

National Health and Medical Research Council Consultation: Publications in Track Record Assessment

29 October 2021

Consultation questions:

Please indicate your view on NHMRC's proposal for publication assessment.

Science & Technology Australia supports this proposal - and makes a further suggestion for improvement.

STA represents 92 member organisations and an estimated 90,000 scientists, technologists and researchers across Australia's STEM sector.

Please provide any other comments from your organisation on the advantages, disadvantages or other consequences of NHMRC's proposal for publication assessment?

Science & Technology Australia agrees with the proposed change to require applicants to cite their top ten publications. However we suggest the NHMRC considers removing the 10-year timeframe.

Some researchers' most significant publications may have been published more than a decade ago. While STA appreciates the importance of researchers continuing to make cutting-edge contributions in their field, we recommend relying on the judgement of peer reviewers. A significant measure of a publication's impact can also be longevity or findings with impact that is only realised years down the track. This approach would also allow research and reports that contributed to policy and metrics such as citations with patent filings to be highlighted as having translational relevance. Imposing a 10-year limit without considering how researchers' time may be allocated across various responsibilities, including teaching, could inadvertently disadvantage some researchers.

STA also recommends the NHMRC ensures the word limit for descriptions of the 10 publications sufficiently allows for comprehensive explanations of the work's context and significance.

There is broad support from STA's diverse membership for the proposed change to nominate a researcher's top 10 citations. We note however our members at the Australasian Neuroscience Society report a desire in the neuroscience community to include a slightly larger - yet still limited - number of cited publications. The NHMRC may wish to consult directly with the ANS on this matter.

To ensure a more consistent approach to research assessment and funding across Australia's major research funding agencies, STA also advocates for policy alignment between the NHMRC and the ARC for listing top publications, any additional publications (if at all), and data sources (such as ORCID).

Please provide any other feedback from your organisation on NHMRC's proposal for publication assessment? For example, will the proposal achieve the aims outlined at the start of this paper?

This proposed move to a focus on career-best publications rather than sheer quantity of publications would be a step forward for excellence and equity - and improve efficiency for applicant and reviewer alike.

It ensures an emphasis on research quality. The onus would still be on the reviewer's judgement to make an accurate assessment of the publication's quality and impact. However, the reduction in the reviewer burden will improve capacity to make an informed and considered judgement.

Focusing on research and publication quality would also strengthen assessment of a researcher's achievements relative to opportunity - which is key to equity and diversity.