



How to Review a Grant, and Rebuttal to Criticism.
(NHMRC Protocol)

Presentation supported by the 'Australian Society for
Medical Research, Victorian Committee'.

A presentation made by Prof. John Furness,
Supported by Prof. Warrick Anderson
Chair of Proceedings Prof. Colin Masters
Introduction by Dr. Rob Ramsay

Melbourne University
Sunderland Theatre.
4.15pm
Monday the 8th of May

Dr Rob Ramsay

Professor John Furness

“A very high standard of review is required this year, as
2000 will set the benchmark for assessment in future
years. This presentation is the best information available
on a new and evolving system”

NHMRC: ASSESSMENT PROCESS IN BRIEF

- Panel consists of chair, deputy chair and 9-10 members.
- Each grant has a spokesperson, deputy spokesperson from the RGAP.
- Spokesperson and deputy spokespersons allocate grant to 4 assessors.

- Chair and Deputy Chair approve allocations.
- Spokesperson reviews assessor's reports, and may (rarely) censor report.
- Reports go to applicant, and applicant has opportunity for rebuttal.
- RGAP meets for 5 days, and categorises and ranks all grants, based on the grant, the assessors' reports and the rebuttal. The spokesperson and deputy spokesperson lead the discussion, all RGAP members participate. At the end of the week, a categorised and ranked list and recommended budgets are prepared for the Grants Committee. This goes with a Chair's report to the Grants Committee.
- The Grants committee considers the recommendations of each RGAP, and produces a list of grants that will be recommended for funding.

THE SEVEN POINT SCALE

Each RGAP will eventually categorise the applications.

The scale has an important role in determining the categorisation of grants, which will provide guidance to inter-panel comparison at the Grants Committee.

7. Outstanding, highest international quality and research performance.

In top 5% of grants internationally

6. Excellent. The research is at the forefront of the field. It has several of the following properties: it is feasible, innovative, intellectually sound, backed by strong track records, likely to lead to significant outcomes and be published in high quality journals.

From 5th to 10th percentile internationally

5. Very good. This work is extremely sound, and the outcomes are likely to advance the field of research. There may be some minor concerns, for example on feasibility or competition from groups in other countries.

From 10th to 25th percentile internationally

4. Good. Highly competitive grants. Fundable, but less competitive than those above. These grants usually have one or more flaws, or there is uncertainty about the feasibility of the plans or techniques, or there are doubts that arise from consideration of track record.

From 25th to 40th percentile internationally

3. Fair
2. Marginal
1. Poor

Below 40th percentile internationally

WHAT WE ARE TRYING TO ACHIEVE

- Identify the most innovative and important research proposals, at an internationally competitive level.
- Identify these through a process of rigorous peer review.
- Assess the likelihood of successful outcome, by evaluating the design of the study, its feasibility and the track records of the applicants.
- Fund the best research.
- Ensure that the process is as open as possible. It is essential that the medical research community is confident in its own system.

IMPORTANCE AND ROLES OF ASSESSORS

- The assessors are the eyes and ears of the RGAPs.
- 2000 will help set the standard for future years. That is, the quality of your assessments this year will set a bench-mark for future years.
- The assessors between them should cover all aspects of the project.

AREAS FOR ASSESSMENT

Significance:

The extent to which the project will make an original and important contribution. The rating must follow the 7 point scale, taking note of the percentile guides.

Approach:

The appropriateness of the approach to the aims. Includes consideration of the conceptual framework, design, methods chosen. You are asked to use the 7 point scale, but the percentile guides may be less rigid here, in that a high proportion of applications will use more-or-less appropriate approaches.

Feasibility:

The likelihood that the project, if funded, can be accomplished. Again, this must be taken on its merits, and the percentile guides for ranking may be less rigid.

Track record:

Productivity, outcomes in relation to opportunity. The rating must follow the 7 point scale, taking note of the percentile guides.

NATURE OF COMMENTS (1)

- Avoid ad hominem comments or comments that reflect your bias in relation to a field of research.
- Comments must be consistent with the ratings.
- If you make a general comment, back it up with a specific example:
 - The methods tend to be outdated: for example, measuring vasopressin by blood pressure assay is not adequate when precise immunoassays are available.
 - If you make a key assertion, provide a reference.
 - The applicants rely on the Schmidt assay. However, it has been published that this assay is unreliable when tissue has been stored for more than 24 hr (Ramsay, J Things, 13, 1-3, 1990).
 - You are evaluating what is before you, not what you think the applicants might be capable of doing if they thought about it more.
 - Be very careful not to be ambiguous, especially in questions posed to the applicants. There is no RGIC to help in interpreting the comments and questions.

NATURE OF COMMENTS (2)**Significance**

Tell us whether this is novel, whether it repeats existing work, whether it will provide a genuine advance or a confirmation of published data, whether the results will be non-trivial.

Approach

Are the studies well conceived and designed?
Are the methods appropriate? The most appropriate?
Are statistics, power calculations OK?
Will the approach answer the questions posed?

Feasibility

Can the studies be done using the methods proposed by these applicants?
Are the resources available to the applicants adequate for the task?

Have the applicants demonstrated that the necessary technical expertise is available to them (or will be if the work is funded).

Track-Record

The purpose of evaluating track record is to provide a judgement whether, based on past records, the CI, or the group of CIs, collectively, have a track record that ranks internationally, and would predict likely success if the grant is funded.

You are asked to give a single score, even though there may be several CIs. Take notice of the team structure.

NATURE OF COMMENTS (3)

Questions

Remember the applicants have 2 pages for their rebuttal, and there will usually be four assessors. Therefore think whether your questions could be answered in less than half a page.

Do not ask very general questions.

Don't ask: the applicants should explain the theoretical basis for believing that early childhood experience leads to post-pubescent rejection of authority figures.

It is often helpful to direct questions at points that you have already elaborated, e.g. under significance.

The questions should provide the applicants the opportunity to clarify ambiguities, or provide information that will assist in the evaluation of the grant. They are not the opportunity for the assessor to demonstrate how clever she/he is.

THE RESPONSE TO ASSESSORS

Current thinking is that there will be usually no primary spokesperson's report.

There will be a guide to the response, but this is not available yet, so some of my comments reflect a personal expectation of the guide.

You will need to evaluate which are the key points to respond to.

You are the judge of how to respond, and you will be judged to some extent on your responses:

- Pick out the most important points
- Answer factually
- Reference where needed
- Don't attack the assessor or the system
- This is not an opportunity to substantially redesign the study: you have been assessed

on the grant you submitted, and cannot be re-evaluated on a new study.

This ended Prof. John Furness' Presentation.

Questions from the Audience

Questions from the audience were then directed to Prof. John Furness and Prof. Warrick Anderson.

Q: Can a reviewer advise the panel on which areas of the grant they are qualified to report on?

A: Each reviewer will be notified personally by their panel chairperson, and will have the opportunity to communicate any information they feel necessary.

Q: Are the four issues (eg Feasibility, Track record etc) weighted differently?

A: Some areas such as track record may prove quite important, but in the end reviewers are requested to give a single score, which means that any weighting will be evened out.

Q: Is it possible to turn around a poor grant with a good rebuttal?

A: Usually all grants improve upon rebuttal, as the researcher has had more time to prepare, if new data or solutions to problems are displayed this may significantly improve the grant, conversely a poor rebuttal may pull down a grant.

Q: "What do you mean by 'International Competitiveness', will there be many international reviewers?

A: International Competitiveness is an NHMRC form of expression, relating to the likelihood that the work presented will be eventually published in high impact international journals. There is a very low number of international reviewers available.

Q: The four categories discussed appear to be interdependent, is it possible for assessors to simply submit an overall single score for all four categories?

A: This is definitely a possibility, although overall single scores have not been good predictors in the past.

Q: What is the situation with Priming Grants?

A: These will be judged in the same way, with all categories still being applicable. They will also have a separate budget.

Q: Will the final scores be released to applicants?

A: This is currently quite hard to organise, although it could get easier as time goes on. This could be something for the ASMR to look into.

Q: Will each assessor have access to the other three assessors reports?

A: Yes that is our eventual aim.

Q: What time is allowed for rebuttal?

A: The timetable is available on the Internet. It is approximately two weeks.

Q: What is the situation for Type 2 grants?

A: The assessment protocol for these doesn't exist yet.

Q: With brand new experiments, how can you judge feasibility?

A: Write your response in a pertinent manner to the panel, ie. It could survive or fail, there is no way to tell at the moment.

Q: Who evaluates the rebuttals?

A: The whole panel will contribute to the process.

Q: How is ranking of scores coordinated between panels?

A: Each panel receives a broad categorisation to follow, the Chairman will have the specific role of checking that the assessments are honest.

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