Development Grants scheme-specific peer review guidelines

Contents

The following sections describe the specific processes, timelines and expectations that apply to the peer review of applications to the Development Grants scheme.

These scheme-specific guidelines complement and must be read in conjunction with the following supporting documents:

- Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018
- NHMRC Funding Rules 2018
- Development Grants scheme-specific funding rules
- NHMRC Advice and Instructions to Applicants 2018
- Development Grants scheme-specific advice and instructions to applicants
- *NHMRC Funding Agreement*.

It is recommended that you read the *Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018* before reading these scheme-specific guidelines.

1. Overview of the peer review process

7 February 2018	Applications close
Phase 1	
Early February 2018	Expert Peer Reviewers (EPRs) declare Conflicts of Interest (CoIs) against applications and nominate suitability. Each EPR will generally be assigned 8-10 non-conflicted applications to assess.
March 2018	EPRs score each application and submit reports to NHMRC
Early April 2018	Not for Further Consideration (NFFC) process
Phase 2	
Early April 2018	Non-NFFC applications are allocated to Grant Review Panels (GRPs)
Early April 2018	GRP members declare CoIs against applications
Early April – early May 2018	GRP members assess and score all non-conflicted applications allocated to their GRP
Early April – early May 2018	Assigned Scientific and Commercialisation Spokespersons will assess requested budgets and provide the GRP with a recommended budget
Mid May 2018	NHMRC collates ranked list based on scores
Mid May 2018	GRP members review ranked list
Late May 2018	Members nominate applications that require further discussion at the GRP meetings
Late May 2018	GRP meeting dates to discuss only nominated applications, as required
July/August 2018*	Notification of outcomes

*Dates are indicative.

2. Key changes to the peer review process

Participants in NHMRC peer review processes previously should note the following changes:

- Changes to section 4.1.5 Not For Further Consideration.

3. Roles and Responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of those participating in the peer review process are identified in the table below.

Role	Responsibilities
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expert	Applications that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research will be considered by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health expert against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (see section 6.3 of the *NHMRC Funding Rules 2018*). An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expert will: • identify and advise NHMRC of all real or perceived CoIs they have with applications

Role	Responsibilities
	• provide written assessments on applications focusing on the strengths and weaknesses against each of the four research excellence criteria.
Panel Chair	The Chair's role is to ensure that NHMRC's procedures are adhered to and that a fair and equitable consideration is given to every application being reviewed by the GRP. Chairs are independent to the review of applications, and must manage the process of peer review in accordance with these guidelines. Chairs will: Before the meeting: • identify and advise NHMRC of all real or perceived CoIs they have with applications to be reviewed • familiarise themselves with all applications being considered for which they are not conflicted. At the meeting: • ask members to declare any associations between GRP members • keep discussions on time and focused • ensure NHMRC policies and procedures are followed • assist members with their duties and understanding of what is expected of them • take appropriate action for each late declared CoI • promote good engagement by all members in discussions • ensure applications are assessed against the Category Descriptors appropriately (see Attachment A of the *Development Grants scheme-specific funding rules*) • facilitate the discussion of budgets and assist the panel to resolve budget discussions where required • ensure discussions are consistent for all applications • record and notify NHMRC of any requests for clarification or advice.
Assistant Chairs	Assistant Chairs will: Before the meeting: • identify and advise NHMRC of all real or perceived CoIs they may have with applications • review each non-NFFC application to ensure compliance with NHMRC requirements. At the meeting: • record key points regarding an application's strengths and weaknesses • record all reasons for adjusting the requested budgets, as necessary • ensure budget discussions are consistent across all applications discussed and inform the Chair if inconsistencies arise.
Expert Peer Reviewers (Phase 1): Scientific or Commercialisation	NHMRC will endeavour to obtain eight assessments from Expert Peer Reviewers (EPR) for each application in Phase 1. EPRs will either be Scientific or Commercialisation based on their expertise and each application will be assessed by up to four Scientific EPRs and four Commercialisation EPRs. The EPRs will: • be selected based on the expertise required to provide a fair assessment of an application but may not have the necessary expertise to cover all aspects of an application • declare all CoIs they may have with any aspect of an application prior to undertaking its assessment • notify NHMRC if an application does not meet eligibility criteria, including formatting requirements • consider all relative to opportunity statements or career disruptions declared by the applicant • score each application against the Development Grants scheme

Role	Responsibilities
	Category Descriptors (Attachment A of the *Development Grants scheme-specific funding rules)* and provide a brief written assessment focusing on the application's major strengths and weaknesses • maintain the confidentiality of information designated as such by applicants in accordance with section 80 of the *NHMRC Act* • score and comment on the Scientific Merit of the Proposal Assessment Criterion if assessing as a Scientific EPR • score and comment on both the Record of Commercial Achievements and Commercial Potential Assessment Criteria if assessing as a Commercialisation EPR. Anonymised comments from EPRs will be collated and provided to applicants after peer review has been completed, noting that NHMRC will not review these reports.
Grant Review Panel Members (Phase 2)	All GRP members are responsible for: • identifying and advising NHMRC of all real or perceived CoIs they have with applications • providing a fair, thorough and impartial assessment against the three Assessment Criteria in a timely manner • considering all relative to opportunity statements and career disruptions declared by applicants • scoring against either the scientific or commercialisation assessment criteria for all applications allocated to their GRP (except where a high CoI exists) • preparing and participating in discussions of applications.
Scientific Spokespersons (Phase 2)	Scientific Spokespersons are responsible for: • scrutinising the proposed budget to ensure grant duration, Personal Support Packages, Direct Research Costs, and equipment requests are appropriate for the described project and are fully justified • keeping a record of any proposed adjustments with input from the Commercialisation Spokesperson • rescoring applications that are nominated for discussion • leading discussion of applications nominated for discussion at the GRP meeting regarding the appropriateness of the requested budget.
Commercialisation Spokespersons (Phase 2)	Commercialisation Spokespersons are responsible for: • scrutinising the proposed budget to ensure grant duration, Personal Support Packages, Direct Research Costs, and equipment requests are appropriate for the described project and are fully justified • providing input to the Scientific Spokesperson on any proposed budget adjustments • rescoring applications that are nominated for discussion • supporting the Scientific Spokesperson in the discussion of applications nominated for discussion at the GRP meeting regarding the appropriateness of the requested budget.
NHMRC Research Scientists	NHMRC staff with extensive research expertise will: • identify potential EPRs and GRP members based on application topic areas • allocate applications to EPRs, GRP members and nominate Scientific and Commercialisation Spokespersons • assist and advise on the GRP process • Chair and/or Assistant Chair GRPs where required.
NHMRC Secretariat	NHMRC Secretariat will be responsible for: • being the first point of contact for Phase 1 EPRs and Phase 2 GRP members • inviting potential EPRs and GRP members based on advice from NHMRC Research Scientists

Role	Responsibilities
	• providing administrative support and advice to the EPRs, Chairs, Assistant Chairs, and GRP members on: o maintaining accurate records of CoIs o ensuring Chairs are aware of CoIs declared by GRP members o the management of declared CoIs • preparing the NFFC list after Phase 1 assessments are complete • preparing the ranked list of applications for Phase 2 GRP members • facilitating access by non-conflicted GRP members to applications • preparing the order in which applications will be reviewed during the GRP meeting • recording and notifying NHMRC Research Scientists of any requests for clarification or advice.
Community Observers	The GRP meeting may have independent Community Observers present to observe procedures. All Community Observers will be briefed on GRP meeting procedures and will need to declare CoIs, where a high CoI exists, they will be required to leave the meeting while that application is discussed. Community Observers do not participate in the discussion of any application. The primary responsibilities of the Community Observer are to: • identify and advise NHMRC of all real or perceived CoIs they may have with applications under review • monitor procedural aspects of the GRP's conduct during the meeting • provide feedback to NHMRC on the consistency of procedures.

4. Peer review process

NHMRC's peer review process is designed to provide a rigorous, fair, transparent and consistent assessment of the merits of each application according to the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* to ensure that only the highest quality, value for money research is recommended for funding (see section 11.2 of the *NHMRC Funding Rules 2018*).

All applications are assessed against the Assessment Criteria as set out in section 4 of the *Development Grants scheme-specific funding rules*, and scored using the Category Descriptors at Attachment A of the *Development Grants scheme-specific funding rules*.

Applications that are accepted to relate to the improvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health are also assessed against the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria as set out in section 6.3 of the *NHMRC Funding Rules 2018*.

Applications are assessed relative to opportunity, taking into consideration any career disruptions (see section 6.2 of the *NHMRC Funding Rules 2018*).

4.1 Peer review process: Phase 1

4.1.1 Recruitment of Expert Peer Reviewers

NHMRC Research Scientists and staff will identify up to eight (four scientific and four commercialisation) EPRs for each eligible application. Each EPR will be assigned approximately eight to ten applications to assess.

4.1.2 Declaring Conflicts of Interest and suitability to assess applications

EPRs will be provided with the Snapshot Summary Report, asked to declare any CoIs, and indicate their suitability to review each application. EPRs will only be given access to the full application if they have a low or no CoI. For information on what constitutes a CoI, refer to section 4.3.2 of the *Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018*.

All EPRs must notify the Secretariat immediately if a CoI is identified at any point in the process. The EPR will be required to destroy any soft or hardcopy files in their possession pertaining to applications for which they have declared a late high CoI. Any late declared CoIs may delay the assessment of applications.

4.1.3 Allocation of applications to Expert Peer Reviewers

NHMRC Research Scientists will allocate applications to EPRs taking into consideration the declared expertise and any declared CoIs. EPRs will be notified of their allocated applications by the Secretariat.

When indicating expertise, it is expected that EPRs should have at least a moderate or high level for the majority of applications in either a scientific or commercial capacity. EPRs should only indicate no expertise in cases where they feel strongly that they do not have the expertise to assess an application.

4.1.4 Expert Peer Reviewers assess and score applications

EPRs will be required to review, score and provide a brief written assessment on all applications allocated to them. EPRs will be allocated between eight and ten applications. Assessors are responsible for ensuring the written comments they provide comply with section 6.1 of the *NHMRC Guide to Peer Review 2018*. The review and subsequent scoring of applications must be conducted using the Category Descriptors (Attachment A of the *Development Grants scheme-specific funding rules*).

Scientific EPRs will only score against the Scientific Merit of the Proposal assessment criterion and Commercialisation EPRs will score against both the Record of Commercial Achievements and Commercial Potential assessment criteria. The written assessments of applications that progress to Phase 2 will be provided to GRP members.

4.1.5 Not For Further Consideration

The Not For Further Consideration (NFFC) process aims to identify and remove applications that are assessed as being less competitive than other applications in the round. Based on the EPRs scores, the least competitive applications will be removed from further consideration except where:

- the application did not receive two or more EPR assessments for either the scientific or commercialisation assessment criteria
- the application received only two assessments for any criterion and the scores are two or more points away from each other and the highest score would have ordinarily excluded the application from the NFFC list
- the application relates to an NHMRC strategic research priority and achieves a notional score that is category 4 or higher.

Once the EPR scores have been finalised, and the NFFC applications identified, they will be removed from peer review. Applications that have not been deemed NFFC will progress to Phase 2.

4.2 Peer review process: Phase 2

4.2.1 Establishment of Grant Review Panels

GRPs are established to review all applications that have progressed to Phase 2 of the peer review process and the Phase 1 written assessments of those applications. The number of GRPs established and the number of members on each is dependent on the number of Phase 2 applications. Each GRP is led by a Chair with support from an Assistant Chair; both are independent within the peer review process and do not participate in the assessment or scoring of applications. Each GRP is supported by a dedicated NHMRC Secretariat who will interact with GRP members as necessary (see section 3. Roles and Responsibilities).

GRP members are selected for their expertise and experience by NHMRC Research Scientists. Some Phase 1 members may also be invited to participate in Phase 2. The Guiding Principles for Peer

Review Panel Membership Nomination and Appointments, endorsed by NHMRC's Research Committee, are applied when determining each GRP's membership.

NHMRC endeavours to limit occurrences where the Chief Investigator (CI) of an application is a member of the GRP that is reviewing their application. NHMRC will make every effort to ensure there are no instances where the Chair or Assistant Chair is a CI on an application being reviewed by the GRP.

Information will not be revealed to the applicant regarding which GRP their application has been allocated to or about the membership of any GRP.

4.2.2 Identification of Conflicts of Interest and suitability

GRP members will be provided the Snapshot Summary Report of each application and asked to declare any CoIs. Members will only be given access to a full application if they have a low or no CoI. For information on what constitutes a CoI, refer to section 4.3.2 of the *Guide to NHMRC Peer Review 2018*.

GRP members must notify the Secretariat immediately if a CoI is identified at any point during the peer review process. It is important all CoIs are declared early. CoIs that are not declared until the GRP meeting are likely to cause procedural delays and extend the meeting time.

NHMRC may review CoI declarations or make a ruling where required. GRP members must review and confirm all NHMRC CoI rulings in advance of the meeting.

4.2.3 Access to full applications

GRP members will be given access to all applications and the associated EPR reports that are allocated to their panel, excluding any applications where they have been ruled to have a high CoI. When accessing a full application, GRP members should revisit whether they have a CoI that was not initially evident and contact the Secretariat immediately to report one. The GRP member will be required to delete or destroy any files in their possession pertaining to applications with which they have declared a late high CoI.

4.2.4 Applications requiring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assessment

Applications relating specifically to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander health will be identified on a preliminary basis by information provided in the application.

NHMRC Assigners Academy members with Indigenous health expertise, in consultation with NHMRC Research Scientists, will confirm that applications have at least 20% of their research effort and/or capacity building focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. Those applications deemed appropriate will be subject to evaluation using NHMRC's Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (section 6.3 of the *NHMRC Funding Rules 2018*).

Advice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health applications will be provided by an expert with the appropriate expertise.

4.2.5 Grant Review Panel member briefing teleconference

NHMRC will conduct a briefing teleconference after members have accessed the full applications. The briefing will cover duties and responsibilities associated with peer review. Any changes to the scheme for the current application round will also be highlighted and discussed as required.

4.2.6 Scoring applications

GRP members will read the complete application and independently review and score all non-conflicted applications assigned to them. Each application will be assessed relative to opportunity against the assessment criteria, with reference to the Category Descriptors.

- Scientific members will provide a score against the Scientific Merit of the Proposal criterion.
- Commercialisation members will provide scores against both the Record of Commercial Achievements and Commercial Potential criteria.

To ensure impartiality and independence of assessments, GRP members must not enter into dialogue when reviewing and scoring the applications. The one exception is the discussion between an application's Scientific and Commercialisation Spokespersons concerning any budget adjustments.

4.2.7 Spokespersons budget reviews

All GRP members will receive an allocation of applications for the purpose of reviewing the budget and for which they will be the Spokesperson. Scientific Spokespersons are responsible for budget scrutiny and are to note any budget adjustments that may be required. The Commercialisation Spokesperson also considers the budget and should communicate to the Scientific Spokesperson any concerns or comments they have on the budget.

Both the Scientific and Commercialisation Spokespersons will adhere to the NHMRC policy relating to budget requests on Personal Support Packages (see section 8.3.2 of *NHMRC Funding Rules 2018*).

4.2.8 Preparation of the ranked list and nomination of applications requiring discussion

NHMRC will develop a ranked list based on the scores entered by GRP members prior to the meeting. The list will identify the overall rank and rating, weighted score for each criterion and standard deviation, notional category and requested and recommended budget.

1. Rating - will be determined by including each GRP member's score for each of the Assessment Criteria. The rating, as calculated arithmetically to three decimal places, will take into account the weighting of each of the three criterion.
2. Category - this will be deemed, based on the calculated rating, as follows:

Rating range	Category
1.001 - 1.500	1
1.501 - 2.500	2
2.501 - 3.500	3
3.501 - 4.500	4
4.501 - 5.500	5
5.501 - 6.500	6
6.501 - 7.000	7

GRP members will be provided a CoI-tailored ranked list and then invited to consider whether any applications require discussion at the GRP meeting.

If an application is nominated, the GRP member must identify whether they have nominated the application:

- for additional budget scrutiny
- based on concerns with a specific selection criterion score, noting Scientific GRP members can only nominate discussion of the Scientific criterion and Commercialisation GRP members only the two commercial criteria.

4.3 At the Grant Review Panel meeting

The GRP will meet via teleconference to discuss only those applications that have been nominated by members prior to the meeting. Only nominated applications will be discussed at the GRP meeting.

The GRP meeting will be held to discuss only the nominated assessment criterion and/or a budget for an application. For example, if commercial assessment criteria were not nominated for discussion, commercial aspects of the application will not be able to be discussed and therefore rescoring of those assessment criteria will not be available during the GRP meeting.

If applications and/or application budgets have been nominated for discussion, the process at the GRP meeting will be:

- the Chair will outline the format of the discussions
- the nominating GRP member(s) will briefly outline their reason for the nomination
- other GRP members will be able to raise any additional issues they consider appropriate but only against the nominated assessment criterion and/or budget
- discussion should be related directly to the application's strengths and weaknesses against the assessment criteria. It is important the GRP members consider the merits in relation to the assessment criteria
- once the Chair has determined that all the raised concerns have been sufficiently discussed, the assessment criterion nominated for discussion will be re-scored by the relevant non-conflicted GRP members.

4.4 After the Grant Review Panel meeting

After the meeting concludes, the following takes place:

1. Funding recommendations – NHMRC reviews the list of application outcomes and determines which applications will be recommended for funding. NHMRC's Research Committee recommends applications to be funded, through Council, to the CEO who submits them for approval to the Minister with portfolio responsibility for NHMRC.
2. Funding announcements – after Ministerial approval, applicants and RAOs will be advised of the outcome of applications electronically (under embargo as required).
3. Assessment comments – each application will receive a report containing all the anonymised EPR comments provided on their application during Phase 1.
4. Application Assessment Summary (AAS) – all applications that proceed to Phase 2 will receive an AAS, which will indicate:

    a) the weighted GRP scores against the three Assessment Criteria:

    i. Scientific Merit of the Proposal – 40%
    ii. Record of Commercial Achievements – 20%
    iii. Commercial Potential – 40%.

    b) overall score of the application

    c) quartile position of the application

    d) funding cut-off score.

4.5 Grant Review Panel documentation

GRP members must retain their speaking notes and any other notes they take of the peer review process until the outcomes of the deliberations are finalised. For GRP meetings, this is after discussion of the last application and when the Secretariat has confirmed all data entry is complete. After this time, both hard copy and electronic notes should be disposed of appropriately.