

Combined report on the National RGMS Workshops

NARF organised a series of workshops in 5 state capital cities in the week of April 12-15 2010. The purpose was to facilitate discussion about the implementation of the RGMS grant management system, its strengths and weakness, and how effectively it will facilitate policy (projects and careers) and peer review. The workshops were a constructive process, generating specific recommendations for the future development of RGMS or a related online system. They gathered a problems list, and focussed on mechanisms to improve RGMS. Each workshop was facilitated by a member of the NARF Executive, and included a panel of scientists (not necessarily Fellows) and research office staff. The workshops were open to all medical researchers and Research Offices. This document represents the collated ideas from each workshop. This is a national paper to provide independent feedback to the NHMRC and will be widely distributed.

Summary of Attendees

Attendees	NSW	Qld	WA	SA	Vic
Grant holders (or aspirants) who are not Fellows or CDAs	8	8	15	16	5
NHMRC Fellows	6	10	7	10	13
NHMRC CDAs or Training Fellows	2	5	2	5	4
Research Office, or Research support/Administration	8	10	1	10	6
Current grant holders	10	21	18	30	21
Total:	26	35	24	48	37

Total attendees (Australia-wide): 170

Mon April 12 – Sydney (3-5 pm @ University of Sydney, Woolley Lecture Theatre, N395)

Tue April 13 – Brisbane 2-4 pm @ University of Queensland (Large Seminar Room, 3rd Floor, Queensland Biosciences Precinct Building #80)

Tue April 13 – Adelaide (4-6 pm @ Royal Adelaide Hospital (Robson Lecture Theatre, Eleanor Harrald Building, RAH, Frome Rd)

Wed April 14 – Melbourne 4.15-6.15 pm @ University of Melbourne (Education Resource Centre - Charles Pearson Theatre, Room 132, Ground Floor)

Thur April 15 – Perth 3:30-5:30 pm @ Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (Seminar Room, B Block, QEII Medical Centre, Nedlands)

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1. INTRODUCTION

The RGMS workshops held across Australia represented both researchers and administrative support staff, with CDA's and training fellows well represented. It was agreed that an online system such as RGMS is a welcome initiative for the NHMRC, but that the system as it stands is sub-optimal, the guidelines and set-up inadequate and often confusing, and the output totally unacceptable. In particular, almost unanimous concern was expressed about how the RGMS output would affect the peer review process, and many feared that the integrity of the final NHMRC funding would be compromised by the RGMS system introduced this year.

As well as the specific issues addressed below, it was generally felt that the RGMS implementation should have involved more consultation with end users and that the system had been introduced without adequate and meaningful testing (i.e., by sufficient numbers of researchers, grant reviewers and administrative staff). A discussion paper could have been disseminated to capture valuable input from the research community regarding the proposed RGMS system and process for rollout - NHMRC has successfully employed such measures in the past. While it was acknowledged that a number of problems were addressed as they arose throughout the process, this may not have been necessary had the system been subjected to more widespread and extensive consultation.

2. RGMS INTERFACE

The interface was considered difficult to work with and generally unsuitable for a grant management system in its current form. Apart from issues relating to preparation and submission of grants/fellowships in the current round, there were concerns as to exactly what the assessors would see in terms of format and content during the evaluation process, and a general feeling that the final output of the grant was not acceptable. The requirement to enter all data in a given format, often choosing from a drop down menu, removed the ability of a CI to individualise their application or to check that the final product was 'polished' to the level possible using previous systems. This was a particular problem for fellowship and CDA applications where applicants should have more control over the final format.

There was genuine and widespread concern that due to the inadequacy of the system: 1) Since grant applications were not submitted; 2) grant applications were incomplete and/or less competitive than they might have been if it were not for technical issues related to RGMS; and, 3) the correct version of the application was not submitted.

Specific Issues:

One size does not fit all

Issue: Project grants, program grants, fellowship and other applications each require a different set of information that is put together differently. Having virtually the same boxes to fill in for each type of application hindered the process and made it difficult to know where to include particular types of information for a particular application. Some people entered duplicate information throughout the system to ensure they weren't handicapped by not having it in the right place, but were then hampered by the space restrictions.

Solution: The interface seen by the applicant should alter according to the type of application selected (eg. project grant, CDA etc.). Only those fields that need to be populated for that application should be shown. Why not include a template for each specific application with the right headers, and margins and format etc. for each section loaded onto the system? Then the system could automatically generate a Word or PDF file.

Issue: Completion of all fields on a particular page is required before saving. Also when a page is saved, it is automatically set back to the top requiring constant shifting by the user.

Solution: Once should be able to save a page at whatever stage it is up to. A system of red flags could indicate missing data.

General Formatting

Issue: Several sections are formatted very badly and need to be changed into a more readable style. This seems to be worse in fellowships than projects. In particular these include:

- Translation into policy/practice
- Most relevant and significant publications

- Conference participation, eg. if you did more than one thing at a conference you had to enter the same data multiple times
- Peer reviewing - information requested is too detailed.

Solution: Complete overhaul of formatting should be undertaken following consultation with end-users to avoid duplication, confusion and time wasted on unnecessary entries.

Issue: Numbering each type of application with the same prefix (APP) is confusing, i.e, which scheme does it belong to?

Solution: Number each application type with a different prefix, eg. PJXXX for project grants, PGXXX for program grant, RFXXX for fellowships, CDxxx for CDA applications.

Issue: It is not always clear which information collected is going to be used and where or which portion is necessary for which scheme (apart from the downloadable table).

Solution: Information should be made available on the electronic form.

System Complexity

Issue: Concern was raised over the physical complexity of the system, ie. too many layers of information. The summary page doesn't always give enough information about the contents of each item, and therefore there is often a need to go into the full listing for each entry, necessitating the opening of multiple pages to access full information.

This complexity significantly increased the average time taken to complete and submit an application using RGMS over and above the time taken in previous years, with general agreement that the minimum additional time taken was one week per CIA.

Solution: Present all information on a single page for each listing to allow the applicant to easily see what has been entered. Reduce the number of consecutive layers required for RAOs to undertake core operations.

Software Issues

Issue: Browser incompatibility was a commonly encountered problem with the system. For example, links to knowledge store only work with Firefox and not with other browsers, yet some users experienced the opposite problem – working with Internet Explorer, but not Firefox. Although it was acknowledged that universities should have been pro-active in ensuring compatibility was in place, the problem highlighted a lack of communication and preparation for the system implementation.

Solution: System should be cross-platform and work with different browsers.

Issue: Snapshot reports printout sometimes provided wrong page numbers (e.g., 15 of 15 on several pages, then jumps to 34 of 34). This also appears to be due to compatibility issue across software versions.

Solution: Provide information about version of software used.

Working on Multiple Applications

Issue: Switching between grants created some confusion when working on multiple applications simultaneously because it is impossible to determine which application was being worked on. There was no title bar on individual pages and the “working ID” and “individual ID” were different. The local institution tracking number was different again. Also, a number of people had problems because it is possible for two or more people to be working simultaneously on the one application.

Solution: This could be solved by incorporating a title bar (or tab) into the pages to indicate application type, version and current location, eg. home, CV, current application number + first 4 words of grant title, etc.. Also, perhaps there could be a “flag” letting people know that others are working on the same application. A date stamp noting when the application was last updated, and by whom, would also be valuable.

Auto-population of Fields

Issue: It was thought that more fields could be auto-populated from data already held in NHMRC databases (although it was acknowledged that this was the intention for past and current grants but did not work in all cases). Of particular note was the budget and time contributions. The number of hours should be added up and inserted at each site automatically to save RAOs trawling through an application to determine if hours committed added up in all sections (same for requested budgets etc.).

Solution: Ensure that in future, stored data is imported automatically. Where applicable, have fields auto-populated with values determined in other sections of the current application. A simple grant ID number system could be used to extract information from other grants?

Snapshot Reports

Issue: The information in the snapshot reports is poorly presented and often in the wrong order (e.g., publications) with respect to convention and common sense. Most attendees were also unaware that the combined snapshot did not contain all the information in the individual snapshots, e.g., the summary snapshot is not included. There was widespread concern that reviewers would not view all relevant data because of this and that it would be difficult and onerous for assessors to find information quickly.

Also, specific items of information entered do not appear when the snapshot is generated. For example, in the section on translation of Translation of Research into Policy/Practice, there are tick boxes to indicate the funding source for the research under discussion, including one for NHMRC. However, if this is ticked, the Combination Snapshot does not show NHMRC as a funding source, even though the individual section snapshot does.

Solution: All relevant information should be contained in a single file in a logical format that allows the information to be accessed more readily by assessors.

Issue: The output is not suitable for general use as a CV. It was unclear what data was drawn from the CV profile to the snapshot and it was suggested that the researcher should have more control over what data was accessed for each application (and at what level of detail). Overall, there was a disconnect between the data entered and the final output.

Solution: For RGMS to be useful as a CV storing tool the output needs to be in a more suitable format. The applicant should have the facility to decide if parts of the CV should not be included in the snapshot. The format and content of the snapshot report should be developed in consultation with researchers and reviewers.

Issue: In some cases, the system crashed after saving but data were not saved. This was a general problem. At least 50% of people present had crashing problems. Also, there is no indication that a report is being generated successfully, prompting additional requests.

Solution: Add an alert to indicate that RGMS is doing a requested snap shot. This would avoid people requesting multiple snapshots of the same application.

Issue: Some data entry sections are not compulsory but will appear as blank in snapshot. Similarly, one can generate snapshots not knowing that information is missing.

Solution: Make all sections required to have non-blank entries, eg. have “not applicable” or a drop-down selection of the same. Or an alternative means to indicate that applicant intends the question to be left blank. In the Informed Filler this was made clear with red crosses to indicate missing or incomplete sections. This should be easy to implement in RGMS.

Issue: Empty fields in the Snapshot Reports were almost unanimously criticised. Where an applicant had no data to enter into a field, e.g., patents, an empty table appeared in the report. This not only added to the general formatting problems and user frustration reported, but also resulted in a tremendous waste of printing time and paper.

Solution: Do not reproduce fields that have no data entered. Also match the sequence of the snapshot with that on the RGMS interface you see on the screen.

Publications

The general consensus was of major problems with the publications section of RGMS.

Issue: Instructions were conflicting and often failed.

Issue: There were numerous and varied reports of Endnote-based upload problems including papers in the snapshot being listed in triplicate and problems with Greek characters. It was also pointed out that not all applicants use Endnote.

Issue: The system doesn't cope with “in press” articles, which do not appear in snapshots.

Issue: No space for brief description of paper significance, points about authorship, etc.

Issue: Of particular concern was the numbering of references and then cross-referencing to other sections of an application. Use of codes for initial publication entry is confusing. Then a second number is assigned when you produce a snapshot, then all referencing changes again on entering a new paper. As a result, reference numbers for a single CI differed among their own applications, progress reports, and other applications of which they are listed as CI.

Solution: References for each CI should be numbered from 1, using initials as a preface, eg. PJR1, PJR2 etc. When there are multiple CIs, each CI should start at 1, eg CIB would be TOB1, TOB2. References should be in ASCENDING order, with newest publications at the end. This will minimise the issues. This would avoid the confusion currently produced among multiple applications. Last-minute changes then affect the newly added publications, not the entire application. These issues are simple to address and will reduce many hours of wasted time and productivity.

Disincentive to International Collaborators

Issue: The current RGMS system discourages engaging international CIs, who do not receive any research funds. Some information requested is not necessarily available from international researchers (eg. all presentations), although it was not entirely clear how much CV information was actually required from international CIs, ie, how much would be imported into snapshot. Due to the onerous tasks involved, international collaborators were relegated to the status of AI in many applications to avoid the burden.

Solution: Reduce and clarify the CV detail required for international CIs. Perhaps request instead an uploaded PDF file for CVs of international CIs.

Instructions, Help and FAQ functions

Issue: The RGMS instructions were often not clear as to what information was required in each section or how it related to one's CV, and in some cases they contradicted the answers to FAQs. When it was unclear where certain information should appear, applicants were often instructed to add it to the appointments section, meaning that their actual appointments became buried. In general, the definitions provided were not clear.

Solution: Draft a more comprehensive Instructions and Guideline document. The online introduction to each section should contain more detailed and relevant instructions on what is required to be entered in that section and useful definitions.

Issue: Grantnet support received mixed reports from no help at all to mixed or contradictory messages if contact was established. This meant that not all applicants had access to the same information. Lack of adequate/quick responses to phone or email messages was also reported. The electronic help function was not connected to a relevant file.

Issue: FAQs is difficult to use. It is not hyperlinked, doesn't provide page number and has no index. Inclusion of FAQ in the Knowledge store is not useful when the system is down and these cannot be accessed.

Solution: FAQ files should be updated more regularly throughout the process in response to queries received by the helpdesk, and users informed when changes have been made. A version number on the FAQ file would be critically important to identify changes.

Time Commitment

Issue: There was some discussion over the move from expressing commitment as a percentage of research time to an hour per week value. Some felt that it is not necessary to allocate a time commitment to grants at all, while others felt that the commitment value was useful for panels to assess the likelihood of the CI being able to undertake the proposed work.

Solution: It may be better going back to % research time, although wider consultation is needed to determine the usefulness of this data collection.

Character limits

Issue: It was felt that the character limit in many fields was inappropriate and resulted in shortened and inadequate responses. Examples: the project grant synopsis is too short given that this is used to assign grants to panels and spokespersons; describing the 5 best publications, with justification, in 2000 characters; only 250 characters for career interruption/opportunity is clearly inadequate. The character limit for describing collaborations was also particularly inadequate. The very restrictive character limits also meant that referencing got dropped, which reduces scientific credibility.

Solution: Increase the length of the synopsis to one page as in previous years. References should not be included in character limits.

Issue: There was also confusion over discrepancies between the character number in Microsoft Word and that accepted by RGMS.

Solution: Add a character counter so the applicant can track space available.

3. RGMS PROCESS

Editorial Access by Institutional Grants Officers and RAOs

Issue: Institutional grants officers and RAOs felt unable to help with many problems because they did not have editing access to applications. Indeed, RAOs could not even view most parts of the application or the CV. It was felt that many problems that were referred to the grantnet help desk could have been solved internally if access was allowed.

Solution: Allow CIs to nominate non-participant editors for each application. Provide RAOs with more editorial rights or at the least, they should be able to view this information on-line, and not simply in the snapshot. CIAs could then check the final grant before submission.

Issue: RAOs have no way to check which version of an application is submitted and whether all the information is complete. In some reported instances, applications were submitted as complete from RAOs, but received by NHMRC as incomplete. Also, due to the lack of section identification in snapshot reports, RAOs had difficulty reconciling information from the various sections of the web interface, such as hours spent per week on application, with info on CV. Doing this manually was time consuming and increased the chance of error.

Solution: Each section of any application should be titled and numbered identically between the web and snapshot versions: eg. Number as “Section 1.1”, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2 and so on, on both the website and snapshot versions. These numbers should correlate to allow easier and more specific feedback from RAOs (and reviewers). A simple table-of-contents could be generated in the snapshot to make it easier for assessors and users alike.

CIA Access to Information

Issue: Since CIAs were unable to view the CVs of other CIs, minor changes could not be made in the final grant without contacting each CI individually to request changes.

Solution: Allow CIA to have editorial access to all components of the files associated with the grant application, including the CV details of other CIs.

Certification

Issue: The CI certification process is onerous and unnecessarily time consuming. It is often difficult to have all CIs available to certify within a limited timeframe, especially when international CIs are involved (or Australian CIs are travelling). CIA can't know whether other CIs have certified FULLY. Similarly, RAOs cannot view the status bar to determine the stage of certification.

Solution: Allow CIs to pre-assign CIAs the right to certify on their behalf. CIAs and RAOs must be allowed to see who has certified fully. Also, certification could be done much earlier in the process - perhaps the software could allow a certain percentage of change or even reversal after the initial certification. NHMRC could learn from the ARC system.

4. CONNECTION BETWEEN POLICY AND RGMS

There was general agreement that the RGMS system introduces a lack of alignment between NHMRC policy and practice. In several ways RGMS actively inhibits behaviours and delivery of outcomes that are NHMRC policy objectives.

Grant Listing

Issue: Information in the grants section is not complete in terms of presenting the research/applicant quality or standing. There are no titles, no idea of which CI the applicant is on the listed grant or whether they receive money from that grant, no place to attribute specific publications to NHMRC grants and no indication of the type of grant (project, program etc.). These issues are a problem for assessments, but also made it difficult for RAOs to assess eligibility.

Solution: Provide space to include full details of grants held, whether the CI directly receives research funds and which publications have resulted from these grants. These were considered essential assessment information & that RGMS has eliminated this crucial data.

Publication Listing

Issue: The publications numbering in RGMS changes from one grant to the next (according to CIA, CIB etc) so publications listed in progress reports etc. are difficult to cross reference against existing/previous grants. There is no place to include joint first authorships, number of citations or other information such as whether the paper was the subject of a commentary or provided the cover art for the journal.

Solution: Number the publications in chronological order (newest at the end) for each individual CI so that the numbers will not change between grants. Provide a free-form box at the end of each publication to allow the applicant to enter other relevant information about that paper (eg Commentary, News & Views, media).

Adverse Impact on Collaboration

Issue: NHMRC has actively encouraged development of cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional teams to facilitate innovation, research translation and optimal usage of expensive core facilities and resources. International CIs are therefore sometimes brought into grant teams to permit access to skills and resources not available in Australia. The NHMRC on-line application system should not present a disincentive for such initiatives. Due to the complexity of the process and the specific issues outlined in Section 2 of this document, international CIs were changed to an AI in around half of all applications involving international research teams this year.

Solution: Improve the RGMS interface to make it more user friendly, and simplify/modify the requested information so it is logical and aligned to reviewer requirements. Provide a simpler process for international CIs.

Progress Reports

Issue: Progress reports are not included in RGMS, but are separate attachments. Why? Producing separate progress reports (with different headers etc.) for each separate grant application is wasted duplicate effort. Progress reports should be accessible from the NHMRC system.

Solution: Include progress reports in RGMS directly. Produce one progress/final report for each existing application and improve the ability to link information between grants and from year to year. This will facilitate multiple applications and assist NHMRC in data capture.

Issue: For a final report the 1-page limit is highly restrictive. Many successful grants would use the entire space just to list publications only, without describing aims or achievements.

Solution: Separate publications from the report. Allow one box (1 p limit) to enter the final report, and another (no limit) to enter the publications list.

Issue: Due to the inability to make everything ‘fit’ into a box, there is no clear way to include “Non-CI” publications in reports. These are papers that are key to a grant outcome, but do not necessarily include a particular CI as author.

Solution: As above, clearly separate the progress/final report content from the publications list, allowing unlimited space for the publication list.

FELLOWSHIPS

It was generally felt that fellowships were most affected by the inflexibility and problems with the RGMS application system as it stands and that the application process was extremely time-consuming. A major concern expressed by many applicants was the lack of control over their own application and the inability to present their achievements in the best light. The length and format of the application is also likely to make it difficult for panels and assessors – a strong concern expressed in all workshops.

Formatting

Issue: The current fellowship application is too long and information is dispersed throughout the application. There was general confusion as to where particular information should be listed, resulting in many instances of replication. There also seemed no obvious place to include certain parameters that have been an integral part of fellowship applications in the past, and a general inability to highlight the nature of certain contributions.

The use of international referees could be hindered by lack of access to RGMS. Also, there is concern that international referees may see formatting errors as sloppiness on the part of the applicant – this could go against applicant through no fault of their own.

Solution: Provide clearer instructions as to where information should be provided, a clear check list of components and consolidate sections to make the form briefer. Provide more free-form boxes to allow applicants the ability to express their achievements in their own words. Improve the final output so that it is more user-friendly and information can be more readily accessed. This should be done in consultation with past and present members of fellowship review panels.

Omission of Executive Summary

Issue: The executive summary is considered by many to be one of the most important parts of a fellowship application and this was excluded from applications this year. It was felt that this would be a particular problem for review panels.

Solution: Include one page for each grant or fellowship that encapsulates the CI's achievements and contributions.

CV/Track record

Issue: The CV/track record generated by RGMS does not properly reflect the balance of key elements in a researcher's track record and research output. The form has been assembled with lack of consultation and was quite poor in its flexibility and ability to adequately convey an applicant's career path and track record achievements. Many key items appear in the snapshot buried within less relevant or lower priority material – this could compromise the review process.

Solution: Review fields and layout of the previous Fellowship application forms and better translate into the RGMS system.

Mentoring and Supervision

Issue: Applicants are only allowed to enter the number of students commenced in each year. This does not allow for inclusion of quality indicators such as achievements of students and post-docs after they have left your lab.

Solution: Increase breadth of this section to include names of students, any awards or honours received, where they moved to after completing their PhD or post doc in your lab.

Committee Work

Issue: There is no option to adequately capture Committee work. Does this fall under Community Activity? If so, it is inappropriate to mix this information with say, engagement with patient groups or public advocacy. NHMRC activity is captured, but the applicant is unable to identify the specific panel (i.e. relevant to area of their application, critical for fellowship applications) and their role on that panel. A similar problem exists for editorial board duties, membership of scientific bodies, etc.

Solution: Instructions need to be clarified and fields expanded with respect to NHMRC service and other committee work.

Conference Participation

Issue: Currently, there is no option to define conference participations: e.g., abstract-based submission vs invited speaker in a symposium. It is important to distinguish between these

particularly in fellowships applications. Also, there is little value in asking whether travel costs are provided, when conferences of many societies do not provide travel support for invited members. Also, is the number of people who attended a conference or institute seminar you spoke at really a valuable piece of information? This should be deleted.

Solution: This section should be broken down more specifically (the “invited” section being particularly important for fellowship application).

Time Limits on CV/Track Record

Issue: The restriction on CDA’s in particular to publications and other achievements only from the past five or ten years is a clear disadvantage those who have recently returned to Australia to establish their own lab and who have experienced the usual gap in publications that ensues or those who have experienced other career disruptions, but with proven success prior to that.

Solution: Allow fellowship and CDA applicants to present their full CV with no time restrictions. Applications must be able to account for career interruption when presenting track record and “Translation into practice” should not be limited by time.

CDA Referee Reports

Issue: Referees were initially requested to send their reports to the applicant for attachment to their application. This was widely acknowledged to be inappropriate and to invite “referee shopping” by the applicants, select the best reports and then submit (or even edit). It generally sent the wrong message to young researchers. Also, the referee could be totally unaware of the final report that bears their name. It was acknowledged that NHMRC made attempts to rectify this situation in the final week prior to the submission deadline, but many reports had already been sent to applicants. This raises serious concerns as to the validity of referee reports in this round of CDA applications.

Solution: For equity reasons panels either should be instructed to ignore the reports or NHMRC should consider verifying the authenticity of each report with the referee. In the future, have the applicant submit the email address of their referee(s), a message with a link then goes out automatically to the referee who can then submit.

Most Significant Contributions

Issue: Currently, there was considerable confusion expressed regarding the two separate but clearly overlapping fields for “Most Significant Contributions” that ask applicants to enter their 4 best publications (twice). Secondly, the character limit is inadequate with most of the quota taken up just by listing the publication itself and insufficient space to explain its significance. Many of the instructions from NHMRC on how to fill in various sections could and were interpreted in different ways. This section is a prime example.

Solution: Merge the two sections into one section that allows at least double the overall word limit.

5. PEER REVIEW

There was general concern expressed as to how assessors and grant panels would perceive the RGMS application output and whether applicants will be penalised for missing or hard-to-find information. There was strong concern that reviewer numbers would decline due to stress over use of RGMS. There was also a feeling that the grant or fellowship format would make the already difficult task of peer review even more daunting, ultimately resulting in a less fair process and therefore perhaps a lower quality outcome.

This is especially true in people-support applications, where many information-input sections were open to interpretation and consequently completed differently by different people. There was major concern that the playing field would not be level this year as a result when it comes to assessing applications. For instance, a person's role in grants or the productivity of past grants was not listed at all.

The system needs to be able to create a single PDF file to be downloaded for peer review. It was also suggested that a summary Table, with metrics for relevant components of the track record/research output for each CI, would be helpful for reviewers.

Receipt of Grants for Review

Issue: Experience from fellowships suggests that assessors and panel members will be asked to access and download grants directly from RGMS. This will involve multiple files per applications, particularly for panel Chairs. Also, the order of information in the snapshot reports is not intuitive, resulting in many pages containing irrelevant information. This overall process is not only onerous, but lends itself to information being overlooked by fatigued panel members and reviewers.

Solution: As in previous years, the NHMRC office should supply all panel members with a CD or USB stick of all applications. Software issues should be resolved to avoid irrelevant information appearing in the final output (if the check box was "No" don't include this information in the snapshot) and improve the layout of snapshot reports.

Non-assessors

Issue: While reasons to nominate somebody as a non-assessor have been required in previous years, many expressed concern that outlining reasons (for non-assessors) could be prejudicial down the track. Also of note, examples were given of applications going to postdocs or colleagues of the nominated non-assessors which is against the principle of non-assessors.

Solution: Leave the nomination as one person and accept that the grant/proposal is not sent to the nominated person, i.e. always honour the request. Ensure that non-assessor also means current or previous colleagues of the nominated non-assessor. Importantly, ensure that the non-assessor request is not included in snapshot reports.

Reply to Reviewers

Issue: There was great concern about how well the reply to reviewer's comments would work through the RGMS system.

Solution: In light of this, it was universally felt that the time for reply should revert to the previous system of 2 weeks.

Reviewer/panel Feedback on Process

It will be very important to get feedback from reviewers and panel members on which sections they actually used in the review of the grant: which sections they wanted to be longer, which shorter. This should be used in designing next year's forms.

6. GENERAL SUMMARY

Workshop attendees welcomed the concept of an online grant system and could see the potential advantages, but were concerned about the poor implementation of RGMS and poor final format of the applications. Significant improvements are needed that should involve major consultation with both research scientists and administrative staff.

In general, researchers felt that the “one size fits all” approach was not appropriate, particularly for fellowship applications – it significantly increased the required time to prepare and submit an application and simply did not work adequately. Administrative staff expressed frustration that they were unable to provide adequate support to research staff largely due to insufficient access/editing rights to applications. There was a level of concern from all that the review process will be adversely affected by the format of the applications and the need to deal with a poor RGMS interface.

A strong concern across the workshops was the clear waste of public time and money to develop a completely new RGMS system when other funding bodies such as the ARC already had useful and functioning systems that could have been adapted to suit or integrated to form a national system. It was also felt that this waste of time associated with the new system extended to the research community. Many international funding bodies have implemented similar online systems that are straightforward and effective to use (researchers at the workshops had experience with NIH, CIHR, USMDA) and their outputs are clear and concise.

The participants strongly recommended a transparent, external and independent review of RGMS. It was felt that the likelihood of this review delivering valuable outcomes would be greatest if (1) the review were external and independent of the NHMRC; (2) the terms of reference were assembled after consultation with the research community and other stakeholders, and (3) the process were transparent and the outcomes made public.

It is recommended that modifications to RGMS should be guided strongly by the research and administrative support staff in the community. Translating the positive aspects of previous systems would be advantageous to such a process for a start. It is then clear that input must be obtained from multiple end-users, including front-end applicants and rear-end reviewers. The experiences of GRPs in particular should be sought once the reviewing process is complete to assess the reality of working with RGMS for the purpose of reviewing multiple and different applications.

In further discussion the point was made that the NHMRC needs to be adequately resourced by the federal government to ensure that its on-line grants management system is of the highest possible quality and facilitates, and does not interfere with, delivery of research outputs and therefore benefits to the Australian community.