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Research grant writing tips and advice

Distinguished Professor Andre RENZAHO

ABSTRACT

Writing a research grant proposal is a challenge. The biggest challenge relates to writing a grant without understanding the audience. There are two audiences one needs to have in mind when planning to write a grant. The first audience is the agency to which you plan to submit the grant application and the second audience is your own institution. You need to ensure that whatever research idea you plan to put forward not only fits the funding agency's research priorities but also that it aligns with your organisation's research priorities. If you fail to articulate your grant application within these two parameters, then you know that it may not necessarily be competitive. Hence, you need to look back and try to understand whether you are aware of the funding agency's mission, research agenda, and guidelines, especially grant submission rules and inclusion and exclusion criteria. You do not want to waste your time putting a grant proposal and then realise at the last minute that you are not going to be eligible. In this paper I outline some of the tips to help you make your grant writing journey a rewarding exercise.

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HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

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Writing a grant application is a challenge. The biggest challenge relates to writing a grant proposal without understanding the audience. There are two audiences one needs to have in mind when planning to write a grant application. The first audience is the agency to which you plan to submit the grant proposal and the second audience is your own institution. You need to ensure that whatever research idea you plan to put forward not only fits the funding agency's research priorities but also that it aligns with your organisation's research priorities. If you fail to articulate your grant within these two parameters, then you know that your grant application may not necessarily be competitive. Hence, you need to look back and try to understand whether you are aware of the funding agency's mission, research agenda, and guidelines, especially grant submission rules and inclusion and exclusion criteria.

You need to add value to institutional research agenda by tapping into an existing research program where your organisation can show long-term sustainability. You may be augmenting an area where the institution is building some track record, something that is taking place and building traction. However, nothing can stop you from being creative and seize the opportunity to improve an area of research of weak performance in your institution. A research area in which you personally have a strong track record, have enough social capital, and can mobilise enough human resources to be able to build that lift that research area. So, lifting a research area performing poorly in your institution may elevate you academically. You also need to understand the research scheme you are applying for.

This presentation draws mainly from my experience in Australia, but most of the tips are applicable in any setting.

Remember, in Australia, as it is in other research-intensive countries, it's about – I'm more reluctant to use the word, but unfortunately, I can say it happens a lot when you are doing research. There is what we call elitism. The research schemes will have a lot of value attached to it, so they are ranked according to their prestige. So, make sure that you understand the prestige associated with or attached to the research scheme you're applying for and quarantine enough time to put together a very competitive research proposal.

In Australia, we have four different research ranks and each one of them has, as I said, its own prestige. If you get a category one grant, then you are among the crème de la crème, but to get there it's not something you will achieve over one night. It can be frustrating. We used to have what was known as the Australian Competitive Grants Register (ACGR), which was managed by the Australian Department of Education and Training. The register listed funding schemes or funding programs approved by the Australian government as competitive research grants. So, all research schemes and research programs that were registered on the ACGR were considered category one grants. The ACGR was retired in 2018 and replaced with institutional self-assessment. In a nutshell, category one grants are advertised nationally, and every person has an equal opportunity to be aware of the grant opportunities and can apply. There are various types of category one grants, but the most competitive ones in my area of research are the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Research Council. With a success rate of ~9-17%, getting such grants is not easy. So, usually, if you are an early career researcher, you want to start building your track-record in category three grant (which are grants received from the private sector, philanthropic organisations including non-government organisations and United Nations agencies, as well as international organisations) and build your way up to category two grants (i.e. grants received from the Australian public sector not eligible to be classified as category one grant including state and territories research schemes) until you can reach the stage where you are competitive for category one grants. When you apply for promotion or you apply for higher level positions that are research-oriented, they will try to look at the proportion of your research income and it is distributed across the categories. There is also what we call category four grants, which are grants received from the Cooperative Research Centre.

Now, before you apply, you need to be aware of the needs versus wants. The need relates to something you can't live without. You can't be a researcher if you don't have enough food to put on a table for your family. You can't be a researcher if you don't have employment. So, you need to ensure that you get compensated for the research you do, being able to bring in money to be able to feed your family in a sustainable way, and to live a functioning life. Which means, you need to have employment, and getting employed is not easy. So, most people finishing their PhDs may not necessarily have a worthy available employment. So, the first thing is if you have a good track record to go for a fellowship. The fellowship has advantages, you get your salary and the cost to implement your research program paid for the duration of your fellowship, which is good. Usually, fellowships guarantee you employment beyond their durations and they allow you to be productive or you can move your fellowship to another university offering you ongoing employment as part of a transfer package (bringing with you your fellowship).

Once you have employment, then you can start addressing, you know, the wants. That is, building a track record in terms of knowledge generation or trying to build the research capacity, building the human resources in your area of interest. So, why are fellowships very important, especially for those who can't secure a tenured track position? They don't have a teaching program, so fellowship could be one of the options that is research-only to propel you to build a strong research track record. If you do not have a fellowship but have completed a PhD by publications (not thesis), you can tap into established research programs as a postdoc and be mentored by an established researcher. In this postdoc position, you get attached to an existing program or project. The program or project will pay for your salary to allow you to build a track record and become competitive in the research market. If you succeed in establishing a very good track record, then you can start leading some research projects and start building some wonderful research programs, but your capacity to build programs, research programs, will depend on your determination and workload structure. For example, some people have what we call 60:30:10 workload, meaning you have 60% research, 30% teaching, and 10% service to the community/governance. Others who don't have enough research track record but are lucky to have a teaching position might have 80% teaching, 10% research, and 10% service. So, you need to be aware of your employment conditions to ensure that when it comes to performance appraisal, you can justify your employment. For example, if you have 60% or 80% or 70% research workload, then the expectation is that your research outputs (publications and research income) will be solid and meet standards commensurate with your academic level. Your expected research outputs will depend on whether you are academic level is A (Postdoc), B (Research Fellow), C (Senior Research Fellow), D (Associate Professor) or E (Professor).

Before you submit a grant application, you need to ask yourself some question. For example, how competitive are going to be given the research scheme you are targeting? If you are going for a fellowship, you need to be aware that fellowships are oriented towards you as an individual researcher. If you have done your PhD by thesis, you may not be as competitive as someone who has done it by publication. This is because those with publications have already research outputs under their belt, so they may be ahead of you. If you did your PhD by thesis, it may take you a couple of years before you can even publish your own data from your thesis. So, you need to try to weigh up your options. Then, if you are competitive and you are going for a fellowship, another question is: do you have a mentor? Because if you're not attached to a mentor with a strong track record, you may not succeed. The funding agencies need to make sure that if they give you their money, you are working under somebody who will mentor you to become successful, somebody with a strong national and international standing who will coach you, mentor you to become successful. The fellowship is for five years, then after five years of mentorship, you are ready to take the next step to start leading research programs. If you don't have a mentor or a good research environment, you may not necessarily be competitive. You need to look at the full package- you as individual, your research environment, your mentor, and your proposed research project or program. I'll touch base on what I mean by a competitive project program as we go forward with my presentation.

You need to understand how your research fits your target funding body's mission, and then closely examine its success rate because the success rate matters a lot. If the target funding body's success rate is very low, then you need to make sure that you have spoken to previous successful applicants to understand what could have enhanced their chances, to have some insight of what could maximise your chances of becoming successful. Once you have gathered all this information, you need to ensure you are ready in terms of having a realistic timeline to draft the grant application. Now, the first thing I always say is make sure you have a very catchy title. A title that really can give an indication of what your research is all about. Most assessors will be assessing 20-100 applications across different schemes in a short time, so if the title is putting them off, you already lost their interest. You need to ensure that the title is catchy and interesting enough to make assessors wanting to read the rest of your application. Make sure your background is spot on. You need answer the following questions: Have you identified what is already known in your proposed research area? What are the gaps are you trying to address? If identified gaps were addressed, so what (significance)? For example, when I'm assessing applications myself, one of the biggest issues that let most applicants down is when they try to do everything. You can't solve the world's problems in one application. So, once you know the gaps, choose the gap you think closely aligns with your track record and interest. Stick to it. Don't try to solve all the gaps in one application, otherwise you'll be setting yourself up to criticism of setting up a bigger program than you can even achieve or afford. Your objectives need to be very clear and achievable, with clearly stated hypotheses that can be tested or research questions that can be answered. Use a well knows framework to guide you like. Use, for example, well known frameworks like RE-AIM (Reach, Effectiveness, Adoption, Implementation, and Maintenance) or PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) and its derivates like PICOT (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Time), PICOTS (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Timing, Setting),

PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Study type), or PICOTT (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Type of question, Type of study). The framework you use will depend on your research field given many other frameworks across disciplines.

So, in a nutshell, if I read your application and used the above framework, can I pinpoint or understand (a) your population of interest and why you chose it? (b) the problem being addressed or situation being studies? (c) how will the problem be assessed, or the situation addressed? (d) what is the exposure? (e) whether you have a comparator? (f) what are the expected outcomes and how you are going to measure them? (g) whether the timeline feasible? (h) whether the study is based on pilot studies to demonstrate feasibility, (i) how much pilot data do you have to inform the sample size calculation? Your pilot studies give an indication of the prevalence, which can inform your sample size. Without pilot studies, you run the risk of not coming up with an adequate budget, because without an adequate sample size informed by pilot studies, without trialled instruments and how to implement them, or without a clear idea of the need for bilingual workers and their training needs, then your budget cannot be accurate. Your pilot studies are the driving force of your grant application. And if you don't have pilot studies, making sure you're building on existing pilot studies, that is, the people you are bringing on your team can at least have pilot studies you can piggyback on to justify feasibility. Then, you need to make sure you can articulate the significance of your study. If you can't really articulate the significance, show the benefits and new knowledge that will emerge from your proposed research study, then you may be duplicating known knowledge and less competitive. That is, what would the societal benefits of your findings be? Such benefits could include economic, environmental, or socio-cultural benefits.

Some funding agencies will ask you to produce no more than one page of the expertise and productivity of your team. That is, does the team have a history of working together? If not, what guarantee would one have that if the project is funded the team would not be dysfunctional and affect the project implementation? Can you articulate each team member's track record and their impact in the proposed research area? The statements need to highlight each team member's career summary, top publications, especially the last five years, and justify their inclusion on the research team. Some of the assessment criteria relate to your overall track record, research metrics, contribution to your field of research, mentoring and supervision, research translation, research leadership, national and international standing, professional and community engagement, and service to the community. You need to address each of these criteria. For example, for our National Health and Medical Research Council we have fellowships known as investigator grants. In this scheme, your salary and the cost of your proposed research program are covered. If you are already employed, then you do not need a fellowship, and can submit a grant application as a research project or program through various grant schemes such as the Ideas Grant scheme (which focuses on innovative and creative research), the Synergy Grant Scheme (which focuses on funding a multidisciplinary team to answer a major research questions that cannot be answered by a single investigator), the Development Grant scheme (which focuses on the translation of health outcomes through commercialisation), Clinical Trial and Cohort scheme or Centre for Research Excellence etc. The assessment weighting criteria for fellowships focus on you as the individual and your track record. So that's why our field is still being referred to as "publish or perish," which is a label I don't like, but unfortunately, if you're going for a fellowship, that's the key. Your track record relative to opportunity accounts for 70% (made of 35% for publications, 20% for research impact, and 15% for research leadership) and generation of new knowledge (30%). For research projects and programs, the assessment criteria and weighting vary by scheme and emphasise the quality and innovation of your research (40-60%), significance (20-40%), and team quality and capability (20%). If it's the Australian Research Council, you can equally apply for a fellowship commensurate with your experience (e.g., the Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards, the Mid-Career Industry Fellowship, Australian Laureate Fellowships, Future Fellowship etc.), or a research project or program (e.g. Discovery Projects, Linkage Projects, or a Centre of Excellence). As stated earlier, if you go for a fellowship, be aware of some of the challenges, because these schemes focus on you as the individual and the research environment you surround yourself with. Depending on the fellowship schemes you go for, the assessment criteria and weighting favour your track record and capabilities (40-50%), then the quality and innovation of the proposed research (25%), anticipated benefits (10-15%), and feasibility, strategic alignment, mentoring and capacity building: (10-25%). So, your track record matters a lot, which means if your track record is not good enough, you've lost around ~50% of the whole weighted scores. However, when it is an industry-based fellowship, the criteria and weighting change a bit to emphasise the impact your research in addressing industry challenges and maximising opportunities arising from such a partnership, commitment and alignment that showcase mutual benefits, the strength of reciprocal engagement, the applicant's capabilities, and the quality and innovation of the proposed research project/program.

Now, what does your track record entail? You need to articulate your research performance relative to opportunity. Of course, this varies by field. I come from the public health field, we're different from social sciences. We tend to emphasise the journal's impact factor, the proportion of publications on which we are the first author (i.e., the knowledge creator), the proportion of publications on which we are last author (i.e. research leadership and mentorship), and the proportion of publications on which we are in the middle (e.g. collaboration). Early career researchers will tend to have a higher proportion of their publications as the first author. As they extend their collaboration, they gain more middle authorship. As they build their research teams through securing research income and higher degree research students' supervision, the proportion of their publications on which they are listed as the last author increases. Summarising your research metrics using well known indices is very critical and the most used one the Hirsch index, commonly known as H-index. It is a good measure of both the productivity and citation impact of your publications. If you don't have enough publications and citations, your H-index will be very low. When I started my academic career, my H-Index was not good, which as was around three. I rarely presented my h-index when narrating my research track record. I instead focused on g-index, which gives more weight on highly cited articles and highlights the researcher's impact. There are more other metrics out there and the whole list and your own research metrics can be found at the Harzing's Publish or Perish database, which freely available. Let me again state that research metrics vary by field, so your track record needs to be tailored to your discipline.

You also need to show that you are not just publishing, but your publications are making a difference in terms of informing policies, practices, or guidelines. For example, I do a lot of research in Uganda and those who are in Uganda know already all my work in Makindye and Nakawa divisions, funded by the Australian government and implemented through World Vision since 2014. That work has been taken up by United Nations agencies, other NGOs as best practice in addressing poverty in slum areas. Another example, I did another evaluation of food aid programs in Mozambique in 2017, and findings have transformed the way food aid targeting is operationalised in disaster and emergency situations. Hence, you need to show how your research is changing practices, informing policies, or influencing guidelines. Another element relates to your service to the community like being a board member of a company or a government department or a community organisation and being on the editorial board of a journal. The latter is critical because you don't want to be part of what we now call predatory journals. You need to make sure you know the kind of journals you are associating yourself with as am editorial board member. With the proliferation of open access journals, you need to make sure that you are not really negatively affecting your reputation by associating yourself with predatory journals.

You need to demonstrate your capacity to bring people together to collaborate both nationally and internationally. The questions you need to ask yourself are: Do I have a team with the right skills and competencies who will complement each other in a harmonious way? Do they have clearly assigned roles and responsibility? Can they get along with each other during the project implementation? Or Do some of the members of the research team have a history of working together or collaborating? Putting together a research teams is like a marriage, a long-term relationship. You don't have to marry someone you're going to divorce after one year. You need to ensure there is some history of working together among members of the team. If there's any perceived risk of divorce or a dysfunctional pattern, then, your grant application may not be competitive. So, you need to show a track record of working together, you've collaborated before. In other words, you need to ensure that there is no potential source of conflict that may make the team dysfunctional, or people run away because of conflicts or mistrust. Here are excerpts from assessors' report on one of my recent category one grant applications (me as the Principal/Lead investigator commonly known as CIA). When commenting on investigators' capability, the assessors agreeably noted

> **Assessor A:** The investigators have a strong track record of working together and also research experience in migration health and practice and engagement in the not-for-profit sector. The NGO engagement of the team is strong. Publication and funding track records are lower than expected considering the experience of the team post PhD. Good evidence of policy translation. Diversity across team members is evident. Not clear that the team has the methodological expertise for the proposed methods (e.g., only one investigator listed Delphi related papers). CIA has an excellent track record.
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> **Assessor B** The investigators on this project have significant research expertise in migrant health, health equity, health promotion and mixed method study design. They have excellent research track records relative to opportunity, with extensive peer review publications and grant success. As this project incorporates community governance as a central aspect of its design and seeks to translate its findings to policy and practice, it is crucial to have established community and professional networks that will

> facilitate this. CIs [names withheld] have strong networks with NSW government departments and Local health district boards and committees which enhance the capability of the investigator team.

You need to show that what you're putting forward is of good quality, addressing gaps in knowledge. It's novel. You are not duplicating knowledge. Your research is informed by a proven theoretical framework, that you understand the theoretical foundation of your research. A number of grant applications are put forward without a clear theoretical foundation that help explain gaps in the knowledge, clarify research questions, demonstrate the relationships between research variables, or methodological approaches. So, you need to make sure the theoretical foundation of your research is clear in your application to demonstrate cohesion between the design, implementation, and data capture. This is a critical part of your grant application. Your grant application may have been assessed by two or more assessors, who sometimes may contradict each other. You ned to be prepared to defend your theoretical foundation and methodological approach as part of your rejoinder. Here are excerpts from assessors' report on one of my recent category one grant applications (me as the Principal/Lead investigator commonly known as CIA). When commenting on the research quality and innovation, the assessors contradictorily noted:

> **Assessor A**: This is a nice project, well thought out in terms of its research design and feasibility of a timely completion. There is great ambition and scope working on a very timely and current topic and as above there is a good research support to achieve the objectives. The key research questions on what role heritage tourism plays in disaster management and sustainable community development practices that are linked to host communities' long-term health and wellbeing and how heritage can play a vital role in building host community resilience are intriguing and certain has some novelty in the Nepal context with all the disasters in recent years. The aims/research objectives manifested through the different studies seem achievable. There is scope for extending theories through augmentation of Structuration Theory and New Materialism Theory is interesting and can also provide insights into business strategies and policies. Having said this, should this study be supported by other international bodies? This may not be a criteria or policy for discovery grants, but how does it benefit Australian scholars? Should there be any lessons learnt or generalizations of results that can benefit Australian as well?
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> **Assessor B:** The project appears to be thought-through well. The project has four case study sites as shown on p.5 and these have been justified. This should enable the researchers to study a cross section of Nepali tourism locations and issues and be somewhat representative of the whole heritage tourism sector in the country. The mixed-methods approach is also relevant to answer the research questions posed in the application. The combination of quantitative and qualitative research, and the level of detail provided in the application, are a strength of this proposal. The governance structure and the dedication of scholarships to Nepali citizens are also innovative approaches, particularly in a DP application. The issue of innovation has not been directly addressed in the application, but it is implicit. The proposed theoretical marriage of structuration theory with new materialism was somewhat undercooked in this application. This part of the application could have been strengthened, particularly to show how a public health focus around vulnerability to disasters (especially in a high-risk country such as Nepal) and the impacts of actual disasters, relates to these theories.
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> **Assessor C:** It is unclear whether the project framework is tourism, health, aid, or development policy. The only theories cited are in sociology. If tourism, it is unclear what this project might achieve. The tourism literature cited is not at all sufficient or authoritative for a tourism grant application. The project refers to "heritage" tourism, but actually seems to be targeted at outdoor nature and adventure tourism. In tourism research, heritage must be qualified as natural, built, material, cultural, etc, with details of authentication. The project plans to test whether restoring prior tourism economies can rebuild host community mental health after a disaster. But it does not consider mechanisms. Strongly cohesive communities, including those in some parts of Nepal, may incorporate social support mechanisms and obligations. These would be critical to this project, but they are not mentioned. If the community health context in Nepal, is central to the proposal, then the framework must presumably be development studies. For example, it could consider the cost-effectiveness of investment in tourism marketing as a means of improving community health, relative to investment in community health directly.

You need to demonstrate how much your proposed research adds to advancing the wellbeing of the target community and the society at large. What difference will it make? Whether it's cultural, social, economic, environmental impact, whatever it is, you need to articulate it. If you can't articulate it, then chances are your

application won't be competitive. You need also need to articulate the feasibility and strategic alignment. For the feasibility component, you need to demonstrate the ability to access the community or your target population, the ability to recruit. Have you trialled some of your frameworks to ensure that they are culturally acceptable? Have community members been trained and empowered to be involved in data collection and they can co-own some of the design? You need to demonstrate that your research questions and proposed methodological approaches are informed by pilot studies. That is, the pilot studies have informed your design. The proof of concept has been trialled and all processes and instruments/tools have been piloted. The budget is clear, and you are providing value for money. Without pilot studies, you run the risk of overestimating your research (there's no value for money) or underestimating the budget (e. reducing the significance of your research). Therefore, pilot studies become really a way of ensuring that you don't underestimate or overestimate your budget because if you don't get enough money, then you can't successfully implement the project, you can't finish it because you underestimated your budget, you under-budgeted your project. You need to ensure that your organisational research environment statement is strong and supports tour proposed project/program. Most universities tend to draft examples of statements articulating the characteristics and productivity of their research environment that researchers can use in their grant application. These statements tend to capture the uniqueness of the research environment and its distinctive culture; productivity in terms of research income, higher degree research students' completion, mentoring capacity, and publications; accessible resources; and research leadership, governance, and expertise. You need to make sure you're working with your organisation to come up with a research environment statement that will give a good indication of the areas of strength of your department, your school, and the university at large. When you see universities bragging about their rankings, you may take it for granted, but these rankings matter a lot. You need to make sure all those metrics are captured in your application. Unfortunately, most grant application guidelines do not allow more than half a page for this section. Hence, you need to be creative in your writing. For example, here excerpts from assessors' report on one of my recent category one grant applications (me as the Principal/Lead investigator commonly known as CIA). When commenting on the research quality and innovation, the assessors contradictorily noted:

> **Assessor A:** Overall, the proposed research that explores barriers affecting access to healthcare for African and Middle Eastern migrants is well justified since it will allow to promote health equity, protect public health, and uphold human rights. Thus, the work has the potential to identify potential solutions and allow Australian society to work towards more inclusive healthcare systems that benefit everyone. The applicants have a record of accomplishment of collaboration. The scope of the project appears manageable, with the available resources. The information about the research design and methods (and the track record of some CIs) gives confidence that the methodology is appropriate for addressing the research questions. The proposed composition of the project has the required expertise to conduct the study and perform that data analysis. The involvement of researchers with health system management expertise and policy development expertise will assist. Considering the experience of the applicants it appears that the proposed budgets, the timelines are realistic, the budget sufficient and all relevant resources accessible.
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> **Assessor B.** The potential benefit of the research in improving migrant health outcomes is stated well. It is unclear how the project will influence Australia's capacity to respond to the impacts of environmental change on communities and industry. The research team will be well supported by their respective organisations and there is strong alignment with the strategic priorities of these organisations in relation to migrant health and reducing health inequities. The resources, facilities, and access to relevant expertise of colleagues outside of the research team are strengths that will assure the success of this project. The research team has a strong track record of supervising PhD students to completion and the PhD student will therefore be well supported.

You need to demonstrate your ability to mentor postgraduate students and junior staff. The questions being: How many PhD students have you mentored and (co)supervised to completion? How many research assistants work under your supervision? or How many PhD students or junior staff have you co-published with? As stated earlier, authorship order matters a lot in public health. Co-publishing with people under your mentorships may allow you to claim last authorship (leadership). Collaborating with people from other departments may mean you may claim middle authorship. When I look at your publication and you are in the middle and progressing toward the senior authorship position, but you have never been first author, it may mean you have never instigated your own research and it may work against you. This scenario tends to be more prevalence among researchers who provide much needed technical expertise on a grant application such as statisticians or health economists. You need to show that

not only are you are a knowledge generator (first authorship), but you are also a tremendous collaborator, and a research leader in your area of expertise. In contrast, within the social science field, people tend to publish as the sole author or allocate authorship by Alphabetical order. Therefore, be aware of the criteria used in your field of interest and use the approach that maximises or amplifies your exposure. You also need to emphasise your awards and any esteem factors to demonstrate that you are competitive. For example, in my recent grant application I wrote:

> I have published collaboratively with 652 academics and policy makers from 123 institutions in 145 countries across 18 disciplines. I have published in 4 of the top 10 journals (Lancet, NEJM, JAMA, and Nature Medicine) and 75% of my papers are published in journals with impact factor > 2. I have (co)supervised to completion 25 HDR students, supervised 4 Sri Lankan Public Health Medicine Trainees, and mentored 22 ECR and 13 MCR since 2012. My research has translated into 6 demonstrable policy & innovative practice outcomes, 3 witnesses at public hearings by the Senate Select Committee, a ministerial appointment on the Dental Practice Board of Victoria, and 11 partnerships with governments for lasting and transformative changes. I have attracted a research income totalling $14.13 million and delivered 40 (inter)national conference presentations and 14 invited keynote presentations. I have received 7 awards for Academic and research excellence. I have led the evaluation of 32 policy and practice-based projects around the world. I have been on 31 (inter)national academic advisory boards/expert panel committees and convened and chaired 4 national research steering committees. I am the co-founder and Asia Pacific Regional Director of the African Child and Youth Migration Network; and president elect of the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific.

Depending on your research experience, you need to show a steep upward curve in your research trajectory. In my recent $1.6 million funded program, I gave an example of how I used pilot studies to inform the grant and grow my research portfolio. I had to demonstrate that the pilot studies led to frameworks that informed all my sub-sequent research and such frameworks have been adopted nationally and internationally. I was able to demonstrate that the pilot studies have allowed me to access the community, create community networks, and demonstrate recruitment and community penetration and enrolment, consenting and screening rates. I was able to show the anticipated attrition rate and articulate strategies to increase participation and minimise the dropout rate and adjust for it in my budget. Once you give this kind of information in your proposal, it's very hard for an assessor not to see that you are building a research program from a strong or solid base.

Before you submit the application, you need to ensure that everyone on your grant has sent you a consent to be listed as a team member. The danger is for you to submit a grant application, and somebody listed comes back to you later claiming that they never consented to be a chief investigator on your grant proposal. This something that hit early career researchers hard, especially when they list their mentors or bosses on grants before obtaining their consent and input. Make sure that everyone you put on your grant application has sent you an email consenting to be listed as an investigator. Most universities will help you with this aspect on the grant application, but it's your responsibility to collect the data. In addition, you need to ensure that you have benefited from your organisational internal review for grant applications to ensure that you don't violate any exclusion criteria or fail to comply with grant application guidelines. Some universities offer peer-to-peer (internal) or external grant reviews, so ensure you seize these opportunities. Most grant schemes have a rebuttal phase, where you are allowed to address assessors' comments. You need to prepare a solid rebuttal. Some assessors can be really mean with their comments making you feel like it is the end of the world. Others can be very gentle and flattering. Be careful. Just because an assessor is gentle and flattering doesn't necessarily mean they may have scored your grant application high enough to get funded. In fact, for most of my successful grant applications I got quite negative comments to the point that I thought I had no hope of getting funded. Those for which I got glowing comments did not get funded. Therefore, when preparing a rebuttal, be careful, be respectful. Make sure you address the comments. Do not be adversarial or argumentative but try to be authoritative. If you start attacking your assessors, it wouldn't sit well with the spokesperson or panel's chair. Respectfully address the comments, outline areas of disagreement and give evidence from your proposal. Do not introduce new materials. By being authoritative with evidence, you're more likely to convince the panel's chair or spokesperson that your project/program is worth funding. Once the results are announced, if you are successful, that is fantastic. Enjoy a bottle of champagne. If you are unsuccessful, don't despair. It's not the end of the world. I have been lucky where some of my grant applications have been funded at first submission, but I have also been unlucky where my grant applications have been successful at the second or third or fourth attempt. On the first attempt, if you are not successful, use the assessors' comments to strengthen your application to maximise the chance of acceptance next time you resubmit

it. In some institutions, especially those that are research intensive, if you are a near miss, they'll give you seeding funds to collect more pilot data to enhance some aspects of your application, so seize the opportunity. Use all the resources available to maximise your chances of acceptance on re-submission. That's it. I hope I've given you enough tips, and I'll be able to answer some questions.

Speaker 3: Hi, Sharlotte. Thank you very much, Professor, for your very brilliant presentation. You touched on very important issues that are applicable at all levels of academic life, student life, those already teaching and researching and also leaders, as you just said. My role is to open this time for questions. If you've got a question, please feel free to put up your hand. You can also write in the chat. Yes, let's start with somebody who has put up their hand. I can see who, that's Magnus. Yes, please feel free to put on your mic and ask your question.

Speaker 4: Okay, thank you so much for that opportunity. Prof, this was a wonderful presentation. I'm very grateful to be part of this. My question is for someone who is running his PhD program, who has not applied for any grant before, and possibly his research publications are recent and in a grant that he or she wants to apply, he's talking about indicating publications that you have done in the past, not recent. So, what would the person do in order to scale through in the application?

Prof. Renzaho: Yes, so as I said, most grants will ask you to highlight your publications over the last five years, so it's not just your recent, but also your past publications. Provide a history of your publications, justify your achievements because your achievements are driven by history of citations. So, in justifying your publications over the last five years, try to be creative and use robust research metrics. What you may fall short on is when you fail to choose the best research metrics to support your productivity because your H-Index, your G-Index, your i10-index, or whatever metrics put forward is driven by your publication history. So, depending on the grant you are applying for, if is a fellowship application, the best thing to do is to make sure you have a mentor with a very strong track record. You can piggyback on their track record to show that if you get funded, you are working in the right environment and you are going to reap the rewards. In this case your research environment matters a lot. And so, if you are not creative, I know some researchers can be selfish and some mentors may think, "I don't want to take you on board because you are going to be lazy, you are not going to be productive and be a burden on the team." So, if you need the mentor, you need to convince them you are worth taking onboard. It's your responsibility to convince them that if they take you on board, you'll never let them down. Now, once you are on board, my role as a mentor is to show you that I'll give you the environment to shine, the support to harness your talent and make you as productive as possible. At the end of five years, you are a star. So, use the opportunities available to you, the people you associate yourself with, their track record, to justify that if you are given a chance, you have a good structure to make you a very good researcher.

Speaker 3: Thank you. Thank you very much, Professor Renzaho, for responding to that question. Peter, your hand is up. Please go ahead.

Speaker 5: Yeah, thanks a lot, Professor. Most of what you presented is like, actually, I was just nodding my head because it's like some of them, it's like I'm now currently experiencing them because recently I'm applying for an NHMRC grant, and then some of them – but going back, like you said, most of – especially for NHMRC grants, 70% of the assessment is about you, your own track record.

Prof. Renzaho: Yeah, if it's a fellowship.

Speaker 5: Yeah, if it's a fellowship. And then, like what the previous person asked a question, you're just coming from your PhD, and, you know, in terms of publications, you're okay with it. Remember, you have good publications. You published your PhD and even in terms of citations, you have relative – because, again, relative to opportunity, you can say. But due to the time you finish your PhD, number of publications and some of the citations you have, your H-Index, or now even, I think, people talk about the FWCI index. But, for me, the issue I have is in regard to translation of your research findings in terms of policy, in terms of practice or whatever. For someone who has just finished – let's say, who has just finished a PhD and let's say your PhD maybe was your first program of research, a formal program of research. And, especially for us Africans per se, most of the time, it's like your PhD is the case, except maybe you have been in a research environment prior to that. It's difficult for you to really articulate that your work has really created the most impact, as critics this knowledge. But when it comes to, in terms of economic or social or whatever, it's so difficult. So, how do you go through – my question is, how do you, as an emerging researcher for a fellowship, especially like just an investigator grant or whatever, how do you really go through that hurdle in terms of articulating your impact?

Prof. Renzaho: So, most funding schemes operate at a different level, the area fellowship cater for every career stage, early or middle career researcher, established research leaders, those with strong links with the industry? But you need to be clear. Peter, the jobs you are doing is in the right direction, I'm following your publications on LinkedIn, and I enjoy reading your papers. You are doing a good job. You have to know that. I read every single paper you post on LinkedIn. You are doing very well. Keep up the good work.

Speaker 5: Thank you very much for that.

Prof. Renzaho: Each time I read your papers, though, they are very good papers. Then the question is, remember, the translation needs to be driven by you. For example, recently there was a review of the pharmaceutical, which is an area working pharmaceutical process in Australia. Did you make a submission? Because that's your area. You just finished a PhD in that area. So, if you make a submission for the government, that's a way of influencing. That's how you're influencing policy. Did you position yourself that if there's an inquiry, you're the person to come to, for example? That's a way of influencing policy. Did you look at the guidelines in pharmaceuticals, try to influence? My research came up with guidelines. You write to the guidelines. I think these are not working for it. So, in other words, translation, you have a role to play because no one is going to wake up, "Oh, I know John's work. I need to read it." No, you need to be the driving force to create opportunities for your own research to be taken up either by politicians, by policymakers, practitioners, and those developing guidelines. If you don't create that for yourself, even after 10 years, 20 years, you still don't have an area where justifying translating your research into policy, practice, and guidelines. Does it make sense?

Speaker 5: Yeah. I totally, I get what you said. And, yeah, like you said, it's like you have to be more proactive. You have to sell yourself more, you know, especially when it comes to policy translation for people, especially that aspect, you know, the policy and the community at that level to really recognise what you are doing. And then –

Prof. Renzaho: Yes. So, if you are working with a leader at Southern Cross in pharmaceuticals with strong translational research, then use them on your grant applications. What you will be telling assessors is 'If you fund me, I'm already working with a big hitter in research translation. Although I'm an early career researcher, by working under him, I'll be able to not only borrow from his approaches, how he's translated his research, but I will also use his approaches to enhance my own influence in the field of research area'. So, what I'm saying, if you don't have someone to assist you, a mentor, then you are stuck. So, if you have a mentor to work with, there's no track record to piggyback on, then it becomes hard to progress. Success rate for fellowships is only 15%. So, getting a fellowship, you know is already very hard. But keep going, one day you'll make it as long as you have support.

Speaker 3: Thank you very much for a brilliant discussion. I can see the other questions, so my apologies for cutting you, both, Peter and Professor Renzaho. We've got another question in the chat. I will come back to you, Magnus. Let me just check in the chat. One of the questions relates to you, Sharlotte, as well as Professor Renzaho.

Speaker 3: Thank you very much. So, there are two other questions. They are from me, so I will just ask now. My first question relates to the research that you have done in Africa. I'm glad that you have done that research in Mozambique and other countries. It's good to see that as part of your huge list of publications. So, are there any lessons that you are able to share with us in relation to the research that you have done in Africa? Not in relation to the research itself, but to the improvement of research in Africa, funding for research in Africa, improving research capacity in Africa. Are there any themes that you have derived from that process, Professor?

Prof. Renzaho: I'm glad you asked this question, trust me. Like I have carried out research in Laos, Nepal, Africa, and when I compare the environmental challenges, it's unbelievable. There are common threads but there are those challenges that are unique to Africa, requiring me to be pragmatic. One of them is most funding bodies will never really approve your research unless you have ethics approval. Like in Mozambique, in Africa, ethics approval is difficult, which means I need to bring someone from Africa I've never worked with before, to facilitate the process of getting ethics approval. So, it becomes really a challenge. I still believe in Africa, one of the biggest innovations, is to establish a multi-country ethics committee. Not only to facilitate collaboration between North and South, because I think the challenge, again, in south, is that capacity around ethics approval clearance. And there is this conflation between government approval and ethics approval. Government approval doesn't replace ethics approval. Government approval doesn't give you ethical legitimacy, right? So then when you get ethics approval, then you're dealing with government machineries. And so that's one of the biggest challenges. The

other big challenge, when it comes to translation, is when the governments are vetoing how much can go out and can be said about your research because of political sensitivity or whatever. So, the question of the ethics and moral obligation is, should you keep quiet about the findings because disseminating such findings might upset the government? Which then means you miss the opportunity to change practice and improve how things are done. Those are the biggest challenges in Africa. And so, as I said, when I'm in Uganda, I use Makerere University for all ethics approval. But the drawback is bringing people I've never worked with to allow me to access the Makerere University Ethics Committee. Because if I get my ethical approval here in Australia at Western Sydney University, it's like I'm importing the Western colonialism. I don't like that. I want to make sure that my research in Africa is approved by an African-owned ethics committee. When was in Mozambique, I used the National Ministry of Health. They have a de facto ethics committee, which I've used. When I'm in Swaziland, there is no way I can get that ethics application approved in Swaziland. Ethics approval processes and knowledge dissemination and translation, and the conflict between the right of a researcher for knowledge translation and the political imperative. But I don't let the political imperative determine my drive to make sure my research is known by the UN, the NGOs or the government. So, what I do is to bring the government up to speed, and Uganda is a very good example. Uganda has a really wonderful government to work with. So, the way I do it is, when I'm in the field, before I leave, I organise a "a pre-field exit presentation to key ministries and government departments," ask for their feedback on the findings. The I ask them if there was any finding that might sensitive, ask them to suggest the best way of conveying the message without creating political tensions. So, once they take everything into consideration, they are often on board, and they will never create any problems for you.

Speaker 3: Thank you very much, Professor, for your feedback on that. I do especially like the issue of decolonisation that you've talked about. It's really important in relation to African research. I also do like the issue of having an ethics committee that is Africa-wide, that is cross-country. It's an important issue. And at the African Social Work Network, with the African Independent Ethics Committee, of course, it's focused on social work and development and social science-related issues. But I'll be happy to discuss that further with you. I've got another question that relates to the publications in Africa, the publishing industry itself, not research itself, but the publication industry itself. Have you had a chance to look at it, and what do you think could be done to improve it?

Prof. Renzaho: There challenges in Africa are threefold. I don't want to import colonialism, but then I have to choose between publishing my work in Africa and negotiating how to publish the findings with integrity. Then most African journals have a low, poor impact factor. I'll give an example. They don't have the profile like an impact factor, but there are sometimes where I have to say: "This research is needed by Africans. Okay, I'll still put it there because the Africans need to know about it." But I will make sure it's no more than 10% of my outputs on Africa because otherwise, no one may not read it. Then the second is the way African journals are managed. You submit to an African journal, two years later, the paper hasn't even reached the editor. Can you imagine? You submit to an African journal in 2021, by 2023, they haven't even looked at it. So, by the time you get the reviews or comments, your research is irrelevant. You lose the momentum. So, capacity building African journals can actually become creative and rewarding. I understand that they don't have enough resources. I understand it, but then it becomes a disincentive and how to overcome our own challenges back in Africa. Issue number three is that when you publish in Africa, it's hard to know which country has the best journals. But, for the majority of the journals, there's no big difference. It's like they're copying each other's model. You ask yourself, where is the innovation? It becomes a disincentive to submit a paper to an African journal.

Speaker 3: Thank you very much for that insight and response, Professor Renzaho. I think another way that we could contribute is to engage in the publications themselves, in the publishing itself, creating publications that will meet the standards that we see at the international level. And I think with people like you, with the skills that you have and the passion that you have in your area, that's possible. And again, it's also another area to decolonise the disciplines when we, ourselves, set the publications that we desire. Let me go to Magnus. You've been raising your hand for a long time. Sorry about that.

Speaker 4: Yes, I want to know the perception of research grant assessors. That's my second question. Then my top question is, are you open to cross-border collaboration with emerging researchers like us, so that we can also learn and –

Prof. Renzaho: Of course, I support emerging African researchers, and I'm telling you I've produced so many Ugandan and Zimbabwean PhD graduates. I give them scholarships. I collaborate with them. At the end of the day, assessors will still assess your grant application based on your foxed criteria. Are you publishing? If you're

publishing, are you publishing in good journals, because if you're not publishing in good journals – what you don't want to hear is saying, "Ah, Magnus publishes a lot, but, you know, all the journals are of poor quality, predatory journals." You don't want that, right? In other words, you'd rather publish one good paper in reputed journal, than 10 articles in poorly ranked or predatory journals. That's how we see it. And what are the tendencies in Africa? When I do get applications for PhD studies from Africa, one of the common issues I tend to find is someone with 15 publications, but mainly in open journals I've never heard of or retrievable on google scholar. When you Google the journals, most of them are predatory journals. I will never even entertain that application. Whereas there are some good Ethiopian students, have they mastered the art of publication. If you get a student from Ethiopia for a PhD, you are getting quality. They will never let you down. They're like machines; they understand their stuff. Their publishing is very good. When you look at Ethiopians, when you look at Zimbabweans, they've mastered the art. Eastern Africa is still catching up. I'm not saying that because I haven't gotten a lot of applications. I get applications from Nigeria. Nigeria, they've crafted their art, and the advantage of Nigeria, they come also as fee paying students, which is good. So, they are not a burden in terms of scholarships. And when they come here, they find work to pay for their tuition. But what I'm saying, the majority of the applications, depending on the region of origin are publishing in bad journals. It doesn't matter what you did at Makerere University, you did in Congo, you did in Algeria or Sierra Leone. At the end of the day, it's the quality of your work, not the location. In other words, if you produce good quality, you'll be given an equal chance.

Speaker 3: Thank you very much for asking that question, and Prof, for your response. I'm mindful of our time. We've gone past um our scheduled time, but there was somebody who's hand was up for a long time. I think it was – I can't see them now, if you are there, please just turn on your mic and ask your question quickly. Thank you very much. Okay, it looks – yes, Milton is back. Please go ahead with your question. We can't hear you. We still can't hear you, Milton. Please unmute Milton, we still can't hear you. Okay.

Speaker 6: Yes, I'm a PhD student in the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences in Makerere University. Your presentation has really motivated me. I was losing, I was almost giving up because of the challenges but now I'm motivated. Thank you, Professor, for the presentation. I, however, have a humble request. Is it possible to have the contact for professor and also need your further guidance and the mentorship in research because I'm now motivated.

Speaker 3: Yes, thank you, Sharlotte, for that. Let me begin by thanking those who attended today's event. We have got members of the African Association of Schools of Social Work. We also have people from the East African Regional Social Work Resource Centre and members of the African Social Work Network. I've also seen other participants from other institutions, especially in Australia but also in Africa. Thank you so much for participating, asking questions, and listening to our Professor Renzaho's presentation. I also wish to thank Sharlotte for organising this event from day one. Thank you, Sharlotte. Well done for the work that you have done. And lastly, to you, Professor Renzaho, thank you very much for coming to present. It was good listening to your presentation and what you have gone through, what we are doing, and your ambitions, especially for Africa. I think we do share a lot in common, and hopefully, we'll be able to sit down and discuss how we can address some of the challenges that Africa faces in relation to research, but more importantly, how to mend our upcoming African researchers. I think it is our role and we do need to play that role. With these words, I'm happy to say this marks the end of our meeting today. Thank you.

Prof. Renzaho: Thank you so much.