2015 Program Grants Funding Round

External Assessor’s Briefing Pack
1. Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the 2015 National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Program Grants Review Process.

Your work as an External Assessor (EA) will occur within the Research Grants Management System (RGMS). No other forms of external assessment will be accepted. Consequently, you will need to be familiar with RGMS functions to complete your responsibilities. If you do not have an RGMS account please contact the Research Help Centre either by email (help@nhmrc.gov.au) or on 1800 500 983.

All relevant information to assist you with completing your assessment in RGMS is available at Attachment A.

2. External Assessor Process

You have been approached by a member of NHMRC’s 2015 Assigners Academy to provide an external assessment report for a nominated Program Grant application. The steps involved in this process are outlined below.
3. Responsibilities of an External Assessor

Program Grants support teams of the highest quality researchers to pursue broad based, collaborative research addressing complex problems. Program Grants provides substantial, long-term, flexible funding to integrated groups of researchers with well-established track records of high impact health and medical research. Program Grants are awarded on the basis that recent past achievements are the best indicators of future performance.

External assessors are a vital component of the peer review process of NHMRC Program Grants to ensure that each application receives an expert, fair and equitable review.

As an External Assessor (EA) your key role is to prepare an External Assessment that will be provided to members of the Program Grant Review Panel (PGRP) to assist them with their scoring. Therefore, your assessment should be focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the application(s) against the three Assessment Criteria detailed below.

Your assessment will also be shared with the applicant (CIA). Shortlisted applicants will have an opportunity at interview to address any comments and/or questions raised. Your identity as EA will remain anonymous to applicants at all times.

3.1 Assessment Criteria

*Note: External Assessors do not provide scores against the assessment criteria.*

You will be required to provide your assessment by completing specific fields within RGMS against the sub-heading below:

**Research Achievements**

Refer to the information available in the *Research Achievements* pdf and relevant sections of the CV.

Research Achievements comprises of two subcategories:

- Academic Recognition
  - Publications and/or high quality Technical Reports
  - Grants
  - Invitations / Prizes / Awards
- History of Research Translation

Comments should be provided against Research Achievements as a whole, with reference to these subcategories as necessary.

**Research Strategy**

Refer to the information available in the *Grant Proposal* pdf.

Research Achievements will be interpreted broadly and appropriate judgements about research achievements will be made by PGRP/s, 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.

**Collaborative Gain**

Refer to the information available in the *Grant Proposal* pdf.

Collaborative Gain will take into account the following four elements:

1. Integration of the Research Teams and Program
2. Team Skills
3. Resource management
4. Intellectual Exchange, Training and Mentoring
3.2 Category Descriptors

External Assessments should be informed by the Category Descriptors. Note that External Assessors provide comments only. External Assessors do not provide scores.


**Career Disruption**

A career disruption involves a prolonged interruption to an applicant's capacity to work, either due to absence (for periods of 1 month or greater) and/or long-term partial return to work, to accommodate maternity leave, carers responsibilities or illness. Career disruption should be considered in terms of how it has affected the individuals funding opportunities and career progress and thus the quality and capability of the team. In addition to impacting on publication rates, a career disruption can severely diminish the opportunities to present at conferences, establish an international reputation for research excellence, apply for funding, obtain preliminary data for grants and recruit new students.

You will be notified by NHMRC if the Career Disruption is of a sensitive nature.

Where an application involves a CI team, the track record of all CIs is considered and will be assessed relative to opportunity (including career stage), based on relevance to the research being proposed and taking into account time commitment. For more detailed descriptions of “relative to opportunity” and “career disruption”. Please refer to Part 1, sections 6.1 and 6.1.1 of *The Funding Rules*.

3.3. Overall Comments

In this section, please provide overall comments and ask specific questions concerning aspects of the proposal that require clarification.

3.4 Further Guidance

The table below provides further guidance to assist with preparing your assessment. The table below supplements information provided in the *Guide to NHMRC peer review 2015*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do's</th>
<th>Don'ts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Provide constructive feedback</td>
<td>• Provide ‘nil’ comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Only ask questions that will assist the Program Grant Review Panel</td>
<td>• Provide inappropriate comments</td>
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<td>to make a fair and thorough evaluation of the application– noting</td>
<td>• Provide broad statements which suggest that</td>
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<tr>
<td>that applicants must be able to address these questions without</td>
<td>the application is worthy or not worthy of funding</td>
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<tr>
<td>modifying their research proposal</td>
<td>• Bring into question the integrity of the research</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Use the category descriptors associated with</td>
<td>or researchers – any concerns regarding potential</td>
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<tr>
<td>the assessment criteria</td>
<td>research misconduct must be raised with NHMRC</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Consider both the strengths and weaknesses for each Assessment</td>
<td>separately</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criterion</td>
<td>• Question the eligibility of the applicant/s and/or</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provide specific references if you think that the</td>
<td>application – this should be raised with NHMRC</td>
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<tr>
<td>applicants have overlooked a relevant body of work.</td>
<td>separately</td>
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External Assessors must also:

• Declare all Conflicts of Interest (CoI) against each application (refer Attachment B: section 1);
• Adhere to the principles of privacy and confidentiality (refer Attachment B: section 2);
• Abide by relevant codes of conduct (refer Attachment B: section 3), and
• Notify NHMRC any concerns about eligibility.
4. Key NHMRC Contacts

Research Help Centre – for issues and questions relating to RGMS and information about peer review policies and guidelines

☎ 1800 500 983

Email: help@nhmrc.gov.au

Program Grants Team

Email: Program.grants.preaward@nhmrc.gov.au

5. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

This section addresses some of the key questions that External Assessors may have.

What does the Assigners Academy role involve?
The primary task of the Assigners Academy is to identify, contact and obtain three independent reports from appropriate External Assessors for each application to which they have been assigned. This process also involves monitoring progress and fielding External Assessors’ enquiries, including questions related to Conflicts of Interest. NHMRC is available to provide guidance to assist in this role. Assigners Academy members’ advice will also be sought on the suitability of potential GRP members.

What is the process for assigning External Assessors?
Assigners Academy members may choose to contact potential External Assessors informally to canvass their availability and interest in the role. However, to formally secure an External Assessor, an invitation will be sent via RGMS. External Assessors will be asked to notify Assigners of their acceptance and to identify any CoI against the summary snapshot of the application provided. If the External Assessor has declared no conflicts, they will have access to the full application to assess it against the NHMRC Program Grants Assessment Criteria outlined in 3.1 Assessment Criteria.

Initial contact with Overseas External Assessors will be via RGMS. However the process of providing an assessment will be external to RGMS.

What is a Conflict of Interest (CoI) and when are these declared?
Cols arise in any situation where personal, financial or other interests have the potential to compromise, or have the appearance of compromising, professional judgement and the ability to make unbiased decisions. When you are invited to review applications, you are required to declare CoI against all applications assigned to you in RGMS. This step must be completed within 48 hours of receiving the email from the Assigners Academy so that applications can be re-allocated if needed. A guide to conflicts of interest can be found in section 4. Principles, obligations and conduct during peer review of the Guide to NHMRC peer review 2015, and are available online at: http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/guide-nhmrc-peer-review-2015

Why do we have to use RGMS to assign External Assessors?
RGMS allows for instantaneous updates in relation to the number of applications assigned to potential External Assessors and includes a list of potential assessors to contact. It also has specific security arrangements to ensure that only people who are authorised (and have no conflicts) can access grant applications. It is important to complete all steps in RGMS to maintain the confidentiality and security of this information.

Why do External Assessors provide comments only and not scores?
This is because External Assessors’ scores are not used in determining the final outcome of the application.

Why then are score boxes provided in RGMS for External Assessments?
The scoring template in RGMS is generic for all assessors and across all NHMRC funding schemes and cannot be modified for Program Grants external assessors.

**Will Assigners Academy members also complete external assessments in addition to their role?**
Yes – Assigners Academy members are required to secure three external assessment reports for each application assigned to them. As an Assigners Academy member, their expertise also makes them highly suitable to assess applications. They may wish to personally prepare and submit external assessments.

**How will the external assessments be provided to Spokespersons and Peer Review Panels?**
All external assessments submitted are provided to Spokespersons on the relevant application and Peer Review Panel members via RGMS.

**Will my assessment/s be provided to the applicant/s?**
Yes, your assessment/s will form part of the Assessors’ Report provided to applicants to respond to in the rebuttal process. However, these assessments are de-identified.
Guide to External Assessment

You have been asked to provide an external assessment for one or more application(s). This is in order to provide impartial advice regarding the application that is being considered for a grant. In this section we will outline how to:

- Accept an invitation and/or declare any conflicts of interest;
- Complete your assessment.

Accept an Invitation and declare any potential conflicts of interest

The process for accepting an invitation and declaring potential conflicts of interest is outlined within the invitation emails sent by members of NHMRC’s assigners’ academy. The emails contain a link to an external website where you are able to:

- Accept or decline the invitation;
- Register any actual or perceived conflicts of interest(s); and
- Request a ruling as to whether a conflict is of a high or low level.

IMPORTANT NOTE:
To assist assigners/NHMRC staff in making accurate rulings please provide as much detail surrounding your conflict as possible.

Once these steps have been completed, the details entered will be imported into RGMS and depending on your response you will be granted access to the relevant application documentation within RGMS.

Completing and submitting an Assessment

Accessing Application Documentation
You have been asked to assess a grant application in RGMS. Following the Conflict of Interest steps, you have either no CoIs or have a low level of CoI. Therefore you are able to have access to the full application within RGMS for the purpose of completing your assessment against the published assessment criteria.

IMPORTANT NOTE:
Save your work often. RGMS will ‘time out’ after 30 minutes of inactivity and DOES NOT recognise typing as an activity. A time out will cause you to lose any unsaved data.

When entering data into text fields with large character limits, avoid a time out by completing a draft of your work in an offline document such as Word, from which you can copy and paste into the relevant RGMS fields.

Please note that the character count used within RGMS differs from that used by Word and Adobe. To check that your data fits within the RGMS character limit restrictions please use the following resource: http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/rgms_charcount/rgms_char_count.html

The following instructions outline the steps for locating the application documentation and completing an assessment in RGMS.

1. From the RGMS Home page select the Assessors/Panel Members tab.
2. Navigate to the **Quicklinks for Assessors** section and select the **Complete my assessment(s)** quicklink.

![Screenshot of the Assessors/Panel Members section with a list of quicklinks and a tab labeled 'Quicklinks for Assessors'.]

3. To identify the appropriate scheme/round, use the binoculars icon to select the relevant Program Grant round (GMS-0749 2015_Program Grant_funding_commencing_2017 round) and select **Add**.

![Image of a user selecting a program Grant round and clicking 'Add'.]

4. Click on the **Filter** button to display the applications assigned to you for your assessment.

5. To commence your review you will need to access the application documentation (e.g. grant proposal and snapshot reports) for all applications for which you have agreed to provide an assessment.

   Select the **folder** icon for the relevant application to access the documents you require. A small portlet window will open in RGMS displaying the **Snapshot Reports** tab.

6. Click on the name of the file you require, to open/download the document.

![Image of a user accessing a snapshot report document in RGMS.]

**Figure 2-** Assessors/Panel Members Tab: Viewing Assessment Snapshot Reports
7. Once you have reviewed the required documentation and are ready to enter your assessment, navigate to and select the Properties tab dropdown menu at the top of the page. You will need to click on the Properties tab again to access the subpages shown in the screen shot below.

8. Select the External Assessment – Part 1 – Selection Criteria link from the menu.

9. Enter your comments against each of the three Assessment Criteria for each application, noting there is a 2000 character limit.

If your preference is to prepare your review offline, and then “cut and paste” into RGMS, please ensure that you are entering the correct assessment for the application being reviewed. Please also note that the character count used within RGMS differs from that used by Word and Adobe. To check that your comments fit within the RGMS character limit restrictions please use the following resource: [http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/rgms_charcount/rgms_char_count.html](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/rgms_charcount/rgms_char_count.html)

**IMPORTANT NOTE:**
As an external assessor you are not required to provide scores against each assessment criteria.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:**
In some cases you may require more than 2000 characters. It is therefore advised that you can continue your comments in the ‘Overall Comments’ section.

10. Select Save.
11. Navigate to the Properties tab dropdown menu at the top of the page again, and select External Assessment – Part 2 – Comments and Verification from the menu.

12. In the fields provided, enter comments you want to include with this assessment.

13. Once complete, select Yes, Assessment is complete from the Verify External Assessment drop down field (Note: if there are missing comments, the drop down list will instead inform you of what is missing. You will need to complete the missing information before returning to this step).

14. To complete the submission of your assessment, select Save and Return.

IMPORTANT NOTE:
Once submitted and the verification process is complete, your assessment will be locked and cannot be altered in any way.
Additional Information

1. Conflict of Interest (CoI)

As an External Assessor you will be asked to declare any actual or perceived CoIs you have with the Chief Investigator team and institutions identified in applications that have been allocated to you for review. If you are unsure whether the nature of the situation constitutes a CoI you should provide sufficient details about the nature of the potential conflict to enable your Assigners Academy member to promptly provide a ruling. In RGMS, please select either 'Yes, I have conflicts to declare' or 'I require a ruling' and then enter the details of your conflict in the 'Details of conflict' text box.

Please note: If while assessing an application you become aware of a CoI not previously identified, you should immediately cease your assessment and notify your Assigners Academy member. You should provide sufficient details about the nature of the new conflict to enable your Assigners Academy member to promptly provide a ruling. Any relationship with an Associate Investigator will always be considered low.

It is extremely important for External Assessors to inform their Assigners Academy member of any potential CoIs to ensure a fair and robust peer review process. Further guidance on managing CoI is located in Section 4. Principles, obligations and conduct during peer review of the Guide to NHMRC peer review 2015.

Panels can only consider the CoI information provided by the External Assessor. It is therefore imperative that all information relating to the CoI is recorded. If the panel concludes that you are highly conflicted and no comments are included in your CoI declaration, they may decide to disregard your assessment entirely.

2. Privacy and Confidentiality

Assessors are reminded of the importance of confidentiality and privacy regarding all areas of the peer review process. It is a legislated responsibility of all NHMRC staff, committee members and external assessors not to disclose any confidential information which they become privy to as a result of responsibilities to the NHMRC. All information contained in applications is regarded as confidential unless otherwise indicated.

3. Codes of Conduct

As an assessor you are expected to exemplify integrity in all involvement with the peer review process, while acting in good faith and in the best interests of NHMRC and the research community. You must abstain from improper use of your involvement to gain an advantage for yourself or any other person, or to cause detriment to NHMRC. Assessors are to adhere to the principles and practices outlined in the APS Code of Conduct and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

4. Application Assessment

You will provide your assessment within RGMS. When preparing your report that will go to the applicant there are several components to consider:

- what are the strengths and weaknesses for each Assessment Criterion;
- what additional information is needed from the applicants to ensure the Grant Review Panel (GRP) can make a fair and thorough assessment of the application;
- are there any concerns regarding the statistical rigour of the proposed study;
- are there any Career Disruptions and how does this impact on Track Record;
- are there any concerns regarding the diversity of population samples, particularly when sampling exclusion criteria are specified, if applicable; and
- are there any concerns about adequacy of strategies for inclusion of population minority groups, if applicable.

All applications that you have agreed to review should be assessed solely on the information provided by the applicant in the application and in the light of your expert knowledge of the relevant field(s) of research.

If, during your review of an application, you have concerns about the eligibility of an application you should inform NHMRC immediately of your concerns and continue to review the application on its merits. Do not question the applicant’s eligibility in your assessment. Please address any concerns about eligibility to the Assistant Director,
Program Grants via email: Program.grants.preaward@nhmrc.gov.au. NHMRC has procedures in place to manage such concerns and where necessary take appropriate action.

**Note:** If your preference is to prepare your review offline, and then “cut and paste” into RGMS, please ensure that you are entering the correct assessment for the application being reviewed. Please also note that the character count used within RGMS differs from that used by Word and Adobe. To check that your data fits within the RGMS character limit restrictions please use the following resource: [http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/rgms_charcount/rgms_char_count.html](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/rgms_charcount/rgms_char_count.html)