NHMRC Project Grant Rebuttals 2015

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Identify aspects of panel roles and NHMRC processes that may impact on how you approach your rebuttal

Examine ways of approaching the rebuttal

Provide an example
Who are your reviewers

- **Spokesperson 1 [SP1]** comments and scores
- **Spokesperson 2 [SP2]** scores; budget comments only, through SP1
- **Two external reviewers** comment but do not score
- All comments/scores are made independently at this stage
- Applicant only sees comments, not the scores

- SP1 and SP2 may not be experts in your specialised sub-field
- Two external reviewers are selected by the panel-independent Assigners Academy. Can be very hard to find reviewers:
  - Conflicts of interest (e.g. ....)
  - Not available because on NHMRC panel
  - Reticence for other reasons

➤ Your grant may be reviewed by:
  - an experienced person who is not expert in your field
  - someone less experienced from within your field

- At time of initial application: very important to help your assigner by identify reviewers who do not have a COI
What happens to your rebuttal

Before the panel meeting
- Bottom 50% of applications are deemed NFFC (some finessing)

At the panel meeting
- In my field, those who know most are likely to leave the room due to COIs
- SP1 and SP2 provide their initial scores
- SP1 leads the discussion, is the key ‘advocate” for your application, addresses strengths, weaknesses and career disruption
- SP2 addresses the reviewers’ comments and your rebuttal, and may add to SP1’s comments
- Budget is not discussed at this point.
- Panel members will have read the application, briefly at least
- All will have it open in front of them on their laptop or in hard copy
- Many will not be expert in the area, and will be guided by SP1
- After discussion, SP1 and SP2 rescore openly—scores may have changed
- Everyone scores anonymously, unless scoring >2 points away from SPs
Scores

- Scoring is done within categories
  - Scientific quality
  - Significance and/or innovation
  - Team
- Each category is scored 1-7
- The weighting assigned to a category differs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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Salient points

- You don’t know who the external reviewers are: they are your peers, maybe your colleagues.

- Most external reviewers put in a lot of time and effort to do a fair job, within the limits of their knowledge and experience.

- You only see comments, not scores. It is often hard to judge a score from the comments.

- One of the reviewers is your panel spokesperson—SP1. You don’t know which one. If you antagonise the spokesperson in your rebuttal, who will stand up for your proposal?

- The panel has an extraordinarily difficult job as the 50% of applications that are considered “fundable” most likely are good grants worth funding. But only a few will get up.

- Final scoring is by category, and the categories are weighted

- Budget issues do not impact directly on scoring
When you get the rebuttal

The four Rs

- **READ** the comments.
- **RANT** and rage if you need to, then put any anger and indignation to one side—these have no place in your rebuttal.
- **RE-EXAMINE** the content carefully, point by point.
  - Which are the difficult questions, that will raise most concerns for the panel?
  - Is there an undercurrent of concern you need to address in some detail?
  - **What** and **who** do you need to help you respond well.
- **RESPOND** always!
  - Be methodical, logical.
  - Use evidence, not words, to convince the panel that your proposal will succeed to do what it sets out to do and that it is among the top internationally.
  - Ask an experienced colleague who is not emotionally involved to read it.
“Agreed. We fund only those proposals we can understand.”
How to organise the rebuttal: Help the panel understand your proposal

- Follow the NHMRC guidelines exactly
- Organise the rebuttal so it is easy to read, visually and content-wise
  - Thematically?
  - Item by item, in order of asking?

- Regardless, I always group them under the scoring category headings. This is how they will be scored by the panel

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- [Budget comes last]
Too many questions—too little space

You want to make it easy for the panel to see that you have answered adequately all the issues raised

- Create a code for the interviewers and their questions.
- However, in general, avoid acronyms. Reviewers outside your specialisation are not be familiar with them, and end up frustrated.
- Include reviewer questions in the response, but abbreviate them.
- Answer all questions, otherwise it looks as though you are evading the issue.
- Devote more space to issues of greater concern within categories of greater weighing.
- Do the budget questions last and do not give them great weight. Your proposal won’t get to the budget discussion if the panel is not convinced by your other responses.
If a reviewer is wrong

- I never say a reviewer is wrong. I respond positively, with a counter-position.
  - *Reviewer*: The way to do X is to use ABC.
  - *Responses:*
    - ABC is not applicable in our situation because…*[OR]*
    - A number of recent studies have shown that DEF is a better approach.

- If a reviewer has misunderstood something important, I take it as an indication that I did not explain/express it well enough, and others will also misunderstand. This presents a good opportunity to clarify things.

[A3] *How many cohorts* • *A point of clarification.* In this historical (aka retrospective) register cohort study, there is one cohort: a birth cohort of children born 1980-2001. The primary outcome (dependent variable) is *psychotic illness* in the children. The primary exposure (independent variable) is level of *social adversity*. Sources of adversity may be at the socio-geographic area level, familial and individual....
If a reviewer points out a major flaw

- Don’t make major changes to your design in your rebuttal.
- The full proposal is about the submitted design, not a changed one.
- If you have a major flaw, you are probably not going to get the grant.
An example

We thank Assessor 1—A1 for very positive comments on the study's methodology ("no weaknesses"), high international competitiveness .... Assessor 2—A2 notes the cogency of the argument...

Here we address the specific questions raised:

Scientific quality

[A2:1] *What % will cross thresholds (either direction).*

- There is a dearth of longitudinal data from naturalistic settings on proportions of people with psychosis crossing metabolic syndrome (MetS) thresholds [see A2:4], a gap our study plans to fill...Conservative estimates give an odds ratio of 2.4 and power of 97%.

[A2:2/A1:1] *[A1.1] No experience with whole of service interventions. How will this intervention succeed ("be scalable") where others have failed? [A2.2] Very short timeframe in which to develop and implement...*

- CIC leads the development of a WA model of integrated care for...
- This is a close, whole-of-service collaboration with AIs who are the clinical directors of Perth's metropolitan mental health services...
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•Note that this is a combined response to similar issues raised by both reviewers
Thank you

"IT STARTED WITH A SIMPLE CASE OF PEER-REVIEW."