Responding to an Australian Research Council Assessor’s Report – the Rejoinder Process

The ARC Assessment Process

When addressing the College of Experts, remember that the assessors do not see your rejoinder. One or Two members of the College of Experts would have already scored your application. They then receive a package containing draft scores from the other member of the College of Experts who scored your application, your assessors’ scores and their comments, and the overall ranking of your application against all other applications in the particular Panel in which it is being assessed, and your rejoinder. This package is usually read at the same time by the College of Experts, so your rejoinder can improve your score if you can argue that an assessor’s basis for giving you a lower score is not justifiable. A poor rejoinder, or no rejoinder, can also influence the final ranking.

The Rejoinder

It is important to read the ARC information on preparing your rejoinder. As GAMS has been phased out for applications you must use RMS to submit your rejoinder on-line. The ARC web site (http://www.arc.gov.au/applicants/assessor_rejoinders.htm) will include current information on the relevant scheme.

You have 5000 characters (including spaces) with no set format. However, be aware that the College of Experts members read hundreds of rejoinders and are reading them very quickly. Don’t use one type of text. Consider dealing with issues thematically. It is recommended to arrange your rejoinder by the scheme’s selection criteria, as (i) that is consistent with the arrangement of assessor reports and the methodology used by the College of Experts to assess applications; and (ii) that arrangement allows you to contrast critical comments of an assessor with positive comments of another on the same theme. Alternatively, you may choose to arrange your rejoinder by dealing with each assessor in turn, or by grouping positive and negative comments. Use paragraphs, numbers and capitals with the key being to emphasize the positive and debate the negative.

It is important not to take negative comments personally. If your reports are very negative you might find it useful to temporarily set aside the report for a day or so before preparing your rejoinder. You need to focus on addressing the issues and aim to convince the College of Experts that you know what you are doing, you understand your application, and the criticisms raised by the assessors are dealt with in a professional, adequate, and reasonable manner.

Go through your reports and note (a) the positive comments and (b) the negative comments/issues to be dealt with. Consider the relative importance of these comments. For example, do the comments relate to an important selection criterion or are they about a very minor issue of little relevance to the selection criteria (refer back to the selection criteria, and
their sub-criteria, in the Funding Rules)? You want to use the space allocated to focus on issues of relevance to the assessment.

Look for consistency or contrast between assessors on both positive and negative comments. Are the assessors providing consistently positive comments about certain selection criteria? Are they consistently negative about certain selection criteria? Where you have a mix of positive and negative comments, look for “considered and logical” positive comments (particularly from an assessor who is clearly an international expert) that you can use to contrast the negative ones on a particular criterion.

Does an assessor comment about lack of detail in the application? If so, does your application clearly set out the information they claim is lacking (reference the section of the application in the rejoinder). If not, can you provide sufficient detail within the rejoinder, or a valid reason why the detail should not have been included in the application (e.g. details of a standard method or technique widely known in the field)? Dealing with negative comment with factually-based rebuttal, showing the referee has not taken something into consideration that is actually in the application, can be very effective.

Do comments in a highly critical report indicate that an assessor is not knowledgeable about the field of research? You may note that, and the ARC could subsequently disregard that report. Do be careful to base your comments on clear evidence though (e.g. self-admission by the assessor), as the person could very well turn out to be a world-expert.

Do you have updated information to provide, e.g. publications accepted since submission of the application, exciting preliminary results from a pilot study, etc.?

**Writing your Rejoinder**

You may choose to begin with a short list of commendations from the assessors, but ONLY if you have space to do so (if you are short on space, still try to begin on a brief positive note: e.g. “We note that all of the assessors rate the team as outstanding, and that they unanimously agree the project is significant, innovative and demonstrates substantial National Benefit…” Quote positive comments where the assessor substantiates her/his praise to remind the Panel how good your application is. Be careful not to overdo the quotations of positive comments. If your rejoinder appears to misrepresent the assessors’ reports, you may lose credibility. Also, be aware that the College of Experts members may be most interested in your responses to the assessors’ criticisms, so excessive reprisals of positive comments may be an uneconomical use of space.

Next look at the criticisms and decide which are the most damaging comments (particularly in terms of the selection criteria) and address these. Concentrate on any issues raised with the significance and innovation of the proposed research and any methodological issues, especially when the assessor indicates that there are flaws in the approach. At this stage it is important to address serious allegations against your approach and methodology. The College of Experts wants to know if you can in fact carry out the work. They want to know if your project is feasible.
This is where the assessors’ comments can be particularly damaging as they are expected to be experts in your particular field.

Often people spend too much time responding to criticisms of their track record/research record relative to opportunity – they take it personally. Conversely, do respond to clearly incorrect statements about track record (e.g. if an assessor has incorrectly stated that you have not published in the field, or have not published in high-impact journals, but you have).

Quote the critical comment by assessor number and then deal with it. Be succinct and direct. There is no space in the rejoinder for academic argument – what can you say that refutes this accusation?

As mentioned above, the best way to address criticisms is when there is disagreement amongst the assessors and you can contrast their comments. For example, if the majority of assessors agree but there is a negative one, use the positive ones to debate the issue. You may have a maverick assessor giving you an outlying low score, so map the positive comments against the negative ones an show where the weight of evidence lies.

If you can’t do this, then you may need to go back to the application. To address the criticisms you must provide evidence rather than simply refuting the statement or using rhetoric (NOT “I am the foremost researcher in this field and am frequently invited to give keynote speeches, etc.). Provide hard evidence: “These X number of publications support this approach”; “the evidence provided by Y suggests that this approach is the best to take”; “this study used this methodology and obtained these results which align with my approach”. The same thing also applies when using comments of one or more assessors to refute the criticisms of another assessor. It is not enough to simply state that assessors 1 and 2 (quote the assessor number that is located at the top of the first page of the report) disagree with assessor 3. You need to use the assessors’ positive comments to make a compelling argument that refutes the comments of the negative assessor.

The assessor may not come from your specific discipline and may not have understood your approach. State this tactfully “the approach we are using is Z, we understand B is used in X, but it is not appropriate here…” They also may not have read it properly but you should always accept the blame and rephrase the salient points succinctly. Remember the Panel goes to the rejoinder to see what the assessor is saying is true. If it is based on an incorrect assumption, then the competence of the assessor becomes an issue for the Panel and your score will be reassessed and should be increased.

If the assessor made a valid point, i.e. spotted a flaw in your argument, then you need to be honest enough to agree with the assessor. To redeem the situation, you need to further extend the idea given by the assessor and indicate how you can improve your project as a result. Good suggestions can also be acknowledged and taken on board so you turn an negative into a positive.

**Specific Issues**
You may only receive one assessor report that doesn’t give you anything much to respond to. Or, if your grant is requesting less than $50,000 per year, you may not receive any assessor reports. However, you still have an opportunity to submit a rejoinder. Use it to remind the Panel of the strengths of your application, and update them with what you’ve achieved in the interim to further enhance your case, e.g. “Since submission of the application there have been X developments that strengthen our case…” and provide a list including pilot study results, any recent publications, grants awarded, international links developed, newly released policy documents calling for this research, PhD students enrolling, etc.

The College of Experts does look at who the assessors are and how much weight their opinions/comments therefore carry. Similarly, the College of Experts notes if they come from the other side of the politics of the discipline.

Have you received a number of reports that are unanimously positive? Should you provide a rejoinder and how long should it be? First, see the next paragraph (they may not be as good as you first thought). If the reports are all “outstanding”, you should still provide a rejoinder, but consider something shorter (reinforcement of the main points plus updates since submitting your application).

Finally, be aware that “good” is not really good enough. There are many more adjectives that come above good (such as excellent, outstanding). If an assessor describes your proposal as “good” they may well mean that it is just above average (e.g. top 40%), which could be a problem since only the very best applications are funded (e.g. top 15%). So you may like to provide evidence that you are better than good. Conversely, some assessors may sound negative, but may use an assessment style that only focuses on critical feedback (i.e. if it is all on minor issues, then they may in fact have ranked your application highly). It is therefore important to weigh the significance of the issues that were commented upon in light of the total application before deciding on which criticisms to rebut.