How ARC Proposals are assessed
(and how to be a good assessor)

May/June 2015
Topics

• ARC Assessment process

• Panels
  – General Assessors
  – Conflict of interest
  – How to provide good assessments

• Detailed Assessors

• Meeting processes

• Feedback on unsuccessful proposals

• Other questions
### NCGP Lifecycle

| Funding Rules | • Approved by Minister  
|              | • Published on the ARC website  
|              | • Sector advised of availability |
| Proposals | • applications submitted via RMS by Eligible Organisations by the relevant scheme closing date  
|          | • instructions to applicants, sample application form and FAQs published on ARC website |
| Assessment | • proposals are considered against eligibility criteria and compliance with the Funding Rules.  
|            | • proposals are assessed by independent assessors  
|            | • applicants may be given the opportunity for a rejoinder to assessors’ written comments  
|            | • proposals are assessed by the ARC College of Experts or a Selection Advisory Committee |
| Selection meeting | • the ARC College of Experts or a Selection Advisory Committee consider all proposals, rank each proposal relative to other proposals in the same discipline cluster and recommend budgets for the highly ranked proposals |
| Approval of funding | • ARC CEO provides recommendations to the Minister in relation to which Proposals should be approved for funding, which Proposals should not be approved for funding, and the level of funding and duration of Projects.  
|                  | • Minister considers recommendations and approves and announces funding outcomes  
|                  | • Postaward and reporting |
ARC Assessment Process

Application → Panel → External Assessment → Selection Meeting → Outcomes
Proposal assessment—overview

• The peer review process is designed to be fair, thorough and transparent

• All proposals are assessed against the selection criteria, and in accordance with the weightings for that scheme

• Proposals are generally assigned to two types of assessors:
  – **at least two** General assessors (usually College of Experts members), and
  – **at least two** Detailed assessors

• ARC staff assess eligibility etc., but do not decide which proposals should be funded.
ARC Assessment Process (1)

Application → Panel → External Assessment → Selection Meeting

‘General Assessment’ → Outcomes
ARC College of Experts

• plays a key role in identifying research excellence, moderating external assessments and recommending fundable proposals

• assists the ARC in recruiting and assigning assessors and in implementing peer review reforms in established and emerging disciplines as well as interdisciplinary areas

• experts of international standing drawn from the Australian research community: from higher education, industry and public sector research organisations

• Nominations are now open!
Selecting College of Experts/Panels

- Balancing Loads/Balancing institutions etc.
General assessment

• General assessors are members of
  – the College of Experts or
  – a Selection Advisory Committee
    (NB: expanded College—not all members sit on all panels)

• General assessors
  – assign their own ratings against the relevant scheme selection criteria
  – consider the proposal, the ratings and comments provided by Detailed assessors, and the applicant’s rejoinder

• Once all assessments submitted to the ARC, Detailed and General assessments and Rejoinders are considered by the panels at the final selection meeting (more on this later).
Forming selection panels

• The ARC recognises the need to have a flexible approach to suit volume and disciplinary spread in each scheme.

• The number of discipline panels varies by scheme.
  • (Funds are apportioned according to demand)
    For example, Discovery Projects typically has five panels:
    – BSB (Biological Sciences and Biotechnology)
    – EMI (Engineering, Mathematics and Information sciences)
    – HCA (Humanities and Creative Arts)
    – PCE (Physics, Chemistry and Earth Sciences)
    – SBE (Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences)

However, proposals can be assigned across two panels to ensure appropriate expertise, and assigned to a breadth of detailed reviewers.

• Some other schemes use a single multi-disciplinary panel (e.g. Australian Laureate Fellowships, ITRP).
Number of Panels

**Discovery Program**

- Laureate Fellowships
- Future Fellowships
- DECRA
- Discovery Indigenous
- Discovery Projects

**Linkage Program**

- Centres of Excellence
- Co-Funded & SRI
- ITRP
- LIEF
- Linkage Projects

- BSB, EMI, PCE, HCA, SBE
- BEM, ET, PMI, HSE
Cross assignment between panels

Assessing Interdisciplinary research

BSB  EMI  HCA  PCE  SBE
ARC Assessment Process (2)

Application → External Assessment → Selection Meeting

Panel → ‘Detailed Assessment’ → Outcomes
ARC Assessors

• We encourage every active researcher to become an assessor for the ARC

• If you are not currently an assessor for the ARC and would like to become one then send:
  • a brief CV
  • list of five recent publications
  • or a web link to this information

  to ARCAssessorUpdate@arc.gov.au
Detailed assessments

• Detailed assessors are drawn from the Australian and international research community (≈25%)

• Detailed assessors complete in-depth assessments of proposals by providing scores and comments against the scheme specific selection criteria

• These assessments are then taken into consideration by General assessors in the later stages of the peer review process (more on this later).
How are assessors assigned? (1)

- RMS generates a “word cloud” of a proposal based on:
  - Proposal summary
  - Proposal title
  - Impact statement
  - FoR codes
  - SEO codes

- RMS generates assessor suggestions based on assessor codes, expertise and history—make sure your RMS profile is up to date.

- No assignments are made ‘automatically’. This information is provided to ARC Executive Directors and College of Experts/SAC members to inform their judgment.
How are assessors assigned? (2)

Aim is to get assessments across full discipline space—many proposals cross over
How are assessors assigned? (3)

• Factors considered by an assigner may include (all things being equal):
  – Breadth of perspectives
  – Institutional spread
  – Gender balance
  – Assessor experience

• For fellowship/award schemes, applicants in that round cannot assess others

• As with assessors, RMS makes a suggestion about the broad discipline panel for each proposal, but these suggestions are reviewed and can be changed.
Conflict of Interest

• In addition to institutional conflicts, an assessor may be deemed to have a CoI with a named participant on a funding proposal for a number of reasons including, but not limited to, if that assessor:
  – has a close personal relationship (including enmity) with that named participant;
  – has a professional relationship with that named participant including:
    o currently holds, or has held within the past two years, funding conjointly with that named participant
    o has a current application or is negotiating an application for funding with that named participant
    o has been a collaborator or co-author with that named participant on a research output within the past four years
    o has been a co-editor with that named participant of a book, journal, compendium, or conference proceedings within the past two years
    o has been a postgraduate student or supervisor of that named participant within the past five years
  – could otherwise be perceived to benefit materially from the awarding of funding to the proposal involving that named participant.
Conflict of Interest (cont.)

• RMS takes into account a great deal of data (eg institutional), but it doesn’t know everything

• Assessors reviewing ARC proposals who identify a conflict of interest must reject the proposal in RMS

• If in any doubt, contact the ARC to confirm whether a conflict exists under our policies

• Assessing proposals despite a conflict of interest is in breach of ARC rules and of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research
Detailed Assessment numbers—some examples

The ARC is grateful to a large number of extremely hard-working assessors who conduct the peer review process:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Detailed assessments</th>
<th>Proposals</th>
<th>Average assessments per proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DECRA 2015</td>
<td>4578</td>
<td>1394</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery Projects 2015</td>
<td>12,173</td>
<td>3689</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linkage Projects 2015</td>
<td>2294</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Detailed Assessment numbers (cont.)

For example, for the last round of Discovery Projects (DP15):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessments</th>
<th># of proposals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>3694</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12,178 assessments submitted by detailed assessors for DP15
## Rating Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scoring Band</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong></td>
<td><strong>Outstanding:</strong> Of the highest quality and at the forefront of research activity. Approximately 10% of Proposals should receive ratings in this band.</td>
<td>Recommended Unconditionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
<td><strong>Excellent:</strong> Of high quality and strongly competitive. Approximately 15% of Proposals should receive ratings in this band.</td>
<td>Strongly support recommendation of funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong></td>
<td><strong>Very Good:</strong> Interesting, sound and compelling. Approximately 20% of Proposals should receive ratings in this band.</td>
<td>Support recommendation of funding with reservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
<td><strong>Good:</strong> Sound, but lacks a compelling element. Approximately 35% of Proposals are likely to fall into this band.</td>
<td>Unsupportive of recommendation for funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong></td>
<td><strong>Uncompetitive:</strong> Uncompetitive and has significant weaknesses or more fatal flaws. Approximately 20% of Proposals are likely to fall into this band.</td>
<td>Not recommended for funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Actual rating distribution—DP15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Detailed Assessors</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility and Benefit</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator(s)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Quality and Innovation</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Environment</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Assessors</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feasibility and Benefit</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator(s)</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Quality and Innovation</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Environment</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do I provide a good Detailed assessment?

- **Objective** comments
- **Detailed** comments (one or two sentences are rarely sufficient)
- **Sufficient** information to allow applicants to provide a rejoinder to your comments
- Comments **match** scores—for example, if you have given significant criticisms an ‘A’ rating is unlikely to be appropriate.
- Observe conflict of interest rules and declare anything you are concerned about to the ARC.
ROPE
(Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence)

• ROPE recognises research excellence in the context of the diversity of career and life experiences

• Takes into account the *quality* rather than simply the volume or size of the research contribution

• Research Opportunity comprises two separate elements:
  – Career experiences (relative to opportunity)
  – Career interruptions

• All assessors should be familiar with the full statement.
Assessment: additional issues to note

• Value for money is a selection criterion for all schemes; commitment of taxpayer funds must be justified.
  – Pay close attention to the budget justification within the proposal

• Research Environment
  – Not simply “which university”; research environment is specific to the proposal under assessment
  – The laboratory, department, school, centre or institute where research will be undertaken
  – Opportunities for knowledge growth, innovation, collaboration, mentoring and student training
  – Just a reference to a good ERA score is not enough!
Assessment: DP example

Investigators (A)

“The Chief Investigators comprise an outstanding team of researchers with complementary skill sets, and extensive experience in researching the four country case studies at the heart of this proposal. I also note that the Project Leader has maximised her research-only position to produce high quality research outputs, including a major review of aid effectiveness commissioned by UNESCO. One CI has had two career interruptions for the birth of her two children, and has published high quality articles in The International Journal of Demography and Population. A third CI has undertaken two secondments to the Asian Development Bank to advise the Bank on best practice for the delivery of aid on the ground.”
Project Quality and Innovation (A)

“The project plan outlines a highly ambitious study of the role of international aid agencies in reducing poverty in four similar internal regions in the four different countries. It will utilise a cutting edge Mixed Methods approach to triangulate data from the 2014 global survey on aid effectiveness, with data mining of relevant documentation, plus ethnographic studies of donors, managers and recipients. The plan is innovative and highly promising and should generate exciting new data and insights into those case studies with generalisable results.”
“This important project may have underestimated the time required to undertake the fieldwork, especially as it’s not clear from the proposal whether the preliminary work necessary to undertake the research such as liaising with regional governors has been undertaken. Such access may be problematic, and lack of access may delay or seriously compromise the project.”
Research Environment (A)

“The project is located in the Research Centre for Regional Studies, a cross-institutional centre which is housed in a major Australian University, with membership drawn from two other Australian universities, and the National Universities of two of the countries to be studied. It includes collaborative research and exchange programs providing exciting training and research opportunities.”
What not to do in an assessment

• Include your ratings in the text

• Write assessments that are so brief as to be unhelpful

• Identify yourself, either directly or indirectly, or refer to other researchers or proposals in a way that can identify them

• Include text that appears to be defamatory or distastefully irrelevant (such as gratuitous criticism of a researcher)

• Include comments about the potential ineligibility of a Proposal. This information should be provided to the ARC by email, as eligibility considerations are kept strictly separate from the assessment process.
What not to do—example 1

Investigator(s)
‘Good relevant experience’

Project Quality and Innovation
‘Not at the forefront but solid’

Feasibility and Benefit
‘Generally OK’

Research Environment
‘Appropriate’
What not to do—example 2

• Don’t just quote the rubric!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scoring Band</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td><strong>Outstanding:</strong> Of the highest quality and at the forefront of research activity. Approximately 10% of Proposals should receive ratings in this band.</td>
<td>Recommended Unconditionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td><strong>Excellent:</strong> Of high quality and strongly competitive. Approximately 15% of Proposals should receive ratings in this band.</td>
<td>Strongly support recommendation of funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td><strong>Very Good:</strong> Interesting, sound and compelling. Approximately 20% of Proposals should receive ratings in this band.</td>
<td>Support recommendation of funding with reservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td><strong>Good:</strong> Sound, but lacks a compelling element. Approximately 35% of Proposals are likely to fall into this band.</td>
<td>Unsupportive of recommendation for funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td><strong>Uncompetitive:</strong> Uncompetitive and has significant weaknesses or more fatal flaws. Approximately 20% of Proposals are likely to fall into this band.</td>
<td>Not recommended for funding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What not to do—example 3

Investigator(s)

“I have serious doubts about the lead CI’s ability to deliver this project. I was unfortunate to collaborate with him on a number of publications in recent years, and partnered on an ill-fated DP proposal last year which fell apart due to his overbearing and tendentious manner. If this is how he behaves towards other researchers it is unlikely he will be able to bring this project, which requires extensive collaboration across institutions, to fruition.”
ARC Allowed items

- So long as it is integral to the research project, is important to achieve the intended research outcomes, and is well justified then we are generally supportive of an item being requested from the ARC.
- An assessor cannot assume something will/should be available at the host university.
- Some items that are specifically allowed (depending on the scheme) and should not be viewed as negative: teaching relief, field work, HDR stipend, focus groups, web hosting, dissemination costs.
- Check funding rules.
ARC Assessment Process (3)

Application → Panel → External Assessment → Rejoinder

Selection Meeting → Outcomes
Rejoinder

• Where the ARC seeks Detailed assessments, applicants are often given the opportunity to submit a rejoinder to respond to comments made by Detailed assessors

• Rejoinders are not viewed by the Detailed assessors but are considered by the General assessors

• The ARC prefers not to interfere in the assessment process. Only rarely will we agree to requests to remove assessments.
What happens after rejoinder?

- General assessors view all Detailed assessments and consider the rejoinder carefully.
- General assessors confer with each other to finalise scores.
- General assessors submit their final scores and ranks for their group of proposals.
- General assessors’ scores in large schemes are then normalised to reduce the impact of different ‘marking styles’.
- Proposals are then ranked within the discipline panel (where relevant—some schemes have a single panel).
ARC Assessment Process (4)

Application ➔ Panel ➔ External Assessment ➔ Selection Meeting ➔ Outcomes
Example..

Raw scores
Weighted to give Totals
Final score: Average College
\[(60 + 60)/2 = 60\]

Average External
\[(88+100)/2 = 94\]

Average both
\[(94+60)/2 = 77 (>70 = B)\]
Proposal Score/Rank Calculation

- ‘Grouped Average’ of all submitted assessments for the proposal
- This calculation results in a ‘Proposal Score’
- Proposal ranks are derived for each panel
- Any proposals (within same panel) with equal Proposal Scores will have equal ranks.

Average of General scores

Average of Detailed scores

Average

SCORE

RANK
Before a Selection Meeting

- Panels are given access to final scores and rankings, and can review all (non-conflicted) proposals, not just those they have had carriage of.

- Panel members are encouraged to note any issues they believe may have skewed the assessment/ranking of a particular proposal, or are noteworthy for panel discussion.

- Members are also invited to closely scrutinise ROPE issues.

- Panel members’ attention is drawn particularly to proposals around the likely funding cut-off, as these will need detailed discussion.
ARC Assessment Process (5)

- Application
- Panel
- External Assessment
- Selection Meeting
- Outcomes
At the Selection Meeting

• Panels meet in person to finalise recommendations

• Proposals are considered in the light of the calculated ranks, but noteworthy/skewed proposals are discussed, regardless of ranking

• Contentious proposals or proposals around the ‘fundable line’ are resolved by anonymous voting

• Panel concludes its recommendations to the ARC regarding fundable proposals and budgets

• ARC CEO provides these recommendations to the Minister, with whom the final decision rests under the ARC Act.
ARC Meeting Process

Initial Ranking → Shortlisting → Funding

Highly ranked:
- Funded application
- Funded application
- Funded application
- Uncertain application 1
- Funded application
- Funded application
- Uncertain application 2
- Uncertain application 3
- Uncertain application 4
- Uncertain application 5
- Uncertain application 6

Uncertainty band:
- Uncertain application 1
- Uncertain application 4
- Uncertain application 3
- Uncertain application 2
- Uncertain application 7
- Uncertain application 5
- Uncertain application 6

Voting

Nominal funding line

Final recommendation:
- Fund
- Fund
- Fund
- Reserve
- Not fund
- Not fund
ARC Assessment Process (6)

Application → External Assessment → Panel → Selection Meeting → Outcomes → ‘Feedback’
Feedback on unsuccessful proposals

• Recently the ARC has provided two types of feedback:
  – Overall ranking band
  – Ranking band within specific scheme selection criteria

• Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposal ID</th>
<th>Lead CI</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Unsuccessful Band</th>
<th>Investigator(s) (40%)</th>
<th>Project Quality and Innovation (25%)</th>
<th>Feasibility and Benefit (20%)</th>
<th>Research Environment (15%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DPxxxxxx</td>
<td>Example, Prof G.</td>
<td>Not Recommended</td>
<td>This proposal is in the band 26% to 50% of unsuccessful proposals within the discipline panel.</td>
<td>Band 26% to 50% of unsuccessful proposals within the discipline panel.</td>
<td>Band 26% to 50% of unsuccessful proposals within the discipline panel.</td>
<td>Top 10% of unsuccessful proposals within the discipline panel.</td>
<td>Band 11% to 25% of unsuccessful proposals within the discipline panel.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discovery Projects Grants rankings

Histogram of Rank DP15-DP12

- 01 Mathematical
- 02 Physical
- 03 Chemical
- 04 Earth
- 05 Environmental
- 06 Biological
- 07 Agri and Vet
- 08 Info and Comp
- 09 Engineering
- 10 Technology
- 11 Medical and Health
- 12 Built Env and Design
- 13 Education
- 14 Economics
- 15 Comm, Mngt, Tour and Services
- 16 Human Soc
- 17 Psychology
- 18 Law
- 19 Creative Arts and Writing
- 20 Leng, Comm and Culture
- 21 Hist and Arch
- 22 Philosophy

Frequency vs. Rank

Legend:
- Funded
- No
- Yes
Discussion/questions