



Australia's National Institute for Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Health Research

Revitalisation of Australia's National Science and Research Priorities draft

**Submission to the Department of Industry, Science and
Resources**

Lowitja Institute, October 2023

Department of Industry, Science and Resources: Response to Australia's draft National Science and Research Priorities.

Department of Industry, Science and Resources,

Re: Review of National Science and Research Priorities

The Lowitja Institute is Australia's national institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research, named in honour of our Patron, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG.

The Lowitja Institute is the only Aboriginal community-controlled research Institute in Australia. We produce high-impact research, tools and resources that aim to have positive health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our research is built on priorities that have been identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Based on this experience we offer the following general comments and responses to the consultation questions put forward in *Australia's draft National Science and Research Priorities* paper.

Please find our submission attached. We would welcome the opportunity to further discuss any of the issues contained therein.

Warm regards



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About the Lowitja Institute

The Lowitja Institute is a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisation working for the health and wellbeing of Australia's First Peoples through high impact quality research, knowledge translation, and by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers.

Established in January 2010, we operate on the key principles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, a broader understanding of health that incorporates wellbeing, and the need for the work to have a clear and positive impact. The Lowitja Institute invests in knowledge creation and translation by enhancing the capability of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research workforce.


At the Lowitja Institute our research is built on priorities identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We aim to produce high impact research, tools and resources that will have positive health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. To guide this, we work by five principles that underpin our approach to research. These principles are:

1. **Beneficence** – to act for the benefit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the conduct of our research.
2. **Leadership by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**
3. **Engagement of research end users** (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities, policymakers, other potential research users)
4. **Development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research workforce**
5. **Measurement of impact** in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health.

General preamble

Since 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been subjected to huge amounts of research. Research was used as a tool of colonial violence, with science and medical research instrumental in developing notions of superiority and inferiority.¹ Data was weaponised against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and embedded in a deficit discourse, which perpetuates the racist presumption that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are a problem that

¹ Lowitja Institute & MTP Connect, 2023, *Targeted Translation Research Accelerator Needs Assessment and Prioritisation Project*, discussion paper, Lowitja Institute



requires fixing.² These presumptions dehumanised and othered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and meant that often research practices did more harm than good.

Research, even if well meaning, has historically been based on non-Indigenous researchers' priorities and presumptions, which did not and do not match the priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This meant that research often does not benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and findings have been – and continue to be – used to support policies and practices that further harmed us.³ These poor research practices have caused significant distrust from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities towards researchers and research institutions.⁴

Despite this, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have become experts and leaders in their fields of research, producing research that has had positive impacts on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and reflecting their priorities and needs. For these reasons, it is crucial that the Australian Government support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, organisations, and communities to advance their research priorities, translate their research outputs into practice, and centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges in doing so. This Lowitja Institute submission addresses the five consultation questions from this perspective.

Consultation questions


Question 1: The draft priorities intend to identify specific challenges facing the country that will require multidisciplinary and multisector efforts to address. Do they achieve this objective? How can we improve them?

The Lowitja Institute is pleased to see that the four proposed science and research priorities align with a number of our core and emerging policy priorities, including

² Fogarty, W., Bulloch, H., McDonnell, S. & Davis, M. 2018, *Deficit Discourse and Indigenous Health: How narrative framings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are reproduced in policy*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

³ Lowitja Institute & MTP Connect, 2023, *Targeted Translation Research Accelerator Needs Assessment and Prioritisation Project*, discussion paper, Lowitja Institute

⁴ AIATSIS and Lowitja Institute. 2013, 'Researching Right Way', *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research Ethics: A domestic and international law review*, National Health and Medical Research Council, p. 3.



climate change and health; cultural and social determinants of health; ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research; effects of a changing environment on housing access, adequacy and sustainability; and building capacity for good partnerships and co-design in health policy and programs⁵.


The four priorities identified are very broad, and therefore will inevitably require multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary collaboration. We appreciate this multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approach as being essential to breaking down siloes; it is well known that working in siloes is detrimental to improving health and medical outcomes for Australians and in producing research impact. It can also create barriers to forging efficient pathways, and can stifle meaningful change.⁶ The proposed multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approach aligns well with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of health and wellbeing, which are holistic and cross-disciplinary by nature. However, putting this approach into practice will require governments to transform the siloed manner in which they currently work. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and organisations can support this transformation by sharing their expertise with governments in the context of genuine, respectful partnerships.

The broad nature of the draft priorities means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership – across the disciplinary and sector spectrum – must be embedded in the refinement of the priorities, pathways forward and critical research areas. The only way to meaningfully and appropriately embed First Nations perspectives and knowledges across each of the four priorities is through partnership and co-design with the Aboriginal community-controlled sector and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research community. It is important to note that the draft priorities do not currently make mention of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, nor how research under these priorities would seek to align with the Closing the Gap architecture. Given the stated goal to reflect First Nations knowledge and knowledge throughout the priorities, this omission should be addressed as a matter of importance.

Genuine partnership and co-design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and organisations will require sustainable investment and capacity-building. Funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research, and incorporating an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research agenda for health and wellbeing, would ensure that future research addresses our diverse

⁵ Lowitja Institute, 2023, *Policy Priorities 2022-2025*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne

⁶ Lowitja Institute, 2023, *Better Outcomes and Value for Money with a Seat at the Table*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne



communities' priorities and needs, maximizing research impact, and embed First Nations knowledge and knowledge systems into the ways we address national challenges.

Question 2: Feedback stressed the need to work in partnership with First Nations people to embed First Nations knowledge and knowledge systems in the way we address national challenges. How might governments and the science and research sector best work with First Nations people to achieve this objective?

Partnerships and co-design are central to research priority-setting that is inclusive and culturally safe. For the Australian Government to ensure that First Nations perspectives and knowledges are embedded in our responses to national challenges, it will be essential to understand what constitutes partnership – as opposed to mere consultation –with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, researchers and organisations.

One of Lowitja Institute's key policy priorities focuses on building capacity for good partnerships and co-design in health policy and programs⁷ in order to ensure that the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are being accurately identified and addressed in research, policy and program development. This priority also aligns with Priority Reform 1 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which commits governments to share decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through formal partnership and shared decision-making arrangements.⁸ There is much work that needs to be done to understand how governments can transform their ways of working and build their capacity to partner effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and researchers.

Investing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research is key to best addressing the gaps and exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives across science and research. An important part of this process is investing in, and building the capability of, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health research workforce. This will complement efforts towards effective and meaningful research partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and research communities in addressing the proposed national science and research priorities. These efforts also align to the *National Aboriginal and Torres*

⁷ Lowitja Institute, 2023, *Policy Priorities 2022-2025*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne

⁸ National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Priority Reforms

<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>



Strait Islander Health Workforce Strategic Framework and Implementation Plan 2021-2031.


As identified in the draft priorities, climate change is a significant national challenge – one requiring enormous investment in science and research. We are pleased to see climate change as a proposed priority area, especially considering that it is also a key Lowitja Institute policy priority. Climate change is an example of a research space that has historically excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, ways of knowing, being and doing, and voices⁹ – despite the adverse health impacts and disproportionate risks that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are facing from a changing climate. We would urge the final National Science and Research Priorities to more clearly identify how research funding and processes under Priority 1 will work to embed First Nations knowledge and perspectives into research going forward, taking into account the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research leadership, meaningful partnership, and engagement with affected communities in the refinement of the critical research pathways.

Question 3: The draft priorities provide a range of critical research paths. How could we refine these research paths, for example, to address immediate challenges?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and knowledge systems are centered on community and Country, and therefore community research priorities cannot be centrally determined by top-down government processes. Climate change, for example, affects Aboriginal people in Central Australia very differently to Torres Strait Islanders living in Zenadth Kes. As such, refining the critical research areas identified in the draft priorities will require meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and communities across the country. Further, as the priorities seek to incorporate First Nations knowledge systems and perspectives appropriately and comprehensively, the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, communities and community-controlled organisations must be specifically acknowledged within the final priorities.

Embedding First Nations knowledges and perspectives into the National Science and Research Priorities going forward requires genuine investment. As outlined in Question 2, the Lowitja Institute recommends collaboration and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and researchers to identify the

⁹ HEAL Network & CRE-STRIDE, 2021, *Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, Discussion Paper, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne



highest-priority critical research areas in the short, medium and long term. From there, pathways forward can be designed in partnership.

The challenges facing the nation, and the resulting priorities for critical research investment, will evolve over time. This engagement must therefore be on a permanent and ongoing basis, and should include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, communities, and peak bodies from across a wide range of sectors. Organisations with specialist expertise in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led research – such as Lowitja Institute – should also be engaged to advise governments and mainstream research institutes on ethical and culturally safe processes, including research commissioning, study design and knowledge translation.


Question 4: How would you implement the priorities in your organisation or setting? What mechanisms would support implementation?

Lowitja Institute's work is underpinned by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understanding of health and wellbeing, which is holistic and multifaceted. In early 2020, we released the Lowitja Institute Research Agenda 2019-2023, which underpins all the work undertaken by the Institute and privileges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and researchers in our research commissioning. The Research Agenda include four themes which frame the research we have commissioned – and will continue to commission – between 2020 and 2023¹⁰:

1. Empowerment
2. Sovereignty
3. Connectedness
4. Cultural safety and respectful systems.

The Lowitja Institute research model begins at the community level, with the identification of priorities taking place with and alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, researchers, and communities. Our policies are also established at our biennial International Indigenous Health and Wellbeing Conferences where the global Indigenous research community comes together. Once the Institute's priorities have been established and have received final endorsement by Lowitja Institute board, we commission research, ensuring that we directly support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers via our seeding grant and major grant programs.

¹⁰ Lowitja Institute, 2020, *Annual Report 2020*, p.14,
https://www.lowitja.org.au/content/Document/LI_AnnualReport_2020_FINAL3_5.pdf



Lowitja Institute is the only known Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research institute in Australia that explicitly funds knowledge translation, and our approach is the first of its kind that incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research principles together with knowledge translation and research impact.¹¹ Knowledge translation refers to a complex and reciprocal series of interactions between knowledge holders, knowledge producers, and knowledge users, with the goal of achieving research impact (which Lowitja Institute defines as positive and sustainable long-term benefit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, beyond the realm of academia¹²).

Despite an abundance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research highlighting solutions to the complex challenges facing our communities, there has been a concerning lack of progress against many of the Closing the Gap targets.¹³ This is a clear indication that there remains a gap between research evidence, policymaking, and practice. It shows that wellbeing improvements are limited not by lack of evidence or knowledge, but by a failure to apply this knowledge into practice, indicating a strong case for an increased emphasis on how knowledge is current being translated. Accordingly, Lowitja Institute advocates strongly for all research relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to include community engagement, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, and knowledge translation.

Question 5: The National Science Statement will explain the role our science systems will play in delivering the priorities and maximising the benefits from science for Australia. How can the following best support the priorities: SCIENCE AGENCIES, SCIENCE INFRASTRUCTURE, AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT SCIENCE PROGRAMS, DOMESTIC, AND INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE RELATIONSHIPS.


One of the reasons for the continued gap in health outcomes is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers have rarely been supported or funded to

¹¹ Williams, M; 2021, *Profiling Excellence: Indigenous Knowledge Translation*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne

¹² Williams, M; 2021, *Profiling Excellence: Indigenous Knowledge Translation*, Lowitja Institute, Melbourne, p.8

¹³ Productivity Commission 2023, *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Draft Report*,

Productivity Commission, Canberra; Productivity Commission 2023, *Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation, Report July 2023*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.




lead research projects – the lack of available funding, and bias in funding decision-making and grant allocations, is a major barrier to the production of a robust evidence base regarding ‘what works’. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations are very familiar with their knowledges and voices being diminished and overlooked by mainstream researchers, Western methodologies, practices and funding processes. Despite this, there is a growing community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health researchers who have the ability to make a substantial and positive impact to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ health and wellbeing. It is well known that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research and solutions yield culturally safe and responsive outcomes that meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The draft priorities seek to ensure that First Nations perspectives and knowledges are woven into every aspect of the National Science and Research Priorities going forward. In order to achieve this, it is essential that the design and execution of processes to identify areas of need, and set priorities for future funding into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific research, are led by individuals and groups that have deep knowledge of the health challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples¹⁴. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health organisations (ACCHOs) lead the way in delivering holistic primary healthcare that is inclusive of all aspects of health and wellbeing. ACCHOs must therefore be funded to engage in and lead research that impacts their communities.

It is essential that the National Science and Research Priorities truly engage in ‘partnerships with First Nations people to embed First Nations knowledge and knowledge systems’ in response to national challenges and to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Achieving this goal will require Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers and organisations to be privileged in the commissioning and allocation of research funds that impact our peoples, and key Australian Government research funding bodies – such as the CSIRO – have a responsibility to fulfill this condition.

The Lowitja Institute model provides a good example of how this works in practice. We are an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation, whose priorities have been decided and set by community, and we provide scholarships, seeding grants and major grants to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, organisations and students.

¹⁴ Lowitja Institute & MTP Connect, 2023, *Targeted Translation Research Accelerator Needs Assessment and Prioritisation Project*, discussion paper, Lowitja Institute



Finally, it is important to acknowledge the role of research ethics in supporting the four priorities. Lowitja Institute has long advocated that all research relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be ethical, in that it should benefit – rather than harm – those communities, and should be carried out with our peoples' full, prior and informed consent. Ethics approval processes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health exist to ensure that research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is conducted in an ethical and culturally appropriate manner. When research ethics are not considered from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, the analysis of a research project's risk and benefits is unlikely to adequately centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities, knowledges, cultural safety, or cultural and intellectual property.¹⁵

Recently, in partnership with the University of Newcastle, Lowitja Institute received \$3 million in Australian Government funding to establish a new, national Aboriginal-led and governed ethics committee. The role of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health and Medical Research Ethics Committee (NAHREC) will be to assess the risks and benefits to our communities of proposed research projects that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing, supporting Lowitja Institute's focus on ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are at the centre of national health research processes.¹⁶

The National Science and Research Priorities should acknowledge the importance of research ethics, particularly for research relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Additionally, any research under the priorities should incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led ethics review processes, like those under the NAHREC. To ensure that this process is embedded within all research under the priorities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human research ethics committees must receive appropriate investment.

¹⁵ Lowitja Institute, 2023, 'Submission to the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia: developing a Decadal Plan for Social Science Research Infrastructure 2023-2032'

¹⁶ The University of Newcastle, 'Almost \$3m grant secured for sector-first in Indigenous health research', 30th June 2023, [https://www.newcastle.edu.au/newsroom/featured/almost-\\$3m-grant-secured-for-sector-first-in-indigenous-health-research](https://www.newcastle.edu.au/newsroom/featured/almost-$3m-grant-secured-for-sector-first-in-indigenous-health-research)