

FAQS – DU Processes for ARC Discovery and NHMRC Project Grant applications

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY NATIONAL COMPETITIVE GRANT (NCG) PROCESS:

1. What is the process?

The process consists of a series of stages designed to review, develop and strengthen grant applications. It is managed and coordinated by the Faculties and the Institute for Frontier Materials (IFM). The process is designed to systematically develop ideas and build projects by incorporating expert feedback (both internal and external) before selecting the most competitive applications to proceed in an NCG round.

The 4 Faculties and IFM are expected to work intensively with potential applicants to systematically review and develop grant applications and to look at alternate forms of funding where NCG may not be the most appropriate funding source. The process should proceed in a calm and measured way to ensure that researchers are supported and their ideas subjected to honest discussion and constructive feedback. Ultimately a Faculty/IFM will need to assess the calibre and quality of the proposal and to determine its readiness and appropriateness for submission.

Applicants whose proposals are selected to proceed to submission are expected to participate in final 'grantsmanship' reviews of other applications. For each application, a lead CI must review 2 applications from outside their immediate area. The centralised review process ensures that grants are read by those outside an individual's immediate area of expertise in order to provide editorial comment, advice and/or suggestions so that an application can be polished before submission.

2. Why has Deakin implemented this process?

Deakin has implemented a revised process for its NCG applications in order to improve the calibre, quality and competitiveness of submitted grant applications. In addition, the University wants to ensure that time spent drafting applications is well spent.

The process provides time for researchers to work systematically on applications so that they are not pressured into having to work extraordinary hours to get an application "over the line" by submission time with the resultant pressure this places on the administration staff supporting them.

3. What's the point?

National Competitive Grant (NCG) funding is becoming increasingly difficult to gain. Deakin's aim is to lift its success rates and to ensure that, every application we submit impresses both assessors and review panels. A primary objective is also to encourage, support and develop the skills of its researchers and to have Faculties/IFM take a very active role in supporting researchers in relation to competitive grant funding.

4. Will we have to do this next year?

Yes, the process of having the Faculties and IFM systematically and methodically develop proposal ideas and applications will continue. Longer lead times and a greater emphasis on the need to thoroughly develop proposals in order to appropriately support researchers will be provided in subsequent year. Researchers should see this as a positive step.

5. I work best under the pressure of timelines. Can I circumvent the process and work to the previous timelines Deakin had?

No. Use the internal deadlines set by your Faculty or IFM and ultimately by Deakin Research – Grants as your 'pressure' points

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6. What data do you have to show this works?

Many other universities and research institutes have implemented similar, methodical review processes to strengthen applications. The Medical Research Institutes commonly use this type of approach and their success rates would indicate its effectiveness. One of the issues with long term strategies is that results are delayed. This is exacerbated with rounds that require long periods of assessment prior to gaining results. Any change to culture is difficult and will require a period of transformation. The University is not expecting that outcomes for these schemes will improve immediately and we have actively encouraged the Executive to take a longer term approach.

7. This is an unrealistic administrative burden placed upon academic staff. Why does Deakin insist on this?

Refer FAQ #2 & #3 above. Academic staff should see this process as positive and not punitive. The process means that senior Faculty/Institute/School or SRC academic staff are working with you to develop your proposal and to make suggestions or give ideas on how to strengthen and improve it. Academic discussion and dialogue should be beneficial to you and your proposal.

8. I am new to Deakin University having commenced in January, can I submit in March?

Those new to Deakin are encouraged to concentrate on establishing their research profile at Deakin and developing networks and collaborations. New staff member's requests will be considered on a case by case basis and those who join early in a calendar year may be asked to postpone any proposed application and use the following 12 months to develop it.

Applicants committed to submitting in an upcoming round should be able to demonstrate a strong ARC or NHMRC track record (eg. An ARC or NHMRC award in the last 3 years as Lead CI) and will require strong support from their Head of School and their Associate Dean (Research) who must commit to developing and 'hothousing' the application prior to submission.

9. My colleagues tell me that multiple applications submitted by the same Project Leader in a single scheme round are not encouraged. Is that correct?

It is extremely rare for a lead researcher to win 2 grant awards in the one round. The ARC has severe limits on the number of funded awards that a Chief Investigator may hold and thus applicants should only ever submit one ARC application in any given round. The NHMRC do allow Chief Investigators to hold a larger number of funded grants so this is less of an issue BUT only those with a known track record of NHMRC success are able to submit more than one grant and DVCR approval must be sought to submit more than 2 NHMRC Project Grants in a single round. The aim of limiting proposal numbers is to ensure that applicants concentrate on writing fewer but better grant applications.

UNIVERSITY WIDE GRANTMANSHIP REVIEW:

10. Why do applicants have to review 2 applications?

The system allows for each application to receive 2 reviews and the workload must be shared. As an applicant, your proposal should benefit from this process so it is only reasonable that you should actively participate by assisting other colleagues. Logistically, these types of processes are extremely difficult to organise. All staff must participate.

11. What if I don't want a particular individual to read my proposal?

You may nominate any individual you feel should not read your application. This information will be recorded in Deakin Research Grants but will be kept confidential

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12. What if I am assigned as a reviewer to an application with which I have a conflict of interest?

We would be grateful if you could alert us to any conflicts of interest. If this occurs we will reassign that application to another reviewer and you will be sent an alternate application to review

13. Am I expected to score or rank applications?

No, this is not the purpose of this exercise. Based on the experience from the previous NHMRC round (for 2015 funding) and feedback from those who undertook reviews it was decided that decisions on the calibre and quality and competitiveness of applications should rest with the relevant Faculty or IFM. This review should focus on reading an application and considering whether it is well written, whether the aims are clear, whether it is engaging and easy to read etc. (This is fully explained in the documentation for reviewers on how to undertake a review.)

14. What if I don't have expertise in the area of the proposal I am reviewing?

It is not necessary to have expertise in the subject area of the proposal. All well written applications can be read by the educated lay person and should be accessible to those outside your field. It is actually better for this process that you do not have specific expertise as you should not be commenting on the 'scientific quality' of an application or its 'significance and innovation'. Deakin Research – Grants will endeavour to provide you with applications that are more 'appropriate' to you given your area of expertise but this will not always be possible.

15. Why isn't Reviewer feedback de-identified?

The aim of this process is to provide constructive feedback to assist applicants refine and polish their applications prior to submission. Your role is not to assess or judge the calibre, scientific merit or quality of the application as this has been undertaken at the Faculty and/or SRC level. Your role is to make sure the proposal can be read by the average lay reader without specific expertise in the subject area and to ensure that the proposal is logical and is an interesting, engaging and compelling read. Any comments you make should be fair and reasonable with the aim of helping your colleague build their application.