

Curtin University submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee on the Inquiry into Support for Health and Medical Research Funding and Priorities

Health and Medical Research at Curtin University

The vision of Curtin University is to make a difference for people and our planet by working in partnership. The University undertakes high-quality health and medical research and trains the next generation of healthcare professionals and researchers. Our health and medical research is primarily undertaken within the Faculty of Health Sciences, which consists of the Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute (CHIRI), the Curtin enAble Institute, and four schools – Curtin Medical School, Curtin School of Population Health, Curtin School of Allied Health, and the Curtin School of Nursing. Within these institutes and schools, there are several high-performing research groups including, but not limited to, the National Drug Research Institute, the liver cancer collaborative and the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Climate Change and Health Impact Assessment. We work in partnership with consumers, the government and non-government health services industry, medical research institutes and collaborate with other universities both nationally and internationally.

Submission Summary

Curtin University welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee on the Inquiry into Support for Health and Medical Research Funding and Priorities. We understand this committee was established to inquire and report on (i) Western Australia's share of national competitive funding, (ii) how health and medical research priorities are determined, and (iii) the corresponding impact on specific types of research and areas of need. The Curtin submission is not an all-encompassing statement but points to areas for prioritisation in response to the terms of reference for consideration by the Committee.

1. Prioritisation of research without compromising our strengths

Health and medical research priorities at Curtin University are anchored in the university strategy, which is centred on People, Planet and Partnerships. The University is responsive to the sustainable Development Goals for health, state and federal research priorities and research strategies, and emerging community priorities not captured by existing research strategies. Curtin's enAble Institute, for example, was recently established in response to the need for a community facing health research institute in WA that conducts innovative mental health, disability, dementia and ageing research across the life-course. Both the Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute (CHIRI) and the Curtin enAble Institute exhibit distinct and complementary strengths that align with the state's priorities. CHIRI is focused on lab bench research, driving advancements in areas that also include the Science and Technology top three priority areas: Regional, Remote and Indigenous Health, Data Linkage and Cohort Studies, and Personalised Medicine. On the other hand, the Curtin enAble Institute is dedicated to patient-facing research, providing insights and innovations in these same priority areas. These combined strengths position Curtin University to significantly contribute to the next WA Science and Technology Plan, ensuring comprehensive coverage from basic research to clinical application and community impact.

Researchers at Curtin are responsive to funding mechanisms that originate from national research priorities and state health and medical research strategies such as the WA Health and Medical Research strategy; the WA Mental Health Research Strategy (soon to be released),

Healthway strategy; WA Health Promotion Strategy; Mental Health Promotion, Mental Illness, Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention Plan; WA Sexual Health and Blood-borne Virus Strategy; WA Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework; and the WA Cancer Plan to name a few. The majority of research funding sought by health and medical researchers at Curtin University comes from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, national), the Medical Research Future Fund (national), the Future Health Research and Innovation Fund (WA) and philanthropic funders. When the national or state priorities become overly specific, it can result in some important areas of research being excluded from funding.

State strategies focus on technological innovation, commercialisation, research that is close to translation, and research that has demonstrable direct benefits to either health services or WA. A consequence is diminished funding for discovery research, primary and secondary prevention, research in community settings (outside of WA's health system), and research with a national or international focus. Discovery research is a particular strength in WA due to high quality basic science and aetiological population health research, a long history health record linkage, and well-established cohorts (Raine Study, Busselton Health Study and the ORIGINS study). Reduced support for primary and secondary prevention results in directing research effort away from addressing the structural determinants of health equity and the social determinants of health. Research that addresses these upstream drivers of mental ill-health and other chronic diseases is critical for preventing some of the challenges that WA's health system is now facing (ramping, over-burdened systems) and is, in our opinion, as important a research investment as investment in digital technologies and innovations to create efficiency and expand the reach of curative services. The focus of WA research strategies on direct benefits to the state can lead to the initiation of more state-focussed research. Non-national research applications without national and international collaboration are less competitive for national funding schemes. International collaboration is an opportunity to strengthen our research capabilities in areas that are still emergent (e.g., implementation science methods and clinical trials design) and can help WA grow its research profile, reputation and impact- all key priorities mentioned in WA's health and medical research strategy.

2. Position WA as a destination for researchers by supporting their entire career continuum

Health and medical research in WA benefits from new expertise from researchers moving into the state. There is also benefit from WA researchers moving out of the state to gain skills and experience not otherwise available and to serve as ambassadors for WA health and medical research. Some institutions outside WA can offer larger research and support packages that cannot be supported by WA institutions. The result is that some of the state's most competitive researchers leave WA and consequently do not submit national funding applications through WA institutions. Winning a National Health and Medical Research Council fellowship (investigator grant) is difficult for researchers in all states and territories. Researchers who apply for such category 1 schemes are expected to apply for funding to cover their salaries, support the salaries of their team members, and cover other direct research costs. State government priorities that lead to covering National Health and Medical Research Council salary gaps would help both retain talent in the host institution and increase future grant success.

The Future Health Research and Innovation program to provide WA Near Miss Awards for Emerging Leaders and WA Near Miss Awards for Ideas Grants are highly valued by Curtin University. These awards support the researchers and research projects from WA applicants who are early in their career (<10 years post-PhD). These early career researchers are the future mid-career and senior researchers who will be competitive for future national funding success.

Once they exceed the 10-year eligibility point, there is no equivalent support even for national grant applications that were very close to the funding cut-off. Support for near miss applicants who are mid-career or senior researchers will increase WA's funding success in national schemes. There are also limited options for researchers (>10 years post-PhD) who either hold National Health and Medical Research Council fellowships (investigator grants) and are in their last year of the award, or had a recently expired fellowship. These researchers have an established track record of success with national funding and provide the research environment for early career researchers yet there are no options in WA for near-miss funding or safety-net salary support. There is opportunity for WA to build national funding success and to position itself as a destination for health and medical researchers via a program to support researchers across the continuum of their careers.

3. Position WA for grant success through research infrastructure support schemes.

Health and medical research in WA benefits from schemes that support research infrastructure. Research in WA would benefit from infrastructure support schemes that provide strategic investments in research centres and institutes, including CHIRI and enAble. These investments would support the maintenance and growth of data assets available to the broader WA research community (clinical registries, datasets, and biobanks), and research support platforms with staff who have specialist skills in consumer and community engagement, research translation, clinical trials management, data science among others. Notably, WA has not yet invested in a clinical trials unit (CTU), a gamechanger in terms of winning both category 1 and international funding. Many institutions outside of WA have invested in these support services, offering researchers a competitive advantage in category 1 funding. State government funding towards this infrastructure could increase future grant success

4. Addressing the visibility challenges and funding bias for WA researchers

WA faces a unique challenge in securing equitable funding from the NHMRC and other agencies due to its geographical isolation from the eastern states. This isolation contributes to a 'visibility problem,' where WA researchers must exert significantly more effort to gain recognition compared to their colleagues in the eastern states. The concentration of perceived research powerhouses on the East Coast further exacerbates this issue, compelling WA researchers to frequently travel for conferences and meetings to showcase their work and build essential networks. Despite these challenges, WA researchers consistently produce high-quality, impactful research. However, the additional burdens of travel and limited opportunities for direct engagement with key decision-makers contribute to an inherent funding bias that needs to be addressed.

To mitigate this bias and promote equitable opportunities, we propose targeted infrastructure support that enhances the visibility and representation of WA researchers on national platforms. Funding to support sustainable travel and registration for conferences on the East Coast is essential, enabling WA researchers to present their work, engage with peers, and participate in critical discussions that influence funding priorities. Additionally, investments in hosting prestigious conferences and scientific meetings within WA will attract national and international attention, showcasing the region's research capabilities and fostering collaborative opportunities. Furthermore, increased representation in lobbying activities in

Canberra is crucial. Ensuring that WA researchers and institutions have a seat at the table during government consultations and funding deliberations will help to balance the geographical disparity and advocate for the unique needs and contributions of WA research.