

Submission to the Draft National Health and Medical Research Strategy consultation



8 October 2025

Executive Summary

The University of Melbourne (the University) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Draft National Health and Medical Research Strategy (the Strategy) consultation. The development of the Strategy is a timely and necessary step toward a more coordinated, equitable, and impactful research ecosystem.

The University commends the National Strategy Team on the comprehensive, action-orientated nature of the Strategy. The Strategy sets out a bold vision for national impact, but its strong emphasis on translation, implementation, and commercialisation risks overshadowing the role of discovery research. Foundational science, which drives long-term innovation and knowledge creation, must be more clearly recognised and supported throughout the Strategy. Our recommendations for improvement are as follows:

Recommendation 1: Add to the 'Values' section a value titled 'Discovery & Innovation'.

Recommendation 2: Add to the 'Goals' section a goal titled 'Lead the globe in discovery research: Advance the frontiers of knowledge and generate the insights that fuel innovation, progress, and societal benefit.'

Recommendation 3: Ensure the value of discovery research is explicitly embedded across all focus areas.

Recommendation 4: Ensure the National Strategy Advisory Council is representative and transparent.

Recommendation 5: Address the need for a specific rapid priority-setting and funding mechanism for pandemic and public health emergency contexts.

Recommendation 6: The Strategy should include an initiative to fund the full indirect costs of research translation and of consumer and community involvement in research.

Recommendation 7: Actions in 'Focus Area 2' must ensure Consumer and Community Involvement (CCI) is applied appropriately across different research contexts.

Recommendation 8: Add to 'Focus Area 3' an action to strengthen Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, and Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance practices.

Recommendation 9: Amend 'Focus Area 4' to acknowledge translation of research into national health policy, public health and prevention programs.

Recommendation 10: Add to 'Focus Area 5' an action to enhance Australia's capacity to rapidly adopt global best practices and implement cutting-edge knowledge and technologies.

Recommendation 11: Amend the 'Workforce' enabler and proposed Australian Health and Medical Research Workforce Plan to:

- Recognise the role of the research support workforce.
- Invest in strategies to retain top research talent and attract global leaders.

Recommendation 12: Add to the 'Funding' enabler the initiative to develop an innovative funding model titled *New Frontiers*, which provides time-limited, outcomes-focused funding to priority-aligned research programs that have demonstrated proof-of-concept success. This funding would support the scale and spread of these programs across Australia by bridging the gap between early-stage MRFF funding and integration into routine clinical practice or industry adoption.

Recommendation 13: Develop the Health and Medical Research Infrastructure Roadmap in close alignment with the National Research Infrastructure Roadmap.

Our response

1. Vision

Does the proposed Vision establish the right aspirations for the future of health and medical research in Australia? If not, what would you suggest instead?

Yes, the proposed Vision establishes appropriate aspirations for the future of health and medical research in Australia. The University supports the Vision's focus on equity, fostering a healthy Australia, and championing research's role in health and wellbeing.

2. Values

Do you agree with the proposed Values? If not, what would you suggest instead?

The University strongly proposes that the value of discovery research be more effectively and prominently reflected in the Strategy. We understand the Strategy aims to focus and coordinate efforts of health and medical research rather than diminish investigator-led science, as emphasised by Ms Rosemary Huxtable AO PSM in Webinar 3. However, the Strategy's language, structure, and policy proposals overwhelmingly prioritise the application of existing knowledge via translation, clinical implementation, and commercialisation, while neglecting the discovery science that generates new knowledge.

Currently, discovery research is only mentioned in the context of balancing investment with priority research areas or to describe the research continuum (i.e. "driving research excellence from discovery science to translation" or "from discovery research to manufacture and marketing"). A more explicit acknowledgement of its intrinsic value would enhance the Strategy's overall message and intent.

Discovery research is an indisputable and foundational driver of medical research quality. Without sustained investment in discovery, the pipeline of scientific knowledge, intellectual property, and innovation (essential for the development of new drugs, devices, and other health technologies) will be critically depleted. Relying on other sectors, countries, or industry to lead in discovery risks creating long-term dependency and outsourcing Australia's future health breakthroughs. This would erode our sovereign capability in research and development, undermining national resilience and competitiveness in the global health innovation landscape.

A vibrant discovery sector is not simply an essential prerequisite for the pipeline of translation and clinical health advancement; it is an equal and essential pillar of a 'healthy' research system.

- **Recommendation 1:** Add to the Values section a value titled 'Discovery & Innovation'.

3. Goals

Do you agree with the proposed Goals? If not, what would you suggest instead?

Following on from our response to the Values question, the draft Strategy is primarily structured around achieving defined societal and economic outcomes. While this is important, it risks overshadowing the value of open-ended, curiosity-driven research that fuels fundamental discovery.

We recommend that the Strategy includes a specific goal that explicitly recognises and supports discovery research as a foundational driver of Australia's future research capability and impact.

- **Recommendation 2:** Add to the 'Goals' section a goal titled 'Lead the globe in discovery research: Advance the frontiers of knowledge and generate the insights that fuel innovation, progress, and societal benefit.'

4. Focus Areas

Do you agree with the proposed Focus Areas? If not, what would you suggest instead?

Do you agree with the proposed Actions associated with each of the Focus Areas? If not:

- what would you suggest instead?
- what areas of improvement would you identify?

While the University supports the proposed focus areas and actions, we strongly recommend that the safeguarding and advancement of discovery research be explicitly embedded across all focus areas in the Strategy.

Foundational, investigator-led research is the engine of long-term innovation and must be recognised as essential to every stage of the research pipeline. This includes strengthening support for high-risk, high-reward research, protecting and growing discovery research funding, and investing in enabling infrastructure and platforms.

Rather than creating a separate focus area, integrating discovery research throughout the Strategy will ensure it is not siloed, but instead recognised as a critical driver of Australia's future health, economic resilience, and global competitiveness.

- **Recommendation 3:** Ensure the value of discovery research is explicitly embedded across all focus areas.

Focus area 1: Build a vibrant research system that delivers for the nation

To ensure a balanced and effective research ecosystem, it is crucial that the National Strategy Advisory Council represents a broad range of interests. Specifically, the council must include strong voices from across discovery research and investigator-led projects through to translation (including preventative, public health and health systems) research. This diverse representation is essential to prevent potential biases in priority-setting and funding decisions.

Additionally, transparency in the priority-setting process is paramount. By implementing a clear and open approach to determining research priorities, we can foster trust and ensure that all sectors of the research community are fairly considered. These measures will help create a more inclusive and equitable research landscape that maximises Australia's scientific potential and serves our national interests more effectively.

We strongly endorse the coordinated horizon scanning approach outlined in the Strategy, along with the proposed collaboration with the Australian Centre for Disease Control. To be most effective, research horizon scanning should be integrated with disease surveillance and One Health initiatives at state, national, and regional levels. This alignment will ensure that research capacity can be rapidly mobilised to respond to

emerging health threats and will support research efforts that complement and enhance disease surveillance activities.

- **Recommendation 4:** Ensure the National Strategy Advisory Council is representative and transparent.
- **Recommendation 5:** Address the need for a specific rapid priority-setting and funding mechanism for pandemic and public health emergency contexts.

Focus area 2: Embed research processes that are modern, efficient and consumer centred

Unified Governance of MREA and MRFF:

The University supports the unified management of the Medical Research Endowment Account (MREA) and the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF). Greater coordination between these schemes will improve resource efficiency, reduce duplication, and enhance the impact of investments. A key opportunity of a unified system is the simplification of application and reporting processes to ensure researchers only need to provide information that is needed, and nothing more.

At the same time, it is essential to maintain a balanced funding portfolio. Discovery and investigator-led research must be protected to ensure that foundational research continues to thrive. The MREA's role in supporting this type of research is critical and must not be diminished.

Resourcing Consumer Engagement:

Effective consumer engagement in research requires investment in the indirect costs of professional research support staff with expertise in how to do this well, and adequate support provided to researchers and institutions in developing consumer engagement expertise. This includes allocating resources for training, guidance materials, and dedicated staff time for relationship-building with consumers.

By recognising and funding these indirect costs, we can ensure meaningful consumer participation, establish effective feedback loops, and ultimately enhance the quality and relevance of our research. Failure to invest in these areas risks superficial engagement and missed opportunities for impactful, consumer-informed research. We must also be mindful of the risk of exhausting consumer goodwill through repeated, short-term engagements.

Supporting Research Translation:

Translation of research into practice, policy, and industry depends on a range of enabling activities such as clinical trial coordination, regulatory compliance, data management, community engagement, management of intellectual property (IP) and commercialisation support. These activities carry significant indirect costs that are often unfunded, forcing institutions to cross-subsidise and threatening long-term sustainability.

Funding these indirect costs is essential to strengthen Australia's capacity to move discoveries into real-world impact and maximise the return on public investment.

Appropriate Application of Consumer Engagement:

The draft Strategy rightly elevates Consumer and Community Involvement (CCI) as a central feature of the research ecosystem, particularly in Focus Area 2. However, the proposed deep integration of CCI across the entire research pipeline risks unintentionally disadvantaging discovery research. By design, consumer engagement tends to favour research with clear, tangible outcomes, often in clinical or translational contexts,

making it less suited to open-ended, curiosity-driven science. In addition, CCI may not be appropriate for certain research processes that requires highly specialised knowledge.

The Strategy must ensure that CCI is applied appropriately and proportionately across different research contexts, and that mechanisms are in place to safeguard the visibility and value of discovery research within a consumer-centred framework.

- **Recommendation 6:** The Strategy should include an initiative to fund the full indirect costs of research translation and of consumer and community involvement in research.
- **Recommendation 7:** Actions in ‘Focus Area 2’ must ensure Consumer and Community Involvement (CCI) is applied appropriately across different research contexts.

Focus area 3: Accelerate research and its translation to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ health and wellbeing

Indigenous knowledge and data must be safeguarded, with research conducted in ways that uphold cultural integrity and empower communities. Embedding Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property and Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles in research agreements will ensure Indigenous-led governance over data and knowledge.

- **Recommendation 8:** Add to ‘Focus Area 3’ an action to strengthen Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, and Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance practices.

Focus area 4: Drive impact through research translation, innovation and commercial solutions

We are concerned by the absence of any reference to the translation of research into national health policy, public health and prevention programs. This is a critical and well-established area of translational research, spanning both clinical and public health domains, and must be explicitly recognised. Elevating this focus will help ensure that research not only generates knowledge but also drives disease prevention, optimises population health, is cost effective and delivers high-value, evidence-informed care to Australians.

This section should explicitly recognise “policy and guidelines” as a key pathway for research translation, particularly relevant for public health and health systems research. Unlike industry-focused translation, which often centres on commercialisation, policy translation ensures research informs real-world decision-making and delivers population-level impact.

- **Recommendation 9:** Amend ‘Focus Area 4’ to acknowledge translation of research into national health policy, public health and prevention programs.

Focus area 5: Position to be ready for future needs and challenges

The ‘Global partnerships’ section can be improved by addressing the need for Australia to have the capacity to absorb global best practice, rather than just be a leading partner in our region. While we generate significant research locally, it’s crucial to recognise that we can only produce a small percentage of global knowledge. Therefore, our research community must be well-connected internationally to rapidly absorb and implement cutting-edge practices and knowledge from around the world.

The swift adoption of mRNA technology during the COVID-19 pandemic serves as an excellent case study. This rapid response, underpinned by government support, demonstrated our ability to quickly assimilate

external expertise and establish new areas of competence across the country. Enhancing this absorptive capacity should be a key focus in our global partnerships and strategy.

The Strategy should explicitly distinguish and support two complementary global engagement priorities: (1) Indo-Pacific leadership through sustained investment in research partnerships, collaboration, and capacity building to strengthen regional development, health security, and democratic resilience; (2) Global alignment by actively absorbing and reflecting international best practice to ensure Australia's research system remains globally informed, competitive, and impactful.

- **Recommendation 10:** Add to 'Focus Area 5' an action to enhance Australia's capacity to rapidly adopt global best practices and implement cutting-edge knowledge and technologies.

5. Enablers

Do you agree with the proposed Enablers? If not, what would you suggest instead?

Do you agree with the proposed Enabling Initiative associated with each of the Enablers? If not:

- what would you suggest instead?
- what areas for improvement would you identify?

The University agrees with the proposed enablers; however, we recommend the following improvements.

Workforce Enabling Initiative: An Australian Health and Medical Research Workforce Plan

The Strategy and Workforce Plan should recognise that indirect costs of research include professional (non-researcher) staff. Professional staff with specialist expertise in areas such as community engagement, co-design, commercialisation, intellectual property, regulation and policy, piloting, manufacturing, and stakeholder partnerships are critical human capital in the research-to-translation continuum. These roles are not optional or ancillary, they are essential to ensuring that research discoveries are protected, developed safely and effectively, and delivered at scale to benefit Australians. Investing in this workforce is fundamental to safeguarding the integrity of the research process and maximising its impact. Providing adequate funding to cover indirect costs of research support staff is particularly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, who need support given the demands placed on them.

Another critical area that warrants greater attention is the retention and attraction of research talent within the Australian ecosystem. The federal government invests significantly in training and funding researchers, yet more strategic focus is needed to ensure that our best minds remain in Australia. Strengthening career pathways, funding stability, and research infrastructure can help retain top talent and prevent brain drain. At the same time, Australia should actively pursue opportunities to attract global research leaders and encourage expatriate Australian researchers to return, enriching our national capability and reinforcing our position as a world-class destination for health and medical research.

- **Recommendation 11:** Amend the 'Workforce' enabler and proposed *Australian Health and Medical Research Workforce Plan* to:
 - Recognise the role of the professional research support workforce.
 - Invest in strategies to retain top research talent and attract global leaders.

Funding Enabling Initiative: Innovative funding models

The health and medical research sector is plagued by fragmented, short-term funding schemes, often leading to a proliferation of pilot projects without sustainable pathways to scale. This approach discourages collaboration and national-scale translation of successful initiatives, while risking the depletion of limited consumer and community engagement resources, particularly for priority populations like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and workforce instability. It also creates pockets of excellence across Australia that are incentivised to compete rather than collaborate.

A critical gap exists in funding mechanisms for successful research programs that have demonstrated impact over several years to enable scale up and implementation nationally. Programs like the Australian Centre for Accelerating Diabetes Innovations (ACADI), a \$10 million MRFF funded program, deliver significant health outcomes and value nationally (see our response to Example Projects question below) and in many ways (research, co-design, new products devices and services, clinical trials, policy and guideline changes). However, they lack avenues for continued funding to sustain and amplify the impact.

The current funding gap is a critical barrier to the systemic change needed to translate research findings into durable, sustained improvements in models of care and health outcomes for all Australians. Without targeted investment in this next phase, research risks stalling before it can deliver the new products, policy reforms, practice innovations, and elevated standards of care that Australians deserve. This is not a 'nice to have' it is an essential step if research is to fulfil its promise and deliver tangible, equitable impact in improving health for all Australians and a sustainable healthcare system.

A mechanism is needed to provide additional support to sustain and expand impactful programs, moving them beyond the 'pilot' phase to sustained, system-wide improvements. Sustained funding for successful projects would provide certainty for establishing national and community level collaborations, enable translation and scaling of innovations to more communities, allow for building and maintaining community partnerships and trust, and support the implementation of learning health system approaches.

We recommend developing a **New Frontiers** funding stream from unallocated disbursements from the MRFF that provides the long-term funding to successful, mission-aligned national research programs.

This New Frontiers funding stream would support projects that have demonstrated success in the proof-of-concept phase, providing time-limited support to enable their transition into routine clinical practice or industry adoption. The intent is to bridge the gap between early-stage MRFF investment and sustainable implementation, with a clear end point in funding for programs to transition from 'innovative' to 'established' status.

The funding model could align with the proposal in the Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD), Issues Paper 1, for 10-year mission-based research project funding. This model offers a framework for aligning national health and medical research efforts with broader strategic coordination and sustained impact.

- **Recommendation 12:** Add to the 'Funding' enabler the initiative to develop an innovative funding model titled *New Frontiers*, which provides time-limited, outcomes-focused funding to priority-aligned research programs that have demonstrated proof-of-concept success. This funding would support the scale and spread of these programs across Australia by bridging the gap between early-stage MRFF support and integration into routine clinical practice or industry adoption.

Infrastructure Enabling Initiative: Australian Health and Medical Research Infrastructure Roadmap

The University supports the proposed Health and Medical Research Infrastructure Roadmap as a valuable initiative for coordinating infrastructure investment and funding schemes. However, we express concern about potential duplication of efforts. While we recognise the importance of discipline-specific coordination, we caution that focusing solely on health and medical research may inadvertently lead to fragmentation rather than integration. Our primary concerns are:

1. The risk of duplicating efforts already undertaken by the 5-yearly National Research Infrastructure Roadmap.
2. The multi-disciplinary nature of research infrastructure, which often serves multiple fields beyond health and medical research.

We recommend that the Health and Medical Research Infrastructure Roadmap be developed in close alignment with existing national frameworks, particularly the National Research Infrastructure Roadmap. This approach should explicitly recognise and leverage the cross-disciplinary nature of research infrastructure, promoting integration, maximising resource utilisation, and avoiding duplication across different research domains.

- **Recommendation 13:** Develop the Health and Medical Research Infrastructure Roadmap in close alignment with the National Research Infrastructure Roadmap.

6. Priority-ranking of Actions and Enabling Initiatives

Please review the Actions (page 15) and Enabling Initiatives (pages 39, 41, 43, 45) proposed in the draft National Strategy. Identify your top 3, in order of importance for you or the organisation you represent.

Please provide a brief explanation of why the selected Actions/Enabling Initiatives are priorities for you/your organisation, and the impact successful implementation could generate.

The three actions and enabling initiatives the University believes are the most important for achieving the Vision and Goals outlined in the draft Strategy are:

1. **Design innovative funding models:**
New funding approaches are crucial to support long-term, impactful and cutting-edge research. This would enable sustained support for successful programs to facilitate the transition from pilot projects to scalable, national initiatives and fund the indirect costs of discovery and investigator-led research to ensure sustainability of this vital component of the research system.
2. **An Australian Health and Medical Research Workforce Plan:**
A coordinated, forward-looking workforce plan is essential to ensure Australia has the talent, skills, and capacity needed to deliver high-impact research across the full pipeline, from discovery to translation. It will help address current workforce challenges, support career sustainability, and build a diverse, future-ready research community.
3. **Research translation:**
Enhancing the translation of research findings into practical applications is essential for improving health outcomes. This involves supporting the indirect costs required to strengthen pathways from discovery to clinical practice, policy implementation, and commercialisation, ensuring that research benefits reach patients and the healthcare system more efficiently.

7. Governance

Do you agree with the proposed National Strategy Advisory Council?

- o If not, what would you suggest instead?

The University endorses the governance model proposed in the Strategy.

We suggest the National Strategy Advisory Council include representation from discovery research stakeholders, as well as universities and research institutes, and research translation stakeholders. In addition, the design of the National Strategy Advisory Council incorporates mechanisms ensuring transparency in decision-making processes. This includes national priority setting, evaluation procedures, and modifications to investment practices.

In addition, the Strategy should clarify how its governance arrangements will intersect with broader research coordination mechanisms proposed under the SERD.

8. Metrics

What key indicators do you consider should be used to measure the success and impact of the National Strategy? Over what time periods should these be measured?

The University supports the Strategy's measurement approach and timeframes. We emphasise the need for metrics that accurately capture how health and medical research impacts broader systems like healthcare, global partnerships, and the economy. This alignment will ensure that the measurement framework accurately reflects the direct and indirect contributions of the health and medical research sector to these wider systems, providing a more precise evaluation of the Strategy's effectiveness in achieving its intended outcomes.

9. Other considerations

Are there other challenges, opportunities or trends that the National Strategy should address?

The Government should commit to fully disbursing the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) each year in line with the advice of the Future Fund Board of Guardians and ensure that MRFF grants support both the direct and indirect costs of research. At present, significant MRFF funds remain undistributed, despite the urgent need for investment in Australia's health and medical research system. Under-disbursement places unnecessary strain on universities and research institutes, which are already subsidising infrastructure and workforce costs from other income streams. Fully utilising the MRFF's available capacity will maximise returns on public investment, strengthen research sustainability, and accelerate translation of discoveries into health, economic and societal benefits.

10. Strategy impact

How might the National Strategy influence the activities and decision-making at your organisation or in your community? What would be required for it to have a positive impact?

The National Strategy has the potential to significantly influence our strategic priorities, research partnerships, and investment decisions. It would guide our alignment with national health priorities, support more effective collaboration across sectors, and strengthen our capacity to train and retain a skilled and diverse research workforce.

For the Strategy to have a positive and lasting impact, it must be accompanied by:

1. Sustainable and predictable funding across the research pipeline, from discovery to translation.
2. Clear mechanisms for coordination and governance across jurisdictions, sectors, and the research system.
3. Incentives and support for collaboration and impact, particularly with health services, communities, and industry.

11. Example projects

Do you have suggestions for projects that highlight best practice in the areas highlighted in the Values, Goals, Focus Areas and Enablers in the National Strategy? Please provide links to published information, or contact details where available.

Australian Centre for Accelerating Diabetes Innovations Research Centre (ACADI)

ACADI is a four-year \$10 million MRFF funded virtual collaborative diabetes centre uniting over 60 partners and supporters spanning all Australian States and Territories and 4 international sites. ACADI includes Academic Partners, Advocacy Groups, Health Services and Industry Partners with a shared vision to benefit people with diabetes at each stage from diagnosis through to its devastating complications.

ACADI's purpose is to deliver novel interventions for timely diagnosis, prevention and treatment of diabetes and its complications. Their research and development platform, national training program, and sustainable model will increase quality of life and life expectancy for all Australians living with diabetes and its complications. Furthermore, ACADI specifically addresses equity in diabetes related healthcare with targeted initiatives to ensure all Australians. In under three years, ACADI has made significant progress toward increasing access to care and accelerating innovation in the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of diabetes. They have:

- Engaged 400+ clinical trial participants from rural, remote and at-risk populations
- Trained more than 1300 diabetes researchers, nurses, educators, allied health professionals and clinicians through expert seminars and summits
- In the six month period before July 2025, ACADI helped 850+ people from ages 1 to 102 years through the Victorian virtual diabetes emergency service, leading to:
 - 85% diversion rate from busy Emergency Departments
 - 94% patient satisfaction rate with the service
 - Each hospital admission for diabetes diverted saves on average \$11,817 and frees up 3.5 bed days
- Initiated ketone testing in Victorian Ambulances to support point of care testing and rapid identification of ketoacidosis.



Further information: https://medicine.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/5336039/ACADI-Impact-Report_FINAL-30072025.pdf

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Evidence for Action on Cold, Damp and Mould in Australian Homes

This project, funded through a 2020 NHMRC Ideas Grant, exemplifies impactful discovery research with strong policy relevance. Led by the University of Melbourne's Centre for Health Policy, the research investigated the health impacts of cold, damp, and mould in Australian homes, conditions that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

The team generated foundational evidence linking poor housing conditions to respiratory illness and other health risks, which has since informed national policy discussions and advocacy for minimum housing standards. This project demonstrates how discovery research can uncover under-recognised public health risks and drive meaningful change in housing and health policy.

Further information: <https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/research-groups/centre-for-health-policy/healthy-housing/evidence-for-action-on-cold,-damp-and-mould-in-australian-homes>

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