



Fact Sheet: Benefit for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health question – Centres of Research Excellence pilot

As a recommended action under NHMRC's [Road Map 3: A strategic framework for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health through research](#) and associated [Action Plan 2021–2024 Triennium](#), a review of the [Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria \(IREC\)](#) was undertaken in 2023. This included national consultation with the feedback considered by the Principal Committee Indigenous Caucus (PCIC) and a [consultation report](#) released in December 2023.

A key finding from the Review, which was endorsed by PCIC, is that there is strong support for adoption of an approach where all NHMRC applications need to answer a question about how the proposed research will benefit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health. This is aligned with the [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#), which aims to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and governments to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians.

What is happening?

NHMRC is piloting the introduction of a question that all applicants will need to address in the Centres of Research Excellence grant opportunity:

How does your application benefit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health and contribute to Closing the Gap targets?

Applicants will need to clearly describe how the proposed research could benefit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health and contribute to Closing the Gap targets (not exceeding 2,000 characters).

The response will be considered by peer reviewers in the overall assessment of the application, using the existing scheme-specific assessment criteria (it does not alter the weighting of the assessment criteria), in the context of the relevant field of research.

Why is this happening?

One of NHMRC's [health priorities](#) is promoting wellness and health equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The desired outcome of introducing this new question across all applications is to encourage the consideration of how all proposed health and medical research could benefit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health and contribute to [Closing the Gap targets](#).

In 2019, the Heath Research Council of New Zealand announced a similar initiative where all applications must describe how their proposed research contributes to Māori health advancement. The information provided about the research proposal's potential to advance Māori health is scored against the [Māori Health Advancement](#) criterion. In contrast, the response to NHMRC's new question will be considered in the overall assessment of the application against the existing scheme-specific criteria.

Is this replacing the Indigenous Research Excellence Criteria (IREC) assessment?

No, the IREC process is separate to the new question and will remain unchanged. The IREC will continue to apply for applications where a focus of the research effort and/or capacity building is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

What if my research does not specifically benefit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health?

Peer reviewers will be looking for affirmation that applicants have carefully considered whether their proposed research could benefit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health or contribute to Closing the Gap targets. If you feel that your proposed research does not have a specific benefit for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health, you must clearly justify this in the response to the question. The appropriateness of responses will be considered by expert peer reviewers in the overall assessment of the application within the specific context of the research and where it is positioned along the research pathway.

Will any guidance be provided to applicants and peer reviewers?

Yes, guidance that has been developed in consultation with PCIC will be provided to:

- applicants on how to respond to this new question. This will be included in the Centres of Research Excellence Grant Guidelines and in this fact sheet.
- peer reviewers on how to consider the responses in the overall assessment of the application. This will be included in the Centres of Research Excellence Peer Review Guidelines.

What should I include in my response to the question?

All applications must describe how their proposed research could benefit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health and contribute to progress against the [targets](#) under the [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#). The potential health benefit(s) of the project can be demonstrated by addressing an important health issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Applicants are encouraged to refer to the [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031](#), which identifies 3 health-specific targets:

- close the gap in life expectancy within a generation by 2031
- increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91% by 2031
- significant and sustained reduction in suicide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people towards zero.

There may be one or more health and wellbeing related benefits for individuals and communities, including increased knowledge, improved evidence-based policy outcomes, enhanced social and cultural wellbeing, engagement in employment and training, greater economic development, increased capacity and capability in work and research activities and improved quality of life. Consideration should be given to potential short-term, medium-term and/or longer-term benefits, which may be direct and/or indirect.

Peer reviewers will be looking for affirmation that applicants have carefully considered whether their proposed research could benefit Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health or contribute to Closing the Gap targets. If you feel that your proposed research does not have a specific benefit for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health, you must clearly justify this in the response to the question (see Example 1 below). The appropriateness of responses will be considered by expert peer reviewers in the overall assessment of the application within the specific context of the research and where it is positioned along the research pathway.

Applicants may want to consider the following questions when preparing their response, noting that not all of these will be relevant to all research:

- For the proposed research, what are the potential benefits (short-term or long-term, direct or indirect) for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health and contribution to Closing the Gap targets? If there are none, what is the explanation for this?
- Does the proposed research address a priority health issue for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples or a critical barrier to progress in Closing the Gap?
- Have the benefits of the project been determined or guided by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities or organisations?
- How will Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations and/or communities and the research team benefit from capacity and capability development in all stages of the research journey?

Exemplar responses are provided below, but these do not cover all circumstances and should not be used as templates.

Example 1: Research with no specific benefit for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health or contribution to Closing the Gap targets

'The proposed research is examining the X signalling pathway using molecular biology techniques and preclinical models. This pathway is thought to play a role in Y disease, which source Z indicates is not a particular priority for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Hence, the research is likely to benefit the health of the general population in the long term, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.'

Example 2: Research with some specific benefit for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health and contribution to Closing the Gap targets

'The prevalence of disease X significantly impacts Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, who also have inferior outcomes compared to the broader Australian population. Understanding the risk genes for this disease in Australian populations is limited, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations in Australia. Through the inclusion of samples from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia (which will be collected according to ethical guidance), an immediate benefit of this project will be gaining new knowledge of validated genetic risk factors for this disease that are relevant to these populations. This knowledge will hopefully lead to the development of genetic testing that is applicable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and can inform tailored clinical screening and management. This could lead to improved quality of life, especially for those living in rural, regional and remote locations. The long-term goal will be to reduce the inequities for this disease, contributing to the target of Closing the Gap in life expectancy within a generation.'

Example 3: Research that specifically benefits Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health and contributes to Closing the Gap targets

'X behaviour is a leading cause of preventable diseases and avoidable death in Australia. The prevalence of X has not reduced for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples at the same rate as the broader Australian population, especially in remote communities. This is a major contributor to health inequities for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. This research will contribute to reducing X, and thus promote life expectancy parity, which is one of the Closing the Gap targets. A reduction in X will also deliver health benefits by reducing associated preventable diseases that can impact on the quality of life and reduce the number of X-related deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The research will also have economic benefits in terms of limiting the financial hardship associated with X and its resultant diseases.'

The potential benefits of this research are a priority for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as outlined in Y that called for more research on effective approaches to reduce X. This project will strengthen the capability and capacity of all members of the research team, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, organisations and communities contributing to the project through two-way learning, mentoring, and the opportunity to undertake formal training with credentials. There is also the opportunity for the development of interested stakeholders who can lead research dissemination efforts and better understand how research evidence can be used to influence policy around X and other issues.'