

30 August 2023

Professor Mary O'Kane
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel

email: AccordSubmissions@education.gov.au

Dear Professor O'Kane

Re: Australian Universities Accord Interim Report – Submission from the National Health and Medical Research Council

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the priority areas identified and issues raised in the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) notes the importance of this review to drive lasting reform in Australia's higher education system and deliver a system that meets the current and future needs of Australia and sets targets to achieve this.

As the Australian Government's lead agency for funding health and medical research, NHMRC invests in the creation of new knowledge about the origins, prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease, drives the translation of health and medical research into evidence-based health practice and policy, and provides guidance on responsible research practices and ethical issues that foster the highest standard of ethics, quality and integrity in health and medical research.

The Interim Report identifies five areas for priority action and raises a range of other issues to promote public debate and inform the panel's final recommendations. NHMRC supports bold action to facilitate long-term, sustainable change in Australia's higher education sector and seeks to facilitate an equitable and inclusive health and medical research workforce to take advantage of the full range of talent to address Australia's current and future health challenges. To this NHMRC delivers a range of activities that support the Accord's vision.

Capacity building

NHMRC believes that one researcher has the potential to improve millions of lives. NHMRC provides funding for research through our grant system, with a transparent peer-review process to determine how funding is allocated. The design of NHMRC's funding program aims to support a diverse range of researchers throughout different stages of their career.

For example, NHMRC helps address the future needs of the nation's health and medical research workforce by supporting outstanding health and medical graduates early in their career through the NHMRC Postgraduate Scholarships scheme which funds emerging researchers to attain a research based postgraduate degree (Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or a research master degree). This allows them to be trained to conduct research that is internationally competitive and develop a capacity for original independent research within Australia.

Research funding

All NHMRC's grant schemes are highly competitive and funded rates (the percentage of applications awarded funding) are low. The funded rate across all competitive schemes in 2022 was 14.9 percent.

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NHMRC grants, including grants that support the salaries of investigators, contribute to the cost of employing research personnel but do not cover the full cost of a researcher's salary or the full costs of doing the research.

NHMRC regularly receives feedback that the costs of research (direct and indirect) are increasing. Universities and medical research institutes (MRIs) that receive NHMRC grants report that they are finding it difficult to meet their obligations to supply additional funds required to support the research. NHMRC is not able to cover the full costs of research; doing so without a significant increase in funding would drastically reduce the number of grants that can be awarded. Careful consideration would also need to be given to what costs are reasonable to attribute to a research grant.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research and researchers

NHMRC is committed to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and contributing to better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, through a range of initiatives and guided by our Principal Committee Indigenous Caucus (PCIC).

NHMRC has a longstanding commitment to expend at least 5 percent of the Medical Research Endowment Account (MREA) annually on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research. On the advice of PCIC, NHMRC has this year committed to also expend 3.4 percent of the MREA annually on grants led by researchers of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. To meet these objectives, NHMRC offers priority funding as a special measure under the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*.

In 2021, NHMRC established a national network for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers known as the OCHRe (Our Collaborations in Health Research) Network. This \$10 million initiative brings together unique skills across culture, knowledge and health research to address the health priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The concept for the network was developed in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers through extensive consultation.

Gender equity

NHMRC is committed to achieving gender equity in its research grant funding program. Under the [NHMRC Gender Equity Strategy](#), NHMRC has taken steps to evaluate and adapt our policies and activities to ensure Australian Government investment improves gender equity outcomes for the health and medical research workforce.

NHMRC requires all [Administering Institutions](#)¹ to have policies, procedures and training in place to support research environments that are free from bias, discrimination and sexual or other harassment and procedures in place to fairly address any instances of such behaviour. Sector compliance is monitored through the [Institutional Annual Compliance Report](#), with shared learnings and [case studies](#) provided to promote better practice.

Since 2017, NHMRC has applied [structural priority funding](#) to its research funding outcomes to reduce disparities in the funding awarded to women and men. Developed as a special measure under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*, structural priority funding is currently used to fund additional high-quality research applications led by women that fall just below a scheme's budgeted funding line. In 2022, this initiative was expanded to include non-binary researchers to acknowledge that these researchers are likely to have experienced systemic disadvantage in their careers in similar ways to women.

From 2023 NHMRC aims to award an equal number of Investigator Grants to women and men across the senior levels of the scheme. This approach is expected to address gender disparities for women by:

- maintaining a strong pipeline of female researchers in the early and mid-career stages
- ensuring that women continue to be funded at later career stages in sufficient numbers to be visible, and

¹ NHMRC funding is awarded through Administering Institutions, which include universities, hospitals and medical research institutes that meet defined research governance requirements.

- making it attractive to recruit, retain and support women so that they may achieve the level of success that makes intervention unnecessary.

Research quality assessment

High quality research that is rigorous, transparent and reproducible contributes to scientific progress, is essential for the translation of outcomes into practical and clinical applications and evidence-based policy, delivers the highest possible value for research investment and promotes community trust in scientific findings.

NHMRC's [Research Quality Strategy](#) was developed with advice from NHMRC's Research Quality Steering Committee that advises NHMRC about enhancing the quality of NHMRC-funded research.

At NHMRC, we are aiming to shift the focus away from academic metrics and towards research quality and impact. We have:

- introduced a new framework for track record assessment from 2019, with the intent to shift track record assessment away from traditional academic metrics towards actual outcomes and impact.
- changed assessment of publications in grant applications to focus on the quality and contribution to science of up to 10 key publications rather than the full list of publications, and
- updated our assessment of leadership to recognise leadership contributions needed for research excellence, stewardship and cultures that foster diversity and inclusion.

NHMRC is also signatory of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) which notes caution around using metrics as surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles and to assess an individual scientist's contributions.

There is a coalition of European and other research organisations signing up to an [Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment](#). The agreement may be relevant for the Accord's considerations on research quality assessment.

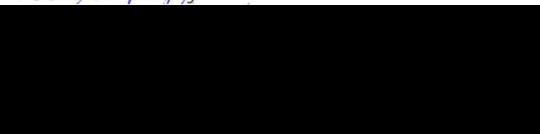
Encouraging collaboration

In addition to the major grant and targeted funding programs funded through the Medical Research Endowment Account, NHMRC encourages partnerships between researchers and end-users through the [NHMRC Research Translation Strategy 2022-2025](#). NHMRC also facilitates Australian researchers' participation in collaborative research projects with international researchers through bilateral and multilateral arrangements.

NHMRC's Partnership Project funding scheme provides funding to create new opportunities for researchers and policy makers to work together to define research questions, undertake research and implement the findings into policy and practice. Grants funded through Partnership Projects cover a range of research topics and leverage contributions from a diverse range of policy partners (details are available on funding partners on [NHMRC's website](#)). The scheme is relevant for the Accord's considerations of ways to encourage government to become an exemplary user of university research.

I agree that NHMRC's submission may be quoted, or otherwise referred to, in material relating to the review (such as the discussion paper and interim and final reports), published on the Department of Education's website and attributed to NHMRC. If you have any queries or wish to discuss NHMRC's submission, please contact me at governance@nhmrc.gov.au.

Yours sincerely



Professor Steve Wesselingh
Chief Executive Officer
National Health and Medical Research Council