

Partnership Programme Peer Review Guidelines

for the

HRC-NSFC Biomedical Research Fund

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Conflicts of Interest

The mission of the Health Research Council of New Zealand (HRC), a Crown agency, is “to improve human health by promoting and funding health research”. To achieve that mission, the HRC utilises individuals as peer reviewers and Steering Committee members to inform its decision-making processes. A conflict of interest arises where an individual has an interest which conflicts (or might conflict, or might be perceived to conflict) with the interests of the Crown body itself.¹ From the HRC’s perspective then, the term “conflict of interest” refers to situations in which financial or other personal considerations may compromise, or have the appearance of compromising, professional judgement in evaluating research proposals.²

In evaluating a conflict of interest, it is important to consider not only known conflicts but also the appearance of conflict. To ensure the integrity of the research proposal assessment process, the HRC provides to external peer reviewers and assessing committee members guidelines on potential conflicts of interest. The intent of the guidelines is to provide the opportunity for declaration of potential conflicts of interest and a means to evaluate their potential effect on the peer review of research applications. The key question to ask when considering whether an interest might create a conflict is “does the interest create an incentive for the appointee to act in a way which may not be in the best interests of HRC, the research, or the researcher(s)?”

Declaration³

Peer reviewers and Assessing Committee members must declare a potential conflict of interest if they:

- Are from the same immediate department, institution or company as the applicant(s);
- Have direct involvement in the research proposal being discussed;
- Have collaborated, published or been a co-applicant with the applicant(s), within the last five years;
- Have been involved in any National Science Challenge funded studies or associated activities with the applicant(s);
- Have been a student or supervisor of the applicant(s) within the last ten years;
- Are a close personal friend or relative of the applicant(s);
- Have had long-standing scientific or personal differences with the applicant(s);
- Are in a position to gain or lose financially from the outcome of the application; or
- For some reason, feel that they cannot provide an objective review of the application.

Evaluation

External peer reviewers can exclude themselves from the assessment process when they recognise a potential conflict of interest by opting out at their point of contact on the HRC’s Online Peer Review site. No further action is required. Peer reviewers, in their reports, also have an opportunity to declare potential conflicts. **If you declare a potential conflict of interest in your report, please contact the HRC to clarify whether it would rule you out of providing a review.** When an external peer reviewer does not recognise or declare a conflict of interest, but the potential conflict is later detected, their report will not be used by the HRC and/or Assessing Committee.

¹ Adapted from the New Zealand State Services Commission, *Board Appointment and Induction Guidelines*, Annex 2 – Identifying and dealing with conflicts of interest.

² Adapted from the Association of American Medical Colleges, *Guidelines for dealing with faculty conflicts of commitment and conflicts of interest in research*, February 22, 1990.

³ Adapted from the *Notes for CIHR Grants Committees: May 2001*, Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

Completing a Peer Review Report

Peer reviewers are asked to read all of this information in this document before starting assessment of applications. Please note by agreeing to act as a peer reviewer you are agreeing to keep all matters pertaining to the content of this proposal in strict confidence.

The assessment of a proposal submitted to the Health Research Council of New Zealand (HRC) is determined by independent external peer review and an Assessing Committee. Your expertise is sought to assist an HRC Assessing Committee to assess the merit and potential of a research proposal.

Confidentiality

You should note that New Zealand has had an Official Information Act since 1982. It is the policy of the Research Partnerships team to keep the details of peer reviewers confidential, unless the peer reviewer gives specific consent to the contrary. Peer review reports are provided to applicants and the Assessing Committee without identifying the peer reviewer.

Report submission

The peer review report should be completed via the HRC Gateway. A link to access this site will be automatically sent to you. The site will guide you through the review and submission process.

Assessment

The peer review report consists of scores and written comments across five criteria. Please refer to the respective criteria for Project and Emerging Researcher First Grant proposals on the following pages. As you proceed through the review process you will be asked to provide a score and a detailed critique of the proposal, for each of the criteria in turn.

Scoring the application

Peer reviewers will score each of the criteria on a 7-point scale. The score for each of the criteria will be based on the anchor point descriptor on the reviewing portal. A full description is outlined below; the best possible score for any specific proposal is 35.

Note: Please use the anchor point descriptors on pages 5-9 as a guide to your assessment.

Written comments

Peer reviewers are asked to consider the criteria and provide comment as to how well the proposal meets the criteria, and in doing so identify the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed research. It would assist the applicant and the Assessing Committee if you could identify specific questions, which when answered by the applicant would clarify aspects of the research proposal and enable a more comprehensive assessment.

Note: Please don't refer to your scores in the comments sections (while the comments are provided to applicants for their rebuttal; reviewer scores are not).

Additional comments

If you wish to communicate additional comments to the Assessing Committee or the HRC in confidence these should be written in the 'Confidential comments' section. Information provided in this section will not be given to the applicant. Peer reviewers undertaking comparative reviews should utilise the 'Confidential comments' section for any comments comparing proposals.

Assessment Criteria for Project Proposals

HRC-NSFC Biomedical Research Fund **Project** proposals assessed and scored by external peer reviewers will utilise the following criteria and anchor point descriptors:

A. Fit with the Request for Proposals (RFP)

- 7 = The applicants have convincingly demonstrated that the proposed research fully aligns with all of the objectives and requirements as stated in the RFP. The proposal clearly conveys a thorough understanding of the objectives and requirements and has outlined how the components of the RFP will be addressed.
- 4 = The applicants have attempted to align the proposed research with the objectives and requirements as stated in the RFP. The proposal does not address all of the objectives and requirements, or does not sufficiently address all of the objectives and requirements to provide the desired outcomes of the RFP. The proposal conveys an understanding of the requirements and has attempted to outline how the components of the RFP will be addressed.
- 1 = The applicants have not aligned the proposed research with the objectives and requirements to provide the desired outcomes of the RFP. The proposal conveys no understanding of the objectives and requirements of the RFP.

B. Scientific Merit

- 7 = The rationale for the proposed research is extremely well made. The aims and (where appropriate) hypotheses are excellent. The proposed research may represent a highly original and innovative approach to addressing the health question. Original findings are highly likely to result.
- 4 = The rationale for the study is well made. The aims and (where appropriate) hypotheses are acceptable. Original findings may result.
- 1 = The rationale, aims and hypotheses for the study are poor or absent. Original findings are unlikely to result.

C. Design and Methods

- 7 = The proposed study design is excellent. The methods and proposed analyses are very comprehensive and clearly appropriate. The applicants demonstrate full awareness of the relevant technical issues. The statistical power (where appropriate) is sufficient to ensure a definitive outcome and the statistical analyses are well-developed. It is difficult to suggest improvements.
- 4 = The study design is adequate. There may be either insufficient detail for parts of the method and proposed analyses, or the study would benefit significantly by improvements in a one or more of these areas.
- 1 = The study design is unacceptable as proposed. Either the design is inappropriate, or there is no (or very little) detail on the methodology and proposed analyses.

D. Expertise of the Research Team

- 7 = The research team collectively have outstanding academic qualifications, as well as excellent topic based knowledge and experience to undertake the proposed research. They have an outstanding publication track record in major peer reviewed scientific journals as well as other professional publications, and/or substantial experience in disseminating research results.
- 4 = The research team collectively have the academic qualifications, topic based knowledge, and experience to undertake the proposed research. They have a track record of publication in peer reviewed scientific journals and other professional publications, and/or experience in disseminating research results. There are some areas, however, where this has not been fully demonstrated.
- 1 = The research team collectively have inadequate and/or inappropriate academic qualifications or research backgrounds to undertake the proposed research. They collectively have a weak publication record and there are serious doubts as to whether the research will be completed and disseminated appropriately.

E. Quality of the Research Partnership

- 7 = The partnership will enable a unique research contribution that has the potential to advance the field further due to the collaborative nature. Excellent opportunities for capability building of researchers, including early career researchers, is provided for. Diversity of gender and ethnicity within the team are considered. The partnership will enhance the transfer of new knowledge and/or technologies and build New Zealand research capacity to address global health research priorities. The collaboration will extend the impact and reach of New Zealand research and provide opportunities to advance to higher levels of research excellence.
- 4 = The partnership detailed in this application may provide opportunities for contributions to existing research, training and development of New Zealand researchers and/or collaborative research in this area. There are some areas where the quality of the partnership has not been fully demonstrated or could be strengthened.
- 1 = The proposed partnership detailed in this application is inadequate and/or unacceptable. There is very little detail and/or there are serious doubts as to the quality of this partnership or the opportunities this research may provide.

Assessment Criteria for Emerging Researcher First Grant Proposals

HRC-NSFC Biomedical Research Fund **Emerging Researcher First Grant** proposals assessed and scored by external peer reviewers will utilise the following criteria and anchor point descriptors.

A. Suitability of the Applicant

- 7 = The applicant has provided evidence of commitment to establish an independent research career and provided evidence of the applicant's ability to take overall responsibility for the work to be completed, including a plan for developing an independent research programme, stemming from the research proposal. The quality of the applicant's track record is high, based not only on quantity of publications but on the applicant's PhD, prizes and scholarships, and other academic achievements. Track record should be considered relative to opportunity.
- 4= The applicant has attempted to provide evidence of commitment to establish an independent research career. The quality of applicants track record is adequate.
- 1 = The applicant has not provided evidence of commitment to establish and independent career and does not have a high-quality track record.

B. Fit with the Request for Proposals (RFP)

- 7 = The applicant has convincingly demonstrated that the proposed research fully aligns with all of the objectives and requirements as stated in the RFP. The proposal clearly conveys a thorough understanding of the objectives and requirements and has outlined how the components of the RFP will be addressed.
- 4 = The applicant has attempted to align the proposed research with the objectives and requirements as stated in the RFP. The proposal does not address all of the objectives and requirements, or does not sufficiently address all of the objectives and requirements to provide the desired outcomes of the RFP. The proposal conveys an understanding of the requirements and has attempted to outline how the components of the RFP will be addressed.
- 1 = The applicant has not aligned the proposed research with the objectives and requirements to provide the desired outcomes of the RFP. The proposal conveys no understanding of the objectives and requirements of the RFP.

C. Design and Methods

- 7 = The research represents a highly original and innovative approach to addressing the health question. The proposed study design is excellent. The methods and proposed analyses are very comprehensive and clearly appropriate. The applicants demonstrate full awareness of the relevant technical issues. The statistical power (where appropriate) is sufficient to ensure a definitive outcome and the statistical analyses are well-developed. It is difficult to suggest improvements.
- 4 = The study design is adequate. There may be either insufficient detail for parts of the method and proposed analyses, or the study would benefit significantly by improvements in a one or more of these areas.
- 1 = The study design is unacceptable as proposed and lacks originality. Either the design is inappropriate, or there is no (or very little) detail on the methodology and proposed analyses.

D. Research Environment Stability

- 7 = The research environment is well described and suitable for the nature of the proposed research; there is potential for development, training and developing collaborative relationships. The nature and level of support provided by the applicant's mentors and colleagues will ensure the applicant has the opportunity to thrive and succeed.
- 4 = The research environment appears to be adequate and there may be potential for personal career development. The level of support provided by mentors and colleagues could be described in greater detail.
- 1 = The research environment is inappropriate and will not provide adequate support to the applicant.

E. Quality of the Research Partnership

- 7 = The partnership will enable a unique research contribution that has the potential to advance the field further due to the collaborative nature. Excellent opportunities for capability building of researchers, including early career researchers, is provided for. Diversity of gender and ethnicity within the team are considered. The partnership will enhance the transfer of new knowledge and/or technologies and build New Zealand research capacity to address global health research priorities. The collaboration will extend the impact and reach of New Zealand research and provide opportunities to advance to higher levels of research excellence.
- 4 = The partnership detailed in this application may provide opportunities for contributions to existing research, training and development of New Zealand researchers and/or collaborative research in this area. There are some areas where the quality of the partnership has not been fully demonstrated or could be strengthened.
- 1 = The proposed partnership detailed in this application is inadequate and/or unacceptable. There is very little detail and/or there are serious doubts as to the quality of this partnership or the opportunities this research may provide.

Weighting of Scoring Criteria

The objectives of the **Emerging Researcher First Grant** awards include developing the health research workforce. Therefore, the emphasis in these applications is on the qualities of the applicant. Applicants are required to clearly demonstrate their suitability for the grant in the 'Suitability of Applicant' section of the Application Form. The Suitability of the Applicant score will be given a 40% weighting and the other four criteria will be worth 15% each.

Criteria	Points	% score
Suitability of the Applicant	7	40
Fit with the Request for Proposals (RFP)	7	15
Design and Methods	7	15
Research Environment Stability	7	15
Quality of the Research Partnership	7	15
Total Score	35	100