Post-Doctoral Committee

Fact Sheet: DECRA

Quick facts:

- Eligibility cut-off at 5 years full-time post-PhD but career interruptions are taken into account.
- Preparing the application can take 4-6 weeks full-time (or equivalent) but can be shorter if applicants have existing research plans and experience with budgeting.
- Lead time is significant, e.g. decision to apply in 2016 for 2017 round means start in 2018.
- If the project proposes new research collaborations, they should be created as soon as possible.
- Most applicants found previous (successful) applications most helpful to familiarise themselves with the structure of the required documents. Asking peers for their applications should be one of the first steps when considering to apply!
- In every round, information can be slightly changed, including template formats or sections being deleted/added.
- The ARC "Instructions to Applicants" document already contains a lot of important advice: http://www.arc.gov.au/sites/default/files/filedepot/Public/NCGP/DECRA17/DE17_ITA.pdf
- The first thing applicants should get started on is a rough draft of their research plan (D1 in 2017) since all the other parts should build around this proposal.

ARC Research Management System (RMS):

- DECRA applicants need to create their RMS account via https://rms.arc.gov.au/
- Upon login, all ARC scheme rounds are visible.
- This is where the application will be stored and updated with submissions along the way; the university Research Office (specific name differs between universities; here referred to as RO) needs to receive submissions for RMS to include and release back to applicants to work on.
- DECRA round will not open in RMS (to fill in the actual online application) until a month before the "internal deadline", so applicants need to start writing sections (in Latex or Word format to make PDFs) *well in advance* of this date.
- When DECRA round opens in RMS, applicants receive an email from the RO/HR department and can login to RMS and create their application (e.g. filling out all of section A, with place-holders if needed); they then receive an ID number. All edits/uploads have to be saved!

Host institution:

Applicants need to choose a host institution in Australia, preferably by November/early December latest for DECRA applications due in March. This needs to be approved by the director because applications rely on their support!

Applicants then have to indicate their interest in applying to their RO to receive any relevant emails. Meeting RO staff might be possible to provide additional guidance. They help with the application process, and in the end they will submit the application on the applicant's behalf to the ARC.

Templates:

As the deadline approaches, applicants will receive templates for the various sections of the proposal from the RO (usually in Word format). These templates are good to use for some sections, e.g. "Strategic Statement" (D2 in 2017 round) and budget, especially where files need to be uploaded in the online application. Other sections can be prepared in Latex or Word to then copy/paste into the online application. The RO might not be able to handle Latex.

Deadlines:

Final submission deadlines to the ARC are generally in late March. This means the deadline for 'internal' submission (submitting documents to RO for review) is around early March. Applicants should (mentally) *treat this internal deadline as the actual deadline*! That way, any extra days/weeks are a bonus for polishing the sections. If submitting documents to the RO by their deadline, they will be able to respond with suggested edits (e.g. structure and technical issues such as margins and fonts), for applicants to respond to. They are there to help applicants have the best chance of getting their proposal approved! However, they do not comment on the science case.

Other internal opportunities might be given by the host school/faculty, for applicants to receive additional feedback on their science case or other aspects of the proposal by senior department members. The availability of this kind of service and its timing might differ between institutions.

Section A:

Sections A4 and A5 (in 2017 round) are short but therefore difficult and require much thought. They are the first things that assessors will read about the applicant's proposal, thus they are quite important. Applicants should keep things very general for a broad audience (e.g. non-physicists).

Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence (ROPE):

These sections include a list of publications and have significant weight in the DECRA grade, nearly as much as the research proposal. Applicants should not be shy to talk themselves up in the appropriate section: no-one else will do it for them! Sections C9 and possibly C7 (in 2017 round) are sections to get started on early: C7 highlights any limited or "lack of opportunities" (e.g. career breaks or part-time) and how this has impacted on collaborations/meetings/invited talks/publications etc.

Main proposal:

This was section D1 in the 2017 round and 8 pages. It is worth a significant part of the DECRA grade and should be started as soon as possible. Generally, the first page should be the best crafted because is the first and potentially only part of the research proposal that assessors will look at! Aim(s) of the project should be stated concisely, with enough background (for a general audience!) but without going into too much detail. Text boxes and different fonts can accentuate critical points but there are guidelines for minimum size allowed, e.g. no footnotes. Figures can work well in this section but there is limited room for them on 8 pages. For complex projects, a schematic overview and timeline can work well.

Strategic Statement (D2 in 2017 round):

This part is normally *due before the RO internal deadline*! Applicants should get started on this ~2 page section ahead of time, and it is a tricky one to write. It is a support letter from the director but applicants might end up using a template or drafting it themselves. The director/head of school will approve the letter before submission to the RO and sign it once processed in RMS.

It is recommended to figure out what the DECRA salary should be based on ("level" of employment and host institution pay scale). The RO can provide a salary calculator. If a "top up salary" needed from the department to meet these pay requirements, this figure should be indicated in the letter.

Peer-feedback:

Getting together with more experienced peers and other DECRA applicants – also from other areas of science – to review drafts of each other's proposal (or just section D1 drafts) can be very helpful.

Rejoinders:

A couple of months after submission, applicants will receive feedback on their proposal from expert reviewers. They will have given a grade but applicants only see the comments. Applicants then have a week or so to address any concerns/criticisms or highlight any positive feedback that the reviewers gave. The RO will set a deadline for this and can give tips on how to write a rejoinder response. A common strategy is to use the individual assessors' feedback to argue against each other since no new information is allowed to be added in the rejoinder. This first set of reviewers never see the applicant's response, only the next set of reviewers will see the first expert comments and the response.

*Questions from potential applicants can be directed to the
CAASTRO Post-Doctoral Committee at cpdc@caastro.org who maintains
a contact database of previous grant recipients at each
CAASTRO location who are willing to mentor new applicants.*