2014 Project Grants Funding Round

External Assessor’s Briefing Pack
1. Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the 2014 National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Project Grants Review Process.

Your work as an External Assessor (EA) will occur within the Research Grants Management System (RGMS). 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 your navigation of RGMS and Training Materials are located on the NHMRC website.

2. External Assessor Process

You have been approached by a member of NHMRC’s 2014 Assigners Academy to provide an external assessment report for a nominated Project Grant application. The steps involved in this process are outlined below.
3. Responsibilities of an External Assessor

As an External Assessor your key role is to:

- Declare any Conflict of Interest (CoI) you may have with the application;
- Provide an assessment for each application assigned to you in RGMS against the three [Assessment Criteria](#) - this should include the appropriateness of any statistical calculations, adequacy of attention to diversity of population samples and Career Disruptions, if applicable;
- Comment on the appropriateness of the requested budget;
- Adhere to the principles of privacy and confidentiality, and;
- Abide by relevant [codes of conduct](#).

It is NHMRC’s intention that no researcher will be asked to provide more than six external assessments.

NHMRC will not preview assessors’ comments. Assessors must ensure, therefore, that their reports do not contain inappropriate or defamatory remarks as their assessment will be provided to the applicant/s and could be used by the applicants in complaints processes.

3.1 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.

3.2 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. 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 Assessors 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 complete 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 Assessors Academy member. You should provide sufficient details about the nature of the new conflict to enable your Assessors Academy member to promptly provide a ruling. Any relationship with an Associate Investigator will always be considered low.

It is extremely important for participants to inform their Assessors Academy member of any potential CoI to ensure a fair and robust peer review process. The [Guideline for Managing Conflicts of Interest in NHMRC Peer Review](#) is available at Attachment B of the [NHMRC Project Grants Peer Review Guidelines for funding commencing in 2015 (PRG)](#).

Panels can only consider the CoI information provided by the EA. 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. This means that the external assessor’s considerable effort and work on the application is in vain.
5. Application Assessment

You will provide your assessment within RGMS.

To prepare your assessment, it is advised that you focus mainly on the Grant Proposal and the publication list, if necessary. 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;
- are there any concerns about adequacy of strategies for inclusion of population minority groups, if applicable; and
- if you have concerns about eligibility.

All applications that you have agreed to review should be assessed solely on the information provided by the applicant in the application.

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. Please address any concerns about eligibility to the Director, Project Grants via email: projects@nhmrc.gov.au. NHMRC has procedures in place to manage such concerns and where necessary take appropriate action.

5.1 Assessment Criteria

There are three assessment criteria that you are required to assess the application against. A full description of each of the criteria can be found in the NHMRC Funding Rules incorporating the Project Grants scheme for funding commencing in 2015 (The Funding Rules) at Attachment E, available online at http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/nhmrc-funding-rules

Note: External Assessors are not required to provide scores against the assessment criteria.

5.1.1 Scientific Quality

Refer to the information available in the Research Proposal section of the Grant Proposal.

Consideration should be given to the clarity of the hypotheses or research objectives, the strengths and weaknesses of the study design and feasibility.

If assessors believe that the proposed research has already been done by others, they may comment or add a query in their assessment. Assessors should provide references so that applicants have the opportunity to comment in their applicant response.

5.1.2 Significance of the Expected Outcomes AND/OR Innovation of the Concept

Refer to the information available in the Research Proposal section of the Grant Proposal.

Consideration should be given to whether the research has the potential to increase knowledge about human health, disease diagnoses, or biology of agents that affect human health, or the application of new ideas, procedures, technologies, programs or health policy settings to important topics that will impact on human health.

Please note: applications need not be rated on both significance and innovation. Truly innovative ideas and research may not reveal their significance until sometime in the future (this is the case for many Nobel Prize winning discoveries). Similarly research of the highest significance such as important randomised clinical trials or public health intervention studies may use ‘tried and true’ methods only, yet be of immense significance to health.
5.1.3 Team Quality and Capability - relative to opportunity, taking into account career disruptions where applicable

Refer to the information available in the CI Time Commitment, Team Quality and Capability, CI Track Record and Career Disruption sections of the Grant Proposal.

Consideration should be given to terms of whether an applicant’s previous research demonstrates that the investigator team is capable of achieving the proposed project and/or has the ability to deliver the proposed project in terms of having the appropriate mix of research skills and experience, and the contribution of junior members to overall team quality.

If a Career Disruption has been referenced in the application, consideration should be given to whether the Career Disruption meets the NHMRC’s description (see below) and if so, what the impact of the Career Disruption has had on the applicants achievements against all the assessment criteria.

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 carers responsibilities or illness. Career disruption should be considered on how it has affected track record, funding opportunities and career progress. In addition to impacting on publication rates, a career disruption can severely diminish the possibility of presenting at conferences, establishing an international reputation, applying for funding, obtaining preliminary data for grants and taking on new students.

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 3.7 and 3.7.1 of The Funding Rules.

5.2. Budget

Assessors are asked to consider the components of the budget and provide comments on whether the salary requests, direct research costs and equipment costs are reasonable and fully justified.

5.3. Overall Comments

Please provide any overall comments and/or questions on your final assessment.

Your assessment of the application will be provided to the applicant, who will then have an opportunity to address any comments and/or questions raised. The applicant cannot modify the research proposal.

6. 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

Project Grants Team

Email: projects@nhmrc.gov.au
7. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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

Q1. What does the Assigners Academy role involve?

The primary task of the Assigners Academy is to identify, contact and obtain the independent reports of 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.

Q2. What is a Conflict of Interest (CoI) and when are these declared?

CoI 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 the PRG in Attachment B, and are available online at: http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants/apply-funding/project-grants

Q3. When will I be provided with my applications to declare CoI?

The Assigners Academy is scheduled to meet in Canberra on 10 April 2014 to manage assignment of applications to External Assessors. You may receive an invitation email on this date or very soon afterwards. As the review process progresses you might receive additional requests to review applications in your field of expertise until the last week of May 2014, as other External Assessors declare CoI and their applications may need to be re-assigned.

Q4. What will the process be 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.

If the External Assessor has declared no conflicts, they will have access to the full application to assess it against the NHMRC Project Grants Assessment Criteria outlined in 5.1 Assessment Criteria.

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

Q5. 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.

RGMS was established in accordance with Australian National Audit Office recommendations. It 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.

Q6. Will Assigners Academy members also complete external assessments in addition to their role?

Yes – Assigners Academy members are required to secure two 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 consider allocating themselves up to six applications to personally prepare and submit external assessments.

Q7. How will the external assessments obtained by Assigners Academy members be provided to Spokespersons and Peer Review Panels?

All external assessments that are obtained by the Assigners Academy will be made available to Spokespersons for the application and Peer Review Panel members via RGMS.

Q8. 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.