



## [Discovery Projects | Australian Research Council](#)

# Review of the Discovery Projects 2-step application process

## Overview

In 2023, in response to the recommendations of the [Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001](#), the ARC introduced a 2-step application process for the Discovery Projects (DP) scheme.

The new process added an Expression of Interest (EOI) stage prior to full applications. Applicants first submitted a 2 page EOI, which was assessed individually by 3 members of the [ARC College of Experts](#) (College). Only proposals shortlisted in this assessment step were invited to submit a full application.

The introduction of an EOI process aimed to:

- Bolster research excellence;
- Reduce administrative burden for researchers and institutions;
- Address delays between submission and outcomes;
- Improve assessment efficiency; and
- Enhance the success rate at the full application stage.

In 2025, the ARC conducted an internal review of the 2-step application process after 3 EOI rounds (DP25, DP26, DP27). This summary outlines key learnings from the review supported by data analysis provided at [Appendix A](#). The data used for the review includes analysis on EOI outcomes for DP25, DP26 and DP27, and full application outcomes for DP25 and DP26<sup>1</sup>. DP27 full applications are under assessment and outcomes are not yet available.

## Key learnings

### Impact of application format

- The introduction of an EOI stage led to a substantial increase in the total number of applications submitted to the scheme. Analysis shows no evidence that the

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<sup>1</sup> DP26 full applications outcomes data excludes a small number of applications that are still undergoing final due diligence checks

EOI stage resulted in increased research excellence through more competitive applications in the scheme (compared to pre-EOI rounds).

- More researchers applied because the EOI was quicker to prepare as a 2-page project pitch with no budget requirement. This generated a larger number of applications with a respective reduction for applicants in administrative burden at the EOI stage. However, for applicants progressing to the full application stage, the overall application process burden increased because they were required to complete both an EOI and a full application. Feedback from Research Offices during these three EOI-structured rounds indicated an increase in administrative burden which echoes the feedback received by the ARC during the NCGP Policy Review consultations.
- The EOI format was limited in its ability to capture the detail of large or interdisciplinary projects. Complex ideas or methodologies may not have been captured well in 2 pages. For example, some strong projects underperformed at EOI but scored higher at the full application stage (and were recommended for funding), while some well-pitched EOIs did not translate into strong full proposals.
- To reduce duplication, selected information from EOIs was automatically populated into the full application and locked. While this reduced re-entry effort for shortlisted applicants, it created constraints where team composition or participating organisations legitimately changed between stages (for example due to researcher mobility and partnership development). This represented a systems design limitation associated with EOI implementation rather than a conceptual limitation of EOIs as a screening mechanism.

### Impact on assessment and assessors

- A small percentage of EOIs received highly disparate scores. Across DP25-DP27, fewer than five per cent of EOIs shortlisted for full application had disparate scores. The ARC's existing calibration process ([available here](#)) mitigated the risk of disadvantage for these applicants.
- The EOI stage relied exclusively on College of Experts members as assessors and used a shorter application form. As a result, applications in highly specialised or emerging sub-fields may not have benefited from direct review by deep subject-matter experts.
- There was targeted use of assessors through the EOI process which involved the entire College of Experts cohort to ensure every EOI received 3 assessments. The use of the full College at the EOI stage enabled appropriate matching of assessors for interdisciplinary applications. However, the shorter format of the EOI limited the extent to which applicants – particularly larger interdisciplinary teams – could articulate project integration and team capability, which in turn

constrained assessors' ability to fully assess the coherence and strength of such applications.

### Impact on scheme delivery

- All applicants who were not shortlisted in the 2-step process received outcomes within 3 months, compared to between 8-13 months in previous rounds.
- Per Table 1 below, the 2-step application process delivered full application outcomes on similar timeframes as previous rounds.

Funding round	Scheme opened	Announced	Duration
DP26	EOI - 31/10/2024	28/10/2025 (tranche 1)	EOI to announcement - 11 months, 29 days
	Full application - 5/03/2025		Full application to announcement - 7 months, 24 days
DP25	EOI - 22/02/2024	26/11/2024	EOI to announcement - 10 months, 5 days
	Full application - 11/04/2024		Full application to announcement - 7 months, 16 days
DP24	1/12/2022	30/10/2023	10 months, 29 days
DP23	22/03/2022	24/11/2022	8 months, 2 days
DP22	11/11/2020	24/12/2021	13 months, 13 days
DP21	13/11/2019	13/11/2020	12 months
DP20	10/12/2018	15/11/2019	11 months, 5 days

Table 1: Scheme delivery dates for Discovery Projects (DP20-DP26).

### Impact on success rates

- The 2-step process impacted the overall success rate when comparing EOIs to successful full applications.
- Per Table 2 below, the overall success rate at the full application stage compared to the number of EOIs submitted was 12.9 per cent, and the success rate at the full application stage compared to the number of EOIs shortlisted was 47.3 per cent in DP25<sup>2</sup>. (still pending as a small number of applications are still undergoing final due diligence checks).
- Prior to the introduction of the 2-step process, the average success rate over the last 5 rounds of Discovery Projects (DP20-DP24) was 19.3 per cent. Success rates vary relative to submission volume, and the introduction of the 2-step process increased application volume in the scheme.

<sup>2</sup> Entire DP26 full applications outcomes data is not yet available as a small number of applications are still undergoing final due diligence checks.

Funding round	EOIs submitted	Success rate at EOI	Applications submitted	Success rate at full application	Success rate of full applications against EOIs submitted
DP26	4063	27.7 per cent	1123	Pending	Pending
DP25	4147	27.3 per cent	1132	47.3 per cent	12.9 per cent
DP24	N/A	N/A	2590	16.3 per cent	N/A
DP23	N/A	N/A	2588	18.5 per cent	N/A
DP22	N/A	N/A	3095	19.0 per cent	N/A
DP21	N/A	N/A	3019	20.0 per cent	N/A
DP20	N/A	N/A	2875	23.0 per cent	N/A

Table 2: Success rates and application volumes (DP20-DP26).

## Impact on equity

Across two years of data (DP25-DP26), there is no evidence that a 2-step process introduced inequities across gender, institution type, assessment panels, or other applicant characteristics. See Appendix A for the data analysis.

## Conclusion

The review found that:

- The EOI process did not lead to an overall increase in the number of competitive applications submitted to the ARC compared to pre-EOI rounds.
- Introduction of a 2-step process resulted in an increase in number of applications and reduced overall success rate. While the EOI step reduced burden for applicants who did not progress, the burden on those invited to submit a full application was higher.

A 2-step process appears most effective when a scheme targets specific research areas, problems or questions, as it provides an early mechanism to determine whether applications fall within the scope of the scheme's objectives. At the same time, there were lessons learnt that require consideration in future EOI processes, including the need for:

- Nuanced, fine-grained assessment of proposals in smaller fields;
- The right blend of assessors; and
- An efficient approach to managing disparate scores.

These lessons highlight the importance of strong assessor matching and consistent scoring processes to ensure that the EOI stage can reliably filter for scope and suitability — particularly in schemes with targeted research priorities.

These findings on the DP 2-step assessment model will inform the approach to assessment design in the new NCGP National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP).

# Appendix A Review of Discovery Projects 2-step application process

## Application volume and overall success rate

The introduction of the EOI process increased short-form application volume by ~60% (2,590 → 4,147), while the number of full applications funded increased modestly (421 → ~536). The overall success rate declined from 16.3% to ~13%, driven by increased application volume at the EOI step, rather than reduced funding. The EOI process was effective in broadening participation and lowering of applicant burden at the EOI stage. However, ~72% (4147 → 1141) of applications were filtered out before the full application stage. The observed decline in overall success rate (incorporating EOI and full application outcomes), is therefore a function of higher entry volume, not a shift in funding settings or increase in absolute number of excellent competitive applications as demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

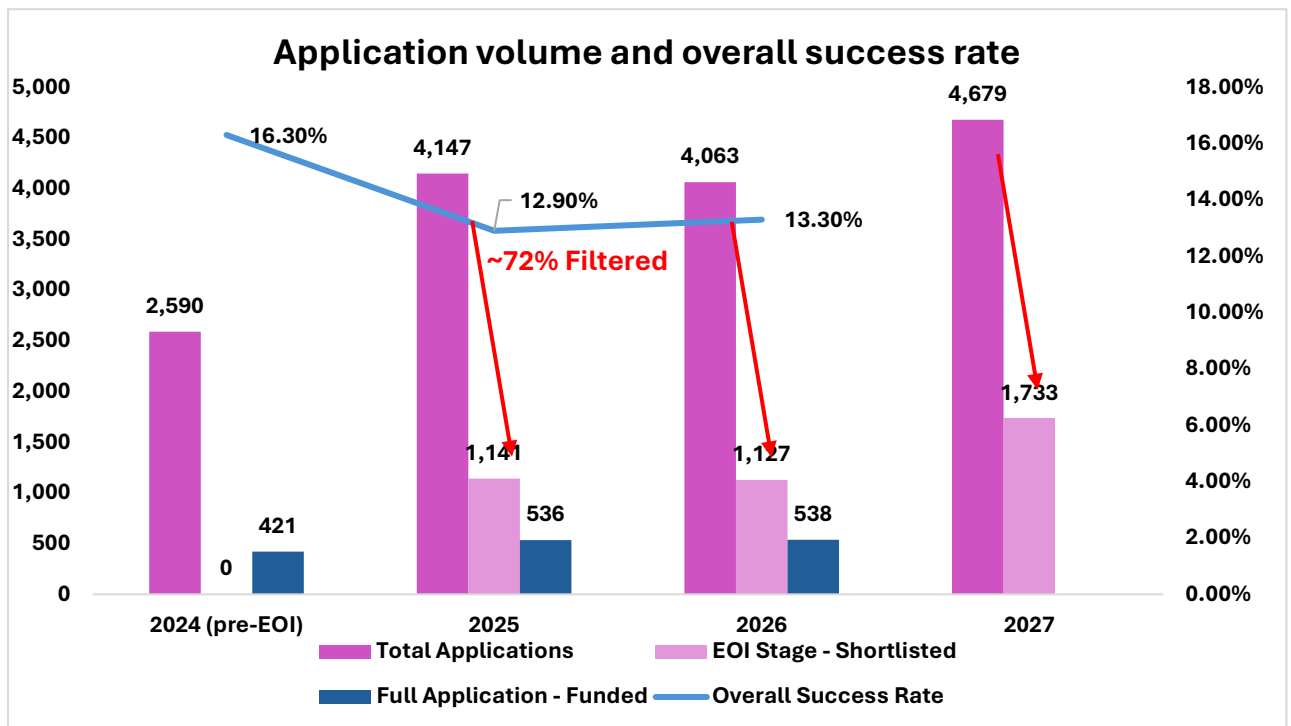


Figure 1: Application volume and success rate

## Gender

The data illustrated no evidence that the two-step process introduced gender-based inequity. Applications with female Lead Chief Investigators (CIs) consistently represent around one-third of total applications. The percentage of successful applications relative to the proportion of submission within the female and male led application cohorts are broadly comparable across both stages, indicating consistency in

assessment outcomes within gender cohorts. However, applications with male lead CIs account for a larger share of successful applications, which reflects the higher proportion of total applications submitted with male lead CIs<sup>3</sup>.

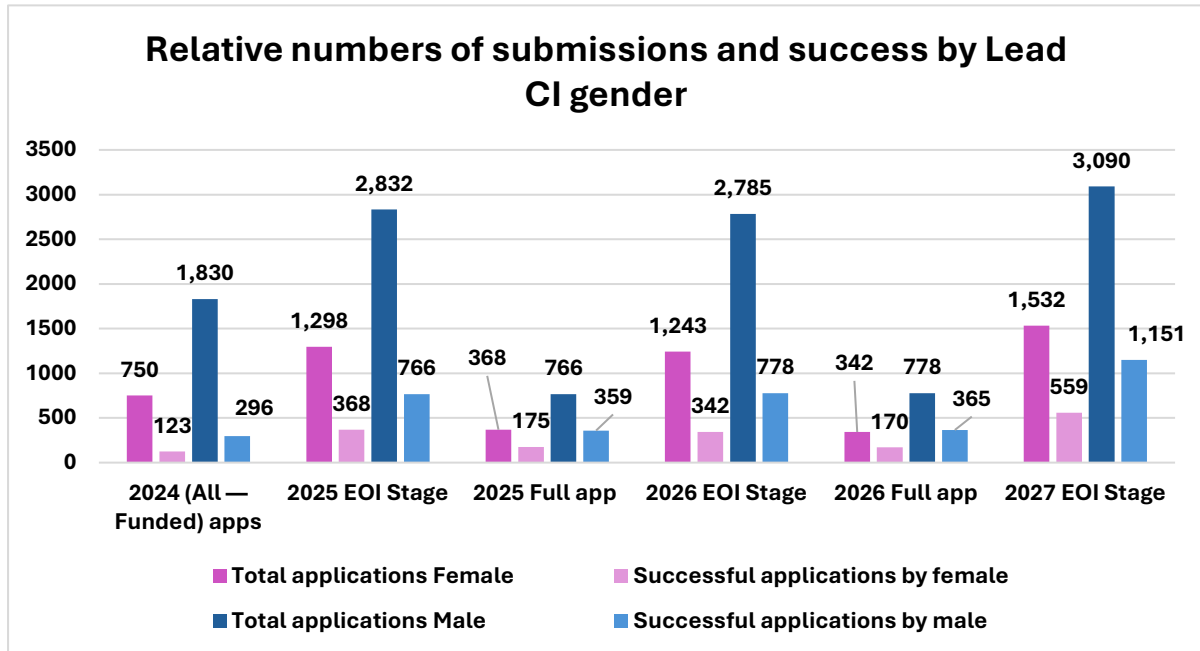


Figure 2: Relative numbers of submissions and success by Lead CI gender

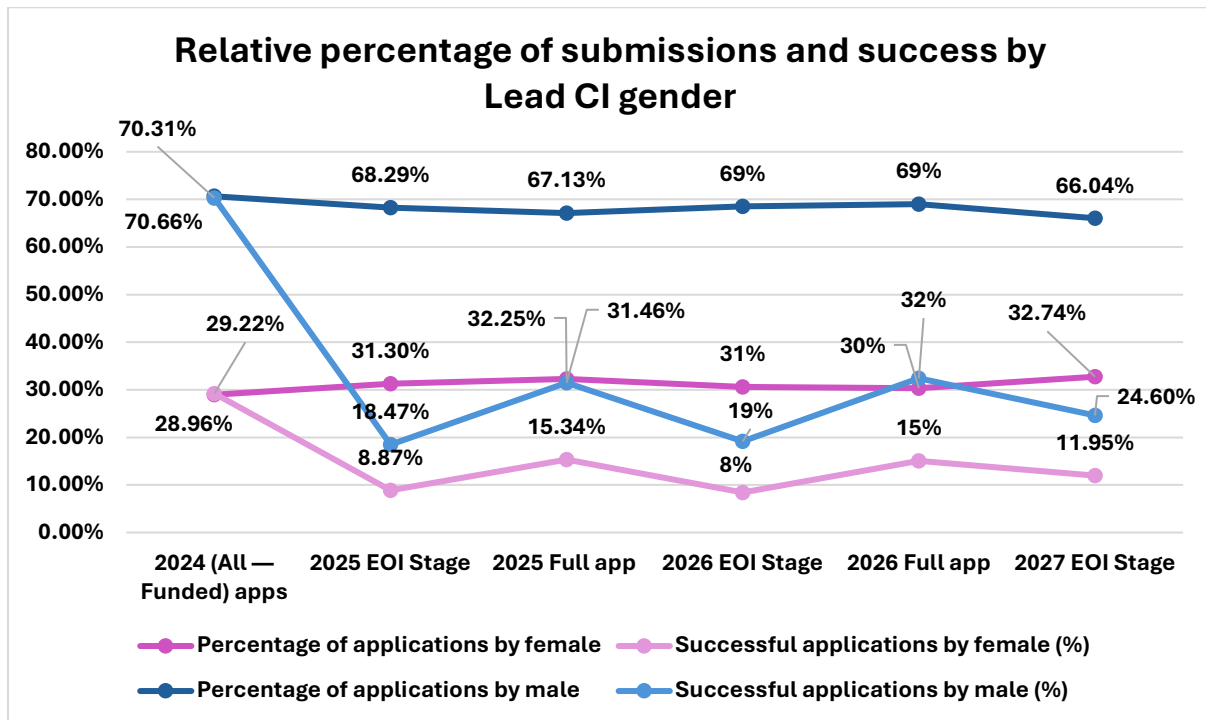
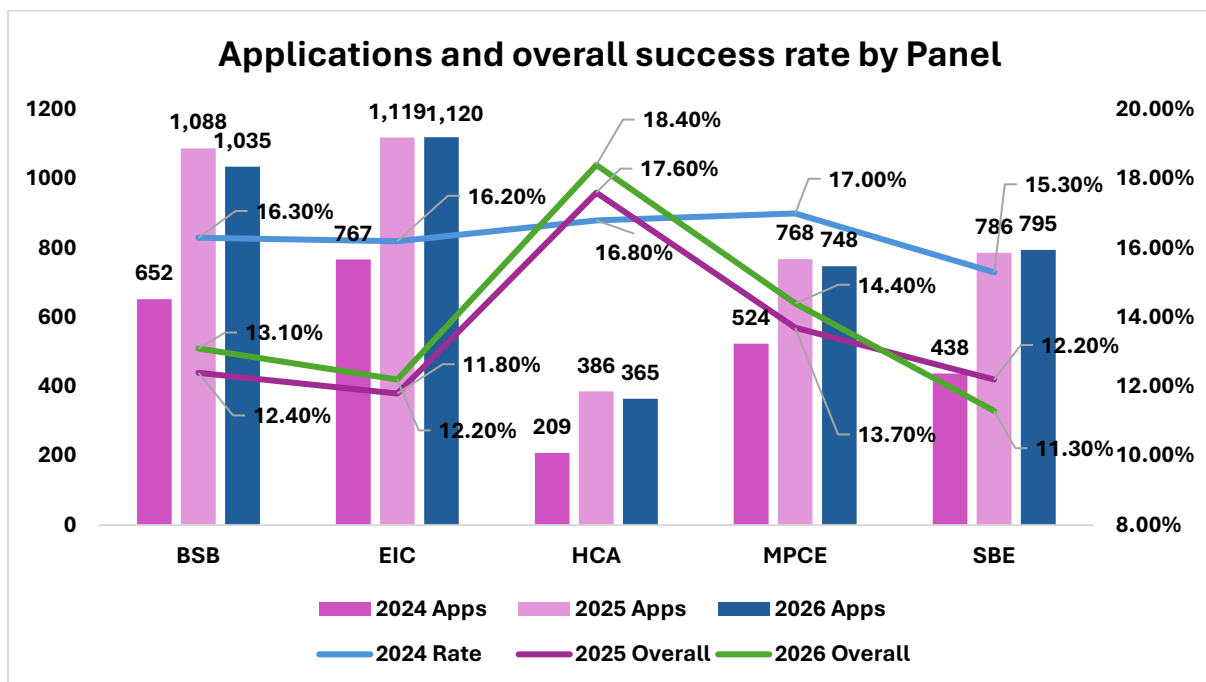


Figure 3: Relative percentage of submissions and success by Lead CI gender

<sup>3</sup> The ARC publishes gender outcomes for discipline panels in our [Selection Outcome Reports](#). Proportions of female and male led applications as a percentage of submission volume, as well as success rates by gender vary significantly between the 5 discipline panels

## Panel

Panel outcomes remained stable across years, with no evidence of systematic differences in success rates under the two-step process. While some variation exists at the EOI stage in some years (e.g., higher shortlisting in HCA (~35% in DP25 and DP26)), these patterns are stable over time and reflect underlying disciplinary structures rather than effects of the two-step process. The share of applications going to each panel (BSB, HCA, SBE, EIC, MPCE) remained broadly consistent across years, with EIC, BSB, and MPCE receiving the largest volumes, HCA the smallest, and SBE in the mid-range—mirroring the pre-EOI distribution. This stability indicates that differences in shortlisting rates are driven by discipline-specific dynamics rather than changes introduced by the EOI process.



\*BSB = Biological Sciences and Biotechnology; EIC = Engineering, Information and Computing Sciences; HCA = Humanities and Creative Arts; MPCE = Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Earth Sciences; SBE = Social, Behavioural and Economics Sciences

Figure 4: Application and overall success rate by Panel

## Institution Group

The two-step process introduced modest increases in shortlisting for Group of Eight (Go8) institutions, but this was calibrated at the full application stage. There is no evidence of EOI-related inequity in final funding outcomes. Go8 institutions receive a higher share of shortlisting (~66% applications (762 of 1141)), but once shortlisted, success rates between Go8 and Non-Go8 are statistically equivalent. The observed gap is concentrated entirely at the EOI stage.

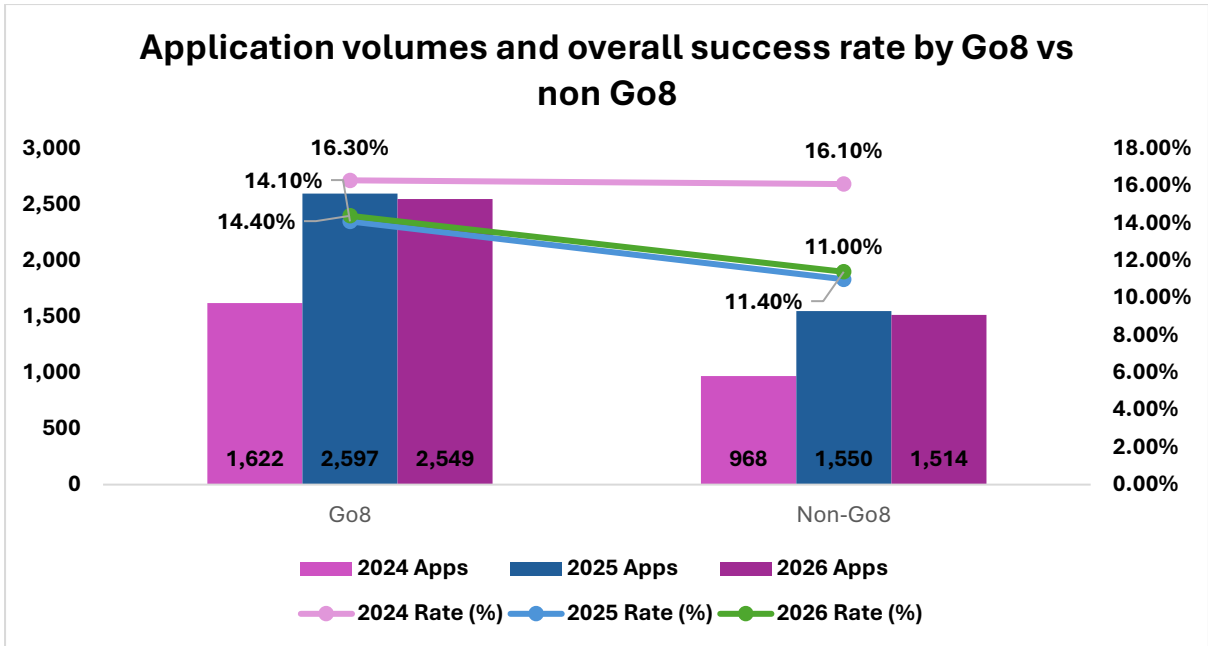


Figure 5: Application volumes and overall success rate by Go8 vs non Go8

### Career Stage

Analysis by career stage shows higher success rates for senior researchers relative to Early Career Researchers (ECRs), consistent with differences in research experience and track record. ECRs are shortlisted at lower rates (10–15%), which reflects the Discovery Projects scheme’s focus on established investigator-led research rather than an effect of the EOI process. Where sample sizes allow, outcomes at the full application stage are broadly comparable across career stages.

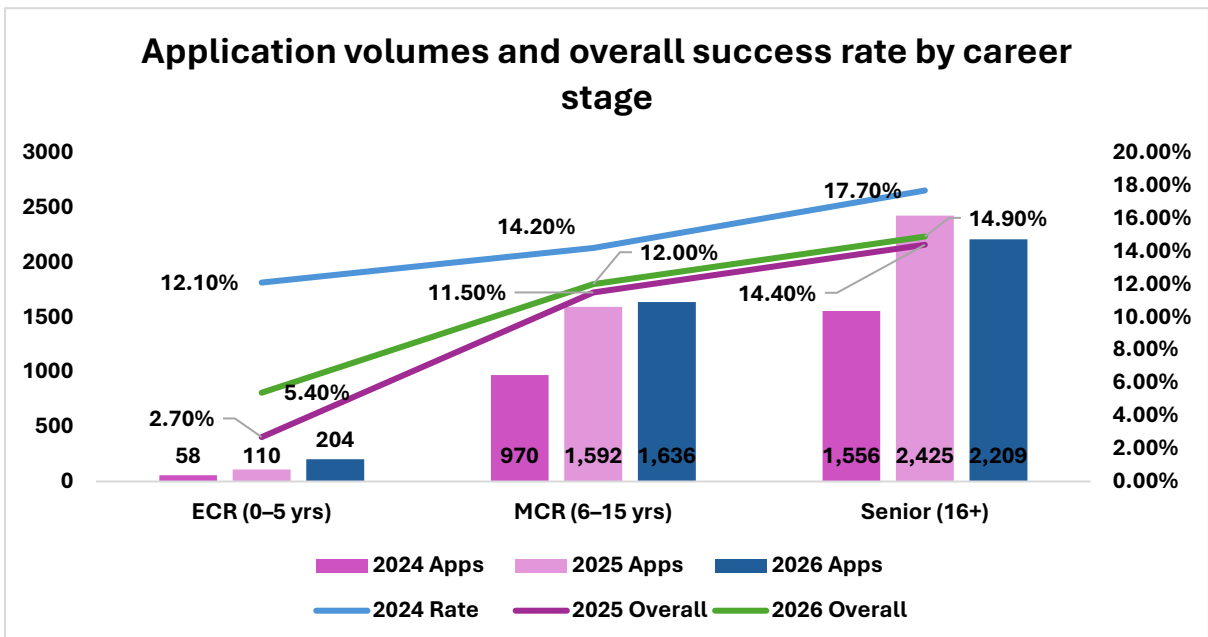


Figure 6: Application volumes and overall success rate by career stage

## College of Experts Involvement

College of Expert members have been allowed to submit applications in the EOI stage they are assessing, primarily due to the need for a large enough cohort of general assessors to ensure each EOI receives a total of 3 assessments. EOIs involving participation of College members were shortlisted at a rate of ~44%% versus non-College EOIs at ~26%. Applications involving College members achieved higher success rates (~13pp gap at full stage). This higher success rate is attributable to the eminence of College members, who are typically senior researchers with strong research track records and experience. Importantly, this pattern existed before two-step process was introduced (~11.8pp) and has remained stable in the full application stage. The two-step process has not introduced new equity concerns related to college status. Accordingly, ongoing monitoring for potential bias and conflict-of-interest compliance remains important. Conflict of interest was strictly monitored throughout the assessment process, and to further strengthen probity of the assessment process, shortlisted College applicants were ineligible to participate in the Selection Advisory Committee assessing the full application. This measure has been in place since the DP25 round

College member on an application?	2024 Total Full (n)	2024 Funded Rate	2025 Total EOI (n)	2025 EOI Rate	2025 Full App Rate	2025 Overall Success Rate	2026 Total EOI (n)	2026 EOI Rate	2026 Full Apps Rate	2026 Overall Success Rate
Yes	245	26.90%	334	43.70%	58.20%	25.40%	318	45.30%	59.70%	27.00%
No	2,345	15.10%	3,813	26.10%	45.30%	11.80%	3,745	26.30%	46.00%	12.10%
Gap between Yes College vs No College		11.80%		17.60%		13.60%		19.00%		14.90%

Table A.1: College member involvement and success rates