Addressing the research impact component

of NHMRC Investigator Grants 2025

Contents

Purpose of this resource

This resource is designed to support ECU researchers to develop the *research impact component* of their **NHMRC Investigator Grant** 2025 application. It draws upon NHMRC guidelines and previous, high-scoring applications.

Introduction to key terms and concepts

Research impact

The NHMRC defines research impact as:

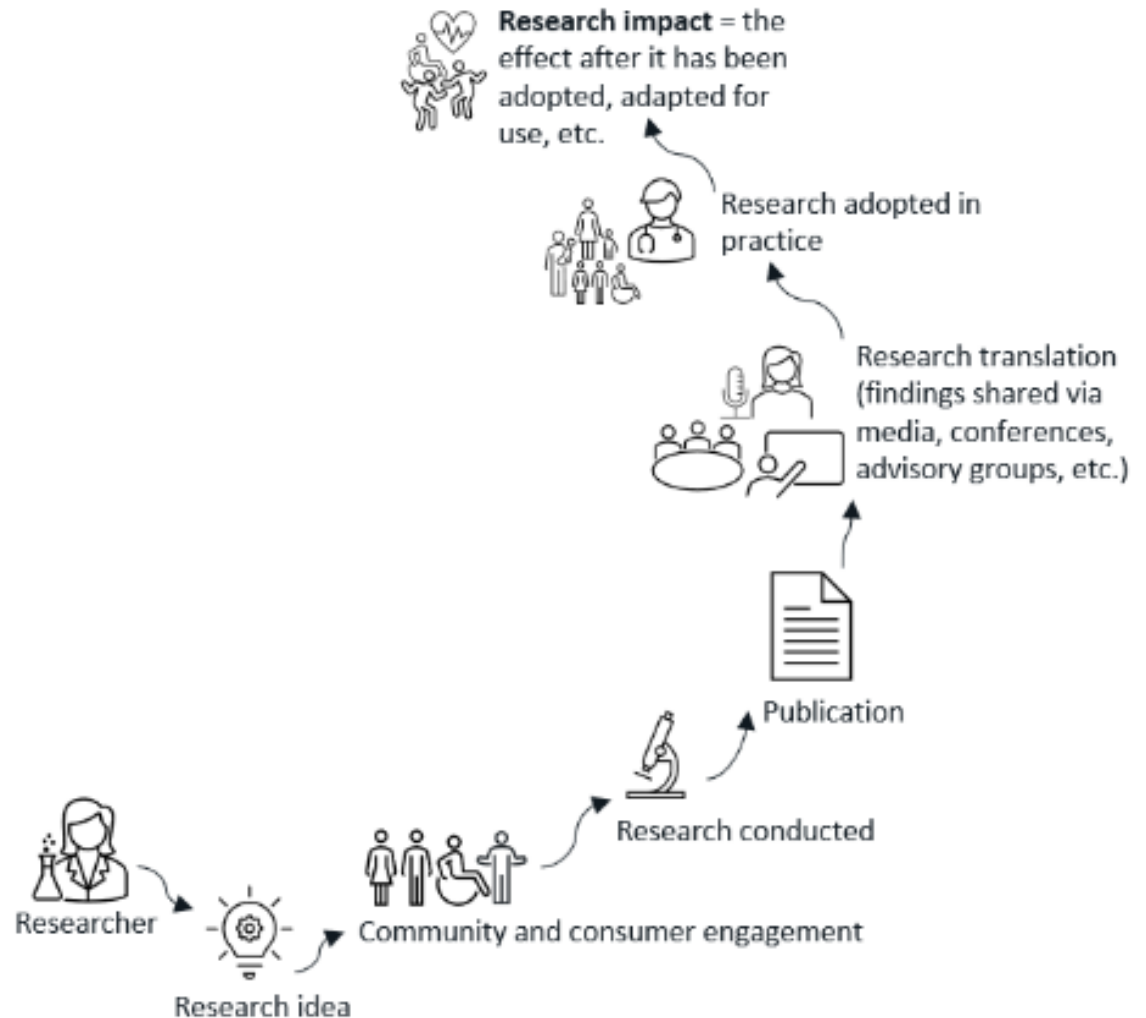*"The verifiable outcomes that research makes to knowledge, health, the economy and/or society. Impact is the effect of the research after it has been adopted, adapted for use, or used to inform further research."*
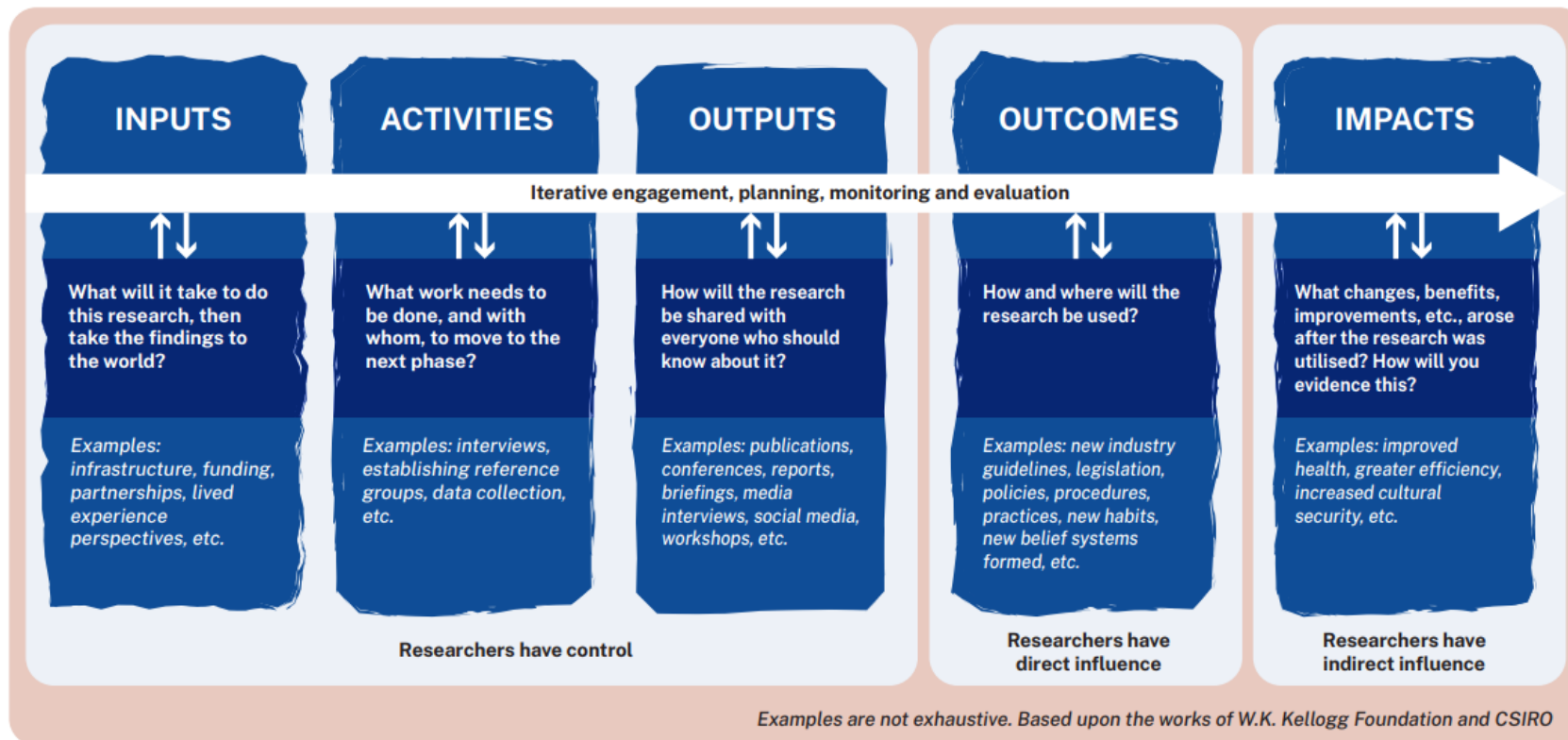
In other words, research impact could be either:

1. the benefit arising from research having been used in contexts outside of academia, or
2. a benefit to the entire field or influence within other fields of research.

Research impact can be difficult to demonstrate in some societal contexts – for instance, how might a researcher evaluate the population-level benefits of research findings having been incorporated into federal government policy? Successful workarounds for this challenge do exist and are addressed in more detail on pages 8 - 9.

The *Research Impact Pathway* on the following page offers another model to express the key concepts and stages of research impact.

Research impact = the effect after it has been adopted, adapted for use, etc.

Research adopted in practice

Research translation (findings shared via media, conferences, advisory groups, etc.)

Publication

Research conducted

Community and consumer engagement

Research idea

Researcher

Research Impact Pathway

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACTS
What will it take to do this research, then take the findings to the world?	What work needs to be done, and with whom, to move to the next phase?	How will the research be shared with everyone who should know about it?	How and where will the research be used?	What changes, benefits, improvements, etc., arose after the research was utilised? How will you evidence this?
Examples: infrastructure, funding, partnerships, lived experience perspectives, etc.	Examples: interviews, establishing reference groups, data collection, etc.	Examples: publications, conferences, reports, briefings, media interviews, social media, workshops, etc.	Examples: new industry guidelines, legislation, policies, procedures, practices, new habits, new belief systems formed, etc.	Examples: improved health, greater efficiency, increased cultural security, etc.

Iterative engagement, planning, monitoring and evaluation

Researchers have control

Researchers have direct influence

Researchers have indirect influence

Examples are not exhaustive. Based upon the works of W.K. Kellogg Foundation and CSIRO

Feedback from previous grant reviewers (2019 – 2023 rounds) noted that successful applicants clearly described and evidenced/corroborated research impact claims.

Reach of impact

"The extent, spread, breadth, and/or diversity of the beneficiaries of the impact, relative to the type of research impact."

Reach of impact is an expression of how far the benefit has spread. Sometimes this is geographic – for instance the reach may be national or international. Be as explicit as possible when naming the places your research has reached.

Reach can also refer to hard-to-reach or hardly-reached beneficiaries such as marginalised communities. Both geographic and social reach require considerable effort to achieve. Research impact in underserved, hard-to-reach communities should be described in context of the challenge and the achievement in order to convey importance.

Feedback from previous grant reviewers (2019 – 2023 rounds) addressed the importance of including evidence that the impact had significant and far-reaching benefits. Additionally, they noted successful applicants gave tangible examples to illustrate the change (impact) that occurred as a direct result of the research, and that an impact beyond the initial research finding was clearly identified.

Significance of impact

"The degree to which the impact has enabled, enriched, influenced, informed or changed the performance of policies, practices, products, services, culture, understanding, awareness or well-being of the beneficiaries (not the prevalence or magnitude of the issue)."

Clearly setting out the importance of the changes to a beneficiary can contribute greatly to a compelling narrative.

Consider whether it is possible and reasonable to relate your impact to a 'bigger picture'. For example, if research findings are used to develop an intervention which reduces public health expenditure; as well as expressing the amount of money saved, can this be expressed as a percentage of the health budget allocated to the particular area? Is there any other relevant information that expresses the significance of the impact?

Research program

"A cohesive body of research by the applicant. It is not limited to an individual case study (as used in a clinical context) or a single publication. A research program may be recent or in the past. Applicants need to outline the research program with corroborating evidence that can be independently assessed by peer reviewers."

Research program's contribution to research impact

"The degree to which the applicant's research program was necessary to achieve the impact(s) (knowledge, health, economic, and/or social impact) based on robust and verifiable evidence. The relationship between the applicant's research program (including related activities) and the impact may be foreseen or unforeseen, and may be an end-product or demonstrated during the research process. Research impact examples may include the adoption or adaptation of existing research."

Use a cause-and-effect approach to explain how the research program resulted in benefits in the world beyond academia. Previous grant reviewers noted that successful applicants clearly described and evidenced how the research program contributed to the reach and significance of the impact. Additionally, they noted that the applicant themselves clearly described and evidenced their contribution to the research program, which in turn led to the research impact.

Assessment Criteria Review
Track record- Research impact **(20%)**

The impact itself is expected to be recent, but the underlying research program is not constrained by time limits.

Categories of impact
The definitions provided below should be considered in conjunction with the scoring descriptors aligned with your career stage.

Knowledge impact
Research that has contributed to discoveries and/or demonstrable benefits emerging from adoption, adaption or use of the discover to inform further research.

Health impact
Research that has contributed to improvements in health through new therapeutics, diagnostics, or disease prevention; or by contributing to improvements in disease prevention, diagnosis and treatment, health policy, health systems, and quality of life.

Economic impact
Research that has contributed to the economic performance of the nation in which the research program was conducted, and/or for which the impact was intended, by creating new industries, jobs and valuable products, and reducing health care costs. An economic impact may also contribute to social or health impacts, including human capital gains and the value of life and health.

Social impact

Research that has contributed to improvements in the health of the society, including the well-being of the end user and the community. This may included improved ability to access health care services and to participate socially.

Examples of impact

A comprehensive collection of case studies have been provided by the NHMRC and are available from nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/impact-case-studies.

Writing about research impact

Understand the bigger picture, and explain how your research relates to it

It is easy to be so immersed and focussed upon a research area that the bigger picture fades into the periphery. The 'bigger picture' is the system-level implications of the research challenge. For instance, researchers aiming to develop an accurate test for a disease may consider the bigger picture to be the population level effect of the disease in terms of the proportion of the population who are affected – or will likely be affected in their lifetime; the cost to the health system of treating that disease; as well as future cost projections; and the combined reduction in life expectancy of sufferers. Being clear on the bigger picture provides an opportunity to add interest to the narrative and explain the significance of the problem and therefore the importance of addressing it.

Be very clear about the importance and relevance of your research

Draw upon evidence and explicitly state the extent of the problem, who it affects and how. Explain who will benefit from the research and how. Make it interesting without overstating.

What is and isn't impact

It might be a contribution of new knowledge to your discipline, or increased accuracy in diagnoses. Beware of conflating engagement and impact (see the *ECU Researcher Professional Development Framework* in the links below).

Mislabelling engagement (interactions between researchers and research end-users or beneficiaries outside of academia for the mutually beneficial transfer of knowledge, etc.) as impact is relatively common and can create negative perceptions amongst reviewers. Mapping out the pathway from research – to adoption / use / influence in a context outside of academia – and the benefits that arise from the use of research in that external context can be helpful to clarify what is engagement and what is impact before you begin writing.

Beware of jargon and technical terms

As an expert, your vocabulary includes terms that people outside your discipline do not understand. Writing about your research in terms that a lay audience can understand helps ensure your message is conveyed and received clearly. It can be useful to have someone outside of your discipline – who is

not familiar with your work – review it to identify jargon or technical terms that otherwise slip under the radar. Where technical terms cannot be removed, they should be defined the first time they are used.

Specify people and places

Explicitly state who you will work with on engagement and translation activities. Explicitly name the places where your research has had impact and wherever possible, avoid generalisations.

Examples below:

Generalisation (avoid this)	Specific (aim for this)
We worked with the government to identify areas of priority…	Working with the Director General of WA Health, we identified priority areas…
A number of hospitals…	Three Western Australian and four Victorian public hospitals…
International industry stakeholders…	Four laboratory managers, located in Australia, Singapore, South Africa and New Zealand…

Active voice

Most academic writing uses passive voice, or indirect language. Grant writing should privilege active voice – that is, direct language. Examples below:

Passive voice (avoid this where possible)	Active voice (aim for this)
The research was led by Professor Doe.	Professor Doe lead the research.
The research findings were incorporated into the government's new policy on health.	The government incorporated the research findings into its new health policy.
The findings of the research were of concern to patient advocates.	The research findings concerned patient advocates.

Addressing research impact early in your career

Research impact typically takes a long time to emerge to a point that it can be evidenced. This presents a specific challenge for early and mid-career researchers.

In response to this challenge, a narrative which compels the reader to believe impact will occur because of the researcher's particular actions and the relevance of research to real-world conditions, contexts and agendas is suggested. Explicit explanation of these 'bigger picture' conditions, and the ways in which the research responds to these, can lead to an assumption that the research will be impactful without overclaiming.

For instance, research that has been undertaken in response to a declared government priority area, with proactive stakeholders who are strategically aligned with, and have demonstrated a commitment to addressing the problem the research also seeks to address, can create an expectation that the research will have impact in time.

To achieve a compelling narrative, the earlier recommendations to use clear, specific, explicit language, and link the research to a broader picture still apply.

Considering that researchers have direct control over the first three stages of the research impact pathway (inputs, activities and outputs), with direct influence over the outcomes stage (which involves the adoption of research by next-users, end-users or beneficiaries external to academia), and indirect influence over the impact stage (ensuring that the first three stages are managed in a way that ensures relevance, connection to beneficiaries, end-users or next-users), can lend itself to a compelling impact narrative.

The non-linear nature of research impact pathways also means that capturing evidence of attribution over the years is essential to making cause-and-effect claims at a later point. This is particularly the case when beneficiaries, research partners, next-users or end-users move on from their roles over time and retrospective evidence is sought years after the engagement occurred.

Further resources and support

For questions about applying for a grant, contact the Research Pre-Award team – research-preaward@ecu.edu.au.

For more resources and guidance on research engagement and impact, see the ECU Researcher Professional Development Framework - Engagement & Impact domain.

For help identifying research impact via policy and guideline citations, contact the ECU Library – library@ecu.edu.au.

References

Investigator Grants 2025 Guidelines, NHMRC, June 2024, nhmrc.gov.au

Investigator Grant Peer Review Mentor Video, NHMRC, nhmrc.gov.au/funding/find-funding/investigator-grants#video1

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