NHMRC PROGRAM GRANTS
PEER REVIEW GUIDELINES
for funding commencing in 2016

Applications close Wednesday, 4 June 2014
Shortlisting anticipated the week commencing Monday 14 July 2014
Interviews anticipated the week commencing Monday 20 October 2014
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1. Introduction

This document is provided to assist NHMRC Program Grant Review Panel (PGRP) members in the peer review of applications. It covers the period leading up to and occurring during the PGRP meetings to be held from 20-24 October, and describes the key steps and procedures involved.

This document should be read in conjunction with the NHMRC Funding Rules for funding commencing in 2015, incorporating the Program Grants scheme for funding commencing in 2016 (the Funding Rules) and A Guide to NHMRC Peer Review (the Guide to Peer Review) which provides an overview of NHMRC peer review processes. The Funding Rules can be found at: http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants/apply-funding/program-grants.

Panel members who have previously participated in the Program Grants peer review process should be aware that there have been some changes to the processes since the last round, and these are contained within this document.

2. Peer Review Documentation and Process Changes for 2014

PGRP members who have previously participated in peer review of Program Grants should note that some processes and procedures have changed. Changes of note include:

- Content from previous Peer Review Guidelines documents that was found to align with that from other schemes has been removed from this document and added to the Guide to NHMRC Peer Review, available on the NHMRC Website.
- The number of panels has been increased to two multidisciplinary panels.
- The shortlisting process has changed. A score-based ranked list will form the basis of shortlisting teleconference discussions (refer: Section 3 “Shortlisting”).
- The assessment of Research Achievements has changed. Panel members are now only asked to review the last five (5) years of publications for each Chief Investigator. Chief investigators will also have the opportunity to highlight significant achievements over the course of their career.
- Members are no longer required to recruit External Assessors or Additional Experts for shortlisted applications. These individuals will be sought and recruited by NHMRC staff in consultation with the NHMRC Assigners Academy (refer: Section 3 “Post-Shortlisting Assessment of Applications”).
- Up to three (3) External Assessors per application will now be sought for scientific assessments (refer: Section 3 “Post-Shortlisting Assessment of Applications”).
- The final ranking process no longer occurs at the end of interviews, and has been replaced with a daily reconciliation of scores.
- Members are no longer required to give a “Must Fund/Should Fund/Could Fund” rating to applications after interview.
- The Interview Process – Guide to Chairs appendix has been removed, as it duplicated information that is provided in Appendix B.
3. Overview of the peer review process

To select the programs of the highest merit the peer review must be consistent with the aims and philosophy of the Program Grants scheme. To this end, the assessment criterion Research Achievements will be interpreted broadly and appropriate judgements about Research Achievements will be made by the PGRP, paying particular attention to factors most relevant to the applicants' field of research.

### Summary of Key Steps

1. **February – May: Establishment of the Program Grant Review Panels (PGRP)**

2. **June: Close of Applications and Eligibility Check. Applications are assigned to two panels.**

3. **June – July: Conflicts of Interest sought and Spokesperson (SP) Allocations Provided**
   - Panel members declare conflicts of interest based on application summaries for those applications on their panel.
   - Panel members are assigned by NHMRC as Primary SP (1SP) and Secondary SP (2SP) according to declared conflicts in consultation with NHMRC Senior Research Scientists.
   - Full applications are provided to panel members for review and scoring based on the shortlisting criterion, Research Achievements.

4. **July – August: Shortlisting of Applications**
   - Scores provided by panel members will guide discussion of applications in the shortlisting teleconference. Any applicants not shortlisted will be notified and receive an assessment prepared by the 1SP.
   - After shortlisting, the allocation of 1SP and 2SP to all applications within each panel will be reassessed, and applications reallocated if necessary.

5. **August – October: Interview Preparation Time**
   - Panel members review the full applications assigned to their panel and provide scores against the remaining assessment criteria, Research Strategy and Collaborative Gain.
   - NHMRC in consultation with the NHMRC Assigners Academy will endeavour to recruit up to three External Assessors and one Additional Expert for each application to which they are assigned.
   - Indigenous External Assessments are sought for applications with an Indigenous Health focus.

6. **October: Interviews**
   - Interviews will be conducted for each shortlisted application. Once conflicted panel members are confirmed not present, 1SP will lead the interview, supported by the 2SP and Additional Expert, and guided by the Chair.
   - Additional Experts will be present for interviews, but are required to absent themselves for the scoring of the application.
   - PGRP members will be asked to perform a daily reconciliation of scores.
   - At the close of each PGRP, panel members will be required to provide narratives for all applications for which they were 1SP. They will also be required to provide Feedback Reports for those applications no later than two (2) weeks after the conclusion of interviews.

7. **November – December: Clearance of Funding Recommendations through Research Committee, Council and the Minister**
Following the Close of Applications

- NHMRC staff will verify that applications are complete and meet eligibility criteria.
- NHMRC staff will allocate applications to one of two multidisciplinary panels, each with a breadth of relevant expertise.
- NHMRC staff will identify applications addressing Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander health that require consideration of the Criteria for Health and Medical Research of Indigenous Australians (the Indigenous Criteria) (see link at Guide to NHMRC Peer Review Section A16: Resources).
- Panel members will review each application summary for applications assigned to their panel and then declare their conflicts of interest in RGMS.
- NHMRC staff will allocate Spokespersons to each application based on the indicated suitability and declared conflicts of interest of each panel member, in consultation with NHMRC Senior Research Scientists. Panel members will be notified of their allocations accordingly.
- RGMS will allow panel members access to all applications assigned to their panel with which they do not have a high conflict of interest (COI).

Shortlisting

- Panel members are expected to read all the applications with which they are not conflicted.
- Panel members will provide scores against Assessment Criterion 1 – Research Achievements (RA) for each team member on applications assigned to their panel.
  
  **Note:** RGMS does not provide for each team member to be individually assessed. NHMRC staff will therefore provide panel members with a template to record each member's RA score. The assessment criteria are provided at Appendix A. When RA scores come to be entered into RGMS, members must enter the average RA score of all team members for that application out of 100.
- Once all members have scored their applications, applications within each panel will be ranked based on these scores, which will form the basis of teleconference discussions.
- The shortlisting teleconference will be held during the week beginning the 14 July 2014.
- The aim of the teleconferences will be to discuss the applications for which there are divergent opinions or contrary views from non-conflicted members, and to finalise the shortlist with up to 10 applications from each panel proceeding to interview.
- The Spokespersons will be asked to briefly speak to any applications with contrary views in turn, and to indicate whether they feel the application should be shortlisted in or out. Members will then be asked whether they have divergent views they wish to present.
- The Chair will confirm with the panel at the end of the discussion the applications to go through to interview. If there is consensus up to the top 10 applications from each panel will go forward to interview.
- 1SPs will, with assistance from their 2SPs, provide feedback reports to applicants that do not continue to interview. The Chair will endorse these reports prior to NHMRC sending them out, to ensure that there is no inappropriate content. SPs will not be identified in the final copy of these reports.
- Reallocation of SPs may occur after the shortlisting teleconference to balance workloads in the lead up to interview.

Post-Shortlisting Assessment of Applications

- NHMRC staff, in consultation with the NHMRC Assigners Academy, will endeavour to contact and enlist up to three External Assessors and one Additional Expert for each application, with due regard to COIs.
- For applications requiring consideration of the Indigenous Criteria, an External Assessor with the expertise to assess the application against both the scheme criteria and the Indigenous Criteria will be sought. If such a
reviewer cannot be identified, an assessor who can provide comment against the Indigenous Criteria in addition to the three scientific External Assessments will be sought.

- Applicants to the Program Grant round are considered highly conflicted, and therefore cannot be recruited as External Assessors or Additional Experts.
- External Assessors will review applications and provide written reports to NHMRC. **External Assessors will not score applications.**
- External Assessments will be de-identified before being made available to applicants.
- Panel members will assess and score all applications allocated to their panel with which they are not conflicted.
- Panel members will assess and score competitive applications against **all** criteria. This will involve the scoring of Research Strategy and Collaborative Gain out of 100, as well as revisiting Research Achievement scores if necessary. Final scores will be weighted appropriately.
- All scores and any comments members wish to make must be submitted to NHMRC by 6 October 2014.

**Interviews, Funding Recommendations and Reports**

- Interviews will be held the week commencing Monday 20 October through Friday 24 October. Prior to commencing the interviews, Panel members will attend an induction session which will cover the interview process and members’ roles and responsibilities. Details of the interview process are included at Appendix B.
- On completion of each day’s interviews, panel members will be provided with a COI-tailored list of applications considered that day and asked to perform a reconciliation of the scores they provided.
- The outcome will be that applications are ranked in a descending order from the highest quality applications.
- Each 1SP, in consultation with the 2SP, will then finalise their feedback reports and narratives (shortened versions of the feedback reports) and provide them to the Chair for their panel. Reports should be constructive, objective, well founded, and useful to applicants in the further development of their team.
- Each Chair will approve the reports and narratives and give them to the NHMRC staff.
- Each Chair will also provide a report on the peer review process including the PGRP’s operation, any administrative matters and suggestions for change to either policy or the process of the Program Grants peer review.
- The final recommendations and narratives will be considered by Research Committee (RC) and Council. The NHMRC Chief Executive Officer (CEO) will then present the funding recommendations for the approval of the Minister for Health.
- After the Minister has approved the funding recommendations NHMRC staff will advise applicants of the outcome, including providing the feedback reports from the PGRP.

**4. Additional Experts**

NHMRC aims to appoint an Additional Expert to the PGRP for each application, with research expertise and experience in the specific field/s of the application. This expert will participate in interviewing, but not scoring, the applicants. The scoring of the applications will be performed by core members only, to provide an appropriate comparative assessment.

More than one Additional Expert may be present at any individual interview, and an Additional Expert may attend more than one interview. Additional Experts will be identified when shortlisted applicants are notified of the panel membership.

Should an Additional Expert be sourced but unable to attend the interview due to unavoidable circumstances, every effort will be made to contact them via teleconference for both the pre- and post-interview discussions.

Should an Additional Expert not be sourced for an application, the Chair will advise NHMRC as to whether additional expertise is required, or if there is already sufficient expertise on the panel.
5. Indigenous Health Assessment Process in 2014

Program Grants relating specifically to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people or health issues will be identified based on information provided by the applicant. NHMRC will endeavour to recruit at least one Indigenous health External Assessor per application to assess Indigenous health applications and provide comments against the Indigenous Criteria.

The PGRP, and in particular the 1SP, will then determine how those comments should be reflected in the scores for the scheme’s assessment criteria. The External Assessors report may include further questions and issues for the applicant to address. The report may also recommend that the PGRP place conditions on the grant such that it meets the Indigenous Criteria.

Reports are provided to applicants, who have the opportunity to address any concerns during their interview.

6. Duties and Responsibilities

The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research stipulates that participants in peer review should:

- be fair and timely in their review;
- act in confidence and not disclose the content or outcome of any process in which they are involved;
- declare all conflicts of interest, not permit personal prejudice to influence the peer review process and not introduce considerations that are not relevant to the review criteria;
- not take undue or calculated advantage of knowledge obtained during the peer review process;
- ensure that they are informed about, and comply with, the criteria to be applied;
- not agree to participate in peer review outside their area of expertise; and
- give proper consideration to research that challenges or changes accepted ways of thinking.
APPENDIX A: Assessment Criteria

Awards of Program Grants will be highly competitive. They will be awarded primarily on the quality and impact of CIs’ research achievements, and the proposal’s Research Strategy and Collaborative Gain. It should be noted that this is a competitive application process, and therefore the standard of applications that result in recommendations for funding will vary from year to year.

In evaluating competing proposals, the PGRP will consider the CIs’ time that is available for research on the proposal, recognising that applicants have other responsibilities, including commitments to teaching, health care, and external grant and industry collaborations. The budget formulation will also take into account each CI’s time available for research.

It is recognised that some applicants will have high levels of achievement, but whose records contain career disruptions (illness or family related), or have unusual features such as industry experience (refer: NHMRC Funding Rules Section A3.7, and NHMRC Program Grants Advice and Instructions Section 2.10). It is up to the applicant to make the case that a particular level of achievement applies, and there is provision in the application form to include a Professional Biography in which applicants may address any such circumstances.

The PGRP will score applications against weighted assessment criteria, so as to permit the scoring of applications in rank order across diverse disciplines.

PLEASE NOTE: This information is reproduced from the Funding Rules.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The assessment criteria and weightings have been designed to reflect the nature and intent of the scheme.

The assessment criteria and their weightings are specified below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Criteria</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Research Achievements</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Research Strategy</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Collaborative Gain</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Maximum score 100

Program Grants are awarded on the basis that recent research achievements are the best indicators of future performance, with Research Achievements carrying the greatest weighting (60). Therefore the most recent five years of research achievements are a focus for peer review. However applicants are able to highlight relevant achievements over a longer time frame for reviewers to consider.

1. Research Achievements

Each CI will be given a score of up to 60 points for their Research Achievements.

The applicant team as a whole can receive up to 60 points as its team’s Research Achievements score. The applicant team’s Research Achievements score will be the average of the individual CIs’ scores.

Research Achievements will be interpreted broadly and appropriate judgements about research achievements will be made by PGRPs, paying particular attention to factors most relevant to the applicants’ fields of research, and focusing primarily on the last five years.
It is recognised that some applicants will have high levels of achievement, but with track records that have unusual features, including **career disruptions** (see *NHMRC Funding Rules*, section A3.7).

Further information on identifying and reporting career disruption(s) is provided in the *Advice and Instructions to Applicants* document.

See *NHMRC Funding Rules*, section A11.2 for further information on the Paid Parental Leave Scheme.

The 60 points available for each CI’s Research Achievements score will be distributed across two parts; Academic Recognition (45 points) and Research Application (15 points).

**Academic Recognition**

The 45 points for Academic Recognition will be distributed across the following three elements:

1) **35** points for publications’ and/or high quality Technical Reports**
   - This may include, without being limited to, for example: publications that contribute in a major way to knowledge in and beyond the specific field; objective evidence of paradigm shift/methodological advances; enduring scientific contributions or technical reports that shape research enquiry; biomedical publications that contribute to major advances in knowledge; clinical publications that corroborate or extend previous insights to make a unique contribution to Australian knowledge; technical reports describing new approaches to data collection, surveillance, analysis or utilisation in public health or health services research.

2) **5** points for Grants
   - This may include major international and national grants or grants from specialist agencies.

3) **5** points for Invitations / Prizes / Awards
   - This may include, without being limited to, for example: invitations to speak at plenary sessions or as invited speaker at major international meetings; chair or invited member of international policy groups; editor or associated editor of international publications; major general or specialist international prizes.

**Research Application**

The 15 points for Research Application will be distributed across the following two parts; Commercialisation and Clinical Application.

**Commercialisation**

This may include, without being limited to, for example: contributing to development of intellectual property in collaboration with Biotech or Pharma, founding a Start-Up, or the development and granting of patents etc.

**AND/OR**

**Clinical Application**

This may include, without being limited to, for example: being a leader of seminal clinical trials; a crucial advocate for changes in clinical practice based on evidence; an initiator, through to implementation, of clinical practice guidelines; an initiator, through to completion, of change to evaluation of clinical practice, e.g. national disease register; making other recognized national contributions to policy and health services development etc.

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* In terms of Publications, the application should focus on the significant, and likely enduring impacts of and outcomes from published works and not the impact factor of journals in which research is published. It is therefore left to the applicants to make a case in the appropriate section of their application as to how particular research outputs rate against the assessment criteria.

** Technical reports can include non-peer reviewed publications that have had a significant impact on health policy and/or practice.
AND/OR

Public Health Application

This may include, without being limited to, for example: holding a leadership role in design, conduct, publication and advocacy for policy and practice of seminal research; having key responsibility for changes in concept, practice or priority of research implications; being an initiator, through to implementation, of a new system of data collection and organizational feedback e.g. population-based data collections; making other recognized national contributions to policy and public health practice; being a constructive and effective change agent in public health discipline etc.

Applicants must indicate their specific contributions to any activities identified in the Research Application section.

2. Research Strategy

The 20 points of the application score will be based on the quality of the application’s Research Strategy.

The Research Strategy should be consistent with research that is broadly based, multidisciplinary and collaborative by nature, and describe how scientific opportunities provided by the collaborations will be exploited. It should also address:

- relevance and/or significance with respect to the field/s of research and/or health outcomes
- national and international competitiveness
- innovation, and potential for contribution to knowledge

3. Collaborative Gain

The 20 points for Collaborative Gain will take into account the following four elements:

- Integration of the Research Teams and Program
- Team Skills
- Resource Management
- Intellectual Exchange

Examples of these four elements include:

- significant productivity gains and the pursuit and achievement of goals permitted by the synergy of the Program’s multidisciplinary components, which would otherwise not be possible by pursuing the components as separate projects
- evidence of existing collaborations amongst CIs, and a description of working strategies employed previously, or appropriateness of proposed new collaborative arrangements
- integration and cohesiveness of the team, and the likely effectiveness of their working collaborations and intellectual exchange
- collective achievements of previously existing teams and likely impact of new team members
- how the team will operate and coordinate, including meeting, planning, decision making and financial arrangements team skills, and how the team components will combine into a broad theme
- performance measures/milestones
- how junior staff will be integrated into the team
- mentoring and other development strategies to be adopted
- contribution of each CI.

With new teams, the following will also be taken into account:
• proposed meetings and work plans
• establishment of advisory panels
• research seminars
• explanation of why the new team has not collaborated previously
• plans for geographical collaboration
• benefits, and relevant indicators of potential collaborations and synergy
• measures to ensure accountability.

If the applicants have had the opportunity to collaborate before and have not done so, an explanation will be required as to why this has not occurred and how the direction of their research has now changed to necessitate or allow the new collaboration. They will also need to explain how they will ensure the cohesive running of the grant. This may involve the use of specific contractual arrangements.
APPENDIX B: Interview Format

A total of up to 2 hours is expected to be allotted to the Panel for each interview, which includes pre-interview discussion and post interview summation and scoring. The interview structure will be:

- the nominated spokesperson leads the questioning;
- the process should be constructive, rigorous and challenging - provocative and confrontational approaches should be avoided; and
- additional experts will participate in the interview process, drawing on their discipline knowledge in pursuing relevant lines of enquiry.

When determining questions to be put to the applicants the 1SP, 2SP and Additional Expert should consider the following points:

- questions are to be clear and concise to ensure that the applicant is not misled;
- the external assessor is not to be identified;
- ask additional scientific questions that may affect the PGRP’s assessment of the application;
- where required, seek clarification of proposed arrangements for the allocation (and re-allocation should that become warranted) of funds during the course of the Program; and
- if an applicant's track record is an issue, appropriate concerns should be raised and the applicant given the opportunity to address them.

For efficiency, consistency and fairness, the panel may wish to devise specific questions for particular sections of the interview that all applicants will be asked. It is at the discretion of the Chair as to whether this approach will be taken.

**Applicant Response to External Assessor Reports**

Applicants will have received copies of the External Assessor reports prior to interview and will have an opportunity to address any concerns arising from these reports during the interview.

**Pre-Interview (~15 mins.)**

The Chair identifies the application, confirms CoIs, and those with CoIs depart, with their mobile phone turned on. The 1SP briefs the Panel on the application and the External Assessor reports, the 2SP highlights the strengths and concerns raised by the External Assessors, and both the 1SP and 2SP identify any key issues and questions for interview and invite comment from members.

Applicants are notified their interview will begin by Secretariat.

NOTE: Timing is indicative, and may change slightly at the discretion of the Chair.

**Opening: (~5 minutes)**
Chair welcomes applicants and introduces panel members, SPs and Additional Expert(s). Chair explains the sequence of interview events and stresses the need to adhere to that timetable. Chair explains that, other than a single written publications update, no new written material will be accepted, but that the interview concludes with the opportunity for verbal updates.

**Introduction and Role of Team Members (~5 minutes)**
Chair invites applicants to provide a brief (no more than 1-2 sentences) introduction to themselves and their Program.
Chair then invites 1SP, supported by 2SP and Additional Expert, to begin an in-depth discussion of Research Achievements and subsequent topics below.

**Research Achievements (~20 minutes)**
The aim is to determine the team’s achievements over the last five years relative to opportunity. This should go beyond the number of publications and find out how the team’s work has influenced the field and what impact its work has had more widely.

**Research Strategy (~15 minutes)**
The aim is to understand the team’s research goals, and approaches to achieving them, over the next five years. Rather than analysing the detail of their research plans, the Panel should seek to understand where the applicants feel the field is going and what new techniques they will bring to bear on their research question(s).

**Collaborative Gain (~15 minutes)**
The aim is to establish the extent to which the investigators have worked, and/or will work effectively as a team, and what synergistic gains will be possible from their doing so. This section can also cover the collaborative gain from supervision and mentorship and from collaborations outside the Program Grant team.

**Budget (~5 minutes)**
The time commitment of CIs is to be clarified at this time. Clarification should also be sought on how grant funds and other resources will be shared, deployed, and redeployed if needed.

**Final Comments including Update of Achievements (~5 minutes)**
The 1SP will confirm with the applicant that any comments raised by the External Assessors have been addressed to the applicants’ satisfaction, and allow the applicant to address any residual concerns.

Applicants are also provided with an opportunity to verbally update the panel regarding any developments (e.g. new publications, awards received etc.) relating to the proposed work that have occurred since submission of their applications. Applicants will have been given the opportunity to provide a list of any publications that have occurred since the application was submitted. This will be forwarded to the Panel prior to interview.

**Member Discussion (~5 minutes)**
The team is dismissed and PGRP members and additional expert discuss the interview, and if desired, formulate additional questions which may have a bearing on the scoring.

**Final Questions (~5 minutes)**
If required, the team returns, responds to additional questions, and then departs.

**Post-Interview (~15 minutes)**
The PGRP will have another brief closed session following the interview to discuss the applicant’s performance and their responses to the questions. All non-conflicted members will be given an opportunity to change their scores based on the team’s performance at interview. Panel members will be asked to justify large moves in scores (e.g. more than five points either way).