

**THE HARTLEY REPORT:  
EVALUATION OF THE SAGE PEER REVIEW AND  
ACCREDITATION PROCESS**

DECEMBER 2020



**S A G E**  
SCIENCE IN AUSTRALIA  
GENDER EQUITY

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND THANK YOU

SAGE would like to acknowledge the strong support of all Chairs, Moderators, Panel Members and Observers for their participation in the evaluation of the SAGE peer review process undertaken by Dr. Margaret Hartley (FTSE FRACI CChem MAICD) on behalf of SAGE Ltd. We are grateful to all survey participants and those who participated in one-on-one interviews for giving their time so freely to aid this evaluation. Their insight and expertise were invaluable in formulating the Findings in this report, which will enhance the SAGE peer and accreditation processes going forward.

A special thank you is extended to Dr. Margaret Hartley, for undertaking this evaluation and for producing an excellent and comprehensive report. The evaluation of the SAGE peer review was conducted between May and September 2020 and involved both a survey questionnaire and individual interviews.

This report (The Hartley Report) presents the highlights of the independent evaluation of the peer review process and its Findings. Also included is a response from SAGE to the evaluation Findings with an implementation approach to deliver process improvements, streamlining and other reforms to the SAGE peer assessment of Athena Swan Award.

The new design for the Bronze to Silver pathway - the SAGE Cygnet Awards - was developed concurrently with the independent evaluation. This is taken into account in the Hartley Report, which documents observations, findings, and lessons learned relevant to the potential operation of peer assessment of the SAGE Cygnet Award.

**Dr. Wafa El-Adhami**

**CEO, SAGE Ltd**

**December 2020**

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# INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) published a report of the independent evaluation of the Pilot program: **Putting Gender on Your Agenda: Evaluating the introduction of Athena Swan into Australia.**

This report covered all aspects of the SAGE Pilot except for the peer assessment and accreditation process, as this was still active up until mid-2019.

In 2020, to finalise the evaluation of the SAGE Pilot, SAGE commissioned an independent evaluation of the SAGE peer review and accreditation processes and procedures to:

- assess the effectiveness of the procedures (and guidance) and its processes, and
- ascertain its fitness-for-purpose and identify any improvements to the process.

**Key principles considered in this evaluation include:** quality, rigour and credibility; fairness; transparency; independence and impartiality; balanced skills and expertise; confidentiality; and the efficiency of process management (e.g. online system, timelines, panel meetings).

**The evaluation identifies process issues and informs enhancements** to assure the quality and credibility of the SAGE peer review and accreditation processes as SAGE transitions from the Pilot to an ongoing program within SAGE Limited.

**Appendix 1** provides a flow chart of the steps involved in the SAGE Pilot peer review and accreditation process, as well as a glossary of roles and responsibilities of those participating in the process.

The evaluation built on an earlier consultation survey of the peer review process undertaken in 2018 (following the first round of peer review) and examines findings of the recent **UK Review of the Athena Swan Charter** on peer review panels and their operation. Any changes to the peer panel processes introduced in the UK April 2020 panel operations were also taken into account.

# EVALUATION FINDINGS

The generous provision of frank and constructive feedback from survey and interview participants has allowed the evaluation to identify a range of potential reforms and new approaches. This will assist SAGE in its efforts to reduce complexity and burden while maintaining the rigour of an evidence-based, data-driven gender equity, diversity and inclusion accreditation system for Australia's Higher Education and Research sector (HER).

## The evaluation has found that:

- Overall, the administration and processes of the peer assessment and accreditation for the Bronze Athena Swan Award were professionally and efficiently delivered, mostly fit-for-purpose, and well regarded (especially training, management of work flow and SAGE's "leaning in" and working with stakeholders).
- The Pilot program, while a learning process, is seen to have already had an impact on gender equity, diversity and inclusion, and cultural change within participating institutions.
- SAGE is seen to be open and genuine in seeking and addressing feedback to enhance its assessment framework and processes.

**12 Key Findings** of the evaluation predominantly point to refinements and changes that will reduce burden through simplification and streamlining, and increase confidence through enhanced clarity and consistency. The Findings will assist in supporting what is predominantly seen as a robust and effective gender equity, diversity and inclusion accreditation scheme for the Australian HER sector.

## The Key Findings have been made across three main areas:

- **Structural issues - 7 Findings**
- **Design and process issues - 4 Findings**
- **Peer review design and customisation - 1 Finding**

# 12 KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS

## STRUCTURAL ISSUES

Findings 1-7

### PEER REVIEW PANEL (Findings 1-3)

F1. Enhance recognition of SAGE peer review assessment practice - *College Of Peer Assessors*

F2. Actively continue to develop and utilise a pool of highly skilled and experienced Panel Chairs

F3. Confirm optimal panel size with minimal observers

### RESUBMISSIONS (Finding 4)

F4. Reform resubmission process

### ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK (Findings 5-7)

F5. Enhance consensus decision through changes to panel requests for data/clarification (links to F4)

F6. Review the role of the SMART Action Plan as a core assessment criterion for the Bronze Award

F7. Inform SAGE peer review practices by monitoring effectiveness of panel feedback

## DESIGN AND PROCESS ISSUES

Findings 8-11

F8. Reform assessment framework against assessment criteria to better focus on streamlining

F9. Improve SAGE assessment portal

F10. Extend utility of existing SAGE training materials - repackage material as ready reference guides for use post training sessions

F11. Mentor new reviewers to supplement the SAGE peer review training program

## PEER REVIEW DESIGN CUSTOMISATION

Finding 12

F12. Revise approach to peer review for progress and impact - Cygnet Awards

# KEY OBSERVATIONS SUPPORTING FINDINGS

**The Athena Swan Bronze Award peer review assessment approach covers the elements required for sound peer review.** However, based on survey and interview feedback, a number of suggested reforms have been made to improve the process.

The emerging narrative that came from stakeholder feedback as it relates to the formation of the 12 key Findings is summarised below. An extract of the quantitative data from the survey and interviews is provided in **Appendix 2**.

## Peer Assessment Panels (F1-3)

**Strengthening the selection and retention of a pool of peer reviewers, with greater focus on depth of experience in this specialised panel process, is important to SAGE’s ongoing impact.** During the Pilot, SAGE balanced its selection of peer assessors against skills, expertise and inclusion principles aiming for panel membership:

- of experts with skills and credentials across gender equity, diversity and inclusion; peer review; and HER strategy, governance and operations; and
- of individuals of diverse genders, identities and abilities; and
- of participants from across the SAGE member institutions.

**In addition, the generous undertaking and commitment of volunteer peer assessors and observers, and the value of their intellectual generosity needs to be highlighted.**

The Pilot took the opportunity to have as many volunteers participate in the peer review process as possible. As a result, very few individuals participated in more than one panel. Whilst interviewees emphasised the rigour and credibility of the Pilot’s peer review, they noted that building depth of experience in this specialised process (akin to ‘clinical privileging’ and other established peer review processes) was not made possible. A pool of expertise in SAGE peer assessment will develop over time, however, **a more sustainable use of the pool of reviewers is required.**

This could be achieved through a combination of strategies, including **a limited pool with diversity of expertise and identities, and formal recognition of SAGE peer reviewers within the sector via a “College Of Peers”** to encourage retention as well as act to attract others to seek participation. Over time, international peers should be included in the College. An exchange of peer assessors would benefit SAGE through exposure to international Athena Swan practices and benchmarking.

A **SAGE College Of Peers** would confirm the status of SAGE peer assessment as part of academic, research and professional leadership and service, and enhance recognition of these specialist professional contributions towards career progression and promotion.

Further, **a mechanism for “refreshing” the reviewers’ pool also needs to be considered.** Incoming reviewers new to SAGE peer assessment will need training, including some form of mentoring that sees a more experienced reviewer provide practical advice to newcomers to SAGE peer review.

Feedback often **noted the importance of a skilled Chair** in assisting peer review panels to reach consensus in a respectful and inclusive way. With a Chair skilled in probity and governance, as well as experienced and expert in peer assessment, the need for SAGE moderators could be re-examined. This is particularly so in light of additional feedback that pointed to the **importance of smaller panels** to encourage open, and therefore more participatory, discussions and deliberations.

#### **Resubmission Processes (F4)**

**Perhaps the strongest area of criticism was related to the resubmission process.**

Feedback noted unpreparedness, differing, and suggested conflicting understanding or expectations of the scope of work involved (i.e. review full application again vs only focus on area of deficit), and lack of instruction and clarity. The resubmission experience was reported as lacking transparency and undermined confidence in the SAGE peer review assessment and accreditation process overall.

This may well reflect a disconnect in the understanding of the term ‘resubmission’ itself, but it is clear from this evaluation that **the boundaries and meaning of a resubmission need to be clarified, as does the process to guide the assessment of these.** Equally important is the need to (i) communicate with, and guide, applicants in preparing for a resubmission (eg. how to use feedback to improve their application) and (ii) guide the assessment of resubmissions.

The resubmission process is explored further under the next set of findings, noting their relevance and interdependence.

#### **Assessment and Feedback Issues (F5- F7)**

Consultation raised the question of **how to more effectively and efficiently handle a panel’s request for clarification or more information** to allow a consensus decision to be reached as to whether all assessment criteria are met. This is a separate but related matter to issues raised on the resubmission process, and potential reform.

This evaluation highlighted that SAGE did not articulate the parameters and process for seeking clarification or additional information where needed during the assessment process. Noting that no Bronze application will be perfect, **the concept of a continuum of deficiency** from low (omissions of data or narrative of a minor nature) to medium (modest clarifications and data issues to be resolved) to high (gross deficiencies, application does not meet assessment criteria and resubmission required) may be a useful consideration.



A possible new approach to elements of resubmission may see minor to moderate issues raised at assessment be resolved without the need for a formal resubmission. As part of reviewing resubmission processes (F4), **SAGE should consider the current design of its data request guidelines and process**, i.e. the extent of information that may be requested from an applicant and the timeframe to submit such information. For example, in the UK minor information from an applicant can be sought by the panel but must be provided within 10 working days of request.

**A “continuum of deficiency” concept may increase the flexibility for panels, reduce administrative burden and enhance transparency while maintaining the credibility and standard of the Athena Swan Charter.** It is clear, however, that the underpinning strength of the Athena Swan Charter is that the accreditation is evidence-based and data-driven. Whatever streamlining is introduced, it must not undermine or diminish the standards of assessment against both these elements.

These are issues requiring process review and redesign that will address not only the confusion around resubmission, but hopefully enhance clarity and transparency on assessment and feedback, the two factors that underpin confidence in the SAGE process overall.

A further aspect that attracted feedback from interviewees concerned the assessment of SMART Actions with respect to the other four assessment criteria [1], and particularly in the context of the Cygnet Awards design.

**The Action Plan is vital to improving gender equity, diversity and inclusion.** The current core criteria to judge the appropriateness of the Action Plan were evaluated to be suitable and should be retained, i.e. Is an action based on data? Are responsibilities and accountabilities clearly mapped? Can the action be measured? Are gaps in data being addressed? What are the measures of sustainability?

**A key insight gained from this evaluation highlights that the Action Plan is dependent on the analysis and synthesis of extensive data sets collected over defined timeframes and within a particular setting.** Deficiencies identified across other assessment criteria, especially in data analysis, have direct implications for the Action Plan. Thus, it will be questionable if the Action Plan is passed by a panel when other assessment criteria are found to be deficient.

**There is a reasonable case for decoupling the assessment of the Action Plan from the other assessment criteria.** Instead, feedback should be given to support the Action Plan as a practical roadmap for institutional transformation. This is of special relevance and significance in light of the SAGE Cygnet approach, where progress and impact across Key Priority Areas becomes the focus.

The recent redesign of the SAGE Bronze to Silver pathway significantly changes the structure of the SMART Action plan to be submitted as part of the Bronze (and subsequently Silver and Gold) Award applications in future. It is noted that current Bronze Awardees will be working with SAGE to identify the Key Priority Areas from their Action Plans for their five Cygnet Awards and the pathway to Silver. Given this, for future Bronze (and higher levels) Applications the Action Plan design will naturally embed the Cygnet Award requirements (i.e. the Five Key Priority Areas).

In this respect, it is important that SAGE considers both: how assessment of the Action Plan fits as a stand-alone assessment criterion and the weighting given to it relative to other assessment criteria.

It is noted that panel members provide considerable effort in providing feedback to applicants on their applications. However, little information is available as to the utility of this feedback to applicants. To inform SAGE and improve the impact of peer review feedback, **SAGE could consider surveying applicants after they have considered the peer review feedback.** This centres on addressing application of the feedback (all, part of, or none); what particular areas or actions it triggers; and what benefits were contributed by the feedback. Gathered information would be published by SAGE and used to inform peer review guidance.

#### **Design & Process Issues (F7-11)**

The administration of the Bronze peer review assessment and accreditation process received positive feedback and was viewed as being of a high standard. With complex application formats that are data intensive, **the assessment workload was deemed reasonable by the vast majority of reviewers due to the detailed and efficient planning by the SAGE Team.** The advanced notice and clear timeframes provided by the secretariat allowed upcoming activity to be duly scheduled into already busy work programs of assessors. **SAGE needs to consider flexible assignment of assessment workload as part of its planning for the peer review panels,** for example allowing for panelists to take on varying numbers of assessments depending on their availability.

The guidance to reviewers was seen to be unduly complex, an observation that was noted to be reflective of the application format itself, which is relatively complex in its design. This complexity is also replicated in the online portal. While noting improvements have been made to the portal over time, **areas for further improvement include streamlining and reducing repetition in sections, and aligning “pop up” guidance to the actual assessment guide for criteria** rather than the application form guidance.

There was strong consensus amongst interviewees that the **SAGE training program is very well considered; it was seen as professionally delivered, practical in advice and provided examples with clear guidance for panel members on roles and responsibilities** in the peer review assessment process. However, the SAGE training program could be enhanced further through additional training modules. For example, focused training/mentoring could be offered to individuals who may have less peer review experience.

The need for “refresher” information/courses, post formal training sessions, was also identified. Certainly, **SAGE could make more use of its high-quality training materials outside formal training sessions** through production of one-page summaries/ready reckoners on key principles/issues.

The formal training program may also benefit from participation of experienced SAGE reviewers to provide insights into how panels reach consensus. Experienced SAGE peer reviewers can mentor and coach those new to the process (both during individual assessment and panel meetings).

### **Peer Review Design Customisation (F12)**

SAGE subscribers are on individual journeys to achieve a safe, equitable and inclusive workplace for all staff and students. The **peer review is concerned with the individual progress** of an institution’s journey towards gender equity, diversity and inclusion, which is accredited against the various award levels of the Athena Swan Charter. Thus, individual Action Plans and priority actions will differ from institution to institution. This is particularly so when examining progress and impact reports (Cygnet Awards).

**It is important that SAGE design its peer review approach for progress and impact for the Cygnet Awards to be fit-for-purpose, criteria based, and flexible in its ability to engage with the applicant.** The progress and impact assessment is dependent on individual institutional targets; as a result, a flexible approach will be required to account for the variation in applications. SAGE will need to facilitate a flow of dialogue between impact assessors and institutions for any questions, clarification or additional information needed. With this in mind, there is no need for a ‘resubmission’ process for progress and impact reports; rather an iterative clarification of the reports in a process similar to that of a journal article will be better suited for these reports.

Differing from grant assessments, impact assessment is only emerging within the HER sector as a measure within research quality assessment frameworks. The ARC and CSIRO have developed methodology frameworks for measuring knowledge translation impacts and research impact evaluation.

With regards to the peer review assessment of impact within the HER sector, SAGE’s progress and impact Cygnet Awards in the Bronze to Silver pathway (and beyond) will need assessment practice that is more aligned with professional accreditation standards design rather than research grant peer assessment approaches.

# SAGE RESPONSE TO FINDINGS

Table 1: SAGE Response to Findings

CATEGORY	FINDINGS	SAGE RESPONSE	IMPLEMENTATION PLAN	TIMETABLE
STRUCTURAL ISSUES (FINDINGS 1-7)	<p><b>PEER REVIEW PANEL (FINDINGS 1-3)</b></p> <p>F1. Enhance recognition of SAGE peer review assessment practice</p> <p>F2. Actively continue to develop and utilise a pool of highly skilled and experienced Panel Chairs</p> <p>F3. Confirm optimal panel size with minimal observers</p>	<b>ACCEPTED IN FULL</b>	<p>F1 will be further developed in consultation with the sector and with SAGE International partners (Advance HE, Dimensions and SEA Change)</p> <p>F2 &amp; F3 will see process change in appointing panels and review of the roles and responsibilities of current participants, including moderators</p>	<p><b>F1 work to commence Oct 2021-Feb 2022</b></p> <p><b>F2 &amp; F3 actions to commence Feb 2021-Aug 2021</b></p>
	F4. Reform resubmission process	<b>ACCEPTED IN PART</b> , noting defining resubmission will require further development	<p>Process improvements implemented for final resubmissions from the Pilot Phase (Oct 2020) and will be assessed for effectiveness</p> <p>Defining resubmission as suggested raises issues of practicality/threshold triggers for actions. Implementation will be considered in consultation with the sector</p>	<p><b>Commence Feb 2021-Mar 2021</b></p> <p><b>Commence Feb 2021-July 2021</b></p>
	<p><b>ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK (FINDINGS 5-7)</b></p> <p>F5. Enhance consensus decision through changes to panel requests for data/clarification (links to F4)</p>	<b>ACCEPTED IN PART</b> , noting F5 links to F4 defining resubmission that will require further development/examination to assess practicality	Will be progressed in concert with F4 (defining resubmission) in consultation with the sector	<b>Commence Feb 2021-July 2021</b>
	<p>F6. Review the role of the SMART Action Plan as a core assessment criterion for the Bronze Award</p> <p>F7. Inform SAGE peer practices by monitoring effectiveness of panel feedback</p>	<p><b>ACCEPTED IN PART</b>, requires consultation with the sector</p> <p><b>ACCEPTED IN FULL</b></p>	<p>Implementation in consultation with the sector</p> <p>F7 to be integrated into SAGE evaluation processes, using survey approach</p>	<p><b>Commence Feb 2021-July 2021</b></p> <p><b>Post Peer Review Actions</b></p>
DESIGN & PROCESS ISSUES (FINDINGS 8-11)	<p>F8. Reform peer review guidelines against assessment criteria to better focus on streamlining</p> <p>F9. Improve SAGE assessment portal</p> <p>F10. Extend utility of existing SAGE training materials- repackage material as ready reference guides for use post training sessions</p> <p>F11. Mentor new reviewers to supplement the SAGE peer review training program</p>	<b>ACCEPTED IN FULL</b>	<p>F8-10 SAGE continue with its scheduled improvements</p> <p>F11 to be integrated with planned F1 development work</p>	<p><b>Commence Apr 2021</b></p> <p><b>F11 work to commence Oct 2021-Feb 2022</b></p>
PEER REVIEW DESIGN (F12)	F12. Revise approach to peer review for progress and impact - Cygnet Awards	<b>ACCEPTED IN FULL</b>	F12 Development of assessment framework to be progressed in consultation with with SAGE Cygnet Award PIR working group	<b>F12 work to commence Jan 2021-Apr 2021</b>

# ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS & SAGE RESPONSE

The panelists took the opportunity to give feedback on areas broader than the scope of the review; in particular highlighting issues relating to data and the consideration of Indigenous Peoples/ Indigenous issues and intersectionality within the SAGE program. Feedback and suggested improvements have informed current and future SAGE activities and are being reviewed as part of a separate consultation process with the sector.

**Increased emphasis on intersectionality & Indigenous issues:** The treatment of intersectionality and consideration of equity and inclusion for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander People in the application was raised as being no more than a “bit of a tack on” or “afterthought”. For subject specialists in this area in particular, there was real concern that these important cultural and inclusion issues were missing from applicants’ action plans and were, as such, a sticking point for granting a Bronze Award. It was assumed that this will be addressed in the Bronze application beyond the Pilot.

Feedback noted that the application framework needs better integration of intersectionality and Indigenous issues across the application and careful editing of manuals and guidance to eliminate binary assumptions in the text. It was noted that there was assumed knowledge for the panels of the particular equity and inclusion issues facing Aboriginal and/or Torres Straits Islander Peoples, those of diverse genders, sexes and sexualities; people with disability; as well as those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Another issue raised was that of racism and how this is integrated into the SAGE Charter. Only by addressing these issues openly and in a culturally sensitive and ethical way will we be able to drive equity changes in the HER sector.

SAGE has been revising its documentation on Indigenous inclusion and intersectionality through working groups that had strong representation from underrepresented minority groups.

**Data: Establishment of a SAGE data set is urgently needed to guide longitudinal collection by institutions.** There were several questions posed regarding SAGE and data. These included:

- What are the mandated data for SAGE at various Award level e.g. Bronze versus Silver?
- How can SAGE help reduce the burden that comes from demanding data that are not necessarily consistent with current nationally required data?
- As SAGE has a lot of data from the Pilot, how is this being collated? and what value add is being planned?
- Can SAGE lead an agreed national dataset (e.g. WGEA, Department of Education & Industry data and State Government reporting data)?

**A set of consistently collected data points will help benchmarking across the sector, however care must be taken to avoid duplicating or increasing burden.**

It was suggested that SAGE should consider publishing progress reports on the sector, noting it has access to data from subscribers. For example, producing new “Scissor Diagrams” as part of progress and impact monitoring would be a valuable contribution to show gender equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives are working. It is noted that the Cygnet Awards will contribute considerably to such data updates for the sector.

# KEY FINDINGS - SAGE IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

SAGE is committed to engaging with subscribers and stakeholders to ensure continuous improvement of processes through reducing complexity, increasing flexibility, and providing greater guidance and support for institutions.

SAGE is grateful for the generous contributions received from the SAGE community to inform and evolve the program further, aiding efficient progress and improvements.

**There are 3 principle strategies SAGE will be employing to implement the findings from this report:**

- 1 Working groups drawn from participating institutions and stakeholders to inform the design of improvements to the peer review and the delivery of guidance materials and specific resources
- 2 Consultation with specialist experts, particularly on Indigenous and intersectionality issues
- 3 Immediate implementation by SAGE, for administrative actions and to reflect feedback in guidance materials

# METHODOLOGY

Engaging peer review participants was undertaken in a consultative manner to encourage contributions. All participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time. All personal information is protected under SAGE’s privacy policy.

Three method elements were used: A survey questionnaire, one-on-one Interviews, and desktop research on peer review methodology to judge their fitness for purpose within SAGE practices.

Feedback informed findings that could strengthen SAGE processes further, underpinning robust, independent and trusted peer review process while maintaining confidentiality, reducing burden on the participants and enhancing efficiency of the SAGE program overall.

## QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

A Questionnaire Survey (34 Questions) was developed in consultation with SAGE over April-May 2020, taking into account the [Review of the Athena Swan Charter in the UK](#).

The Survey included sections focused on:

Panel membership and roles

Training

Assessment processes

General comments

Survey questions were a combination of single choice, multiple choice, and free text.

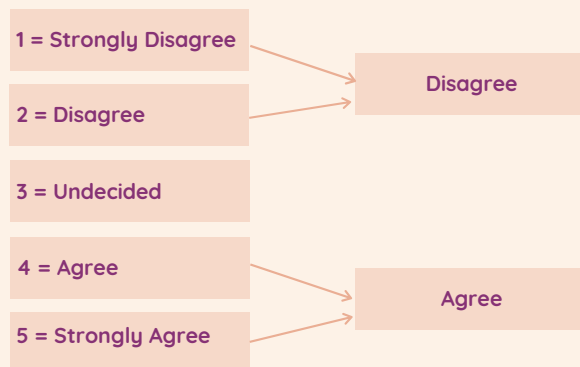
The survey was distributed to 108 people – being all panel members, moderators, and observers across all the three cohorts for Bronze application assessments under the SAGE pilot. A total of 53 people participated in the survey making the overall response rate 49%. This is a high participation rate and shows a strong engagement with the program.

The survey was distributed through an email from the SAGE CEO who advised of the evaluation activity and issued an invitation and encouraged everyone to participate in giving feedback to inform the peer review and assessment process going forward.

The Survey was open from 15 June to 10 July 2020. Information on the survey was communicated to stakeholders during this period via SAGE communication channels and email reminders to encourage as wide an engagement as possible.

## Data Treatment

To highlight the key results, where a five-point Likert scale question has been used, points 1 and 2, and points 4 and 5 have been combined. For example, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree, 'Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree' have been combined into 'Disagree', and 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree' have been combined into 'Agree'.



Where quotes have been used to demonstrate key findings within the qualitative data, these are illustrative only.

## Participants' Profile

Of the 51 participants responding to the survey question on their role in peer assessment panels, the distribution across the various peer review roles was reflective and approximately proportionate to the total pool of participants and roles across the three-year Pilot.

**Table 2:** Survey Respondents (%) by Role in Peer Assessment

Panel Role	Survey Respondents % (51)	Total Pilot Members % (108)
Panel Member (inc Chair)	69% (35)	65% (70)
Moderator	14% (7)	12% (13)
Observer	18% (9)	23% (25)

Of the 51 responding to the question on number of panels they participated in, 39 (76.5%) participated in one panel, seven (13.7%) in two panels, two (3.9%) in three panels, one (2.0%) in five panels and two (3.9%) in all panels held. Moderators participated in the greatest number of panels with a role of ensuring assessors' compliance with procedures, policies, and guidelines. Moderators are non-scoring and do not contribute to consensus decisions of the panel but ensure consistency of the processes.

Some 30 (58.8%) participated in panels that considered re-submissions of applications.

### The socio-demographics of respondents are summarised below:

- Of 49 respondents to Q32, 14 (28.6%) identified as having a culturally and/or linguistically diverse background
- Of 50 respondents to Q33, one (2%) identified as Aboriginal
- Q34, eight (16%) identified as having a disability or a long-term medical condition (with two preferring not to say)
- Some 51 responded regarding gender with 68.6% women, 29.4% men and 2% non-binary
- Some 72% of survey respondents who participated in peer assessment panels were under 60 years of age



## INTERVIEWS

Interviews were structured with the benefit of analysis of the survey results and the themes identified in open text comment. The interviewee list and interview questions were discussed and finalised in consultation with the SAGE CEO.

The Survey asked all participants to identify if they were willing to be followed up by the consultant for interview. Of the 52 responding to this question, a majority of 71% (37) agreed to be followed up. A third (12) of these survey respondents were interviewed.

A further 11 panel members were also identified for interview to ensure that broad coverage of participants in SAGE peer assessment activities was achieved. This meant the issues raised in the survey could be further tested in interview with almost 50% of interviewees not having participated in the survey, thus providing an opportunity to validate (or not) the survey findings.

Invitations to be interviewed were issued by the SAGE CEO to the 23 identified people on 28 July 2020. On follow up by the consultant, all agreed to be interviewed.

All interviews were conducted by Zoom videoconference (due to COVID-19 travel restrictions). All but one interview was conducted between 5 -21 August 2020, with one conducted on 7 September due to their availability. Interviews were conducted over an average duration of 42 minutes, up to a maximum of one hour.

Interviewees were those who had been involved in the peer assessment panel process as either Chairs, Members, and Observers; and provided gender balance, geographical balance (State, metropolitan and rural) and proportionally covered all types of Institutions involved in the Pilot (University, Medical Research Institute, Publicly Funded Research Organisation). The interviewee cohort comprised of 12 Men and 11 Women. Nine interviewees had assessed a resubmission and one participant was from an organisation that had made a resubmission.

# PEER REVIEW PRACTICES: FIT FOR PURPOSE

Expert peer review is a common element in the HER sector and the composition and operation of a peer panel or an equivalent are similar. However, there are discrete differences in assessment processes, and the expertise and experience set for the Chair and members depending on the task in hand.

Robust independent peer review is the cornerstone of informing many decision-making processes. For example, the peer review process is used to:

- ensure that manuscripts submitted to scientific journals are qualified for publication;
- assess the merits of research proposals for funding;
- assess the standard and contribution of experts for appointment/election to honorific awards and positions;
- accredit professional education standards;
- evaluate research impact;
- assess the impact of research, innovation and/or policy decisions; and
- ensure that government regulatory actions and policy decisions are scientifically-based, evidence-based and proportional to risk against regulatory standards.

Overall, the process of peer assessment, while seen by the scientific and academic community as an appropriately robust foundation for ensuring scientific and research publication integrity, is predominantly advisory in nature. Regardless of purpose, a rigorous peer assessment process ensures robust and trusted advice to the decision maker.

Given that an emerging theme of importance in the evaluation of the SAGE peer assessment process was identified by respondents as being the panel itself - its membership, operation, roles, skills and experience - peer panel models were considered for SAGE going forward.

Peer panel models were also considered for the new SAGE Bronze to Silver Pathway design, which introduces new progress and impact reports that will be assessed for a **Cygnnet Award** for each of the five Key Priority action areas designated by an Institution.

**Table 3:** A comparative summary of some of the key features of peer review practices mapped to SAGE\*

PEER REVIEW PURPOSE	PUBLISHED OR AGREED PRINCIPLES	PANEL DISCUSSION ON EXCEPTION BASE	PEER ASSESSED	PANEL ENGAGEMENT WITH APPLICANT	SCORING CHAIR	INDEPENDENT CHAIR
<b>RESEARCH GRANT</b>						
ARC	Y	Y/N	Y	Y (Rejoinder)	N (SAC)	Y
NHMRC	Y	Y	Y	N	Y/N	Y
MRFF/Other	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y
<b>JOURNAL PAPER</b>	Y	N/A	Y	Y/N	N/A	N/A
<b>PROFESSIONAL STANDARD ACCREDITATION</b>	Y	N/A	Y Expert	Y	Y/N	Y
<b>RESEARCH IMPACT ASSESSMENT</b>						
CSIRO	Y	N/A	Internal	Internal	N/A	N/A
ARC	Y	N/A	Y	N	N/A	Y
NHMRC	Y	N/A	Internal	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>ATHENA SWAN</b>						
UK ATHENA SWAN	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
SAGE (BRONZE)	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N

\*Y = Yes, N = No, N/A = Not Applicable

## Summary of UK Review, UK Advance HE response and SAGE comments on Peer Assessment processes of the Athena Swan Charter:

UK REVIEW RECOMMENDATION	ADVANCE HE RESPONSE	SAGE COMMENTS
<p><b>R33</b> The current panels are replaced by Panels of Experts with significant experience of EDI as an academic or an EDI professional drawn from a collected pool of approved members.</p>	<p>We recognise the need to develop the current panel processes and need to consider the approach within the wider portfolio of Advance HE peer review services (Fellowship and Race Equality Charter for example).</p>	<p><b>R33</b> Expert Panels focused on EDI aspects is a model proposed for Cygnet Awards. Bronze and Silver Awards may be best served with a mixed membership of EDI experts and academic peers to maintain confidence in the system of “for the sector by the sector”.</p>
<p><b>R34</b> The Panels operate in a manner akin to grant awarding panels.</p>	<p>We will work with the Advance HE Peer Review Quality Committee to ensure that the new assessment processes developed for Athena Swan are reliable and rigorous, whilst ensuring their integration with the wider Advance HE offer.</p>	<p><b>R34</b> Grant panels <b>rank</b> applications for monetary award - AS award panels need to judge achievement to a standard of the Charter- is Yes or No (or maybe with amendments)? An independent decision maker is required in both models – it is not practical or reasonable for a panel of expert volunteers to be subject to an appeal. Who pays legal support?</p>
<p><b>R35</b> Awards will not be removed unless there is little or no evidence of progress against the action plan since the last application and no reports of other developments.</p>	<p>We have concerns that without careful implementation this could risk devaluing Athena Swan as a progressive charter. We will work to further streamline and define requirements for evidence of progress. We have concerns that satisfy and clarify this position in the new criteria and guidance.</p>	<p><b>R35</b> The SAGE Cygnet Awards design for the Bronze to Silver Award defines the requirements for progress and impact against institutional Key Priority Areas, which in turn will define the requirements to achieve and hold an Athena Swan Award in Australia.</p>
<p><b>R36</b> Unsuccessful applicants receive constructive feedback from the panel chair via the panel secretary to ensure they understand the revisions that are required to be successful upon resubmission.</p>	<p>We will build effective feedback mechanisms into the new assessment processes</p>	<p><b>R36</b> SAGE already undertakes post assessment feedback and conducts workshops to assist institutions to implement their feedback and prepare for resubmission, including on areas that require increased analysis and expertise (e.g. data analysis).</p> <p>SAGE will work with the sector to establish a “College Of Peers” which will have an active role in supporting the feedback process.</p>
<p><b>R38</b> Panel Chairs meet annually to review progress, identify any issues that have emerged and agree a report for submission to the Governance Committee.</p>	<p>We will develop an annual programme of development and feedback for both panel chairs and panelists. The quality assurance of panel chairs and associated processes are overseen by the Advance HE Peer Review Quality Committee.</p>	<p><b>R38</b> This can also be addressed with, for example, panels having independent Chairs, and feedback from the Chair providing SAGE with ongoing input for continuous improvement in processes. Following the Hartley Report findings, actions like the “College Of Peers” will inform SAGE reforms.</p>

# UK ADVANCE HE REVIEW OF ATHENA SWAN PROGRAM

The findings of the recent UK Review of the Athena Swan Charter as they related to peer review panels and their operation, including new formats introduced in April 2020, was also included in this analysis in terms of relevance to SAGE peer review processes and guidelines. These issues and feedback have been captured and provided to SAGE so as to inform work it is currently undertaking in these areas under separate processes.

The recent independent [review of the UK Athena Swan Charter](#) made five recommendations to Advance HE regarding the peer panel and outcome processes. These were based on concern of the review's Steering Group by the "*lack of confidence across the sector in the current system of reviewing and assessing applications*".

It is noted that Advance HE has accepted in principle these recommendations, (see summary of the UK review, Advance HE response and SAGE comments on page 19 of this report) and work will proceed to implement change as required.

The peer review process was endorsed with the emphasis on the panel composition being that of expert peers reflecting the gender equity, diversity and inclusion aspects being evaluated. This allows for a diverse panel covering subject expertise, discipline expertise, and STEMM and/ or HASS as appropriate.

In addition, Advance UK have recently announced a revision to the [Athena Swan principles](#) and changed some practices for the [November 2020 Athena SWAN Award assessment round](#). These reforms arise from their response to the findings of the independent review of the Athena Swan Charter.

Many of the areas targeted for reform and streamlining are similar to Findings in the Hartley Report and the implementation response of SAGE. In particular;

- recognition of the importance of the role of the Chair in guiding consensus;
- enhanced training of Panel Members and Chairs;
- panel guidance, training and templates being explicit in Advance HE's intention for the assessment processes to be supportive of applicants, with a particular focus on ensuring that feedback returned to applicants is clear, helpful and instructive; and
- a new process for supporting 'borderline' applicants to undertake minor revisions for approval by Chair's action following the panel meeting

As the UK system introduces these reforms, SAGE will work closely with Advance HE as Australian reforms are implemented to share best practice in peer assessment to ensure ongoing alignment with the new Athena Swan principles.

# SAGE CLOSING COMMENTS - IMPACT OF THE HARTLEY REPORT

Putting Gender on Your Agenda, the SAGE Pilot formative evaluation, established the effectiveness and adaptability of Athena Swan Framework as a mechanism to build organisational and sector capacity and foster transformational change in Australia. It also informed improvements to the program and service delivery. However, at the time, the implementation of the Pilot was not sufficiently advanced for the evaluation to offer any insights on the peer review process - a core element of Athena Swan.

The Hartley Report completes and concludes a comprehensive evaluation of the SAGE Pilot, in its entirety. Its findings reveal confidence in the rigour and credibility of the all-important peer review and inform key reforms to its processes and procedures moving forward.

The honest and constructive feedback offered by the participants in this evaluation is invaluable; it provides rich insights that will guide improvements to the SAGE peer review. The Hartley report will thus complement enhancements arising from the formative evaluation and credibly assure the quality and rigour of the SAGE peer review, a core pillar in accreditation and driving substantial and sustainable change.

The impact of the Hartley Report will be realised in novel and innovative Australian adaptations to the Athena Swan framework that will enhance its fitness-for-purpose and build an internationally reputable and benchmarked best practice through a well recognised "College Of Peers". Australia is already acknowledged as a leader in its adaptation of Athena SWAN; acting on the findings of the Hartley Report will cement Australia's higher education and research leadership on this front. SAGE will continue to engage and collaborate with the sector, ensuring ongoing evaluation of the program to stay responsive to the changing landscape.

# APPENDIX 1 :

## SAGE PROCESS FLOW CHART AND GLOSSARY OF ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF SAGE PEER REVIEW AND ACCREDITATION

### RESPONSIBILITIES

#### Panel Members

- Confirm availability to review applications and attend the face-to-face panel meeting
- Provide a summary of their relevant expertise (to assist in balancing panels)
- Report any conflicts of interest with SAGE member institutions
- Participate in panel member training sessions
- Report any additional conflicts of interest when applications are allocated for review
- Review all assigned applications in accordance with the assessment framework; provide pre meeting scores and comments by the nominated deadline
- During the meeting, lead the discussion for any application for which they are assigned as lead spokesperson; contribute to discussions for all other applications assigned to their panel Submit a new score against each criterion for an application after discussion within the panel
- After the meeting, review feedback for any application for which they are lead spokesperson
- Undertake any additional tasks as directed by the Chair or SAGE secretary during the meeting
- Maintain confidentiality about the applications, discussions, and review outcomes

#### Panel Chair

**In addition to the responsibilities of a panel member, the Chair is also required to:**

- Participate in panel Chair training sessions
- Conduct the business and outline procedures for the meeting; keep the meeting to schedule
- Review all applications assigned to their panel (Chairs will not be assigned as a lead spokesperson)
- Give structure to the deliberations and move the discussion toward a decision
- Ensure consistency of discussions and scores, amongst panel members and across applications
- Ensure discussions are professional, non-prejudicial, and focused solely on relevant content
- Manage any additional conflicts of interest that may be discovered during the meeting
- Make a clear recommendation to the SAGE Executive Director on behalf of the panel
- as to whether an institution should be accredited with an Award
- Be responsible for the quality and accuracy of the feedback for all applications assigned to their panel
- Liaise with SAGE on matters arising from the meeting; suggest updates for policy and/or procedure

## RESPONSIBILITIES

### Observer

- Confirm availability to attend the face-to-face panel meeting
- Report any conflicts of interest with SAGE member institutions
- Participate in panel member training sessions
- Attend the face-to-face panel meetings (Observers will not participate in application review or panel discussions)
- Suggest updates for policy and/or procedure
- Maintain confidentiality about the applications, discussions, and review outcomes

This is a non-voting role.

Note: observers may be called upon to participate in the review of applications and discussions in the event that a panel member needs to withdraw from the process prior to applications being distributed for review.

### Expert Advisor

- Report any conflicts of interest with SAGE member institutions
- Be available for consultation during the face-to-face panel meetings
- Review relevant sections of an application, if necessary
- Provide advice to the panel and answer any specific questions impartially
- Maintain confidentiality about the applications, discussions, and review outcomes

This is a non-voting role.

### SAGE Team

- Issue a call for panel member nominations before each review period
- Select panel members from nominations; augment with additional expertise, if required
- Select panel Chairs; identify a pool of expert advisors
- Collate and manage conflicts of interest
- Prepare and deliver training sessions for panel members and Chairs
- Set the application deadline; provide any relevant updates to SAGE members
- Manage the online tool for application submissions
- Assign applications to reviewers within the appropriate panels
- Collate and manage any additional conflicts of interest
- Reassign any applications where panel members/Chairs may have a conflict of interest
- Review and collate the pre-meeting scores and comments from panel members/Chairs
- Set meeting agenda
- Update review panel procedures and guidelines, if necessary, based on panel feedback
- Review and quality assure recommendations from the panels
- Announce award recipients; communicate feedback to all applicants

## RESPONSIBILITIES

### SAGE Secretary

- Manage the administrative and procedural activities for the duration of the review period
- Collate new scores from the panel members against each criterion for an application
- Record the panel's final consensus/majority view against each criterion for an application
- Document and consolidate the feedback for each application
- Document the panel's recommendation for each application
- Forward all recommendations to the SAGE Executive Director for a decision to confer
- Document key discussions, noting any suggestions for improvements to policy and/or procedure
- Liaise with the panel Chair on matters arising during the meeting

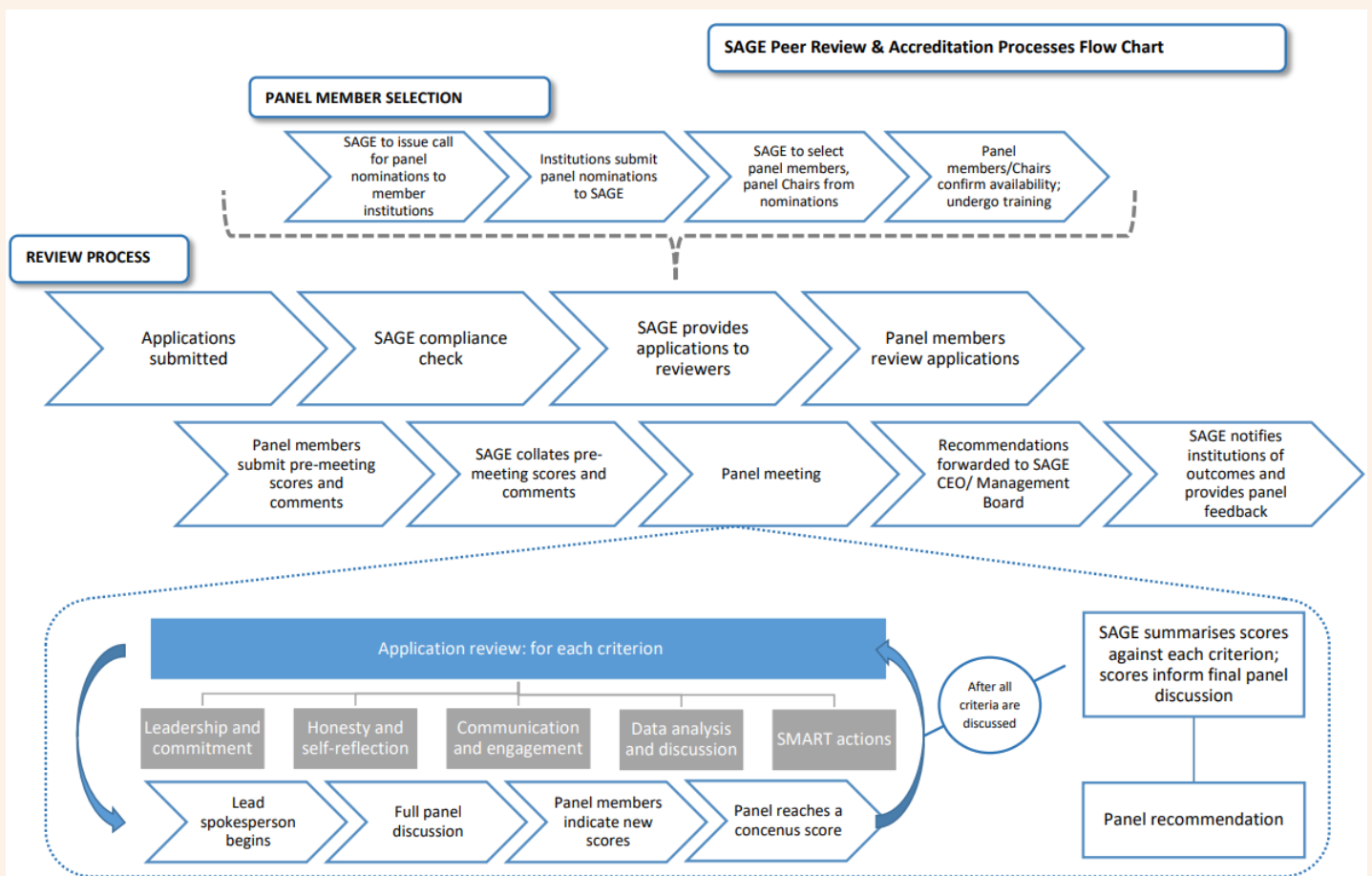
This is a non-voting role.

### SAGE Moderator

- Provide assistance and guidance on the application and assessment procedures for the duration of the review period
- Ensure the panel complies with the relevant policies, procedures, and guidelines
- Ensure consistency within and across panels of the assessment and decision processes

This is a non-voting role.

### SAGE PROCESS FLOW CHART:



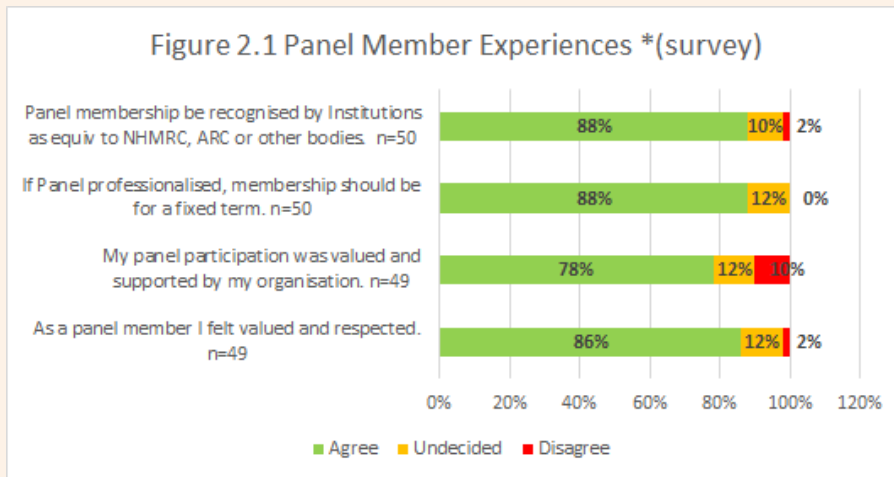


# APPENDIX 2:

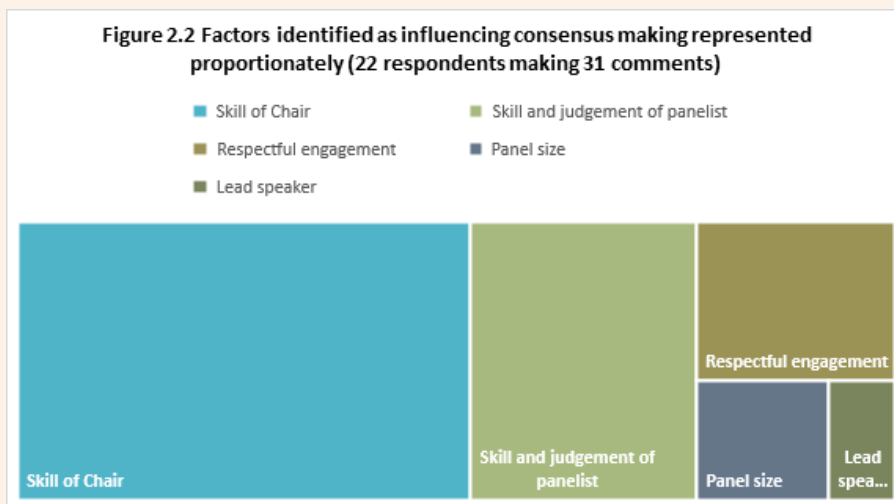
## EXTRACT OF SURVEY AND INTERVIEW DATA

### Peer Panels

The personal experiences of panel participation were captured by a series of survey questions relating to value, respect, and support, and views on other models for peer review processes. Panels were seen by the vast majority as operating with a culture of respect and inclusion.



Interviews identified **five factors as influencing consensus decision making** by panels (see Figure 2.2).



It was noted in general that the larger the panel, the more challenging consensus decision making is. This needs to be balanced with the need to ensure panels comprise the skill set and expertise required for the task at hand. More concern was noted with the large number of non-panel members in the room.

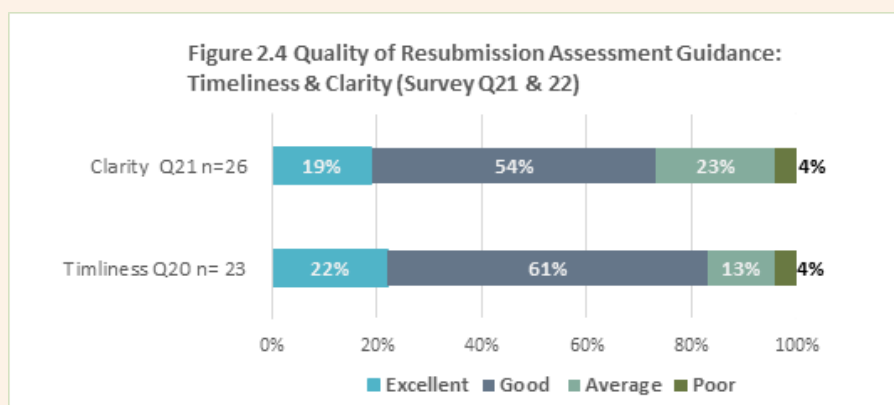
The availability of a pool of experienced and skilled Chairs and Panel Members is an important message for SAGE. Review of the Pilot pool of Chairs and Panel Members showed the vast majority only participated in one panel.



All but one person agreed that if SAGE could raise the status and prestige of the activity via a College of Peers, an honorarium for panel participation would not be needed.

### Resubmission Processes

Some 30 survey respondents had been involved in a resubmission of an application and of these 24 indicated they were involved in the actual assessment of a resubmission. Experiences of the resubmission guidance are summarised in Figure 2.4.



Feedback on resubmission assessments indicated that this had the greatest variation in experience and while the majority rated the guidance as Good or Above, the performance of the Guidance was ranked lower for clarity than timeliness. This is also reflected in the qualitative feedback.

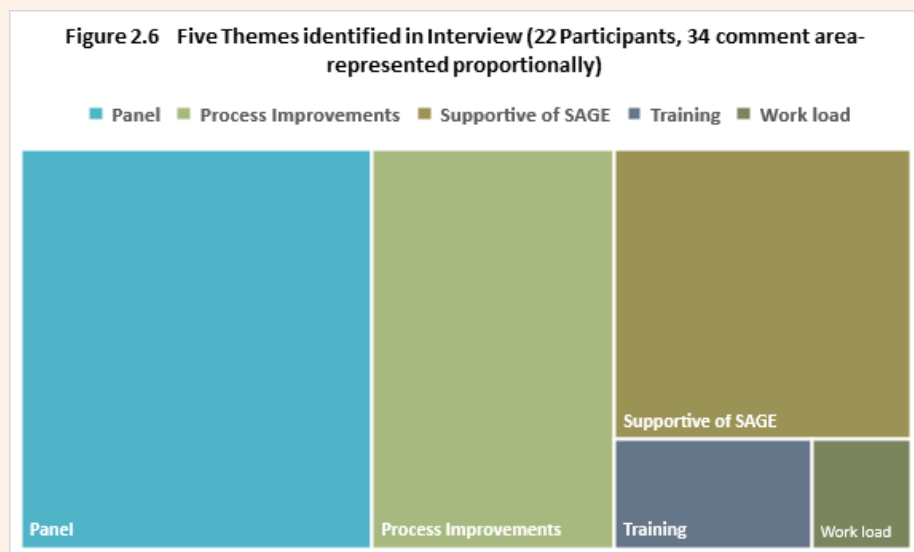
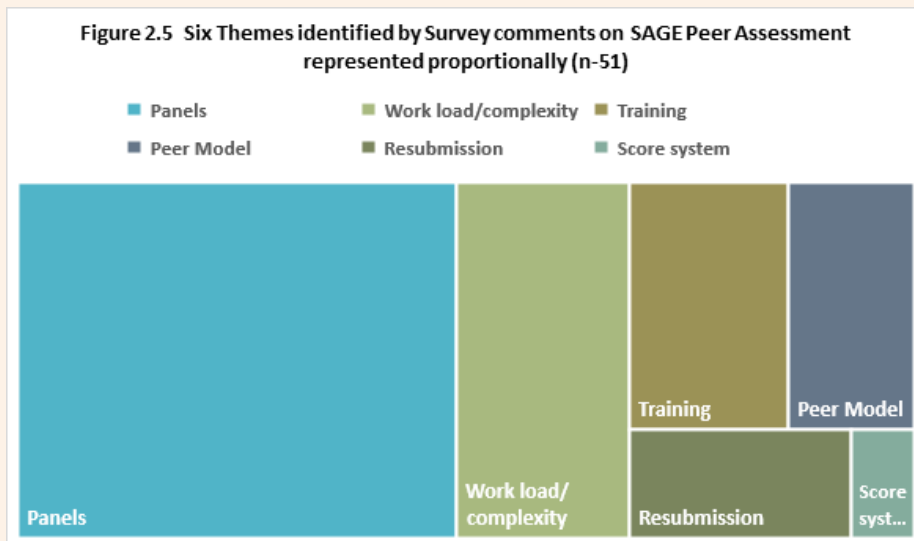
Interviews also identified resubmission as the most problematic of all processes in the Pilot with the 13 respondents collectively describing their experiences as bruising, poor, or unhappy. A lack of consistency with unclear guidance and processes was reported. In addition, there was a lack of transparency, including poor or no feedback to panel members of final outcomes, and a feeling of “behind-the-scenes/backroom decision” process in place.

This feedback covers a range of timing of panel meetings considering a resubmission, and thus while SAGE has addressed concerns from Cohort 1 in subsequent rounds. This feedback comes from a range of panels considering a resubmission. While SAGE has attempted to address concerns, the feedback points to a need to redesign the resubmission process. Further, the resubmission experiences of panel members, while noting it was a Pilot, would appear to be a major contributor to a lower levels of confidence participants had in the SAGE peer assessment process overall.

### Broad Issue Identification

Both survey (Figure 2.5) and interview (Figure 2.6) participants were invited to identify key themes for examination associated with peer review and accreditation processes.

These themes, while similar in trend, were examined further in the evaluation.



Workload and work complexity went to the size and complexity of the applications and hence the assessment framework. The majority found that 5 applications per assessor be seen as a maximum workload.

While the vast majority of academic and researcher panel members noted that peer assessment was common to their overall work (e.g. grant and journal peer review) the Pilot was just that - a pilot- and hence all were on a learning curve and that with practice comes expertise. Experienced peer assessor (for grants and journals) noted that assessments took a bit longer than they expected but that the time allocated was adequate.

There were comments on the good processes of SAGE secretariat, where adequate warning of the evaluation process, time required to be allocated to the task and clear due dates were provided well in advance. The applications were made available on the dates advised.

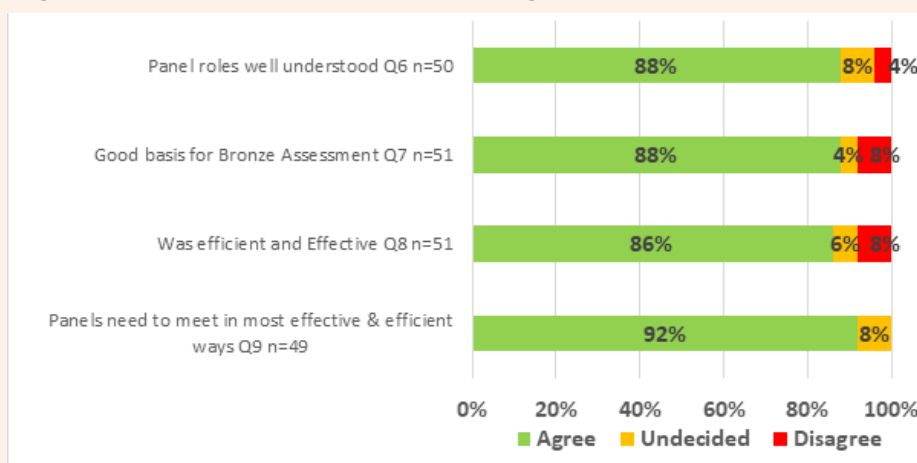
Some commented that there was an assumption of experience in peer review for all panel members by SAGE, and that panel members have equal skills. This was not the case in practice and there were suggestions for focused training/mentoring to be offered, if needed, for those topic experts who may have less experience in peer assessment practice.

Further, the extensive spreading of the assessor pool over the various assessment panels (see Figure 3.8) meant that only a few panel members (16%) participated in more than one panel. While this was to ensure inclusion of as many participants as possible, it in fact resulted in a reduced opportunity for assessors to “hone their skills” in the practice of SAGE peer assessment.

### Training Survey

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the SAGE training for assessment was effective and efficient in its delivery and equipped panelists with an understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Respondents confirmed that SAGE training provided a particularly good basis for assessment of the Bronze Award (see Figure 2.7).

**Figure 2.7 Effectiveness of SAGE Training**



Overall, there was strong support for, and recognition of quality delivery of, the training for panelists. Comments were sought on these questions as an option only, these additional comments supported the training as well presented and clear, but took the opportunity to provide constructive ideas for how training could be improved further.

Of the 51 written comments on training, some 67% were positive with no issues raised. Respondents indicated that training was “thorough and provided clear, equitable parameters”, made good use of examples and handy hints (colour-coding the application for the different criteria when reading), and that panelist were “comfortable in their roles”.

*...I was very impressed with the training and the trainers.  
The trainer Tamzen is excellent  
...training was very thorough and prepared panelists well for their role.*

It was suggested that training may be more efficient if delivered via Zoom conferencing given the travel and time many needed to attend what were “centralised” training sessions.