

# UNIVERSITIES ACCORD

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Submission in response to the Interim Report

September 2023

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## Summary of Recommendations

<b>Better supporting EMCRs</b>	<b>The Expert Panel identify the job security, career progression and professional development of early and mid-career researchers as an area of focus for the Accord in the Final Report and recommend it be addressed as a shared responsibility of research funders, universities, researcher managers and researchers.</b>
	<b>The Expert Panel investigate the UK's Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers as a model for how this shared responsibility can be implemented.</b>
<b>Improving Research Training</b>	<p><b>The Expert Panel recommend in its Final Report the expansion and extension of existing programs that offer placements and exposure to research roles beyond universities.</b></p> <p>(Research Australia has proposed to the Government a new Clinician Researcher Fellowship to be provided to existing health care professionals who either already have or are undertaking a PhD.)</p>
<b>Research Funding</b>	<p><b>The the Expert Panel should, in framing the recommendations in its Final Report on the indirect costs of research, give the highest priority to ensuring Commonwealth sponsored research is funded adequately.</b></p> <p><b>This requires the Commonwealth to provide sufficient levels of funding for the direct costs of the research it funds as well as meeting its fair share of the indirect costs of this research.</b></p> <p><b>The Universities Accord provides the opportunity for the Commonwealth to reach an agreement with universities about the level of support it will provide for both the direct and indirect costs of Commonwealth funded university research.</b></p>
	<p><b>Supporting universities to undertake research funded by industry and other sources, including at universities' own initiative, should be a distinct and separate priority for Government, with its own policy rationale (supporting business, driving exports, creating secure well-paid jobs). This support should not be provided to the detriment of meeting the direct and indirect costs of Commonwealth funded research.</b></p> <p><b>The Universities Accord provides the opportunity for the Commonwealth to separately reach an agreement with universities about the level of support it will provide for the indirect costs of research conducted by universities where the Commonwealth is not the primary funder of the research.</b></p>
	<p><b>Commonwealth support for the indirect cost of university research that is not primarily funded by the Commonwealth (e.g., industry research) should come from a separate pool.</b></p>

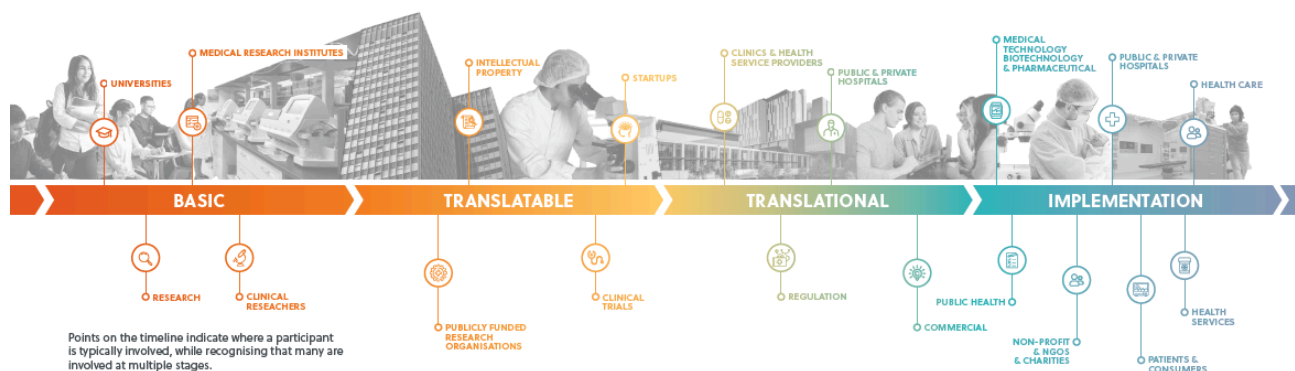
# Introduction

Research Australia is pleased to make this submission and congratulates the Expert Panel on the Interim Report.

We are responding as requested, with our most significant reflections on the report's recommendations, areas of substantive agreement, and suggested measures.

As the national peak body for Australian health and medical research and innovation, we recognise that universities are critical to our sector; in addition to training the health and medical research workforce, around half of all health and medical research is undertaken in the higher education sector.<sup>1</sup> Our initial submission to the discussion paper and this response are focused on research and research training.

## Research Australia represents the entire Health and Medical Research and Innovation pipeline



<sup>1</sup> Research Australia analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics data, available at <https://researchaustralia.org/category/hmr-facts/>

## Executive Summary

Our submission responds to three key issues identified in the Interim Report.

The first relates to the career prospects and professional development of early and mid-career researchers. Research Australia proposes that this be a shared responsibility of research funders, universities, researcher managers and researchers. We also welcome further consideration of programs to support exposure to roles in industry and government during the completion of a higher degree by research.

The second relates to the funding for indirect research costs. We propose a new structure for the future funding of direct and indirect research costs and two distinct principles to guide the structure. We also propose that funding for National Research Infrastructure be included in these deliberations.

Research Australia gratefully acknowledges the contribution of our membership to our initial submission and to this response to the interim report; particularly members of the Research Australia University Roundtable and the Research Australia Early and Mid-Career Working Group.

## Better supporting early and mid-career researchers

Research Australia was pleased to see recognition in the Interim Report of the need to better support our early and mid-career researchers.

‘Many early career researchers at postdoctoral level, while valuing postdoctoral experience, are extremely stressed as they seek a research career but, as there is relatively little research funding available, the number of postdoctoral positions is limited so the next job for these researchers is rarely guaranteed.

Given this, further consideration needs to be given to the future of research training programs, including the financial support and career structure necessary to build the next generation of research leaders, and empower a more diverse cohort of early career researchers...

Research training in the form of tailored career development for teaching-and-research and research-only academics could also be enhanced. Such training needs to complement training in university education.

Clarity of approach to research training and support for early career researchers is vital and needs to be addressed with some urgency.’ (Interim Report pages 95-96)

Research Australia agrees that the interrelated issues of **insufficient financial support for research salaries, insecure employment, and a lack career structure and ongoing professional development for researchers** must be addressed and we are pleased that the Expert Panel has elevated these in the Interim Report as issues requiring urgent action.

## Interrelated issues

It is worth considering how these issues are interrelated, to help identify a suitable response.

There are high levels of employment of university researchers on fixed short-term contracts. Research Australia undertook a national survey of health and medical researchers in May 2020. 79.4% of all respondents were employed by a university (a further 14% were employed by a medical research institute).

65.5% of early career researchers were employed on a fixed term contract, with a further 10.5% employed casually. For mid-career researchers, 57% were employed on a fixed term contract, and 2% on a casual basis. By far the most common contract period was 12 months.<sup>2</sup>

In the same year, a team at the University of Melbourne and Monash surveyed early and mid-career researchers in the health and medicine faculties of their universities. The survey found that only 26.8% of respondents had either continuing employment or more than 24 months remaining on their employment contracts; 50.7% had less than 12 months employment left on their employment contract.

While the percentage of casual employees is low compared to industries like hospitality and retail, the number of respondents on fixed term contracts is far higher than the national average.<sup>3</sup>

**A key reason for the high prevalence of fixed term contracts is the way in which research in our universities are funded.** University research is heavily reliant on funding from open competitive grant programs such as those administered by the National Health and Medical Research Council, the Medical Research Future Fund and the Australian Research Council.

The bulk of the funding under these programs is for a fixed period (up to five years, but often less) to undertake a specific research project. It is 'grant in aid', providing funding to meet some but not all of the costs of the research. While formally the grant is awarded to the university, typically the funding is controlled by the successful applicant, the Chief Investigator (CI) named in the grant. The CI is responsible for assembling a team of researchers to undertake the project, and for the offers of employment made to each researcher. Individual researchers are contracted to work on a project, and often only in fractional appointments for their expertise or skill required for a specific stage of the project.

The prevalence of short-term contracts affects the value placed on researchers as employees and the level of commitment their employers have to them. This in turn affects the level of support offered to early and mid-career researchers.

In these circumstances, neither the CI nor the university typically has an ongoing commitment to the career progression or career development of the individual researcher employed as a fixed term contractor. There is certainly no incentive to support the researcher to make a progression into a role in government or industry, and in general CI's and other team leaders don't have the experience or connections to facilitate the transition to a position in government or industry.

Even if a CI is supportive of professional development for their team, there are no funds in the project's budget for professional development activities like further training or attending

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<sup>2</sup> Research Australia, 2020, *The impact of COVID-19 on health and medical researchers*

<sup>3</sup> G, Gilfillan, Trends in use of non-standard forms of employment, December 2018, Australian Parliamentary Library

conferences or participating in mentoring programs. In the case of the NHMRC, except for People Support Programs (e.g., Fellowships), research project funding cannot be used for professional development activities.<sup>4</sup>

Some universities are now investing in professional development and career support for some early and mid-career researchers from other funding sources, but the amount of funding made available, the nature of the programs and the eligibility requirements vary widely.

In summary, many early to mid-career researchers are employed on short term contracts to perform a particular role in a specific research project in circumstances where there are no resources to support their career and professional development and no incentive for the university or the CI (their immediate employer) to support them. This has a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of researchers and the effectiveness for the research system.

## A solution

This situation is not unique to Australia. Very similar circumstances were the motivation for the creation in the UK of 'The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers'.<sup>5</sup>

The Concordat has been in place in the UK since 2008 and was revised in 2019. A key aspect of the Concordat is that it recognises responsibility for supporting the career development of researchers is shared between research funders, research organisations, researcher managers and researchers. (A researcher manager is a researchers' direct supervisor or manager.) Improving the job security and working conditions of researchers has been a key goal.

The Concordat also recognises that better support for the career progression and professional development of researchers has benefits beyond the individual, promoting more effective workplaces and supporting better science.

Better support for researchers will help retain researchers in the sector and will also support their involvement in other parts of the research and innovation pipeline beyond universities. The Concordat provides a mix of funding, policy frameworks, guidelines and infrastructure to systematically support the career progression and professional development of researchers.

**Research Australia proposes that the Expert Panel identify the job security, career progression and professional development of early and mid-career researchers as an area of focus for the Accord in the Final Report and recommend it be addressed as a shared responsibility of research funders, universities, researcher managers and researchers.**

**We further propose that the Expert Panel investigate the UK's Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers as a model for how this shared responsibility can be implemented.**

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Government, NHMRC, 2019, Direct Research Costs Guidelines

<sup>5</sup> Available at [https://researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Researcher-Development-Concordat\\_Sept2019-1.pdf](https://researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Researcher-Development-Concordat_Sept2019-1.pdf)



## Improving research training

The Interim Report has identified potential proposals to improve research training.

‘Improving the research training system to support and attract students to research careers:

- a. increasing PhD stipend rates
- b. offering postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers' extra skills-oriented training in parallel with PhD study or postdoctoral work
- c. creating research training targets for equity groups
- d. encouraging taxation adjustments to make industry-linked and part-time research training scholarships tax free, in line with full-time scholarships
- e. encouraging institutions to offer innovative PhD and professional doctorate models, including using portfolio, project, and multi-part dissertation formats and revitalising HDR coursework offerings.’ (Interim Report, page 102)

There is an opportunity to provide greater exposure to the breadth of research careers at an earlier stage during research training. This is far more common internationally than in Australia, with a range of different programs well established in many countries.<sup>6</sup>

The Australian Research Council is now offering the National Industry PhD program, starting with 65 candidates initially and rising to 150 per annum when it is fully established. The current program is focused on industry and excludes government as an eligible partner/employer.<sup>7</sup> The NHMRC offers the postgraduate scholarship to health and medical graduates early in their career who want to undertake a PhD. It funded 62 scholarships in 2023.<sup>8</sup> One of the aims of the program is to foster the development of clinician researchers, a vital role in supporting the contribution of research to better health outcomes and a more effective health system.

There is also the opportunity to offer placements in industry, government and not for profits while undertaking a higher degree for research. The greatest current barrier to this is the time period for which an individual is funded to complete their qualification. A specific funding extension to cover the period of the internship could help address this issue.

**Research Australia proposes the Expert Panel recommend in its Final Report the expansion and extension of existing programs that offer placements and exposure to research roles beyond universities.** (Research Australia has proposed to the Government a new Clinician Researcher Fellowship to be provided to existing health care professionals who either already have or are undertaking a PhD.)

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry reported that in 2021 there were 601 PhD studentships with pharmaceutical industry links in the UK. <https://www.abpi.org.uk/facts-figures-and-industry-data/industry-and-academia-links-survey-2022/phd-collaborations-studentships/>

<sup>7</sup> See para 2.9.1 of the National Industry PhD Program Guidelines, Department of Education

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/funding/find-funding/postgraduate-scholarships>



## Research Funding

Research Australia is pleased the Interim Report has identified the need to address research funding, including the funding of indirect research costs and the research infrastructure.

‘To protect research basics, the Review is giving further consideration to the following policy areas:

- a. developing a funding mechanism that explicitly recognises the importance of research, innovation and scholarship
- b. how best to ensure sufficient funding for the Australian university research sector to meet national research priorities
- c. moving over time to ensure National Competitive Grants cover the full cost of undertaking research
- d. developing a national, holistic policy for research training
- e. improving the measurement of the quality and impact of Australian research, including by deploying advances in data science to develop a ‘light touch’ automated metrics-based research quality assessment system
- f. making the cost of university R&D, innovation and scholarship activities across all universities transparent
- g. ensuring ongoing investment in critical research infrastructure and its maintenance.’ (Interim Report, page 101)

### Funding the full costs of research

In our submission to the Discussion paper, Research Australia outlined the history of funding for the indirect costs of research and how the priorities and objectives had changed over time, from meeting the indirect costs of government funded research to providing an incentive for universities to undertake research with or for commercial entities. The effect of those changes has been to reduce over time the level of support provided for the indirect costs of research funded from National Competitive grants.<sup>9</sup>

Research Australia is very pleased to see the Expert Panel focus on how best to ensure sufficient research funding for national research priorities, and the imperative of covering the full cost of National Competitive grants.

There is a clear role for the Government to fund research that is in the public interest and serves the Government’s policy objectives for the kind of society and economy we want.

**Research Australia submits that the Expert Panel should, in framing the recommendations in its Final Report on the indirect costs of research, give the highest priority to ensuring Commonwealth sponsored research is funded adequately. This requires the Commonwealth**

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Research Australia, 2023, Universities Accord, Response to the Discussion paper, <https://researchaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/RA-Unis-Accord-Sub-FINAL.pdf>

to provide sufficient levels of funding for the direct costs of the research it funds as well as meeting its fair share of the indirect costs of this research.

**The Universities Accord provides the opportunity for the Commonwealth to reach an agreement with universities about the level of support it will provide for both the direct and indirect costs of Commonwealth funded university research.** The ratio of indirect cost funding to direct Commonwealth research funding should be determined by what is necessary to enable the research to be undertaken effectively and should be used to determine the annual allocation of funding for the indirect costs of Government funded research.

This will require coordination with the other Government Departments, such as the Department of Health and Ageing, which fund university research in addition to the Department of Education. This funding could be administered as a separate program, as it is now, or funded as a loading on each eligible research grant. This new arrangement would reverse the decline in Government support for the university research it funds and provide certainty to universities about the level of funding available for Government funded research when applying for grants.

**Supporting universities to undertake research funded by industry and other sources, including at universities' own initiative, should be a distinct and separate priority for Government,** with its own policy rationale (supporting business, driving exports, creating secure well-paid jobs). This support should not be provided to the detriment of meeting the direct and indirect costs of Commonwealth funded research. **The Universities Accord provides the opportunity for the Commonwealth to separately reach an agreement with universities about the level of support it will provide for the indirect costs of research conducted by universities where the Commonwealth is not the primary funder of the research.**

When it comes to the structure of future research funding, **Research Australia proposes that Commonwealth support for the indirect cost of university research that is not primarily funded by the Commonwealth (e.g., industry research) should come from a separate pool.** As the level of non-Government funded university research is beyond the control of the Government, it is not reasonable to expect the Government to commit to subsidising this research at a fixed ratio, although a notional ratio could be used to guide the allocation. This approach would support universities when negotiating with other parties about funding for the direct and indirect costs of research.

## Conclusion

It is undeniable that universities play a vital role in Australia's economy and society. Universities are the training ground for our researchers as well as undertaking a large proportion of our research. They are also an essential pool of talent and research for the rest of Australia, and we need to ensure researchers can transition successfully into a range of roles in government, industry and broader society where their skills and expertise are increasingly required and tremendously valued.

Supporting researchers to be as effective as possible in their careers within and outside universities is critical. Research Australia believes this needs to be a shared endeavour, and a subject of the Universities Accord.

The Commonwealth and universities also have shared responsibility for the funding of research; both the direct and indirect costs. There needs to be a clear understanding of the drivers for Government participation, with at least two separate principles for Government involvement articulated: the first is the effective funding of the direct and indirect costs of Commonwealth funded research; the second is the rationale for the Commonwealth contributing to the indirect costs of research funded by universities themselves and others, including industry. The future structure for Commonwealth funding needs to adequately address both these principles and the Accord provides the opportunity to achieve this.

If you have any questions regarding this submission or require further information, please contact Greg Mullins, Head of Policy, at [greg.mullins@researchaustralia.org](mailto:greg.mullins@researchaustralia.org)

# ABOUT RESEARCH AUSTRALIA

**Our vision:** Health and prosperity through Australian research and innovation.

**Our mission:** Use our unique convening power to maximise the impact of all stages of health and medical research and innovation.

## Our role:

### Engage

Australia in a conversation about the health benefits and economic value of its investment in health and medical research.

### Connect

Researchers, funders, healthcare providers and consumers to increase investment in health and medical research from all sources.

### Influence

government policies that support effective health and medical research and its routine translation into evidence-based practices and better health outcomes.

Established with the assistance of the Federal Government in 2002, Research Australia is the national alliance representing the entire health and medical research (HMR) pipeline, from the laboratory to the patient and the marketplace. Research Australia works to position Australian HMR as a significant driver of a healthy population and a healthy economy.

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