



NHMRC Assessor Guidance Module - Suitability Declarations Transcript

This guidance module provides information on NHMRC's Suitability declaration process, for the purpose of peer review of grant applications.

The information provided in this module is not exhaustive and does not replace the advice within the relevant scheme's Grant Opportunity Guidelines or Peer Review Guidelines.

This module provides background and explanations, as well as an example of how to approach identifying and declaring your suitability correctly, the first time. Achieving this reduces your workload, and contributes to the rigour and integrity of NHMRC's peer review system.

Please note, suitability and conflict of interest declarations are undertaken in NHMRC's granting system, in tandem.

Background and explanation

Once you agree to participate in peer review for NHMRC, we will broadly match your expertise to groups of applications in your field. You must then declare your level of suitability to assess individual applications before NHMRC can assign your allocations. To do this, you need to review application summary, which consist of project title, research team, administering and participating institutions, research classifications and synopsis. Detailed instructions on how to download application summaries, and record your declarations in NHMRC's grant management system will be provided by your secretariat.

Of the four options, you must select one option regarding your suitability for all applications assigned.

To make your participation in peer review worthwhile NHMRC generally expects you to declare either 'Yes' or 'Moderate' for the majority of the applications allocated to you.

Selecting 'Yes' or 'Moderate' means you feel confident in your ability to understand and assess the proposal's aims, background and research plan, against assessment criteria and associated category



descriptors. It also signals you are confident making a judgement on the appropriateness of each project's budget, timeline, risks, outcomes, and significance.

Please note, not all NHMRC schemes will require you to consider all of these elements when declaring your suitability. For example, some schemes may not require you to assess the budget or another may only ask you to assess the commercial viability of a project. Refer to the scheme specific documentation and instructions for further information.

We will now provide examples to illustrate how to effectively declare your suitability, noting, that these should not be considered as an exhaustive list of scenarios.

Example 1:

Dr A, a medical oncologist specialising in gastrointestinal cancers, has been appointed as an NHMRC peer reviewer. Dr A has been asked to declare their suitability to assess an application on chemotherapy resistance for colon cancer. After reading the summary, they feel very confident to assess all aspects of the proposal, other than one portion, which focuses on a specific technique for genome sequencing. Although Dr A is familiar with this technique, they have limited practical experience. As they are confident to assess a majority of the application, Dr A selects 'Yes', and would be considered to assess this application.

As you can see from this example, you are not expected to have expert knowledge of **all aspects** of the application, especially in the case of multi-disciplinary proposals. In most cases across NHMRC funding schemes, there are multiple, *complementary* assessors for each application. This ensures all aspects of the application are reviewed appropriately.

Example 2:

Associate Prof B, a Virologist who specialises in HIV has been appointed as an NHMRC peer reviewer. Associate Prof B, an experienced Virologist with a focus on blood borne viruses, does not have extensive practical experience with the techniques relating to respiratory viruses. Associate Prof B is confident they could provide a thorough assessment of the general principles outlined in the application. Associate Prof B selects MODERATE suitability, and may be called upon to assess the application.

Example 3:

Professor C, a Cardiologist specialising in paediatrics, has been appointed as an NHMRC peer reviewer. Professor C has been asked to declare suitability to assess an application on heart transplants. While Prof C has cardiac experience, they have not worked in the field of transplants and are not familiar with the techniques. Prof C could only provide general cardiac advice in relation to this application and as such declares LIMITED suitability. Professor C may be called on to assess this application, only if the overall suitability provided for this application has been low.

Please only declare a 'No' if you have absolutely no ability to review the application. Keep in mind that the wider the assessor pool available for each application, the fairer the outcome it will receive.

If you select 'limited' or 'no' for a large number of applications, NHMRC may ask you to re-examine your suitability. If suitability is not improved, NHMRC may release you from peer review for that year. As well as finding the best expertise and self-declared suitability matches, NHMRC also needs to ensure that each assessor's workload is fair and balanced. NHMRC will assign each assessor (or spokesperson) a similar number of applications to review.

This process is self-assessed and subjective in nature. No two experiences are the same, with each expert inevitably perceiving different levels of comfort to assess the variety of applications.

NHMRC still requires you to select your level of suitability to assess an application, even if you are declaring a high conflict of interest. This is because you may have expertise in an area which the assigned assessors needs further guidance. In rare circumstances, NHMRC may ask you to provide advice to a very specific question relating to an application for which you are highly conflicted. You would not assess the application in any way; but simply provide expertise to assist the assigned peer reviewers in making their assessment.

If you require any further information on the suitability declaration process, refer to the scheme documentation or contact your NHMRC Secretariat.