

11 October 2023

Science Strategy and Priorities Taskforce  
Science Division | Science Policy & Governance Branch  
Department of Industry, Science and Resources  
Ngunnawal Country, Industry House,  
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Submitted by email to: [priorities@industry.gov.au](mailto:priorities@industry.gov.au)

Dear Science Strategy and Priorities Taskforce,

***APS submission to Australia's draft National Science and Research Priorities***

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on *Australia's draft National Science and Research Priorities* to help refine the draft priorities and inform the National Science Statement. We understand that this process is intended to re-energise conversations across the Australian science and research sector.

At the APS, our core mission revolves around enhancing the wellbeing of all in our society. We are informed by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which champion inclusivity, social equity, and the empowerment of marginalised and vulnerable groups<sup>1</sup>. By advocating on behalf of our members and the community, we strive to bring about meaningful reforms in Australian health and social policies, psychological science and research systems. Our overarching objective is to ensure equitable access for all to quality, evidence-based services that promote health and well-being.

We understand that the current consultation is addressing:

- How well the draft priorities reflect the key challenges and opportunities for Australia,
- How governments and the science and research sector can best work with First Nations people to build a system that recognises and values First Nations knowledge and knowledge systems,
- How further refinement can be undertaken, and
- How the priorities could be implemented.

However, for the purposes of our feedback to the Science Strategy and Priorities Taskforce, the APS has focussed on the first point in terms of exploring how well the draft priorities reflect the key challenges and opportunities for Australia.

From a general perspective, it is important for the National Science and Research Priorities (the priorities) to include a broad range of scientific disciplines with psychology having a leading voice; noting that psychology is a STEM discipline with both the APS and the Psychology Foundation of Australia being members of Science and Technology Australia.

### **Priority 1. Ensuring a net zero future and protecting Australia's biodiversity**

The impacts of climate change are of particular interest to the APS, as detailed in our Position Statement: *Psychology and Climate Change*<sup>2</sup>.

A key challenge with achieving the goal inherent to this priority is the behavioural change that will be required of individuals, communities, industries, and government. Psychology is the science of human behaviour and behaviour modification and would therefore have a central strategic role to play in planning and implementing the necessary changes to achieve this goal. Evidence-based psychological interventions relevant to the mitigation of and adaptation to the effects of climate change must be a priority. Behaviour change that supports a net zero future is missing from this priority.

It is well established that there are both direct and indirect impacts of climate change on mental health<sup>3,4</sup>. Given this, the importance of conducting research on how healthy ecological environments impact and support mental health and wellbeing (e.g., recreation, connection to Country), which is also relevant to Priority 2, is missing from this priority.

### **Priority 2: Supporting healthy and thriving communities**

A preventative approach to health and wellbeing is central to the ethos of the APS and we therefore commend the aims included under Priority 2.

However, there are elements that appear to be missing from this priority, namely:

- The social and emotional wellbeing of First Nations people which differ in many regards from western conceptualisations of 'mental health'<sup>5</sup>.
- Critical research on the drivers of mental health and wellbeing in systems, organisations, and communities across the lifespan.
- A focus on early intervention. While the prevention aspect of this priority is acknowledged, research also needs to look at early intervention.
- Research on the impact of public policy reform on mental health and wellbeing.
- Research that explores strength-based approaches, as well as variations in health and mental health.
- The reduction of health and mental health inequities between metro and rural communities <sup>see 6</sup>.
- Services, skills, and expertise to broaden the focus out from just "Techniques and practices".
- Research that embeds psychological science principles in education.

It is important to conduct research on how healthy ecological environments impact and support mental health and wellbeing (e.g., recreation, connection to Country) – as stated above regarding Priority 1. As we have previously advocated, the scale of the impacts of climate change require a public health, preventative approach to provide Australians with the psychological tools and resources to be resilient to climate change impacts<sup>2</sup>.

### **Priority 3: Enabling a productive and innovative economy**

This priority requires funding to secure a workforce that is enabled and appropriately resourced to conduct long-term programs of research to match the percentage of GDP of our competitors in the OECD.

Psychology has a clear role under this priority in terms of expertise analysing organisational function and the implementation of workplace change, as well as research into fostering innovation, growth, and entrepreneurial mindsets. We also draw attention to the unknown psychological impact of increasing use of and reliance on AI and related technologies and emphasise the importance of psychological research and expertise in harnessing such opportunities in a safe and sustainable way.

#### **Priority 4: Building a strong, more resilient nation**

As previously mentioned, the scale and broad impacts of climate change mean we must take preventative, evidence-based approaches to adjust to its psychosocial impacts. Evidence suggests that proactive investment in 'cohesive communities' is helpful to buffer the effects of disasters<sup>7</sup>. Research must use a preventative and health promotion approach to develop initiatives that equip communities to efficiently prepare for and respond to the impacts of climate change.

- The aims of Priority 4 overlap with Priorities 2 and 3 in that a critical area of research is applying evidence-informed psychological principles in education to build a stronger more resilient nation. There is, of course, specific research in psychology on resilience of individuals and organisations that should be noted.
- Social justice and the justice system, as key social determinants of health are missing from this priority, as is the United Nation Sustainable Development Goals.
- An innovative and productive economy is linked to the mental health of workers, especially employment models (e.g., the gig economy, casualisation) which could also be noted under this priority.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to *Australia's draft National Science and Research Priorities*. If any further information is required from the APS, I would be happy to be contacted through the national office on (03) 8662 3300 or by email at [z.burgess@psychology.org.au](mailto:z.burgess@psychology.org.au)

Yours sincerely

**Dr Zena Burgess, FAPS FAICD**  
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