

Assessing Grant Applications Part I: Criteria Review

Activity 1

Objective

Review the exemplar ARC assessment excerpts below and discuss what makes an effective peer review.

Task: Consider the excerpts below. They have been selected from the exemplar assessments available on the ARC website. In your group, ask these questions of the excerpts.

1. What **distinguishes** the **high-quality assessments** from the **low-quality ones**?
2. How **useful** might these assessments be for a General Assessor who must identify the highest quality applications for funding? Why?
3. As an applicant for funding, how would you react to receiving assessments like these? You might like to consider:
 - a. the tone of the assessment
 - b. the informativeness of the assessment
 - c. the persuasiveness of the A-E scores and text comments
 - d. the usefulness of the assessment for you (rejoinder, future applications).

Table 1. A-E scores and descriptors (DP27)

Score	Descriptor
A	Outstanding: Of the highest quality and at the forefront of research in the field. (~10%)
B	Excellent: Of high quality and strongly competitive (~15%)
C	Very Good: Interesting, sound and compelling (~20%)
D	Good: Sound but lacks a compelling element (~35%)
E	Uncompetitive: Has significant weaknesses (~20%)

Source: [discovery-program-detailed-assessor-handbook-dp27.pdf](#)

Assessment Examples

High-quality Assessments

Feasibility (A)

The project is well designed and achievable within the proposed time and budget. It will build on an existing project and so much of the required infrastructure and networks are in place. The CI and PI have appropriate experience and training to conduct both proposed data collection and analysis. The established international links with seven highly relevant international research centres provides further assurance of a collaborative research environment that enhances the feasibility of the project.

Feasibility (B)

Some issues regarding feasibility have been noted above with respect to the scope of the project and possible constraints on data collection. I also note a lack of international collaborations among the co-authors on the candidate's journal publications. Again, there is limited evidence that the candidate has succeeded in building the international and interdisciplinary collaborations that would facilitate project implementation and poses a risk to achieving its outcomes. A greater demonstration of building or working in international collaborations would provide confidence that an ambitious and well-designed project can be implemented successfully.

Feasibility (C)

The project timeline and budget generally seem feasible with some exceptions. For example, the part-time casual Research Assistant (RA) is expected to enter all employee surveys every year (p.12). This is unrealistic. Have sufficient funds been requested for adequate support staffing? The prolonged support of the Staff Advisers from Industry participants is critical to the success of the study. Will there be Ethical issues for them in providing data for the study? Some assurance of clear attention to the need for Human Research Ethics clearance would be helpful in assessing feasibility.

Feasibility (D)

As noted, several aspects concerning the specific scope and breadth of the research are unclear from reading the description of the research project (for example, timeframe, number of groups and participants), which makes it difficult to evaluate feasibility. That said, it appears to be a very substantial project and I wonder whether the CIs might benefit from additional consultation with others engaged in broadly similar projects. research environment that enhances the feasibility of the project.

Low-quality Assessments

Feasibility (A)

Solid and clear.

Feasibility (C)

Generally OK.

Feasibility (E)

Not feasible.

Reference: <https://www.arc.gov.au/funding-research/peer-review/how-write-quality-peer-review>

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Activity 2

Objective

This activity provides guidance on writing a high-quality ARC assessment, together with the ARC quality assessment criteria and application excerpts for participants to assess.

ARC Quality Assessment Principles

A high-quality assessment:

- Is well-considered, balanced, and meaningful, offering fair and objective evaluation of the application's strengths and weaknesses against the assessment criteria
- Provides relevant, justified comments and critiques that are consistent with the assigned scores
- Supports applicants in preparing a clear and constructive rejoinder
- Assists the Selection Advisory Committee (SAC) in making well-informed funding decisions
- Excludes any inappropriate content or remarks.

Task: Choose **one** of the excerpts from ARC application texts below. **As a group**, write a high-quality assessment of the excerpt, keeping the **ARC criteria for quality assessment** in mind. Discuss what makes your assessment high-quality.

ARC Criteria for Quality Assessment

1. **Objective**, constructive and professional comments.
2. **Detailed comments** on the merits or otherwise of the application with respect to the selection criteria. One or two sentences is not sufficient – minimum of one paragraph.
3. **Sufficient information** to allow applicants to provide a Rejoinder to comments about the application.
4. **Comments that align closely with scores** – for example, if you have given significant criticisms an 'A' rating is unlikely to be appropriate. Further, if a 'D' rating is given, then suitable constructive criticisms and comments justifying the score are required. It is

important to remember that applicants see only the comments and the SAC [Selection Advisory Committee] will see both comments and scores. Assessors are encouraged to identify specific aspects of applications that warrant the score given, rather than provide broad general comments.

5. **Comments that are fair, meaningful and balanced**, addressing only issues relevant to the application in terms of the selection criteria. Comments should provide a sound, comprehensive account of, and justification for, views about the application, while respecting the care with which applications have been prepared.
6. Comments free from platitudes, exaggeration and understatement.

Source: <https://www.arc.gov.au/funding-research/peer-review/how-write-quality-peer-review>

Excerpt 1

FEASIBILITY

Project research environment. Coastal Plains University's (**Harris, Nguyen**) School of Education and provides a research-intensive environment that delivers and translates high quality research into outcomes that are relevant and meaningful to our communities through its Institute for Education Futures (IEF). This project is aligned with IEF theme *Transforming Educational Outcomes for Diverse Communities*. In 2025, CPU was ranked 7th globally in the category of Education and Education Research, illustrating its leadership in education research and innovation. With the support of the IEF, the School is currently leading 5 Category 1 projects and initiatives totalling ~\$1.4M, and 18 Category 2-4 projects totalling ~\$900,000. The school provides high-quality mentoring and research training.

Research at Western State University (**Patel, Ross**) has been strategically developed as evidenced by a significant growth in HDR student enrolments (now over 400), research income (approx. \$25M p.a.), and a significant improvement in ERA ratings in 2018. WSU has a well-established and successful research strategy that provides targeted support for early, mid-career and established researchers to develop a strong research culture, high quality external research proposals, and international research collaborations.

Metro City University (**Zhang, O'Brien**) has a strong and internationally focused research culture, ranking within the top 100 universities worldwide. ECRs at MCU are supported through opportunities for independent funding and have access to training and professional development opportunities in, for example, HDR supervision, leadership, and commercialisation.

Complementary expertise and timely completion. Feasibility of this project is enhanced by the size and diverse locations and expertise of the research team, spanning three states with

different policy contexts that affect educational attainment. The team comprises broad disciplinary expertise in Education to recognise and analyse differences in diverse educational contexts. The lead CI, **Prof. Harris**, is the leading international researcher in this field. The team composition also includes early-career, midcareer and highly experienced researchers, providing opportunities for mentoring and research capacity.

Value for money, project facilities, and budget support. The project is designed to ensure cost effectiveness by: (i) using online interviews to reduce travel time and enable easier participation; (ii) using national and international dissemination events as opportunities to gain expert feedback on the developing framework; and (iii) purposefully aligning the time allocation of the two Research Assistants with key phases of the project. Value for money is further enhanced by each university's contribution of facilities and equipment. The RA based at CPU will undertake project management duties, including managing the budget.

Excerpt 2

Feasibility

Proven capacity to conduct research of this nature

The research team brings a strong track record of successful collaboration and highly relevant experience in both the substantive area and the methods used in previous projects. **CI Bennett** has undertaken two successful ARC Discovery projects (DP0000000, DP1111111). Like the current proposal, both projects involved sociological analyses of how school-based partnerships and community engagement shape students' numeracy development and access to numeracy support. As a Mathematics and Numeracy Education academic, CI Bennet has expertise in analytic methods relevant to the project and the requisite knowledge of numeracy pedagogy.

CI Buchanan has led two ARC Linkage projects (LP0000000, LP1111111) with multi-phase, mixed method designs in which qualitative data informed a larger quantitative study. Both projects involved an analysis of factors that influence students' numeracy outcomes in regional, rural and remote communities. In the last project, CI Buchanan designed, conducted and analysed student interviews using the participant-centred interview methodology planned for the proposed project.

The team will also engage **Prof. Lucy Ball** as a statistical fellow to help design and analyse the survey in the final phase of the study. Prof. Ball was a co-investigator in CI Bennet's previous ARC Discovery projects, as evidenced by joint publications. She brings extensive statistical expertise to the project.

Accessibility of potential data sources

The data sources and processes outlined in the project proposal are feasible. For Phase 1, the data sources to be collated are already in the public domain. For Phase 2, both CI Bennett and CI Buchanan have previously established productive relationships to access schools and

community partners through their previous ARC projects. Their experiences in similar designs suggest that community partners are willing to share their experiences of their approaches to support students' numeracy development. The CIs have asked for teaching relief to make themselves available and as flexible as possible to allow the interviews to take place at a time that minimises impost for research participants. The participant survey will be distributed in both online and paper modes to enhance response rates (e.g., paper surveys distributed via schools, online survey distributed via schools' online newsletters). With multiple strategies, achieving an adequate response rate will be feasible.