



16 December 2022

Professor Mary O'Kane  
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel  
Email: [AccordSubmissions@education.gov.au](mailto:AccordSubmissions@education.gov.au)

Dear Professor O'Kane,

**Re: Consultation on the Review of Australia's Higher Education System Terms of Reference - Submission from the National Health and Medical Research Council**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission identifying priorities for the Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

I note that the Australian Government has committed to an Australian Universities Accord to drive lasting reform in Australia's higher education system. The Accord is a 12-month review of Australia's higher education system, led by the Minister for Education, on advice from the Australian Universities Accord Panel (the Panel) that you Chair. The Panel will make recommendations for Government, the higher education sector and other relevant stakeholders to deliver a higher education system that meets the current and future needs of Australia and sets targets to achieve this.

I am pleased to provide the attached initial submission to the review on behalf of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) on the priorities for the review.

**Use of NHMRC's submission**

I note that the attached submission will be used to inform the Panel's forthcoming discussion paper for release in early 2023, which will provide an opportunity to explore key issues in detail and gather data and evidence to inform the Panel's recommendations.

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.

**Questions**

If you have any queries or wish to discuss NHMRC's submission, please contact me at [governance@nhmrc.gov.au](mailto:governance@nhmrc.gov.au)

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Anne Kelso AO**  
Chief Executive Officer



# Submission: Consultation on the Review of Australia's Higher Education System Terms of Reference

## Introduction

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) provides this submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel (the Panel), on the priorities for the Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

## About NHMRC

NHMRC plays a unique role in the Australian health system, set out in the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992*. 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 and the promotion of health and wellbeing. NHMRC also drives the translation of health and medical research into evidence-based health practice and policy through clinical, public health and environmental health guidelines and other pathways. NHMRC also provides guidance on responsible research practices and ethical issues that fosters the highest standard of ethics, quality and integrity in health and medical research. NHMRC's range of activities gives it a unique breadth of influence on the quality and integrity of Australian health and medical research and its translation into evidence-based policy and practice.

Sustained investment through NHMRC's Medical Research Endowment Account (MREA) has underpinned Australia's outstanding record of productive health and medical research and the development of its internationally competitive research workforce. This investment through NHMRC provides the foundation of capability and quality in health and medical research on which the Government draws to meet Australia's medical research and innovation priorities through additional investments under the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF).

NHMRC's grant program encompasses a diverse portfolio of schemes that:

- fund across the spectrum of health and medical research, from basic science to translational research
- invest in people with outstanding research achievement and promise
- support the most innovative research to solve complex problems
- meet specific strategic objectives.

Research grants are awarded competitively based on NHMRC's rigorous peer review process that identifies the highest quality and most significant research. NHMRC's grant program supports both investigator-initiated and priority-driven research across all areas of biomedical science and health, which schemes structured to achieve specific goals – such as funding new ideas, clinical trials and cohort studies, or proof-of-concept studies to support commercial development.

NHMRC's grant program is structured to provide opportunities for multidisciplinary and collaborative research (including international collaborative research), early and mid-career researchers, women and non-binary researchers, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health



researchers. NHMRC recognises the importance of consumer and community involvement in health and medical research, which helps ensure research meets the health needs of the community.

NHMRC's grant program funds the direct costs of health and medical research undertaken in Australian universities, medical research institutes (MRIs), hospitals, public health networks and other organisations. NHMRC provides a contribution to the indirect costs of research for MRIs through the Independent Research Institutes Infrastructure Support Scheme.

The MRFF, established under the *Medical Research Future Fund Act 2015* (MRFF Act), provides grants of financial assistance to support health and medical research and innovation to improve the health and wellbeing of Australians. It operates as an endowment fund with the capital preserved in perpetuity, providing a long-term sustainable source of funding for research to improve health outcomes, quality of life and health system sustainability. While the Department of Health and Aged Care oversees the MRFF, NHMRC contributes its deep experience in the conduct of competitive grant programs to implement a significant proportion of grant opportunities offered through the MRFF. NHMRC's grant management system - Sapphire - aims to deliver efficient and effective support for grant application, assessment and management on behalf of NHMRC and other agencies (as a grants hub) and to reduce the burden on the research sector.

One of NHMRC's strengths is its governance structure and engagement with the health and medical research sector, greatly amplifying the agency's reach and intellectual resources, and keeping us connected with and responsive to the sector we support. NHMRC's Council and committees bring together the skills, experience and perspectives of people across the health system and the community, including governments, researchers, medical, nursing and allied health practitioners, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and research leaders, teaching and research institutions, health services, community health organisations, consumers and carers.

### Strategic priorities

NHMRC's strategic priorities are areas where NHMRC-led action can help ensure the highest quality and impact of health and medical research to build a healthy Australia, with a focus on how research is conducted and structural issues in the health and medical research sector. NHMRC's six strategic priorities for 2021–2024 are listed below.

#### *1. Promoting consumer and community involvement in health and medical research*

NHMRC works with the Consumers Health Forum of Australia and NHMRC's [Consumer and Community Advisory Group](#) to facilitate consumer and community involvement in health and medical research. NHMRC's current focus areas include increasing the involvement of consumer and community representatives in the review of targeted grant opportunities, and promoting the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, rural and remote, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities in health and medical research and care.

#### *2. Improving diversity and inclusion in the health and medical research workforce (including but not limited to support for gender equity, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and early and mid-career researchers)*

Guided by our [Gender Equity Strategy 2022–2025](#), NHMRC undertakes a range of activities to promote gender equity in Australia's health and medical research workforce. Most recently, NHMRC announced [new special measures](#) under the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* to address systemic disadvantage faced by female and non-binary applicants to NHMRC's Investigator





Grant scheme. We additionally allocate [structural priority funding](#) to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers in selected NHMRC grant schemes. NHMRC also liaises with OCHRe (the National First Nations Research Network) and supports its mission to strengthen capacity and capability amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers. This work is guided by our [Principal Committee Indigenous Caucus](#) and [Research Committee](#).

*3. Promoting international collaboration in health and medical research to achieve better outcomes for the Australian community*

NHMRC engages bilaterally and multilaterally with international research funding agencies, and in international fora that promotes high-quality open science and global health objectives.

*4. Streamlining and improving the effectiveness of peer review processes*

NHMRC's independent scientific peer review ensures we invest in meritorious health and medical research. We continually evaluate and improve our peer review processes, seeking an appropriate balance between rigour of review and burden on reviewers.

*5. Fostering research translation and impact of NHMRC-funded research*

NHMRC's focus is on promoting, communicating and measuring pathways from research to impact, as well as accelerating the translation of health and medical research into public policy, health-related systems and clinical practice and supporting the commercialisation of research discoveries, for the improvement of individual and population health.

NHMRC's [Research Impact Position Statement](#) describes our role within the broader health innovation system in generating research impact.

NHMRC's [Research Translation Strategy 2022-2025](#) outlines our three priorities:

1. Encourage partnership between researchers and end-users
2. Encourage and build capacity and capability in research translation
3. Maximise the use of high-quality research evidence for public benefit.

We work with partners to demonstrate the longer-term impacts of NHMRC-funded research, guided by advice from our [Health Research Impact Committee](#).

*6. Promoting the highest quality in research funded by NHMRC*

NHMRC's [Research Quality Strategy](#) supports high quality research by focusing on the education and training of researchers, and by providing guidance for institutions on the conduct of high-quality research. This work supplements and extends NHMRC's leadership role in the promotion of the highest standards of research integrity through co-authorship and oversight of the [2018 Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research](#).

## Priorities for the review

NHMRC provides the following comments on the priority issues within the key areas outlined in the review's terms of reference. NHMRC's comments are arranged under the key areas of the review.



### **Key Area 6: Quality and sustainability**

NHMRC offers the following suggested priorities in this area:

- Importance of investment in research infrastructure and the indirect costs of research to maximise the value and benefits of the significant Government investments made through competitive research funding (e.g. through NHMRC, the MRFF and the Australian Research Council).
- Opportunities to strengthen the quality and integrity of research in Australia.

### **Key Area 7: Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability.**

NHMRC offers the following suggested priorities in this area:

- Mapping and supporting Australia's research capacity and the research workforce pipeline.
- Improving diversity and inclusion in the research workforce.
- Supporting the full spectrum of research activity, including recognising:
  - o The importance of basic and discovery research to new knowledge and innovation
  - o The value of ideas generation from within the research sector (and investigator-initiated research proposals), as well as priority-driven research.
- Recognising the multiple pathways to research translation and research impact on society and the economy (such as the improvement of health), which include but are not limited to research commercialisation.