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National Health and Medical Research Council

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NHMRC International
Engagement Strategy
2016-2019

| WORKING TO BUILD A HEALTHY AUSTRALIA |

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NHMRC International Engagement Strategy 2016-19

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1. Introduction

The *NHMRC International Engagement Strategy 2016-19* (the Strategy) outlines NHMRC's approach to prioritising new and existing activities with our international partners over the next three years.

A strategic approach is important and the NHMRC will use this strategy to guide engagement in activities that align with Australian Government policy, the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act 1992* (the NHMRC Act) and the *NHMRC Corporate Plan*¹ (the Corporate Plan).

NHMRC's leadership role includes the pursuit of strategic objectives through the development of relationships with overseas funding agencies, organisations and alliances. International engagement by NHMRC can assist in the achievement of broad strategic objectives including:

- investment in high quality health and medical research and building research capability by supporting the best research and researchers
- support for the translation of health and medical research into clinical practice, policy and health systems and the effective commercialisation of research discoveries
- maintenance of a strong integrity framework for research and guideline development, underpinning rigorous research and relevant and accurate guidelines and promoting community trust.²

International engagement by NHMRC is also relevant to National Health Priority Areas including improving the health of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and building the capability of researchers in this area.

The Strategy identifies four key principles for international engagement:

- 1) *strategic alignment*
- 2) *potential for scientific impact*
- 3) *potential for scientific diplomacy* and
- 4) *resource implications*.

2. Background

Australia has for many years recognised the value of contributing to international efforts in science and technology through international engagement. With excellence in research Australia makes valuable contributions to an international endeavour that promises over future decades to repeatedly re-shape how we think about health and wellbeing.

¹ As updated each year over the period of the Strategy.

² NHMRC Corporate Plan (page 16).

In addition, this endeavour informs Australian ethics, values and expertise to yield the maximum benefit to the health of all Australians. Contributing to international research efforts assists in addressing global health challenges and concerns, especially for low-income countries.

International engagement also has considerable benefits for Australian researchers and the NHMRC. These benefits may include:

- improved health policy development arising from a global perspective
- ability to understand and adapt knowledge that is generated overseas for use within Australia
- skills formation at an international level
- access to jointly funded facilities and infrastructure that may be beyond the funding capacity of Australia
- enhanced probability of, and opportunities for, innovation and commercialisation
- opportunities to leverage funding, and the potential for enhanced social rates of return on the national investment
- greater access to international expertise, and enhanced and earlier access to data
- enhanced capacity to respond speedily and effectively to epidemics and pandemics and work towards finding solutions
- diverse approaches to research questions
- access to and the potential for sharing, scarce research material and resources.

International engagement improves both the quality of research undertaken in Australia, and the uptake of the latest international research in Australian health policy and practice.

International collaborative activities are a key strategy for ensuring that Australia contributes to, shares in, and benefits from, the work of the global research community. The Australian Government recognises this and supports international collaborative efforts through a wide variety of programs and initiatives across all sectors of research. While some activities target specific international relationships others include international linkages developed at the researcher working level.

Some examples of Australian Government initiatives that support collaborative approaches include:

- Australia's recent Global Innovation Strategy that will invest \$36 million over five years from 2016 in international innovation and science

- the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP) of the Australian Research Council that provides flexible opportunities and a range of support for international research engagement
- the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 'Health for Development Strategy 2015-2020' which will encourage the use of innovative approaches and partnerships to improve health and to improve knowledge about what works and how to manage risks.
- the Department of Education and Training 'National Strategy for International Education 2025' that will enable Australia's international education sector to be more adaptive, innovative and globally engaged.

NHMRC acknowledges that no single country has the resources, skills and capacity to address all health and medical research challenges and, therefore, recognises the need to encourage and support international collaboration with countries around the globe.

This commitment is demonstrated by numerous international collaborative efforts and through the significant collaborations of our funded researchers.

These include:

- bilateral and multilateral agreements with international counterparts for the joint funding of research
- participation in international research organisations in order to enable access by Australian researchers
- leadership on important issues facing the sector through participation in bilateral and multilateral activities with overseas counterparts
- participation in the development and implementation of internationally consistent platforms and standards to facilitate and guide research (eg: data sharing and the responsible conduct of research).

Funding schemes are designed to have sufficient flexibility to support international engagement by researchers as illustrated by relevant provisions in scheme funding rules:

- investigators located overseas can be named as investigators on applications for research grants
- NHMRC grant funding can be used overseas where this is necessary to achieve the aims of the research (that is, where an equivalent research outcome could not be achieved without international collaboration)
- Targeted Calls for Research may provide support for networking activities between grantees and similarly focussed research groups located overseas

- People support schemes provide opportunities for career development by supporting a meaningful period of training at an overseas research institution.

Also of note is the importance of peer reviewers assessing applications in the international context and the proactive approach taken by the NHMRC in working with other government agencies on international issues. NHMRC plays an important role in shared international commitment to reducing the global burden of disease and ill health.

3. Prioritising international activities

NHMRC participates in many long standing international collaborations via bilateral and multilateral fora, but also welcomes and is regularly approached about new opportunities for further international collaboration. Many of these opportunities have one or more of the following characteristics:

- consortia of researchers (or international research funders) inviting NHMRC to jointly fund research in a field or disease area of interest to the consortia
- representatives of overseas governments proposing jointly funded collaborative research in areas of mutual interest
- groups of researchers, research funders and advocacy bodies with an interest in a particular health issue who are looking to develop and co-ordinate an international response (possibly including a research component).

NHMRC will assess and prioritise these and other opportunities against the following four principles in reaching decisions on international engagement, to ensure alignment with government policy and NHMRC's strategic direction in health and medical research.

Principle 1: Strategic alignment

Participate in activities that align with Australia's broader government priorities for international engagement³ and with the NHMRC's strategic objectives (particularly the NHMRC Act and Corporate Plan).

When assessing whether a particular activity aligns with the NHMRC's strategic objectives, NHMRC will:

- prioritise activities that align with Australian Government policy
- consider whether an emerging issue is of sufficient importance to warrant inclusion in a future NHMRC corporate plan

³ Global Innovation Strategy (<http://www.innovation.gov.au/page/global-innovation-strategy>)

- consider the potential displacement of other NHMRC activities in meeting international requests.

Principle 2: Potential for scientific impact

New engagement activities should be expected to achieve significant scientific outcomes that would not otherwise be achieved. When assessing an activity's potential for scientific impact NHMRC will consider:

- potential benefits of NHMRC funding the proposal
- impact for Australia and the region from the proposal
- likely quantity and impact of scientific output
- the additional opportunities for Australian researchers.

Principle 3: Potential for scientific diplomacy

Scientific diplomacy should provide Australia with an avenue to engage internationally by building relationships and addressing common interests.

When assessing the potential for scientific diplomacy NHMRC will consider:

- the partner's standing and international contribution as outlined in section 4 of the Strategy
- potential to strengthen international relations
- mutual benefits through strategic partnering that leads to new international activities and opportunities, including to improve global health outcomes.

Principle 4: Resource implications

NHMRC will consider both the level and availability of resources to support the proposed activity and whether these costs are justified by the strategic value of the activity. When assessing the resource implications NHMRC will consider:

- justification and availability of funding from the MREA or administered funding
- level and availability of support from reviewers and the Office of the NHMRC
- whether the activity presents 'value for money'
- whether proposed research can be supported through NHMRC standard funding schemes and in standard timeframes.

4. Partnering with NHMRC

To assist NHMRC in identifying partnerships the following key categories will be used for understanding the partner's standing and international contribution. This is a key consideration under Principle 3 of the Strategy.

Long-standing partners

Countries and organisations in this category have long-standing established partnerships with Australia, which include close and long-standing

collaborations between health and medical researchers. These partnerships continue to provide the opportunity for NHMRC to drive collaborations and projects that maintain key relationships, and leverage long-term and ongoing benefits for the Australian community.

Emerging partners

Australia has been actively developing significant diplomatic relationships with countries in this category, and is likely to share common interests and issues. These countries often have a rapidly growing and/or transitioning health and medical research capability. Whilst to date there have been fewer engagement opportunities, these partnerships provide the opportunity for NHMRC to build high quality health and medical research collaborations that have the potential to deliver health benefits.

Regional partners

A focus for Australia's international relations is regional cooperation. Scientific diplomacy offers opportunities to develop and improve regional partnerships with countries in the Asia-Pacific region. As many countries in this region have a health and medical research capacity that is evolving, these partnerships offer significant opportunities for NHMRC to assist with the growth of research capability and integrity, and to build high quality health and medical research collaborations that have the potential to deliver regional health benefits. As well, these partnerships can strengthen linkages and build new collaborations between health and medical researchers.

5. Modes of collaboration

NHMRC collaborates via two main mechanisms:

1. Arrangements focussing on research funding, which typically involve:
 - a. co-funding health and medical research projects
 - b. fostering opportunities for Australian researchers to attract research funding from other international funding bodies
 - c. providing research support through access to techniques and technologies not yet available in Australia.

2. Arrangements focussing on other health and medical research activities, which typically involve:
 - a. participation in international dialogue on key issues in research, research ethics and integrity
 - b. creating opportunities for Australian researchers to be involved in major international collaborative activities and influence their development
 - c. promoting the Australian health and medical research sector.

Other modes of engagement are also possible and will be considered by NHMRC on a case-by-case basis.

6. Current priorities

Consistent with the principles outlined above, NHMRC will pursue the following international activities:

- encourage researchers to engage in international collaboration by ensuring sufficient flexibility in funding schemes
- meet specific commitments in the Corporate Plan to finalise collaborative research funding with at least two international organisations by 2016 to address global health issues of relevance to our region
- consider unilateral, bilateral and multilateral arrangements to promote collaborative research projects and the provision of overseas training opportunities for Australian researchers
- consider bilateral and multilateral activities that support health research and building the capacity and capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers
- participate in the development and implementation of internationally consistent platforms and standards to facilitate and guide research
- participate in emerging, fast developing or strategically relevant initiatives that are not necessarily related to funding opportunities (eg: to develop joint statements or compare grants to prevent the duplication of research).

A list of current NHMRC international activities is published at:

<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/research/international-activities>

7. Periodic review

NHMRC will review this Strategy and its international activities from time to time and amend as necessary in response to changes in government priorities and the international environment. The performance of this Strategy will be internally monitored to ensure that it continues to assist the NHMRC in reaching its goals.