General Assessor Handbook

A guide for **General Assessors on the assessment of Expressions of Interest** under the Discovery Program grant opportunities for

Discovery Projects - DPEI27

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1. Overview

This Handbook provides instructions and advice for **General Assessors** on the assessment process for:

1. Discovery Projects Expressions of Interest (EOIs) for funding commencing in 2027 (DPEI27).

This scheme is part of the Discovery Program of the Australian Research Council's (ARC) National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP).

The Discovery Projects scheme reflects the Australian Government's commitment to excellence in research by providing grant funding to support research projects that may be undertaken by individual researchers or research teams.

The specific objectives and assessment criteria covered in the Handbook are listed in the Appendix and are also available in the relevant Grant Guidelines on GrantConnect.

The 2027 Discovery Projects round uses a two-step process – consisting of an Expression of Interest and Full Application – for the preparation and assessment of applications. **This Handbook contains assessment information for the Expression of Interest stage only.** A separate Full Application Handbook will be released prior to the close of Full Applications.

2. The assessment process

Peer review is the method used to assess all ARC applications. **For DPEI27, Expressions of Interest will be assessed by members of the College of Experts, otherwise known as General Assessors**. General Assessors should assess EOIs against the relevant assessment criteria outlined in this Handbook and the Grant Guidelines, score and then rank those EOIs allocated to them. The objective of the assessment process is to ensure that the highest quality EOIs are invited to proceed to Full Application stage.

Applying for a Discovery Project Expression of Interest does not preclude General Assessors from assessing at the EOI stage for this round.

Each EOI will be assigned to (up to) three General Assessors for assessment, on the basis of disciplinary fit as guided by FOR code(s) and equitable workloads. This assignment will be overseen by the ARC Executive Directors. Detailed Assessors will not be used at the EOI stage, nor will a Selection Advisory Committee (SAC) be convened to deliberate on the EOIs that will be recommended for shortlisting. Both Detailed Assessors and SACs will be used at the Full Application stage.

Approximately 1,500 applications will proceed from the EOI stage through to the Full Application. General Assessors' scores and application rankings will be used to create a ranked merit list from which EOIs are shortlisted. Based on these recommendations, the Accountable Authority (ARC Board) determines the shortlisted EOIs to proceed to Full Application.

The Research Management System (RMS) is the online system used for the preparation and submission of research applications, assessments and rejoinders for the ARC. It will be used in the assessment of EOIs. The *RMS User Guide for Assessors*, assists assessors to navigate the RMS assignment and assessment process. This User Guide is available on the ARC Assessor Resources page. Here, assessors can also find additional information about the peer review process and RMS specific to the Expressions of Interest stage.

Assessor scores (anonymous) will be available to both successful and unsuccessful applicants once the Expression of Interest outcomes are announced in RMS.

2.1 General Assessors

RMS profile

It is important that General Assessors ensure that their RMS profile is up-to-date and contains the following details:

1. **Expertise text:** Please outline your expertise briefly. The following format is suggested **"**My major area of research expertise is in a, b, c. I have additional research experience in q, r, s. I would also be able to assess in the areas of x, y, z. The research facilities, techniques and methodologies I use are l, m, n".
2. **Field of Research (FoR-2020) Codes:** Please include between 6 and 10 FoR codes at the 6-digit level that reflect your key areas of expertise.
3. **Employment History:** Please ensure that your employment history is kept up to date, to enable your organisational conflicts of interests to be identified in RMS.
4. **Personal Details:** Please ensure your personal details are up to date, including conflicts of interest and personal material interest declarations.

This information in your RMS profile will be used to match assessors with EOIs (excluding any Conflicts of Interest) and should accurately represent your research expertise.

General assessment process

All General Assessors must declare any conflicts of interest (COI) and reject the EOI assignment as soon as possible if a COI exists. This will assist the ARC with the timely re-assignment of EOIs (see Section 3.1 for further information). If a General Assessor is unsure of whether a COI exists, they must seek advice from the ARC before proceeding with accepting an assignment by emailing ARC-College@arc.gov.au as soon as possible.

When assessing EOIs, General Assessors must rely solely on the information provided within the EOI including referenced publications and preprints and should not seek additional information from any sources. This includes following any hyperlinks that may have been provided in the EOI. The inclusion of webpage addresses/URLs and hyperlinks is only permitted under certain circumstances such as publications (including preprints) that are only available online. Webpage addresses/URLs and hyperlinks should not be used to circumvent page limits, nor should they provide information that is not contained in the EOI. All information relevant to the EOI must be contained within the EOI.

Assessing and submitting scores in RMS

Following the assignment process, General Assessors independently read and assess all of their assigned EOIs against the relevant assessment criteria, based on an A to E Scoring Matrix. (Although the matrix provides guidance on the expected averages across the entire set of applications, each application must be assessed on its own merits).

General Assessors of EOIs should assess and score their EOIs independently of other General Assessors. General Assessors will not be notified of others assessing an EOI and no General Assessors should confer or discuss applications with other General Assessors.

Once a General Assessor has completed their scores, they will be prompted in RMS to rank all the EOIs they have assessed in order of merit. This process is important to facilitate the normalisation of scores across all General Assessors.
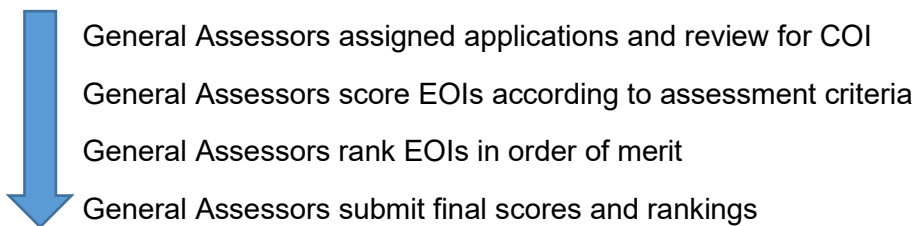
Final scores and ranks should be **submitted in RMS** by the required final due date.

When all final scores are submitted, RMS will produce a ranked list of all applications (see Section 2.2 for further information). This list is used to inform which EOIs will be shortlisted and invited to submit a Full Application.

Order of the EOI assessment process

The following diagram provides an overview of the EOI assessment process.

Diagram 1: Overview of the EOI Assessment Process

General Assessors assigned applications and review for COI

General Assessors score EOIs according to assessment criteria

General Assessors rank EOIs in order of merit

General Assessors submit final scores and rankings

2.2 Scoring and ranking assessments

Scoring

When applying the Scoring Matrix, General Assessors should have regard for the specific grant opportunity objectives as outlined in the [Appendix](#) and assessment criteria for the scheme they are assessing.

Figure 1 – Example assessment form page on RMS

Scoring applications against assessment criteria can be a difficult exercise when Assessors might only look at a small sub-set of applications. Bands within the Scoring Matrix ideally represent a distribution across all applications submitted to a grant opportunity.

Only the very best applications should be recommended. As a guide, approximately 10% should fall into the top scoring band ('A'). These would have been assessed as near flawless applications across all assessment criteria.

A Scoring Matrix for the scores A to E is provided in the [Appendix](#) and should guide scoring by General Assessors.

Ranking

Each application must have a unique rank. Although RMS will use the **overall application scores** to automatically rank an Assessor's assessments as these are completed in RMS, if multiple applications have the same **overall application scores** these applications will be flagged and an Assessor must assign a unique rank to differentiate equally scored applications. Differentiation should be based on how you compare the applications in relation to the Scoring Matrix.

Assessments should be submitted when all applications have been assigned 1) a score and 2) a unique ranking.

2.3 Important factors to consider when assessing Expressions of Interest

Objectives and assessment criteria

Each grant opportunity has specific objectives and assessment criteria. Assessors must have regard to both the objectives and the assessment criteria as outlined in the relevant Grant Guidelines and the [Appendix](#) of this document.

National Interest Test (NIT)

Applicants are not required to provide a National Interest Test statement at the EOI stage. A NIT statement will be required for Full Applications.

Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence (ROPE)

The ROPE assessment criterion requires all Assessors to identify and consider research excellence relative to a researcher's career and opportunities for research. It aims to ensure that NCGP assessment processes accurately evaluate a researcher's career history relative to their current career stage and consider whether their productivity and contribution is commensurate with the opportunities that have been available to them.

The required elements of ROPE vary according to the objectives of each grant opportunity. All General Assessors should be familiar with the full ROPE statement located on the ARC website.

Interdisciplinary research

The ARC recognises the value of interdisciplinary research and the ARC's commitment to supporting interdisciplinary research is outlined in the *ARC Statement of Support for Interdisciplinary Research*.

Interdisciplinary research can be a distinct mode of research, or a combination of researchers, knowledge and/or approaches from disparate disciplines. Under the NCGP, examples of interdisciplinary research may include researchers from different disciplines working together in a team; researchers collaborating to bring different perspectives to solve a problem; researchers utilising methods normally associated with one or more disciplines to solve problems in another discipline; and one or more researchers translating innovative blue sky or applied research outcomes from one discipline into an entirely different research discipline.

Assessors are required to assess all research on a fair and equal basis, including applications and outputs involving interdisciplinary and collaborative research. To assist with this, the ARC facilitates consideration of EOIs by relevant General Assessors with interdisciplinary expertise or where not feasible, EOIs are allocated to General Assessors who have broad disciplinary expertise regardless of discipline grouping.

Preprints or comparable resources

General Assessors should consider the merit of publications including preprints and comparable resources that are listed in the EOI. Assessors may access hyperlinks and evaluate if a citation included in the application is a crucial part of the research discourse, and evaluate the suitability, quality and relevance of the research output to help them determine the quality and novelty of the proposed research. However, Assessors should not use online search engines to identify or evaluate applicants' publications that are not included within the EOI.

Preprints or comparable resources can be included in any part of an application. This includes within the Research Outputs list and the body of an application. An application will not be deemed to be ineligible for the citing and listing of preprints or comparable resources.

A preprint or comparable resource is a scholarly output that is uploaded by the authors to a recognised publicly accessible archive, repository, or preprint service (such as, but not limited to, arXiv, bioRxiv, medRxiv, ChemRxiv, Peer J Preprints, Zenodo, GitHub, PsyArXiv and publicly available university of government repositories etc.). This will include a range of materials that have been subjected to varying degrees of peer review from none to light and full review. Ideally, a preprint or comparable resource should have a unique identifier or a DOI (digital object identifier). Any citation of a preprint or comparable resource should be explicitly identified as such and listed in the references with a DOI, URL or equivalent, version number and/or date of access, as applicable.

Inclusion of preprints or comparable resources within the body of the application should comply with standard disciplinary practices for the relevant field.

3. Ensuring integrity of process

3.1 Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest (COI)

The *ARC Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Policy* is designed to ensure that all COIs are managed in a rigorous and transparent way. It aims to prevent individuals from influencing decisions unfairly and to maintain public confidence in the integrity, legitimacy, impartiality and fairness of the peer review process.

Any individual who is reviewing material for the ARC must agree to comply with the confidentiality and COI statement and must clearly disclose any material personal interests that may affect, or might be perceived to affect, their ability to perform their role.

All Assessors must maintain an up-to-date RMS profile, including personal details, current employment details and previous employment history within the past 2 years. This information will assist the ARC with the identification and management of organisational conflicts of interest.

Assessors reviewing ARC grant applications who have identified a conflict of interest must reject the grant application assigned in RMS to assist the ARC in the management of conflicts of interest.

Examples of material personal interests that are considered by the ARC to be COIs include holding funding with a named participant within the past 2 years or having been a collaborator or co-author with a named participant on a research output within the last 4 years. For more information on disclosure of COIs, including material personal interest declarations, please refer to the *Identifying and Handling a Conflict of Interest in NCGP processes* document.

> **Note:** In RMS, Assessors will be asked to indicate their willingness to comply with this policy before proceeding to assess. They can do this by selecting the 'Accept' button.

> **Extract from the ARC Policy on Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence in the ARC's grants programs (July 2023):**
>
> The ARC Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Policy (2020) requires that all officials and individuals carrying out ARC business, including assessors and peer reviewers, are required to preserve the principles of confidentiality outlined in the policy. **Release of material into generative AI tools constitutes a breach of confidentiality and peer reviewers, including all General Assessors, must not use generative AI as part of their assessment activities.**

3.2 Research integrity and research misconduct

If in the course of undertaking an assessment you identify or suspect a potential research integrity breach or research misconduct, please notify the ARC Research Integrity Office (researchintegrity@arc.gov.au) in accordance with Section 5 of the ARC Research Integrity Policy.

The ARC Research Integrity Office will consider whether to refer your concerns to the relevant institution for investigation in accordance with the requirements of the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2018)*. You should provide sufficient information to allow the ARC to assess whether there is a basis for referring the matter to the institution and to enable the relevant institution to progress an investigation into the allegation (if required).

3.3 Foreign financial support, foreign affiliations and foreign honorary positions

Participants applying for ARC grants are required to answer questions in their application relating to foreign financial support and foreign affiliations, including current and previous associations. Participants are required to declare:

- foreign financial support (cash or in kind) for research related activities
- current or past associations or affiliations with a foreign sponsored talent program (for the last 10 years)
- current associations or affiliations with a foreign government, foreign political party, foreign state-owned enterprise, foreign military and/or foreign police organisations

If in the course of undertaking an assessment you identify or suspect a potential issue of foreign interference, please send an email highlighting your concerns to the ARC via ARC-College@arc.gov.au as soon as possible.

Note: In RMS, Assessors will be asked to indicate their willingness to comply with this policy before proceeding to assess. They can do this by selecting the 'Accept' button.

3.4 Expressions of Interest outside the General Assessor's area of expertise

The ARC receives applications from many scholarly fields. You may be asked to assess an EOI that does not appear to correspond closely with your area of expertise. As a General Assessor, your views are valuable as they are being sought on the entire EOI, drawing on your expert knowledge as a researcher. If you are concerned about a particular EOI's research area and your ability to provide a robust assessment, **please contact the ARC via** ARC-College@arc.gov.au **before rejecting the assignment**.

3.5 Eligibility

If, while assessing an EOI, you have concerns about eligibility, ethics or other issues associated with an EOI, please send an email highlighting your concerns to ARC-College@arc.gov.au as soon as possible. The ARC is responsible for investigating and making decisions on these matters, and Assessors should not conduct investigations at any point. Please complete your assessment based on the merits of the application **without** giving consideration to the potential eligibility issue.

3.6 Unconscious bias

The ARC is committed to ensuring that applicants to NCGP schemes are not disadvantaged due to unconscious bias in the assessment process. We ask assessors to make every effort to slow down the pace of their automatic judgements and model instead the reflective quality involved in good decision making.

The Royal Society video explaining unconscious bias is available at the following link and we ask all assessors to view it prior to undertaking their assessments: Understanding unconscious bias | The Royal Society.

Examples of unconscious bias include:

- Basing assessment on the gender, age, name or background of the researcher without regard to carefully evaluating the research program proposed
- Halo (positive) and Horns (negative) - allowing one positive or negative quality to drive an entire assessment
- Confirmation bias – picking out information that matches your (low/high) views and expectations
- Conformity bias – changing a view to match that of another group, even when you don't agree (see Royal Society video)
- Affinity bias – favouring researchers or research areas with which you are familiar and may support
- Anchor bias – allowing one (often first) piece of information to form the basis of your decision making.

4. Contact details for queries during the assessment process

For **all** queries relating to assignment and assessment, as well as accessibility, please send an email to ARC-College@arc.gov.au with a reference to the scheme round (e.g. Discovery Projects 2027).

Appendix: Scoring Matrix and assessment criteria considerations

Assessors assign a score and do not have to consider the weighting of a criterion as this is applied automatically within RMS. The tables below provide ready access to assessment criteria set out in the *Discovery Program Grant Guidelines (2024 edition – Variation 1): Discovery Projects* (available on GrantConnect) and the Scoring Matrices outlined in this handbook. Assessors should use their judgement and experience to assess the appropriate score within the context of the relevant discipline.

Discovery Projects Expressions of Interest 2027 (DPEI27)

Key Dates and Notes

Task	DPEI27 Dates	Detail
Assessment Period	5 January 2026 – 5 February 2026	**Carriages** Assess applications independently to determine final scores and ranks in RMS.

Grant Guidelines

The objectives and assessment criteria below are from the *Discovery Program Grant Guidelines (2024 edition – Variation 1): Discovery Projects* which are available on GrantConnect.

Overview

The Discovery Projects scheme reflects the Australian Government's commitment to excellence in research by providing grant funding to support research projects that may be undertaken by individual researchers or research teams.

Objectives

The **Discovery Projects** scheme objectives are to:

a. support excellent pure basic, strategic basic and applied research, and research training, across all disciplines excluding clinical and other medical research, that addresses a significant problem or gap in knowledge and represents value for money;

b. expand research capacity in Australia by supporting excellent researchers and teams;

c. foster national and international research collaboration;

d. create new knowledge with economic, commercial, environmental, social and/or cultural benefits for Australia; and

e. enhance the scale and focus of research in Australian Government priority areas.

Assessment criteria and Scoring Matrix – Discovery Projects

Score	Criteria	Recommendation
A	**Outstanding:** Of the highest quality and at the forefront of research in the field. Approximately 10% of applications should receive scores in this band.	**Recommended unconditionally**
B	**Excellent:** Of high quality and strongly competitive. Approximately 15% of applications should receive scores in this band.	**Strongly support recommendation of funding**
C	**Very Good:** Interesting, sound and compelling. Approximately 20% of applications should receive scores in this band.	**Support recommendation of funding with reservation**
D	**Good:** Sound but lacks a compelling element. Approximately 35% of applications are likely to fall into this band.	**Unsupportive of recommendation for funding**
E	**Uncompetitive:** Uncompetitive and has significant weaknesses. Approximately 20% of applications are likely to fall into this band.	**Not recommended for funding**

Assessment criterion	(A) Outstanding Of the highest quality and at the forefront of research in the field. Approximately 10% of Applications should receive scores in this band.	(B) Excellent Of high quality and strongly competitive. Approximately 15% of Applications should receive scores in this band.	(C) Very Good Interesting, sound and compelling. Approximately 20% of Applications should receive scores in this band.	(D) Good Sound, but lacks a compelling element. Approximately 35% of Applications are likely to fall into this band.	(E) Uncompetitive Has significant weaknesses. Approximately 20% of Applications are likely to fall into this band.

Assessment criteria and weightings for EOI application	Assessment criteria details
Investigator(s)/Capability 30%	Taking into account research opportunity, • Record of high-quality research outputs appropriate to the discipline(s) • evidence of excellence in research training, mentoring and supervision (where appropriate); and • the capability of the investigator or team to build collaborations both within Australia and internationally.
Project quality and innovation 70%	• Contribution to an important gap in knowledge or a significant problem • Novelty/originality and innovation of the proposed research • Appropriateness of the proposed research design • Potential to create new knowledge and research capacity, and economic, commercial, environmental, social and/or cultural benefits for Australia.