



# National Network Concept Workshop

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This report was written through a collaboration between Katrina Fanning PSM (Director, Coolamon Advisors) and NHMRC. The National Network Concept Workshop was facilitated by Katrina Fanning PSM.

### Background

NHMRC is committed to improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through research funding and building capacity and capability of researchers. *Road Map 3: A strategic framework for improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health through research* (Road Map 3) outlines the strategic goals which NHMRC will work towards and the approaches NHMRC will take.

In May 2018, NHMRC conducted a workshop which brought together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers at all stages of their career to discuss how NHMRC could strengthen capacity and capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers. One of the identified strategies was for NHMRC to support the development of a National Network for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. This workshop was intended to follow up this recommendation by including a range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and research organisations in the consultation.

### Executive Summary

The workshop participants agreed that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia to achieve equity there needs to be well informed policy development and program design. This can only be delivered when it is inclusive and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples themselves. It is also clear that harnessing the informal networks and talent that currently exist into a sustainable and agile ecosystem will be highly advantageous to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers.

The development of a long-term strategy and identifying gaps in the current environment will be crucial initial goals for the Network. The National Network should also enhance the community's ability to be heard, to manage their information and direct the work of the Network. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based researchers were recognised as an underutilised and undervalued component of this ecosystem and are an area for development.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and medical research sector needs to build strategic partnerships in key research areas, including ones that cover the social determinants of health both nationally and internationally. This may include growing funding and developing more partnerships with corporate and philanthropic groups for the long term. The long term strategy will include building a pipeline of talent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research and researchers, to harness expertise across the group to build good policy and ultimately improve opportunities for the wider community.



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## 1. National need: Strengthening and growing capacity and capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and medical researchers

There is a sense of urgency in building on the momentum that currently exists to strengthen and grow the capacity and capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and medical researchers. Setting a common agenda for the benefit of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities is a core focus area. The establishment of this agenda will assist in attracting people to work in the area and to assist funding bodies to prioritise allocations that support this goal.

For the sector to have sustained growth, the way the system is resourced needs to change. This is due to the significant barriers in the processes and systems underpinning the resourcing for the sector. In order to build a sustainable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research sector grant applications for and proportion of funding distributed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander projects need to be prioritised. The processes need to be streamlined, delivered more consistently (including the timing of the processes) and accessibility needs to be improved for community-based researchers. There was also widespread recognition that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working across the sector needs to increase and strategies developed to build a pipeline of talent. This includes setting significant targets for qualifications at tertiary level and vocational training to assist in growing the pool of community researchers. Non-traditional entry points to research should also be established to recognise the unique skills and experiences Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people bring with them in engagement with community and the deep understanding of information collected.

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### 1.1 Building on existing momentum

There is increased activity in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, a review of how funding is allocated and benchmarking is conducted will help researchers and project managers to understand the current environment better. During the workshop, discussion also centred on creating greater emphasis on collaboration and innovation within the sector. This included recommending changing some of the disincentives that currently exist in competitive grants programs and encouraging collaborations to deliver sustainable approaches to research. Ultimately an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research academy that acts as an information hub should be established to drive change, ensure quality and to nurture the development of the research sector. Key considerations identified by workshop participants included:

- Ensuring data sovereignty and community control of research
- Building of Indigenous research capacity
- Equipping people to access mainstream funding, resources and infrastructure to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers are competitive
- Ensuring equity across all research funding
- Tackling racism
- Influencing researchers and institutions through Indigenous grant criteria.

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## 1.2 Growing through a common agenda

Having an Indigenous-led common agenda is a vital next step to ensure the growth needed in the sector is achieved. This may be met through research projects, workforce development and the systems to support them. Examples include setting additional targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers to attain PhD level qualifications in the next decade, agreement on the proportion of Indigenous participants required in a study for it to be deemed an Indigenous project and structured mentorship programs. Mentorship was deemed crucial for growing the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as researchers. Funding is therefore required to support training and mentoring arrangements and to engage new researchers in the sector. Key considerations identified by workshop participants included:

- Working together with respect, diversity and inclusiveness
- Building and strengthening capacity and capabilities of researchers at all levels
- Prioritising research by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers
- Supporting Indigenous-led projects and programs
- Sharing of a common vision.

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## 1.3 Collective impact

The multi-faceted improvements made throughout the research ecosystem will have a positive collective impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and research as a whole. This will contribute to positive sustainable change in the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. A key focus area is connecting the research sector with communities to work collaboratively and to leverage the strengths of all parties. This will also build the talent pipeline for research, increasing the reach and capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to undertake large scale research projects. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled service sector is also valued as a vital partner in the ecosystem and must be resourced and supported to be an active participant. This relationship provides unique reach into communities and leverages a workforce with a vested interest in the research as it determines the policy, program and funding that underpins service systems. Key considerations identified by workshop participants included:

- Creating opportunities to integrate and combine Indigenous knowledges
- Recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers are much stronger working as a group and represent a more effective and efficient investment of resources
- Bringing people together regularly to share information and skills
- Working collectively.

## 2. Planning to address the need: Scanning the research sector to understand the need

There are networks in Australia and overseas that work to advance and build capacity of and have a positive impact on Indigenous peoples internationally. The network models, funding mechanisms, governance structures and influence vary from one network to another. Participants were asked to discuss the models and programs that currently exist and create an image of a network (or some other mechanism) to deliver the overarching goals outlined in the pre-reading documentation.

Attendees advised that inherent in the current systems that support the resourcing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research are systemic biases that have traditionally impeded the growth of the sector. Some of these biases relate to the lack of cultural appropriateness in the system, such that it does not allow for thorough co-design and engagement from concept to application and implementation. In addition, the timing and duration of funding may lead to lack of security on income streams, detracting from research as an attractive career choice.

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### 2.1 Research Environment

In order to design a network or funding model, the current research environment must be reviewed. The cost associated with applying for grant funding using an inclusive and culturally appropriate methodology (e.g. co-design and complete consultation with communities on applications) is high and time consuming. In addition, the costs of associated with executing culturally appropriate processes are not well understood by developers of mainstream grant programs. It is therefore difficult to have these activities appropriately resourced, even if the investigative part of the project is funded. A new model must address this system bias through culturally appropriate engagement. There is also a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking the Chief Investigator-A (CIA) role, and the perception is that those who do, experience very limited support from other senior leaders. A new model must also address the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be decision makers in all facets of the processes that underpin research in Australia. The key observations/advice from the workshop include:

- Competitive and low rate of grant success observed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research applications
- Many pockets of research excellence exist but there is limited connectivity to drive a common agenda
- Engaging communities is resource intensive and if the grant is not successful, communities are disappointed. Managing these relationships, long term is difficult due to the uncertain nature of the process
- NHMRC should influence institutions to include mentoring and building capacity of researchers as part of their strategic plan.

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## 2.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and medical research workforce

The current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and medical research workforce has some significant barriers that must be addressed. Attendees considered that the current workforce lacks diversity, cohesion and career development pathways. These are prevalent across entry level opportunities to senior leadership positions and require well-supported (financial and mentorship) development opportunities. If these barriers are not addressed, the workforce will not increase or improve, leading to lower standards and/or lack of researchers. The lack of cohesion across the sector isolates individuals and groups. The absence of job security, the competitive rather than collaborative nature of funding and limited understanding of the value of community researchers are all contributors in this regard. Therefore, there is a need to grow the sector while maintaining or improving the quality of the work.

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## 2.3 Existing capacity and capability programs and networks

There exists pockets of good collaborative practices that can be harnessed to influence whole of sector growth. Participants however discussed the many contributing factors to a fragmented and underperforming system that at present does not maximise opportunity, encourage cross sector growth or leverage the skills of the community research sector. In moving forward, it was strongly agreed that work needs to focus on supporting pathways between universities and research institutes to ensure an appropriately resourced broad network.

All future work should be underpinned by efforts to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, knowledge and aspirations at every level. A vital group in this regard are the community-controlled health services and effort should be directed to building partnerships with these key stakeholders. It is important to ensure that these partnerships are cost neutral to the services and align with their core business objectives. Key points from the discussion included:

- Reforming and resetting power imbalances while sharing power
- Valuing community voice and individuals
- Recognising the Medical Research Future Fund as a source of funding
- Improving and extending Indigenous governance
- Connecting current initiatives and improving cross-sector collaboration.

### **3. Activities to meet the need: Strengthen collaboration and integration within the research sector**

The third section of the workshop focussed on the need for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers to work together in a non-competitive, collaborative and culturally secure and supportive space. The focus goal for this section of the workshop was to discuss building cohorts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders for the long term who will foster and support an environment for growth and learning. Participants were also asked to consider how to build a system and infrastructure to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Models of collaboration were discussed that could move beyond localised agendas towards sustainable, long term benefits for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities.

Participants were very clear on the need for a model that allows for Indigenous truth-telling in research with a networked group of at least 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. This group would be connected through a specialised research academy that ensures quality and development across the health and medical research sector for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

This should not limit any one individual or group or field of study but through strategic collaboration, identify the collective impact opportunities that a sector wide approach can deliver. These opportunities should provide a platform for growth and for seamless passage of researchers through the sector to meet needs as they arise. The critical factor in planning and monitoring this approach is to focus on long term sustainable change and not just meeting immediate needs or opportunities.

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#### **3.1 Service model**

The first model discussed was a centralised approach to collaboration and integration within the research sector that provides one gateway for all, consistency of processes and a clear line of sight between effort and impact. This does present issues for decision making with strategic priorities being decided by a small group from a diverse sector and would require significant effort to bring the existing diversity of approaches and people together.

In contrast, a decentralised model would provide a basic Secretariat service which would have less competition issues to deal with and could potentially be more responsive to local needs. This model would have challenges in dealing with new and emerging memberships and directing activity and priorities nationally.

A hybrid of the two in a hub and spoke model would reflect the need for local capacity at the spoke level whilst providing centralised resourcing and prioritising for national impact at the hub. It would allow for a broad range of stakeholders to contribute and for training and benchmarking to assist this sector's growth. This model was overwhelmingly preferred by workshop participants.

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## 3.2 Strategic collaboration

To see real growth and collaboration in the outcomes of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and medical research sector, opportunities and partnerships with corporate and/or the philanthropic sectors need to be nurtured. The current potential that exists within the sector can be optimised through key stakeholders, boards and the existing research infrastructure; in turn attracting talent and investment. The strategy must highlight the value proposition that will inspire people to invest in collaborative approaches. For collaborations to be effective, a map of current collaborative practices and barriers is crucial. This information will contribute to the design of a journey map so that people and other resources can be shared across the sector in a seamless fashion. In addition, this exercise will more importantly identify the areas of synergy and improve collaborations.

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## 3.3 Long term change and sustainability

To achieve the long-term change and sustainability for the sector, strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ownership and leadership in the research ecosystem is fundamental. Resource contributions and accountability from Universities and research institutions will be required. This will be through a mix of optimising existing effort and directing new resources to the identified priority areas that align with an agreed strategic direction. To ensure sustainability of centralised support and resources that provide benefit across the sector, the sector must keep pace with growth and stay relevant. This includes the processes by which funding is allocated, the centralisation of IT systems to support the sector and a 'no wrong door' approach to talent development.

## 4. The way forward

In looking forward, the workshops discussed a set of milestones for a ten-year plan to realise long term and sustainable efficiencies and growth in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and medical research sector. The stages for the ten-year plan could be viewed as designing, building and normalising.

This will require in the first stages to design a shared vision for the plan and a national statement that clearly articulates its purpose and provides an opportunity to attract the broadest range of participation possible. It is also an opportunity to extensively map the sector in its current state, agree to a desired state and to map the steps to get there.

In the building stage which would occur in the second and third years of the plan, the focus will be in ensuring the infrastructure, evidence base and resourcing requirements are established and able to meet the requirements of growth, collaboration and innovation.

Once the first two stages are completed the plan moves to normalising this new sector approach and embedding the changes across the entire sector. This final stage will ensure reflective practices, clear processes and practices are used to ensure accountability, emerging opportunities are being shared and adjusted as required to accommodate growth.



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## 4.1 The next 12 months

Through the establishment of an Indigenous health and well-being National Network, a better understanding of the purpose, intended impact and processes that will be needed for success will be established. This group must be Indigenous-led and focussed on doing things differently and collaboratively, utilising the talent in the sector, including the community researcher workforce.

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## 4.2 Years 2-3

This is the building stage where the direction and evidence from the first-year drives activities. The work in this stage will provide the system and process solutions for success in the future years. This includes the development of a database that captures details of Indigenous researchers, projects, stakeholders and funding that can be utilised by the sector. It also involves the commencement of new stakeholder and partnership arrangements focussed on delivering on the strategic agenda set in phase one.

A key area of activity in this stage is to develop the pathways and resources that will support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through all career levels in the sector. This includes the expansion of technical skill training, building a robust and effective mentoring program and ensuring the commitment of funding to these talent management programs. Having clearly articulated pathways will attract more people into the sector. This is particularly relevant if focus is provided to non-traditional entry pathways that also target the community researcher work force.

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## 4.3 Years 4-10

During this normalising phase the strategic directions for the sector will be met by transitioning concepts into the practices and processes of the sector. This should also include the increased capacity to influence policy, provide greater evidence base from which Government can leverage to direct their efforts and ultimately assist to close the life expectancy gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Whilst much of the detail for targets in this section will be worked through in the first two phases, the workshop participants provided some initial ideas for consideration including:

- Five hundred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to complete Masters, PhD or honours programs in ten years
  - A website that includes online training, clearing house of information and that provides links for community researchers and webinars for sharing of learnings
  - An annual network conference
  - An enhanced international profile including the hosting of international fellows.
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#### **4.4 Monitoring, review and evaluation**

The National Network must evaluate its achievements against its goals annually and provide a report to NHMRC annually. The report will be reviewed by a panel of experts and feedback will be provided to the National Network. It is also expected that the National Network will leverage funding to continue the work of the National Network beyond the NHMRC funding period.

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