NHMRC rebuttals: advice for applicants

Applicants should always take the opportunity to rebut, regardless of how positive, or negative, the assessor comments appear.

Preparation

In preparation for the rebuttal, you should identify a mentor within the Faculty, to assist you in interpreting the assessor comments and composing a reply. If assistance with obtaining a mentor is required, please contact: Research Development Adviser, Dr Amanda Cleaver (amanda.cleaver@uwa.edu.au).

Rebuttal is only accessible online from the NHMRC website using the applicants RGMS login and ID. It is strongly recommended that you copy and paste the comments to a word document and save them. This will make it easier to access them later - as well as ensuring that you retain a more permanent record, since the rebuttal will eventually (i.e. after the grants have been allocated) be deleted from the website.

The NHMRC panel will send your application to as many assessors as they think appropriate. However it is beyond their control as to how many of those assessors will respond before the deadline date, if at all. Therefore you should not attempt to read anything into the number of reports you receive.

Be prepared – assessor comments are like any other form of critical feedback and might invoke very strong feelings in you – either positive or negative. It is essential that your response to the comments is dispassionate and objective. It is also worthwhile remembering that the external assessors will not see your rebuttal – it goes directly to the panel. The assessor comments represent only advice to the panel. A negative report does not necessarily mean that your application will be unsuccessful. Conversely, a positive report from the assessor is no guarantee of success.

Writing a rebuttal

- It is the responsibility of the first-named Chief Investigator (CI) to write the rebuttal, using the appropriate RGMS login.

- Be objective. Do not emotionally debate the assessor report. Under no circumstances should the assessor be personally engaged. The rebuttal should address the comments, not the person writing them.

- Address the important points first.

- Respectfully reply - one of the assessments WILL be from your primary spokesperson i.e. the person who is responsible for 'championing' your grant when the panel meets. It is often impossible to determine which of the assessments is from the spokesperson (although sometimes you can make a good guess), so it is best to play it safe and assume that any could be this person, and respond accordingly (e.g. objectively, respectfully, etc).
• As with the original application, rebuttals are entered online. They can be saved multiple times, but only submitted once. It is recommended that the rebuttal is drafted in a word document and only entered online when finalised. This will also reduce the frustration associated with logging in during peak load times.

• Remember that the NHMRC panel members will be reading an enormously high number of assessor reports and rebuttals. It should be concise, to the point and compelling.

• Avoid jargon, or information requiring detailed knowledge of your topic. Remember, you are not responding to the assessor, you are writing to panel members who are unlikely to have experience in your field. Any comments the assessor makes that are specialised in nature must be responded to in plain English that the panel can understand.

• Ensure that all issues raised by the assessor are addressed.

• Make the rebuttal ‘self-contained’. Assume that the panel does not have the assessor report readily to hand. Your response should include a brief summary of the criticism or praise contained in the assessor’s report.

• When the reports are all positive:
  o Be brief in your response
  o Take the opportunity to update your track record

• When some or all of the reports are negative:
  o Remember, address the comments, not the assessor. Be objective.
  o Attempt to counter the criticisms. Ideally, you should be able to direct the panel to sections of your application that demonstrate that the criticism is unfounded, or even that the assessor has not properly read your application. If possible use direct quotes from your application to show this.
  o Where appropriate point to differences of opinion between the assessor reports. For example, use comments from one report to rebut criticism from another.
  o If your reports are a mixture of positive and negative, don’t focus on the negatives. Ensure your response includes the praise as well, to help counter the criticism.
  o Do not focus on minor criticism.
  o Do not attempt to re-write your application to counter what you consider to be valid criticisms. Instead, demonstrate how these criticisms can be addressed within the framework of the original research topic, methodology and budget.

• Ensure your rebuttal is reviewed by your mentor, or another peer. Seek feedback from a peer who is not an expert in your area. If they are convinced by your rebuttal, it is more likely the NHMRC panel will be.