2015 Project 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) Project 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 Project Grant application. The steps involved in this process are outlined below.
3. Responsibilities of an External Assessor

External assessors are a vital component of the peer review process of NHMRC Project 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 the applicant (CIA), who will then have an opportunity to address any comments and/or questions raised. Your assessment will also be shared with, and considered by, the Grant Review Panel (GRP) when its members are assessing the same application at the GRP meeting in Canberra. Therefore, your assessment should be focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the application(s) against the three Assessment Criteria detailed below.

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:

**Scientific Quality (Feasibility can include contribution of Associate Investigators)**

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.

**Significance of the Potential 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 to be assessed on significance and/or innovation, but not necessarily on both. 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.

**Team Quality and Capability - relative to opportunity, taking into account career disruptions where applicable (does NOT include Associate Investigators)**

Refer to the information available in the CV-RF: Research Funding CV-ORF: Other Research Funding, Team Quality and Capability, CI Track Record and Career Disruption sections of the Grant Proposal. Also refer to A-RT of the Assessor Snapshot Report.

Consideration should be given to whether an applicant’s previous research demonstrates that the investigator team is capable, in terms of having the appropriate mix of research skills and experience, including the contribution of junior members of the team, to successfully completing the proposed research.

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, the impact of the Career Disruption on the applicant’s achievements.
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.

**Note:** Please disregard any information located in the CI Time Commitment section (Section C) of the Grant Proposal. Applicants were advised to leave it blank.

### 3.2. Budget

Refer to A-RT and B-PB of the Assessor Snapshot Report.

Assessors are required 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. Further information on the Budget mechanism for funding commencing in 2016 is available on the NHMRC website: [http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants-funding/apply-funding/budget-mechanism-funding-commencing-2016](http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants-funding/apply-funding/budget-mechanism-funding-commencing-2016)

### 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>
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<tr>
<td>• Provide constructive feedback</td>
<td>• Provide ‘nil’ comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Only ask questions that will assist the grant review panel to make a fair and thorough evaluation of the application— noting that applicants must be able to address these questions without modifying their research proposal</td>
<td>• Provide inappropriate comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use the category descriptors associated with the assessment criteria</td>
<td>• Provide broad statements which suggest that the application is worthy or not worthy of funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consider both the strengths and weaknesses for each Assessment Criterion</td>
<td>• Bring into question the integrity of the research or researchers – any concerns regarding potential research misconduct must be raised with NHMRC separately</td>
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<td>• Consider any Career Disruptions in detail and understand the longer term impact these have on scientific output</td>
<td>• Question the eligibility of the applicant/s and/or application – this should be raised with NHMRC separately</td>
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<td>• Provide specific references if you think that the applicants have overlooked a relevant body of work</td>
<td>• Provide scores</td>
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<td>Consider:</td>
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<td>• the clarity of the hypotheses, research objectives and/or research plan</td>
<td>• Invite or encourage an applicant to make significant changes to the submitted research plan</td>
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<td>• the strengths and weaknesses of the study design and feasibility</td>
<td>• Consider that a topic is ineligible simply because the bulk of the work is being conducted in a particular setting (e.g. overseas).</td>
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<td>• the statistical rigour of the proposed study</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• if applicable, the diversity of population samples, particularly when sampling exclusion criteria are specified</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• if applicable, the gender/sex of samples to be used in the study— is there an appropriate explanation for omitting a gender/sex?</td>
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| Significance of the Expected Outcomes AND/OR Innovation of the Concept - also refer to the category descriptors |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| **Do’s**                        | **Don’ts**       |
| Consider:                       |                 |
| • whether the research has the potential to significantly advance the field | • Assess the significance of the study as a measure of the prevalence/incidence of the health issue |
| • whether the research has the potential to identify new ideas, procedures, technologies, programs or health policy settings to important topics that will impact on human health | • Assess applications as if they needed to be both significant and innovative |
| • whether the outcomes will generate broad interest | • Make assessments of the study’s significance based on the consensus in the field |
| | • Disregard the innovation of the study if it is using ‘old’ methods. The innovation may relate to another aspect of the work |

| Team Quality and Capability, relative to opportunity - also refer to the category descriptors |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| **Do’s**                        | **Don’ts**       |
| Consider:                       |                 |
| • All confirmed Career Disruptions – ensure the career disruption meets NHMRCs Advice (refer to Attachment A) | • Assess the CIAs track record only |
| • Whether the research team has the capability to deliver on the proposed research | • Consider only individual aspects of a team member’s track record |
| • Whether the research team have included junior members on their team | • Dismiss career disruptions |
| • The track record of all CI, relative to opportunity (including career stage and/or career disruptions) | • Use journal impact factors or person-centric citation metrics such as the H-index |
| • All aspects of the teams output, including publications, translation of findings into policy or practice | • Suggest alternative/better CI for the proposed project |
| • Citations of publications | • Simply ‘average’ the track record scores of the team |
| | • Penalize teams in which junior members are being mentored to contribute to the research |

| Budget |
|--------|-----------------|
| **Do’s** | **Don’ts**       |
| • Consider whether the salary requests, direct research costs and equipment costs are necessary and fully justified | • Provide generalised comments that cannot be addressed |
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.

Secondary spokespersons will nominate outstanding external assessments before the GRP meeting and these external assessors will be acknowledged on NHMRC’s website. NHMRC will also be notified of assessments that are of poor quality or inappropriate, and will approach these external assessors to seek an explanation.

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

Project Grants Team

Email: projects@nhmrc.gov.au
5. 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 two 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.

Q2. 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 Project 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.

Q3. 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 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.

Q4. When will I be provided with my applications to declare CoI?
The Assigners Academy is scheduled to meet in Canberra on 13 April 2015 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 second last week of May 2015, as other External Assessors declare CoI and their applications may need to be re-assigned.

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. 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.

Q6. Why do External Assessors provide comments only and not scores?
This is because External Assessor’s scores are not used in determining the final outcome of the application.

Q6. 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 Project Grants external assessors.

Q8. 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.
Q9. 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.

Q10. 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.

Q11. Will the quality of my assessment be considered by the panel?

Yes. The secondary spokesperson for each application will be asked to nominate one external assessment that they felt was of particularly high quality and of significant benefit to them as a spokesperson. These external assessors will be acknowledged on NHMRC’S website. Applicants and panel members will also draw NHMRC’s attention to poor quality assessments. NHMRC will approach these external assessors for an explanation and work with them to improve future assessments.
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.
3. To identify the appropriate scheme/round, use the binoculars icon 🕵️ to select the relevant Project Grant round (GMS-0672 2015_Project Grant_funding_commencing_2016 round) and select Add. ⬤ 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.

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**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 sub pages 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:


**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 on the budget and/or overall 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.

To prepare your assessment, it is advised that you focus mainly on the Grant Proposal and CV-Pub: Publications, A-RT: Research Team and Commitment and B-PB: Proposed Budget sections of the Assessor Snapshot Report. 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 Director, Research Grants via email: projects@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: