Title: Where to from here? Nutrition and dietetics research into the future.

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This year has been tough, just ask a researcher. While the coronavirus pandemic has continued to cause global health and economic devastation, the research and higher education sectors have experienced widespread disruption and financial hardship. Across Australia, over 17,000 university jobs have been lost due to pandemic-related reductions in income and organisational restructures, placing additional workloads on those who remain. For students and emerging researchers, most learning activities are still occurring online, dampening opportunities to be immersed in society to discover knowledge and drive impact through research. Travel restrictions, job losses and significant increases in the demands on health services have meant that continuity of health-related research has been exceptionally challenging. All members of academic and research teams will have witnessed the logistical, financial and emotional hardships that have been felt by researchers during the coronavirus pandemic. This has been a challenging time for all.

Difficult and challenging times present opportunities for reflection and review to ensure that the relevance, importance, and impact of research in nutrition and dietetics becomes stronger into the future. Now is an opportunity to review our research processes, systems, teams, and culture to ensure a bright future for research in nutrition and dietetics. Leaders in both the health and higher education industries are re-examining the sustainability and suitability of their business models and service delivery systems to ensure they are having the most positive impact on a rapidly changing society. It is important that we also consider whether our own research processes in nutrition and dietetics are optimal for ourselves, our research partners, and our end-users. In the process, we should address growing concerns in our sector, including unmanageable workloads, increasing administrative burdens, deteriorating working conditions, unhealthy work practices during lockdown (and arguably outside lockdown too). If we do not reflect on ourselves as individuals and as a profession, then our postgraduate students, PhD candidates and academic colleagues will question whether a career in research is worth pursuing. Let’s make sure it is.
It is a privilege and honour to present this issue of *Nutrition & Dietetics*. While we celebrate the new contributions to the literature brought about by the original research articles, let’s also take this opportunity to think strategically about the future of research in nutrition and dietetics. I urge readers to consider how your own research teamwork, planning, and procedures can continue to develop for a vibrant future. Most research leaders are presently focussing on supporting a happy, healthy, and productive research team to ensure business continuity during the pandemic. But now, it’s time to lift again, look to the future and consider what opportunities and challenges will be on the horizon as we transition to the ‘new normal’ after the pandemic.

There are five ways I am working to put my own research program in a position to offer the most value for my institution and the research and higher education sectors into the future; I encourage you to join me. First, I am improving my understanding of the bidirectional relationship between research and society. Research needs funding, primarily salary for researchers (or time investment by students and volunteers) and costs of consumables for projects. In the past, research funding has often been seen as a gift, or prize for high quality work. However, research funding is actually an investment by tax-payers (via government) or from other not-for-profit or private enterprises within our society. The knowledge generated from research is the return on that investment, ultimately contributing to an enriched society. A prosperous future as researchers will require us all to be able to demonstrate how our work provides a return on investment beyond merely the results, publication and dissemination of our work. We must engage closely and frequently with those who invest in research in nutrition and dietetics to clearly articulate the impact and benefits of research in our profession. Impact narratives are not always easy for researchers to develop and express, but they are crucially important for demonstrating the value of knowledge creation and translation. We need to orient our research questions, processes, and procedures to provide solutions to some of the big challenges in modern society.
Second, I am continuously refining the processes in place for my research team to work together productively and supportively. Healthy Primary Care is a rapidly growing research team at Griffith University, funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council, as well as other research partners. Our goal is to reorient primary health care services and systems to focus on healthy lifestyles and healthy environments, especially nutrition. Our monthly professional development workshops and weekly brief team meetings (“huddles”) keep us focussed, engaged, and continuously learning even as we have returned to working on campus and in the community. Supporting each other has never been more critical during the pandemic, but it will also be very important in the future when new challenges arise.

Third, I act on opportunities to lift others in research and higher education through service leadership. We will all have maximum impact by serving the ambitions and fostering the achievement of others. Modest steps such as acknowledging the efforts of peers and partners and celebrating all successes helps to build an inclusive, positive culture that results in meaningful impact. Inspiring new graduates in nutrition and dietetics to include research as a key component of their work or even to pursue a full-time career in research has a significant impact on the research capacity and capability of our entire profession. I am also grateful for the exceptionally positive experiences I had when my research career was forming. I am now driven to foster positive experiences for all. As the coronavirus pandemic continues, let’s also celebrate the generation of new knowledge and hold space for reflection on what has been achieved despite significant challenges. Our work would not be possible without the efforts of others, and it’s important to communicate our appreciation.

Fourth, I continue to look for inspiration in other nutrition and dietetics researchers, as well as leaders across Australia’s higher education sector. People in the highest leadership positions are often the most generous with their time. This year, I interviewed 51 Vice-Chancellors and Deputy Vice-Chancellors from all major Australian universities to gain insight into what current
academic and research leaders believe is in store for future leaders; what we will need to do and how can we best prepare for the rapidly changing higher education landscape. Their passion and enthusiasm for what they do and their commitment to making positive change was evident. This learning experience was also a reminder that all researchers, at all stages of career, benefit from mentors and sponsors who open doors and encourage others to reach their full potential. Our inclusive research workforce in nutrition and dietetics is an asset to our profession.

Finally, good quality research requires time and space for deep thinking and critical reflection. Although this need is well recognised, the challenges of the pandemic have shown how home and work environments can be structured to foster time and space for productive endeavours. What we originally thought was not possible, is now unavoidable when it comes to blending home, family, work and social aspects of our lives. Flexible working conditions are an attractive aspect of academic work, but are now quite common in other research environments. Flexible working conditions are also a double-edged sword, with high demands placed on vulnerable early career researchers who can feel the weight of unlimited expectation, even from within themselves. The core reward of working in academia is joy from the pursuit of new knowledge that contributes to an improved society. Let’s be mindful that the flexibility, autonomy, and intellectual passions of research are motivators, rather than detractors.

The current issue of Nutrition & Dietetics includes papers that will inform practice into the future. Several articles have strong potential for research impact, including Bell et al’s implementation of the SIMPLE program in Queensland hospitals, and Pirotta et al’s examination of the preferences of women with polycystic ovarian syndrome regarding support for healthy lifestyles. The next step for these studies is to engage with the end-users of this knowledge and articulate exactly how these findings can be acted upon to benefit society. Another positive note is the focus on continuous improvement in two articles in this issue, spanning dietetic education and training and tertiary dietetic services. I want to acknowledge
the efforts of Mallett et al, whose study received no external funding, but was made possible only through the dedication of two medical students and a team of supportive supervisors based in regional and rural NSW\textsuperscript{5}. Furthermore, succeeding in a PhD is not easy during a pandemic, yet Tam et al has evaluated the nutrition knowledge of elite Australian athletes and collected data before and during the onset of the coronavirus pandemic\textsuperscript{6}. Finally, I am inspired by Taylor et al who has brought together an impressive team of high-functioning researchers across several states in Australia to examine the food and nutrient intakes of young Australian adults (18-24 years) using data from their National Health and Medical Research Council funded ‘Aim4Me’ study\textsuperscript{7}. This group contains some of Australia’s leading dietetic researchers and their strength in mentoring others is shining through in this study.

This issue serves as a timely reminder that nutrition and dietetics research is continuing to progress our understanding of human health. Despite the ongoing challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, it is an absolute pleasure to witness the progress and success of researchers in our profession and their important contribution to society. I recognise the ongoing efforts of the authors, their supporting teams and the environments and cultures that are required for productive outcomes. Congratulations to all, let’s continue to celebrate research and new knowledge.
References


