

## **Advice to applicants for ANN Overseas Travel Fellowship Scheme**

This document is intended to provide some informal advice from the Overseas Travel Fellowship (OTF) working group on how to prepare a better application for travel support from this scheme. It does not replace or supplement the formal guidelines for the scheme, nor is the advice contained guaranteed to be optimum for all application scenarios; it is simply our general experience based on the common features of the stronger proposals across the OTF rounds to date.

**Read the eligibility, conditions and guidelines carefully:** Before you invest time in writing an application, make sure you are actually eligible, there is nothing worse than writing an application and finding out you wasted your time. If you haven't done so already, go to these two websites:

[http://www.ausnano.net/content/overseas\\_travel](http://www.ausnano.net/content/overseas_travel)

<http://www.ausnano.net/index.php?page=overseasTravelApplicationForm>

and read every word on them very carefully. In particular, ECRs must be within 5 years of the award of their Ph.D. degree, so if your Ph.D. was awarded 10 years ago, do not even bother applying, this is probably the most common reason for a submitted proposal to be ruled as ineligible.

**Have a clear plan:** Probably the most important part of a proposal, and often given the least effort/detail in many applications. The specific days/dates don't matter so much, what counts is having a very clear plan for exactly how you will spend the 'x' week duration of your visit. A clear plan for the visit helps convince us that you will very likely achieve a tangible outcome and that you've budgeted time properly. Be realistic – it is probably better to err on the side of longer to account for delays such as OH&S, equipment issues, etc., but at the same time the trip needs to be cost-effective and efficient. In our experience, funded OTFs are typically 4-8 weeks in duration (not including any conference or summer school time). It is hard to achieve serious science in a shorter period. Do not request to go 'just for discussions' or for multiple institution tours, these rarely produce an outcome that justifies ranking them highly enough to be funded – aim to go to one, possibly two places, and do something substantial instead.

**Choose your collaboration well:** The choice will vary from case to case, so it's difficult to give universal advice, but the best choice of collaborator usually involves a group/institute that provides a scientific capacity that you cannot otherwise access in Australia, has a clear strength at what you want to achieve, and that can help ensure you produce a worthwhile outcome during the duration of the visit. If they are someone you haven't worked with previously, you should do your best to demonstrate that they are strongly committed to the success of the project. This is done most effectively via the support letter. If you have worked with them previously, you should do your best to demonstrate how this produces something significantly new beyond what your collaboration has already produced. This is particularly important if your visit is to go back to where you did your undergrad, masters or Ph.D. work, or to visit someone it is clear that you have already visited. Many such visits are poorly justified (in our experience). For ECR applicants (e.g., postdocs), it is often more favourable to develop new collaborations that forward your career than request *alma mater* visits unless there is very obvious novelty in the outcome of such a visit.

**Develop your plans with an investor's mind-set:** You should see the working group's role as investors. Our aim is to allocate resources to competing proposals to achieve the best likelihood of beneficial outcomes across a diversity of topics, career stages, organizations, etc. You should not assume we are risk-averse and looking only for safe projects; there is always risk in science and often high reward entails some risk. That said, generally, risk with a clear plan and productive researchers on both sides with a strong commitment to the success of the specific project represents a better investment than risk with no plan and less productive researchers who appear to be working together simply for the sake of the application. Would you put your own \$5k down as a bet on your visit's success? If not, you might want to develop your plans/collaboration/application a bit further for another round.

**Try to think like we have to think, write accordingly:** If you had to assess these projects, what would you want to know? What mental check-list would you have to put each proposal against?

To give you some idea, the working group tends to think questions like: Is the student trying to answer an interesting and important scientific question? How does this fit into the area of nanotechnology? How does this really help the applicant's career? Is this the right group to visit or is there a better one? Can it be done in Australia? Is the collaborator really committed to the project? What sets this application apart from the other thirty? What is it that really excites or scares me about this application? What exactly will this achieve? Is the project realistic on the timescale of the visit? Is it realistic given the capacity of the collaborator? Is it realistic given the capacity of the student? Is this put together just to get money to go somewhere because the scheme exists, or is there a serious motivation behind the application? Is this just "CVism"?

You shouldn't answer these questions specifically/literally (i.e., Q&A or catechism style). It is a trend in the strongest proposals that many of these questions have clear answers after having read the application text.

**Be concise in your introduction:** The panel has to read around 30 applications each round including CV's and supervisor/collaborator letters. A two page monologue on what nanotechnology is, why it's important, and the extensive nanotechnological background to your research topic masks your key points and doesn't help you much (The sub-committee members have broad knowledge of nanotechnology, so what you are saying in a long intro we probably already know). It should only take a few sentences to make clear that what you want to do falls under nanotechnology; if it takes much more, then is it really nanotechnology?

**Care about your supervisor and collaborator letters:** With many applications, much effort has clearly been put into the application, and then the supervisor and collaborator letters are bland, or even inconsistent with the application. These letters serve a vital purpose, they help the committee to intuit the commitment to the project from the two most important parties beyond the applicant. While it's easy to think they are an administrative hurdle, they can make a crucial difference to an application's success. The letters don't need to be long, if anything excess length is detrimental, but they do need to be effective.

**Matching funds matter:** International visits for substantial periods rarely fit inside \$5k. Demonstrating a definite source for the remaining funds helps considerably. If the source is another external competitive funding scheme, then it helps more than internal competitive funding schemes (e.g., university postgrad travel support), and this in turn helps more than your supervisor's research grant.

**Be sensible with your budget:** Spend a little time getting proper estimates for your costs. As with having a clear plan, having a sensible budget shows you've done your homework on the visit. The following is rare, but avoid doing crazy things in your budget (e.g., food cost = 150 McDonald's happy meals @ \$3.95 ea, requesting a movie ticket a week for weekend entertainment, staying 50km from the visit site as it's a more fun place to live). We don't expect you to live in a tent and eat bread and dripping, but on the flip-side, we don't expect you to stay in the Hyatt and have a limo drive you 50 km to work every day either. Get someone with some experience to look over your budget and tell you what's reasonable and practical; try to be as cost-effective as possible within reason. You don't need to budget to the dime, just include the key costs (e.g., flights, accommodation, land transport, living costs).

**Get your application proof-read by someone:** The best applications have been carefully written and carefully proof-read, with errors and inconsistencies caught and removed, and advice from someone experienced in writing funding proposals. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you can write a great application alone having written nothing like it before. Do not have your application 'ghost written' either, nothing stands out more than an application ghost written by a supervisor. Get advice; don't cross the line on fairness.

**The best applications are not dripping with hype or jargon:** Try to keep it simple, accurate, realistic and accessible. Keep your application as concise and brief as possible. Use tangibles (e.g., CVs, references, patent applications, etc.) to demonstrate how good or important something is, they carry more currency than hype.

**Take care with conferences:** The OTF scheme does not support conferences (with the exception of well-justified summer schools as per guidelines). Do not try to 'construct' an OTF visit as a thinly veiled cover to go to a conference, the committee sees straight through these applications, we have a lot of experience at detecting them. If the visit happens to coincide with a conference and it makes it easier for you to have the opportunity to attend (with the additional costs covered outside the OTF scheme, of course), then state that as it is a plus, but the visit should be worthwhile independently of any conferences.

**Advice for more "senior" ECR/postdoctoral applicants:** ANN expects more senior applicants to write better applications, addressing all selection criteria in a more mature way, in order to be successful. ANN is looking to support ECR applicants who are academically strong, show potential as self-driven researchers, but who have not yet made a transition to fast track institutional support or externally funded fellowships. If you are already supervising research students and already have substantive independent research funding you are not the primary category of postdoctoral ECR ANN is looking to support.