI applicant team overall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>does not demonstrate capability to execute the project and deliver outcomes;</li> <li>does not have access to the necessary technical resources, infrastructure, equipment and facilities and if required, has access to additional support personnel (Associate Investigators) relevant to the project, and raises several major concerns;</li> <li>does not have access to expertise, experience and training essential to the proposed research in terms of depth and breadth;</li> <li>In the case of care research, the research does identify a plan to partner with health services to improve MND care delivery.</li> </ul>

## **MND Australia Relative to Opportunity Guidelines**

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of this document is to outline MND Australia's Relative to Opportunity Policy with respect to;

- MND Australia peer review, and
- Eligibility to apply for Postdoctoral Fellowships

MND Australia's objective is to support the best Australian MND research and the best researchers, at all career stages. MND Australia seeks to ensure that researchers with a variety of career experiences and those who have experienced pregnancy or a major illness/injury or have caring responsibilities, are not disadvantaged in applying for MND Australia grants.

### ***Policy approach***

MND Australia considers Relative to Opportunity to mean that assessment processes should accurately assess an applicant's track record and associated productivity and achievements relative to stage of career, including considering whether productivity and contribution are commensurate with the opportunities available to the applicant. It also means that applicants with career disruptions should not be disadvantaged (in terms of years since they received their PhD) when determining their eligibility for Postdoctoral Fellowships and that their Career Disruptions should be considered when their applications are being reviewed.

Considerations should include;

- **Research opportunity:** Researchers' outputs and outcomes should reflect their opportunities to advance their career and undertake the research they conduct.
- **Career diversity:** Researchers with career paths that include time spent outside of academia should not be disadvantaged. MND Australia recognises that time spent in sectors such as industry or care provision may enhance research outcomes for both individuals and teams.

The above principles frame MND Australia's approach to the assessment of a researcher's capability during review of grant applications and eligibility of applicants applying for Postdoctoral Fellowships. MND Australia expects that those who provide expert assessment during peer review will give clear and explicit attention to these principles to identify the highest quality research and researchers to be funded. MND Australia recognises that life circumstances can be very varied and therefore it is not possible to implement a formulaic approach to applying Relative to Opportunity and Career Disruption considerations during peer review.

### ***Relative to Opportunity considerations during peer review of applications for funding***

During peer review of applications, circumstances considered under the Relative to Opportunity Policy are:

- amount of time spent as an active researcher
- available resources, including situations where research is being conducted in remote or isolated communities
- building relationships of trust with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities over long periods that can impact on track record and productivity
- clinical, administrative or teaching workload
- relocation of an applicant and his/her research laboratory or clinical practice setting or other similar circumstances that impact on research productivity

- for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants, community obligations including 'sorry business'
- the typical performance of researchers in the research field in question
- research outputs and productivity noting time employed in other sectors; for example, there might be a reduction in publications when employed in sectors such as industry or care provision
- carer responsibilities (that do not come under the Career Disruption policy below).
- disability (including mental health conditions and psychosocial disability) or illness
- calamities, such as pandemics, bushfires or cyclones.

***Career Disruption considerations during peer review and eligibility to apply for Postdoctoral Fellowships***

A Career Disruption is defined as a prolonged interruption to an applicant's capacity to work, due to:

- pregnancy
- major illness/injury
- carer responsibilities.

The period of career disruption may be used:

- to determine an applicant's eligibility for a Postdoctoral Fellowship
- to allow for the inclusion of additional capability information for assessment of an application
- for consideration by peer reviewers.

To be considered for the purposes of eligibility and peer review, a period of Career Disruption is defined as:

- a continuous absence from work for 90 calendar days or more, and/or
- continuous, long-term, part-time employment (with defined %FTE) due to circumstances classified as Career Disruption, with the absence amounting to a total of 90 calendar days or more.

***Career Disruption and eligibility to apply for Fellowships***

A Career Disruption can affect an applicant's eligibility to apply for a Postdoctoral Fellowship. For such grants, the 5-year (Postdoctoral Fellowship) limit on the number of years post-PhD may be extended commensurate with the period of the Career Disruption.