



Ideas Grants 2022

Peer reviewer briefing webinar

Tuesday, 12 July 2022

Edited transcript of Webinar Questions and Answers

Table of speakers

Speakers
Professor Anne Kelso, CEO NHMRC
Ms Amanda Lawrence, Director Ideas Grants, Research Foundations, NHMRC
Professor Rosalie Viney, Ideas Grants Peer review mentor
Distinguished Professor Nicholas Talley, Ideas Grants Peer review mentor
Professor Yvette Roe, Ideas Grants Peer review mentor (not in attendance)

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Q1 Assessing if budget is too low

Chat question: *What happens if I think that the requested budget is too low to complete the proposed aims? Do I put those comments in the budget section or does that become part of the feasibility issue in the project?*

- A1.1 Prof. Anne Kelso: If you do think that the budget's inadequate to complete the work, it's really important to point that out. We can't create a budget that's higher than people have asked for, but it becomes a question of the ability of the project to be delivered. So please, please comment on it in the budget comment box.
- A1.2 Amanda Lawrence: What we do find sometimes, is that applicants might state as part of their grant proposal that they are receiving additional funds through their institution or funds might be coming from elsewhere, which is why they're not seeking the full project costs in the budget they're requesting of NHMRC. Others may not and so if you do find that there's no information to explain why someone might have such a low budget, please just flag it for us in the budget comment box.

Q2 Scoring Cancer Australia applications

Chat question: *Can you please explain further about re-scoring CA applications? I understand that a lot of the time the Cancer Australia application will be shorter, and they'll cut out aims because of the budget limit, but if I've already scored it through NHMRC, are you saying I need to rescore it and give it another score for Cancer Australia?*

- A2 Amanda Lawrence: Some of the projects being submitted through Ideas Grants (where funding is also being sought through the Cancer Australia PdCCRS scheme) may exceed the time frame and the budget for which funding is offered through the PdCCRS scheme. Where this is the case, the applicant can provide an additional 'one pager' in their Grant Proposal (Part F) which outlines how they would 'scale back' the project to align with the PdCCRS requirements.

Please score the application as normal in Sapphire (ignoring the additional one-pager for PdCCRS initially). Once you have provided your scores and comments for the full application, then review the one-pager provided at Part F of the Grant Proposal Proposal PDF which outlines how the applicant team will scale back the project for PdCCRS. If you have any concerns about the scaled back project that would cause you to change the scores already provided in Sapphire (for example, if you think the scaled back aims reduce the Significance of the project), then let your secretariat know via email what score you would've provided for the relevant criterion/criteria. This will be captured offline and provided to Cancer Australia for their reference.

Note that this process is done 'by exception' only, and no rescoring is necessary if you don't have any concerns about the information provided in the additional one-pager (and the scores entered in Sapphire are still applicable).

(Please contact your secretariat if you'd like further clarification on this process.)

Q3 Preliminary Data

Chat question: *Whilst preliminary data are not required in Ideas grant, as an assessor how do we assess feasibility?*

- A3.1 Prof. Anne Kelso: Draw on your own experience, and if you think that what's proposed is impossible, then that's obviously a consideration. But if the technology is feasible, the concept is feasible, then I think the point is you shouldn't need preliminary data in order to score it that way.
- A3.2 Prof. Rosalie Viney: I think bearing in mind the sort of nature of the program, that it's not necessarily going to be the case that people are in a position to have preliminary data beforehand or pilot data because it is by its nature innovative and creative. Would it be possible to do this, is there evidence? So think about what preliminary data normally provides you. It's a sort of a proof of concept and then I think we're assessing then whether the evidence for that proof of concept is still there in the way that they've described it.
- A3.3 Prof. Anne Kelso: I think another consideration at the moment that makes this really important for this scheme it's always been important for this scheme but with the impact of the COVID pandemic on so many people's ability to do research over the last few years, then I think we need to remember that many people may have planned to do certain experiments and simply have not been able to, and that makes this aspect of the Ideas Grant scheme even more important at this time, although it was always part of the design of the scheme.
- A3.4 Prof. Nicholas Talley: I think the experimental design usually gives you a good indication of whether this is going to be feasible or not with or without preliminary data, and the justification should be really clear. That's so important, the justification of the methodology, and if there is no justification, I think that's a real problem, or limited justification, but if there's very clear justification, very clear capability, you definitely shouldn't, in my view at least, mark them down because there's no preliminary data. That's not appropriate in this scheme, and I think that's a really important message because otherwise the scheme really isn't fulfilling its goals as an Ideas Grant scheme, rather than marginally pushing forward the science scheme.

Q4 Report on scores

- Q4 Peer reviewer: Is it possible for us to have a computer program so we can generate a summary, say, like 20 proposals assigned to me and an overall summary of my score against the final score from five reviewers, so each of our reviewers can have a summary report how far we are away from overall scores so we can learn from our experience.
- A4.1 Prof. Anne Kelso: At the moment, the intention is only to share the comments, not the scores, and it's the first time we're doing this, and so we'll learn from the experience this year and consider in the future whether scores should be shared as well. So we won't be sharing the final scores of the other reviewers of the

applications. It will be very interesting to see how useful it is for you to see the comments, so we'll appreciate your feedback on that after the whole process is over.

A4.2 Prof. Rosalie Viney: I think in terms of that, one of the things to think about is that role of the category descriptors in the scoring process, and I guess the thing here is that what you want is for everybody to be working on aligning the comments that they put on the grant with the score that they have and that that should match the category descriptors. So while at some point in the future it may be possible or useful to have the scores, at the moment it's really important that we think about each grant individually and assess it individually against the category descriptors and that each person is doing that as much as possible.

Q5 Scoring applications if subject has been published in the past

Q5: Chat question: *How do your peer reviewers mentors recommend changing scoring if the subject proposed is found to be already published and does this vary if published a couple for years ago versus very recently? Basically, if you find that the idea proposed for investigation has been published either in the '60s or during the last year they've been scooped, how do you treat that in the scoring?*

A5.1 Prof. Rosalie Viney: So I think there are two things here. Yes, obviously, if something's been done before and it isn't innovative, then that is going to be reflected in the scores. I think what we perhaps need to be careful of is development in different fields and asking that question about whether this actually might be innovative in a particular field. So I think it's about transfer of results and things like that because I do think that we sometimes see areas where there's been a body of work in one field and there is still innovation in the fact that it's been brought into a different field. So I guess we need to be careful about not being too quick to judge it as being not new.

A5.2 Prof. Nicholas Talley: I think it's a problem for innovation and significance, etc., if we already have data that's published, even though it was in the more distant past, and I think that is an issue and I take that into account. I also agree that if you're unfortunately scooped in the time from your application submission to when it gets reviewed, that is a problem and I don't think, unfortunately, you can ignore that, if that's the case. But I think you need to really carefully read the application right to ensure that assessment is fair and just. In other words, you haven't missed the nuance that they've raised in the application that really does distinguish what they're suggesting they want to do versus what is published either recently or in the distant past. That's a really critical piece, if you recognise that particular factor, because it's so important one is as fair as possible for every applicant. But I think you need to take the information into account if it's relevant, yes.

Q6 Preliminary Data + Salary budget

Q6a Chat Question: *Should we ignore prelim data if presented, to fairly assess applications? I may mark up if prelim data is presented?*

Peer reviewer: Coming back to the prelim data, we might not mark down applications that don't have them because they're not expected to be there, but we may mark up applications that may have them. So I'm just wondering if we should be ignoring prelim data in these applications to be fair. I'm not sure if the instructions are not to include them.

Q6b Chat Question: *Is it acceptable for budgets to be essentially salaries?*

Peer reviewer: And then also just one other comment quickly on budgets - and this may not be an issue - where almost the entire budget is for salaries. Some applications I see where it's 98%, 99% of the funds requested are essentially for salaries. Is that an issue or not?

A6a Prof. Anne Kelso: I think, first, on the question of preliminary data, it's true the guidelines are clear that people don't need to include preliminary data but they're not going to be penalised if they do include it, and maybe one way to think about it is how important is the preliminary data to convince you that the project is feasible and if you're convinced already, then it's of less importance, but if it's going to some area of otherwise weakness, where you would not be convinced, then of course you might take it into account. That would be how I think about it.

A6b: On the budget, I guess there are some projects where people need very little other than person-power, and maybe that's the case in the situation you describe, but of course there are other areas of research where there's no way that the work could be done without consumable budgets. So it's a bit hard to comment in a generic sense.

Q7 Judging feasibility + Blinded peer review

Q7a Peer reviewer: The question relates back to the feasibility question. So, for example, say the experimental techniques are all very well founded and you think the result will come out, but whether the result actually completely addresses their research question - and you have talked about that - then how does that reflect on the feasibility score?

Q7b Is NHMRC going to consider having a kind of blinded review similar to when we review journal articles, when we don't usually see who the authors are? If there's a bias, that is recognised by the NHMRC already, so whether that will be looked into. So those are the two questions that I've got.

A7.1a Prof. Anne Kelso: If the proposal is putting forward a hypothesis or an aim and then the description of the experiment will not answer that hypothesis, will not address that hypothesis or will not answer that question, then that's a problem and that would definitely be, in my view, a reason to point that out and not to score as highly.

- A7.1b On the question of blinded Peer Review, I think this is something that we'd be very interested to try and we're having an active discussion at the moment with our Research Committee about how you would design that and perhaps whether we can do it as a trial in some way to see whether it would make any difference. Now, it's not something that's very easy to implement, so if we decide to proceed, it might not happen in the next round. It's obviously not happening in this round, but it is under active consideration because I think it is one possible way to address the intrinsic bias that all of us have to some extent.
- A7.2a Prof. Nicholas Talley: I think it really develops your score for research quality, etc., if the experiment the outcome of the experiment won't match your hypothesis and won't answer and deliver the way it's supposed to. It also drops some of the other scores too. So I think that's a very reasonable issue to take up and obviously the comment on back to the researchers who've applied, if that is the case.
- A7.2b (Comment on blinded Peer Review) In academic journals, there are some research suggesting it makes absolutely no difference to the outcome. That's in blinded review for Peer Reviewed journals, not research grants, so I can't comment on research grants, but just to comment there is a lack of data that that really would help at the moment.
- A7.3 Prof. Anne Kelso: Of course there's also the other kind of experiment that's nothing to do with science, but it's the musician behind the curtain who's auditioning for an orchestra, and the blinding there, there's evidence that it's very effective, and because it does depend on the circumstances and the extent to which bias does affect the outcomes, it's why we're thinking about how we could set this up as a trial so that we can test the question instead of just assuming that it's going to give the answer that we might want.

Q8 Judging capability of team

Q8 Peer reviewer: Regarding track record, should we judge whether the proposed team has a history of working together?

- A8.1 Prof. Rosalie Viney: So I think obviously a track record of having worked together speaks to capability and capacity and the feasibility of the grant, but I think we always have to bear in mind that particularly in this area of innovation, there may be a reason why you're bringing together a different team or you're bringing somebody different together, so it should be judged in the context of the grant and the context of the reason for the team. I think it's really important to ask why are each of those people in that team and to think about this is in the context of the Ideas Grant scheme, where one of the things that might happen is that you might be bringing together new ways of thinking.
- A8.2 Prof. Nicholas Talley: I don't think having worked together before is essential for capability, although I think it could be taken into consideration if it's relevant to the particular application. So it's application specific, rather than a general issue, and sometimes it's irrelevant or less relevant. Obviously, though, they still need

to justify and show that they can or will be able to work together if they're pulling a new team together. That needs to be in there because that's one of the potential risks.

Q9 Comments and outliers

Chat Question: *Is there a process for adjusting extreme score disparity between the reviewers?*

Q9 Peer reviewer: So I was interested in looking at the comments afterwards, as well as just finding grants, where the totally wrong comments have been mistakenly pasted into the box. Is this going to be something that helps to look at really extreme outlier scores or identify issues where we think that might be the case?

A9.1 Prof. Anne Kelso: There is an outlier check that's already being performed in the office. It's not possible until all the scores are in, then the secretariat will look at whether there are outlier scores and will then look at whether the comments match the scores provided and, if there's any question about it, we'll go back to the reviewer to check with them. It's a delicate area because an outlier score is not necessarily a wrong score. It could be absolutely correct that that person, based on their expertise and their insight into the proposal, scores differently from the other assessors and that is valid and it's one of the reasons to say that every score counts. We're not going to say it's an outlier, therefore we're going to drop it. It will be counted, but the main thing is that it's the right score for the right grant and people have used the scores in the right direction they haven't given a 1 when they meant a 7, for example and that if there's anything really wrong, that that can be identified.

Q10 Identity of reviewers

Q10 Peer reviewer: Will the reviewers be identified to each other at that point? so will we know who the other reviewers are between the five reviewers?

A10.1 Amanda Lawrence: No, the reviewers' identities will be kept confidential. You'll just have access to what they've written in their comments.

A10.2 Prof. Anne Kelso: You can see that this is a fairly cautious step towards having more sharing between the reviewer sets. So we're taking one step forward and seeing how that works, what the issues are and whether it's useful.

Q11 Significance

Chat question: *Please talk about scoring significance and innovation for applications seeking to address a very new aspect; i.e., it could be an extremely novel and potentially significant but not a well-justified project (poor quality)*

Q11 Peer Reviewer: My question is in relation to assessing innovation and significance. So I know we're meant to assess and score each criterion on its own separately but it's very, very difficult to separate and score innovation and significance and ignore the quality if you've found or if you deemed that the quality of the project just wasn't there or was quite poor. So could you help us understand how to address that dilemma which I find happens a lot?

A11.1 Prof. Anne Kelso: Yes. It's probably hard for me to be very specific about this but it sounds as if the issue is really in the description of significance.

I mean, that's the starting point. If the project was successful as they hope, would it matter? Would it have the potential to change treatment if you're talking about a treatment modality? Would it actually have a significant impact?

And that's where I was making the comment about the scale of the problem. You can think about working on a very common cancer and having a huge impact on that or working on a rare cancer and having a huge impact on that. Both of those I would have considered highly significant, but the fact that the cancer is rare in one case doesn't make the significance low.

It's the potential of the research actually to make a difference to that problem. But you're describing a situation which I think is more let's see if we can create a new drug for which there's no problem. If that's the case, then the significance does sound low, but I hesitate to go too far down this path without guiding you on something where that might not be the appropriate response.

A11.2 Prof. Nicholas Talley: I think it's all about the justification. If it's justified in a way that's convincing, that says, "Look, if we do this, there will be a major outcome and this is what it will be", then I would judge it well; I would score up. But if, on the other hand, it's, "Oh well, it's going to possibly create something and replace a current drug that we don't need replacing", for example, I'd argue that justification really wouldn't add much value. On the other hand, if they said, "By learning the mechanism of this drug it will create a whole new class of drugs that may change the field", that's clearly very significant. So it depends always on the application and what they've written in there for that justification. If they haven't justified well, I score down. I mean, it's as simple as that. But I make sure I've read it all, that I haven't missed the justification. But that is really important, that you've read it really carefully to ensure you don't miss what is a critical sentence or two relevant to that sort of issue, and all the other issues for that matter.

A11.3 Prof. Anne Kelso: But it also sounds as though if it's the justification that's the problem, rather than the design of the study, then it's on the significance that you score it down rather than on the quality because it could be a perfectly designed project. It's just the significance lets it down. So that shouldn't influence your scores across every criterion. It should influence your score on the relevant criterion.

A11.4 Prof. Rosalie Viney: I think one of the things that is the challenge here and it's important for all Peer Reviewers to think about is we bring our own expertise to the Peer Review process. We bring the knowledge that we have of an area. But as Nick says, you've got to assess the application and think about what they've said in that application. So it's really important to just stress that: have you read what they have, and be careful not to bring our own assumptions and our own knowledge in. Obviously you're there because you've got expertise but we need to make sure that we're actually assessing what's there in the application, not our knowledge of the field overall. And I'm sure that's not what you meant, but I think it's worth saying.

Q12 Category Descriptors + Calibration

Q12 Peer reviewer: My question is around descriptor and score sharing. What I find difficult in the last couple of years with the Ideas Grant is the descriptors, where it really just changes the adjective from 7 to 1, and what is outstandingly innovative, what is extremely innovative, what is very, very innovative, what is very innovative, innovative or quite innovative? Whereas I think in the older days, when we still had the benefits of the face to face meeting, the descriptors, from memory, at that time were a little bit more specific and gave a bit more guidance (e.g. if it is a 7 that is equivalent to being internationally significant etc.).

But in those times, the panel around the table would gain some degree of self calibration, knowing my 5 is a little bit like other people's 6, or that kind of adjustment, whereas without the score sharing at the moment, there is no such adjustment, and not showing the scores afterwards, then people don't actually know whether their 'very tall' is someone's 'extremely tall' or 'quite tall'. And I have been on other granting bodies' panels in the last 12 months and there are newer people in the process who consistently score one or two grades higher than the rest of the panel, and it's only when you actually have the score sharing that you can -adjust or the person will be able to realise that and adjust for that. And I think this is what we might have to think about in the future years.

A12.1 Prof. Anne Kelso: They are issues that we are aware of and think about. One of the advantages of each Peer Reviewer having about 20 to review is that you'd expect to see a spread there, so that if you think of it for yourself as a ranking exercise, I think that's a very good start. And I think we also know that a 7, when it's really exceptional, we're talking about really amazing work that would be a tiny per cent.

A very long time ago, NHMRC used to provide advice about more or less the band, that 7 would be top 2% or something, I don't remember the exact descriptors, but that's another way of thinking about it. If you think of it on an international scale, how would you rate it? But we do appreciate that this kind of benchmarking is quite difficult for people who are less experienced.

We had a Peer Review Analysis Committee meet over several meetings and we're getting close to being able to release this report from the Committee. It has an analysis of distributions of scores, how many people are outliers and whether there are people who consistently score higher or lower. It helps us to see that it's a very small percentage of people who are consistently different from their peers with this sort of approach that we now take, but I think you'll probably be interested to see those data when we get them out on to the website.

The final thing to say is that there's a whole other set of issues about Grant Review Panel meetings that have concerned us as well, and that is that some of the getting together and talking about it means that you can have very dominant personalities who end up driving the overall process, and so while there are challenges in independent scoring, there are also real benefits in getting scores

that are truly independent of what the other person at a table might think, and so we actually think that that's a really important reason that independent scoring is a good way to go, and we'll simply over time try to develop better support for it. And if we can find a better way to describe 1 to 7, we would really like to do that and would appreciate your ideas on that, because I know exactly what you mean about what's the difference between 'exceptional', 'outstanding', 'excellent'.

Q13 COVID consideration

Chat question: *Can I ask what advice is there regarding COVID considerations when assessing?*

Q13 Peer reviewer: I think that COVID, particularly for human trials, introduces difficulties in the implementation phase, for example, if you need to delay recruitment. Is there any advice about how we monitor ourselves so as to not bias an application because we think it may be more difficult or less feasible for them to actually undertake the trial they have proposed (due to COVID related roadblocks) versus, say, perhaps in animal research where such roadblocks may not be an issue.

A13.2 Amanda Lawrence: Yes, so we have instructed applicants, where there are considerations impacted by COVID, to address it as part of their risk management strategy in their grant proposal, in particular. So that's where we expect to have most information about how the applicant team would manage those uncertainties or difficulties around what you've given examples of there. I wonder if Nick or Rosalie have any other tips in terms of how you actually go about assessing some of those considerations?

A13.3 Prof. Nicholas Talley: I would expect in this round that some justification of risks for human trials would be there regarding this and related issues in terms of recruitment strategies and what the back-ups might be if the recruitment plan for a clinical trial, for example, might be at risk. And you're right, there is a chance, depending on where the pandemic is, next year that there would be risks, I would expect. But as long as it's justified, I'd be comfortable again scoring it with that in consideration. Obviously if no-one talks about any risks, that would be also something to take into account in that particular setting. However, I don't think you can assume there won't be any clinical trials next year. We just don't know for sure really. So I think it's not a matter of suggesting that we should score down those proposals. Far from it. But the justification of risk is critical.

Additional Questions received during the Q&A that were not able to be answered due to time restrictions:

Q14 Working in Sapphire and saving comments

Q14 Chat question: *Working in SAPPHIRE, can we save as a 'draft' before submission? For instance, after I've done a few preliminary reviews, I'd like to be able to go back over what I've done to make sure I'm being consistent about my evaluation.*

A14 NHMRC: Yes you can save your draft comments and scores before “Submitting”. NHMRC encourages reviewers to look across their whole pool of applications for benchmarking and to ensure consistency in scoring. You are able to put comments into the system without submitting and submit at the very end, after you've assessed all of your applications and have completed your own benchmarking exercise. Secretariats can see where there are scores or some comments in system (even though they are not yet submitted), so this helps us know that peer reviewers are working on assessments even if they haven't yet submitted anything in system. Working directly in system also reduces transcription errors that may be caused by copying and pasting scores and comments from your own offline spreadsheet into the system.

Note too that you can also extract your own scores and comments from the system should you wish to do so prior to submitting them. Please seek advice from your secretariat if you need assistance with this.

Q15 Compliance of application

Q15 Chat question: *If the application doesn't satisfy compliance instructions, e.g. their proposal name format is not right, the font is not consistent, margin is not correct etc. Do we address these issues in the review or it's not part of our reviewing content?*

A15 NHMRC: If you detect an issue with the application that may relate to compliance with application requirements or eligibility, please inform your secretariat, who will look into this separately. Do not address compliance or eligibility concerns in your assessment comments or as part reviewing the application. You need to continue to review the application against the assessment criteria and the objectives of the scheme against the category descriptors. Your secretariat will separately manage any compliance or eligibility related processes. If you find a requested budget item that does not comply with the Direct Research Cost Guidelines, please flag those in your budget comments (budget remarks do not go to applicants), to bring it to the attention of NHMRC.