

Tips for writing a NHMRC Project Grant

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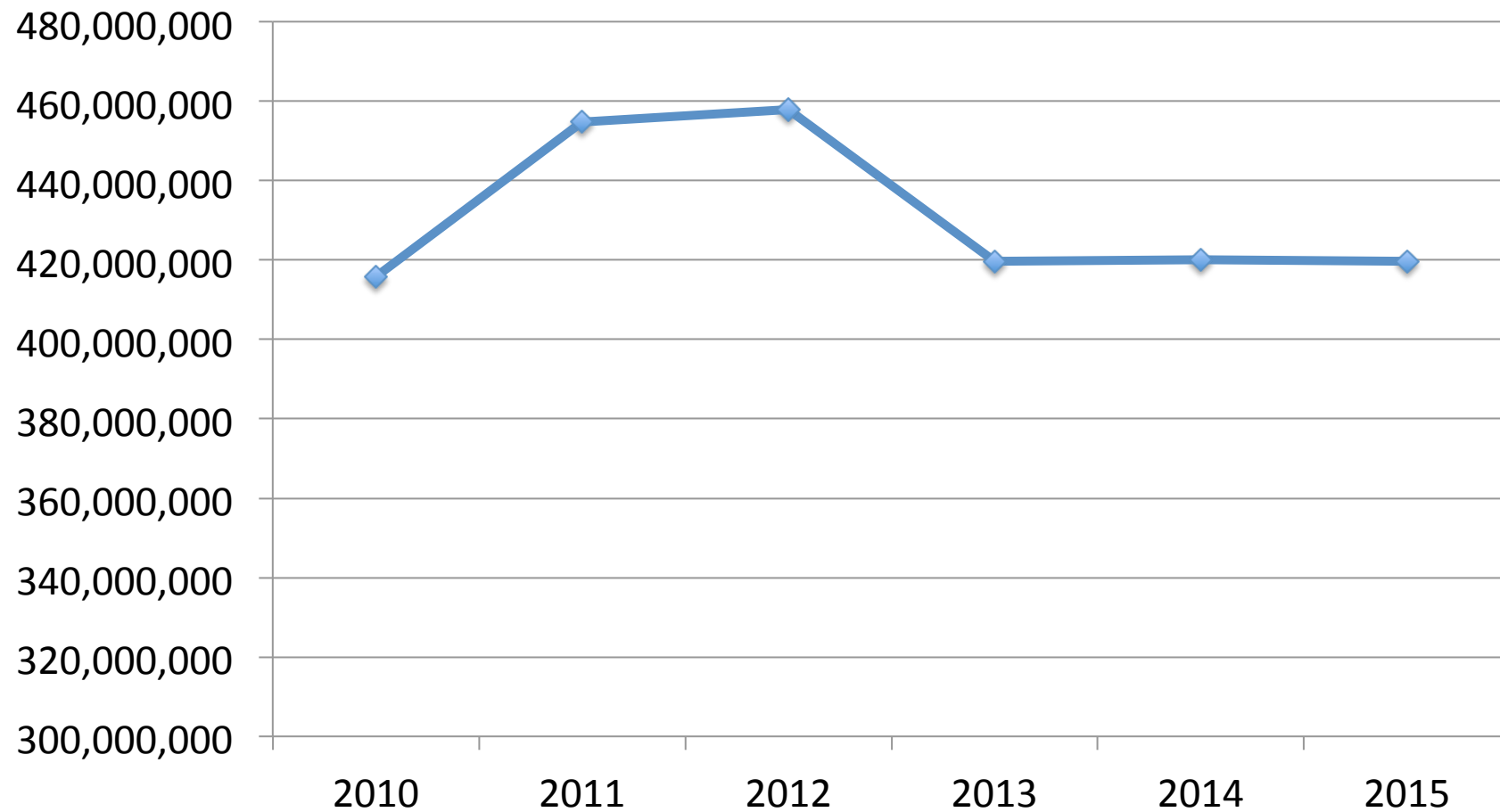
Professorial Fellow, Uni of Melb



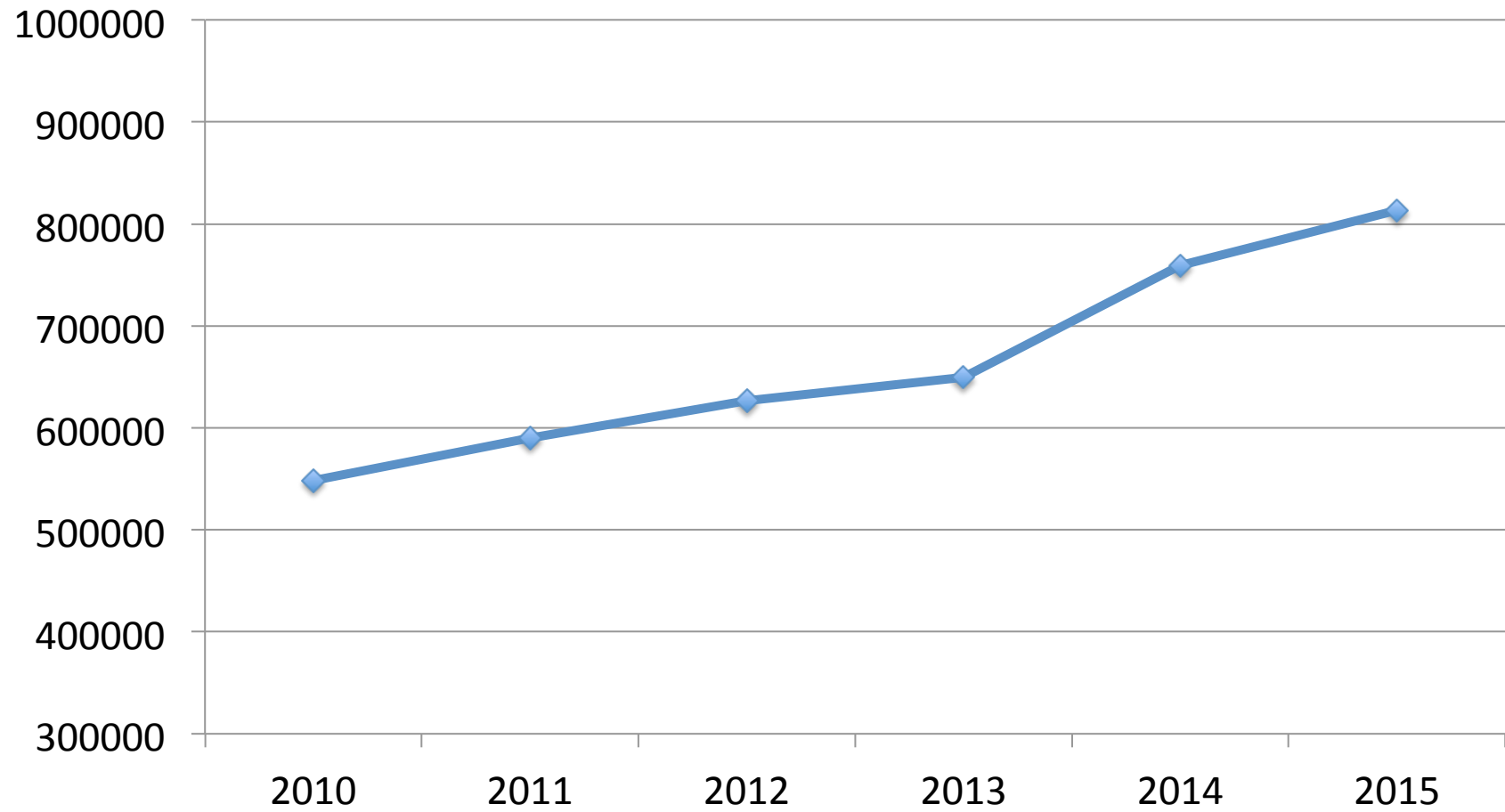
NHMRC Project Grants

The objective is to “support the creation of new knowledge by funding the best investigator initiated research plan of five years, or less, in any area relevant to human health.”

Yearly Funding Allocated to New Project Grants

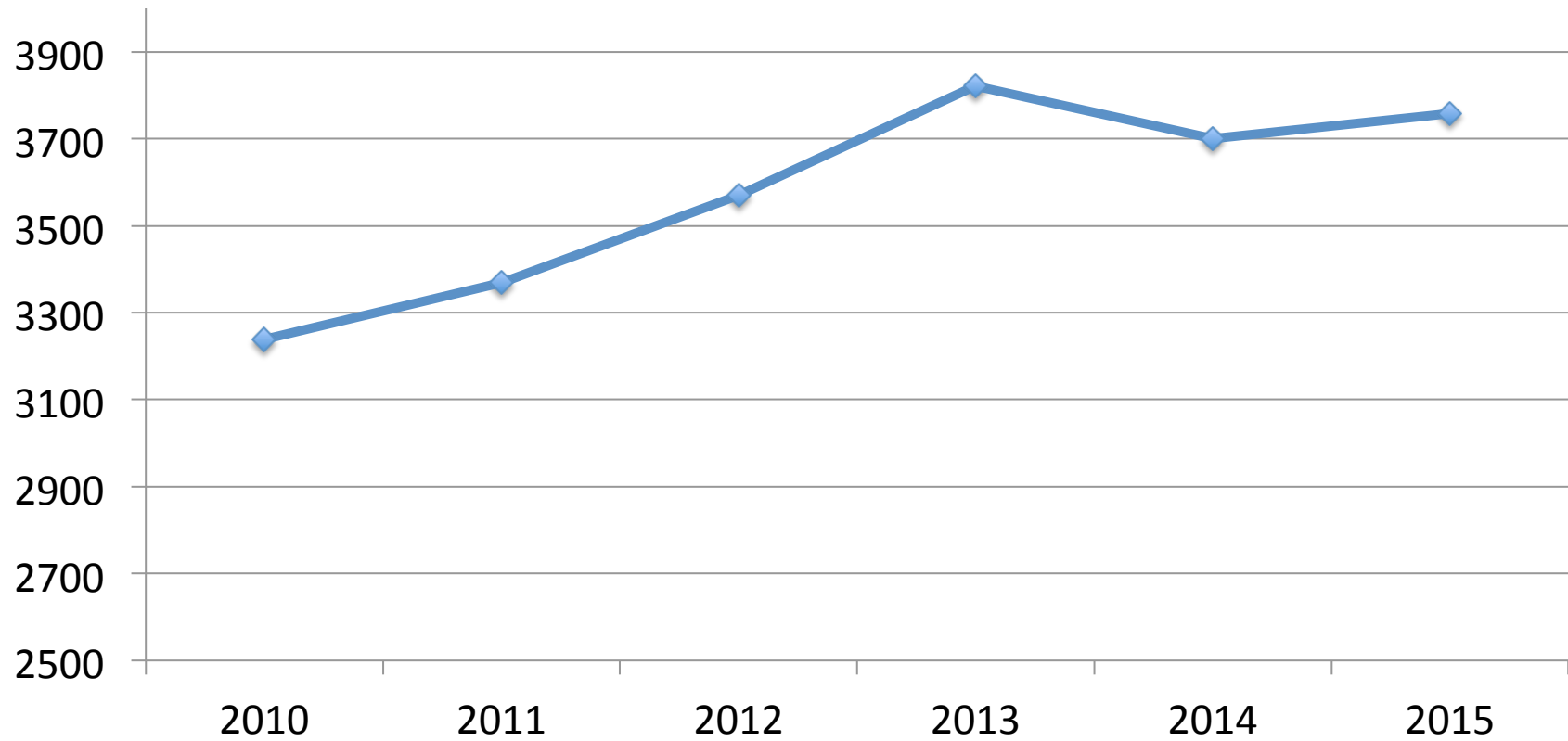


Average Grant



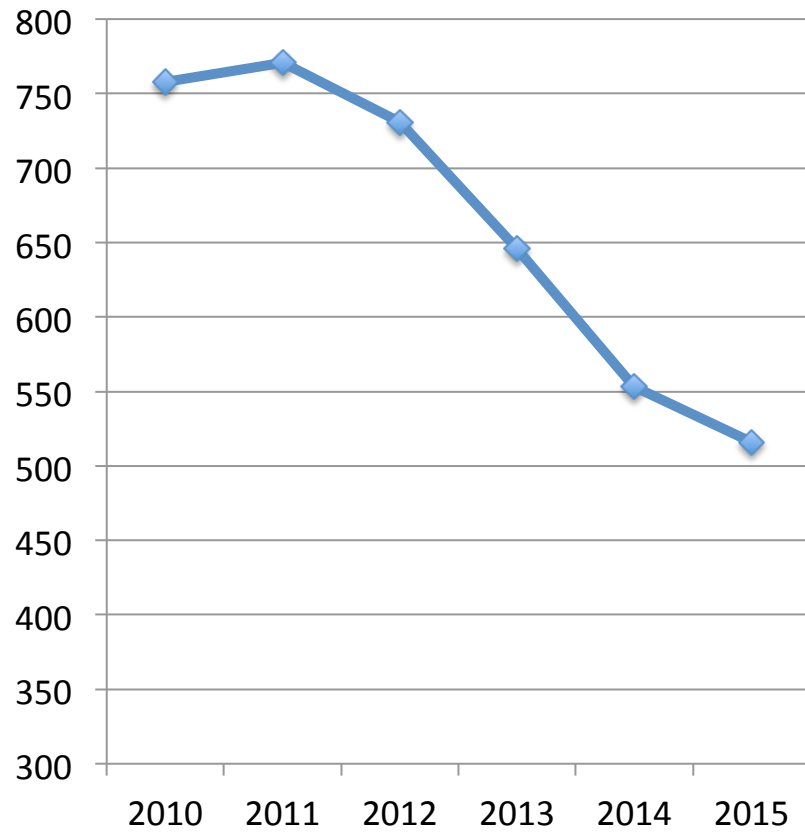
Competitive

of apps

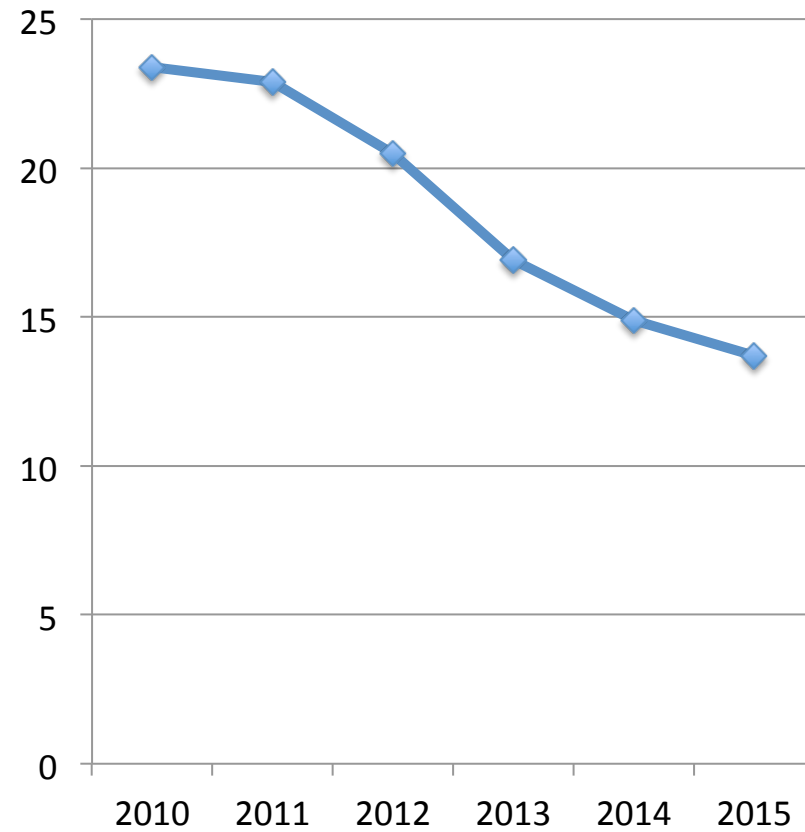


Success Rate

funded



% funded



New Investigator Grants

- All CIs must:
 - Less than 10yrs since passing thesis (taking into account career disruptions)
 - Not named as CI on NHMRC Project Grant or ARC Discovery Grant
 - Not named as CI on competitive grants totaling \$250K
- 2015
 - 230 applications, 33 funded (14.3% success)

Process - 2015

Application due date	18 th March
Assigning external assessors (Assigners Academy)	Late March
GRP members – Col and Preferences	Early April
Allocation of applications to panels	Early April
Assignment of 1 st and 2 nd Spokespersons	Late April
External Assessor reports due	Late May
1 st spokesperson submits report & score	Late May
Reports sent to applicants	1-9 June, 22-30 June
Applicants submit rebuttal	11-19 June, 2-10 July
1 st and 2 nd Spokesperson revise scores	Mid June – Mid July
GRP members consider not for further consideration (NFFC) list	Early July
GRP meets to review all non-NFFC applications	27 July – 4 September
Applications recommended for funding submitted to: NHMRC Research Committee, NHMRC Council, Minister for Health for approval	Late Sept - October

External Assessors

- 2 external assessors per application
- Independent, no Col
- Expert in relevant field of research
- Provides written reports
 - Strengths & weaknesses against scoring criteria
 - Queries for applicants to respond
 - Comment on budget
- Does **NOT** provide scores

Grant Review Panels (GRP)

- Number and composition of GRPs depends on number & type of applications
- Chair and Assistant Chair
 - Independent and do not score
- Panel members chosen for expertise and experience by NHMRC Senior Research Scientists.
- Usually paediatric/obstetrics panels

GRP Members

- Read all applications
- Assigned 1st spokesperson and 2nd spokesperson applications
 - Based on expertise and suitability
- Participate in panel discussion for each non-NFFC app
- Score each app reviewed by panel

1st spokesperson

- Score applications and submit a report for applicants
 - Scrutinise the budget
- Review assessors report and applicant response and re-score
- Prepare speaking notes for panel discussion
- Lead panel discussion
- Provide final scores

2nd spokesperson

- Score applications and submit
 - Written report for applicants
 - Review budget and submit comments to 1st SP
- Review assessors reports and applicant response and re-score
- Prepare speaking notes for panel discussion
 - Focussing on assessor reports and applicant response
- Provide final scores

Applicant Response (Rebuttal)

- Applicants' opportunity to address questions and criticisms raised by external reviewers & spokespersons
- Maximum of 2 pages
- Up to 10 days (inclusive of weekends) to submit

Not for further consideration (NFFC)

- Identify and remove applications that are less competitive
- Must have a score from both SPs
- The apps in the bottom 50% based on scores fall within the NFFC range

Proposal

- Submitted online via NHMRC RGMS (Research Grants Management System)
 - CV, budget, keywords, etc entered directly into RGMS
 - Every CI needs a RGMS account
- Proposal (PDF uploaded into RGMS)
 - Research Proposal (9 pages) + references (2 pages)
 - Team Quality & Capability (1 page)
 - CI track record (2 pages per CI)
 - Career Disruptions (1 page)

Research Proposal (9 pages)

- Used to score scientific quality (50%) and significance/innovation (25%)
 - Background
 - Aims / hypotheses
 - Methods & techniques (justify sample size, power)
 - Timelines
 - Outcomes & Significance

Team Track Record (25%)

- RGMS CV
- CI Track Record
 - Career Summary (esp last 5 yrs)
 - Describe top 5 publications, research support, collaborations, supervision & training, peer review, community engagement
- Team Quality & Capability
 - Expertise of team (relevant to app)
 - Influence of collective team in the field
 - Has the team worked successfully in the past
 - How will the team work together on this project
 - Describe role of junior members
- Up to 10 Chief Investigators plus Associate Investigators (not includes in assessment of Track Record)

Career Disruptions

- Will be taken into account to ensure that everyone is treated fairly
- Describe how disruption is relevant to research productivity
- Can provide details of additional research outputs that should be considered
- Maternity Leave, changing labs, illness, reduced hours
- Sensitive career disruptions can be forwarded to NHMRC and will not be revealed to reviewers
 - Evaluated by senior NHMRC staff

Targeted programs

- Priority-driven Collaborative Cancer Research Scheme
 - Support applied cancer research
- Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria
 - At least 20% must relate to Aboriginal / Torres Strait Islander health

Budget

- Salary Support
 - CIs but not AIs can request salary support
 - Personnel Support Packages (PSPs)
 - PSP1 (technical - \$56K), 2 (junior graduate - \$66K), 3 (experienced graduate / junior post-doc - \$72K), 4 (experience post-doc - \$85K), 5 (senior post-doc - \$92K)
- Direct Research Costs
 - Items, services and equipment needed for project
 - Allotted in quanta of \$5K
- Equipment
 - Individual items btw \$10K - \$80K
- **Each item needs to be described/justified**
- **Make it as simple and transparent as possible**

Scoring

- 3 categories each scored 1 – 7
 - 7: Outstanding by international standards
 - 6: Excellent
 - 5: Very Good
 - 4: Good
 - 3: Marginal
 - 2: Unsatisfactory
 - 1: Poor

Scientific Quality (50% weighting)

- Research Plan
 - Articulation of research question
 - Quality and appropriateness of study design
 - Strengths and limitations
 - Sample
 - Measures
 - Design
 - Power
 - Feasibility
 - Experience in the area, techniques
 - Capacity to recruit, complete study on time

Significance & Innovation (25% weighting)

- Importance to human health
- Capacity to lead to fundamental outcomes/ improvements
- Capacity to translate in clinical/health policy
- Uniqueness (nationally – internationally)
- Innovation leading to advances in concepts
- Resulting in high-impact pubs and plenary presentations
- Does not need to be clinically significant and innovative!!

Track Record (25% weighting)

- Expertise relevant to proposal
- Quality research achievements in field
- Reputation in the field
- Involvement in research & clinical training
- Community engagement
- Contribution to the field/discipline

Tips - Preparation

- Strong proposals often take years of planning
 - Study design
 - Composition of team
 - Selling importance of problem
- Allow sufficient time
 - Input from investigators (multiple reviews)
 - Review from institutional and independent reviewers (multiple)
 - Seek brutally honest feedback
- Go through app one-on-one with strong methodologist (e.g. trialist, epidemiologist)
 - Aims/hypotheses
 - Analytic design

Tips - Application

- Know the rules & exploit them if possible
 - Eg Career disruptions
 - Special initiatives
- Know the assessment criteria
 - Aim for scores of 6 and 7
- Allocate enough time to adequately complete all sections
 - Including CV
- Obvious when a 3rd party has populated CV sections
- CI sections – use consistent structures & headings

Tips – Research Proposal

- Consider the workload and role of the GRP members, esp 1st & 2nd spokespersons
 - Make it interesting & engaging
 - Simplify concepts
 - Reviewers unlikely to be as knowledgeable as you!
 - Experts in the field likely to have Col
 - Make app easy to read
 - Short sentences and paragraphs
 - Break-up with headings and subheadings
 - Logical flow
 - Easy to navigate – find important information
 - Include diagrams / figures when relevant
 - Don't wait to be asked for more details – too late!
 - Address features that may be viewed as shortcomings

Tips – first page

- External reviewers, 1st & 2nd spokesperson
 - Get their interest and engagement early
- Other GRP members
 - May only read the first page so include enough depth for them to assess:
 - Scientific Quality
 - Significance & Innovation
 - Track Record

Tips – Research Proposal

- Be focused and targeted
 - Don't include secondary studies that aren't directly relevant
- The bigger the project the more things open for criticism
- Justify everything
 - Research question
 - Sample size / power
 - Design / measures

Tips – The “so what” factor!

- Majority of apps will be worthy of funding
- Only top 10-15% will be funded
- Need to stand-out from other well-designed clinically important studies
- Find balance of selling the critical importance of study without being overstated
- Sufficient space in proposal to explain short- and long-term implications of research
 - As well as international impact

Tips - Feasibility

- Present preliminary data or data from preceding studies
- Demonstrate ability to recruit sample in timeframe
- Demonstrate ability to perform tests, techniques, interventions
- Demonstrate leadership in field

Tips – Writing / Presentation

- Be consistent with terms and writing style
- Minimise use of acronyms and field specific jargon
- Ensure figure, diagrams, tables are relevant and readable
- Avoid complex, dense writing
- Proof-read, proof-read, proof-read!!

Tips - Team

- NHMRC state that Track Record based on entire team
 - Less experienced CIAs should be encouraged
- Teams consider membership and order very carefully
- Only include investigators who will contribute
- Avoid including investigators for their track record
 - Everyone should have a very clear and unique role
 - Avoid too many investigators with the same expertise/role (difficult decisions)

Tips – Targeting reviewers & GRP

- Applications are assigned to external reviewers, panels and spokespersons according to:
 - Fields of research / research subcategory
 - Research keywords / phrases
 - Synopsis
- Prepare these sections carefully to ensure your app goes to the most appropriate reviewers, panel and spokespersons

Tips - Budget

- Critically important
 - Nightmare conducting study without sufficient funds
- NHMRC Salaries are considerably lower than university/MRI salaries
 - Have strategy
- Budget for every legitimate expense
 - Some expenditure can not be requested (publication costs, computers, conference expenses)
- Justify everything!
 - Separately for each year

Tips - Compliance

- Projects that don't comply with rules risk being judge ineligible
 - Margins, font size, citing web sites etc
- Utilise institutional compliance checks
 - Requires app to be submitted by internal due date
 - At least 2 compliance checks are recommended
- Make sure that all sections (proposal, budget, synopsis) are in synch
 - Starting and completion dates, sample sizes, number of tests

Tips - Rebuttal

- Always submit a rebuttal
- Only spokespersons score and you don't know which reports are from external reviewers
- Don't be aggressive or dismissive
- Most effort in responding to the major criticisms
- In order to be succinct, merge concerns into broad categories
- Start and finish positively

Questions?