Author’s response to reviews

Title: "Are you siding with a personality or the grant proposal?": observations on how peer review panels function.

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Response to reviewers

Reviewer 1

Reviewer 1: This is a very interesting and relevant research that investigates the peer review process in a qualitative way. There are not many reports of such research, which makes this one valuable and very insightful.

Our response: We thank Reviewer 1 for this acknowledgement of the uniqueness of our research.

Reviewer 1: The methodological approach was not clear enough. While the study was a part of a larger evaluation of a new grant proposal, there is not enough information about the selection of the participants. It is not clear how the grant proposals we collected and what was the rationale for focusing on two fields (why were they considered to be "key fields")?

Our response: We have revised the methodology section with clearer details of the ways in which the participants (panellists) were selected and the rationale of focusing on two fields (Basic Science and Public Health)

Reviewer 1: There is not sufficient explanation about the two review processes.
Our response: We have made clearer the process for comparing the simplified review process with the conventional review process.

Reviewer 1: Also, there seems to be too many objectives, and the primary objective is not clearly presented.

Our response: We have clarified the objectives of the research by adding further explanations.

Reviewer 1: Abstract: The purpose of the study is not clearly presented - it is too broad in relation to what was presented in the article. The aims of the study are mentioned in the Results section of the Abstract. The conclusion in the Abstract does not follow from the presented results.

Our response: The Abstract has been re-written with the aims, methods and findings more clearly stated.

Reviewer 1: There are only two references in the Introductions section. Despite the fact that there is little qualitative research on grant peer review, there is a lot of literature about problems with grant review, which could be summarized here.

Our response: We have added 5 more references that have commented on the grant review process. These are:


Hodgson C. How reliable is peer review? An examination of operating grant proposals simultaneously submitted to two similar peer review systems. J Clin Epidemiol 1997;50:1189–95;


Barnett, Adrian G., Herbert, Danielle L., Clarke, Philip, & Graves, Nicholas Including or excluding conflicts of interest among expert peer reviewers had little impact on funding success, a case study from Australia. 2014 Working Paper downloaded from https://eprints.qut.edu.au/77513/
Reviewer 1: Methodology section, particularly on the construction of the grant proposal sample and the choice of experts, is not detailed, as explained in my general comments.

Our response: See above. We have clarified how the experts (panellists) were selected.

Reviewer 2

Reviewer 2: This article does the important work of examining, in depth, the grant peer review process.

Our response: We thank Reviewer 2 for this acknowledgement of the uniqueness of our research.

Reviewer 2: While there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the article, I found it very long and repetitive (particularly the results), with a very "flat" structure. I think the article could be strengthened considerably if the authors identified the two or three (rather than eight) findings, or sets of findings, that they thought were most interesting/important/worrying and presented those in detail. These might be, (just for example):

- Factors influencing the quality of review
- Factors influencing the fairness, integrity and objectivity of review
- Cultural considerations

The discussion could then focus on each of these key findings in turn.

The other themes could be summarised very briefly, without the need for illustrative quotes or great detail.

Our response: We thanks Reviewer 2 for this advice and now have only two themes as suggested. We have used the remaining original themes as sub-themes. This provides a more hierarchical structure and overcomes the ‘flat’ structure that the reviewer comments on.

Reviewer 2: It was not clear from the abstract exactly what the focus of the article was to be—seemed to be about

- Exploring the effects of illuminating the peer review process (the focus of the background)
- Describing the process from the perspective of reviewers (the focus of the rest of the abstract)

Our response: The Abstract has been rewritten with clearer reference to the purposes of the research.