

## Combined Study to Help Lift Health, Happiness

Everyday the public is overwhelmed with information about health – so much so that it is confusing and even seems contradictory to the average person. At the same time, Australians are showing more interest than ever before in managing their own health to prevent diseases associated with lifestyle.

Since Norm told us to “Be In It” back in the 1970’s, the airwaves have been full of health advice and warnings, as well as some very dubious spruiking of products like diet pills and exercise machines.

Even simple things like milk have changed. Thirty years ago there was plain milk in bottles. These days you’re faced with an array of cartons declaring themselves ‘low fat’, ‘no fat’ or enriched with calcium, iron, or vitamins. So which one is the best one for your particular needs?

Now, five of Australia’s most innovative universities will collaborate in an unprecedented effort to define the ideal healthy lifestyle, and give the public trustworthy information about foods claimed to be healthy.

The program, called the Australian Centre for Metabolic Fitness, has won more than two-million dollars funding from the Australian Technology Network of Universities **Research Challenge**, which strives to enhance collaboration across its members and across disciplines.

The Centre for Metabolic Fitness is a perfect example of harnessing the vast intellectual resources of the ATN: UniSA, Queensland University of Technology, Curtin University of Technology, RMIT and University of Technology, Sydney.

**Curtin University  
of Technology**

**University of  
South Australia**

**RMIT University**

**University of  
Technology  
Sydney**

**Queensland  
University  
of Technology**

Chancellery  
GPO Box 2471  
Adelaide  
SA 5001

Tel +61 8 8302 9132  
Fax +61 8 8302 0943

[www.atn.edu.au](http://www.atn.edu.au)

**BUILDING  
PARTNERSHIPS  
FINDING  
SOLUTIONS**

Already, the Centre has attracted enthusiastic support and funding from the CSIRO, public health agencies and food manufacturers. In total, a budget exceeding six-million dollars is projected for the first five years.

Critically, at a time when the Federal Government is about to embark on a major review of the \$3billion research funding system, it provides tangible evidence of the need to develop performance measures to assesses accurately the social impact of such applied research.

The ATN argues forcefully that the current funding system based on indicators such as citations, awards and prizes, fails to recognise and measure the community impact of research for it to be properly resourced in the funding split.

A more realistic set of indicators is necessary, measuring collaboration, the ability to attract repeat business from industry and the penetration of new industry sectors. The ATN is focused on applied research with industry partners. If we are working with major industry partners and they continue to work with us in a collaborative arrangement we would argue that that is a reasonable and justifiable measure of the quality of our research.

We know that research is critical for industry development and we know it is fundamental to the formulation of public policy. If we believe these to be key components for measuring research, then the Federal Government's review must find a way to evaluate them – unlike the experience in the UK Assessment Exercise.

The ATN universities are leaders in opening new research fields and disciplines, and assimilating diverse areas of academic research to work on practical problems.

The Centre for Metabolic Fitness represents research on a scale unprecedented in Australia – and possibly in the English-speaking world – with more than thirty research teams working in eight different fields all with the mutual goal of metabolic fitness.

The ATN devotes the greatest proportion of its total Research and Development investment to the fields of Public Health and Health Services, and we have a special emphasis on applied research, directing more of our Research and Development investment towards these activities than any other university group in Australia.

The reason for our position in this review process therefore is quite clear. We undertake research that has impact, is relevant and is in fact, vital for the well-being of the public.

Even though policy makers have known for at least two decades that the only way the already ailing health system will cope in future is if the public adopts healthier lifestyles now, there is little known about the effectiveness of various public health programs, and in particular different *combinations* of exercise and diet incorporating food supplements.

The Centre for Metabolic Fitness is planning the most extensive research ever conducted of various diet and exercise combinations, including large community-based demonstration trials.

Another of its core goals is to independently verify, with rigorous scientific testing, claims of specific health benefits for new food supplements or ‘functional foods’, such as Omega-3 enriched products.

At present in Australia, it is illegal for food manufacturers to make any claims about the health benefits of their products beyond such general information as low-salt or high-fibre. However, next year the Federal Government will make the most significant changes to the rules since RDI’s (Recommended Daily Intake) were introduced 15 years ago. Under the new regulations, food manufacturers will be allowed to promote the health benefits of food supplements, but only if they have been verified scientifically.

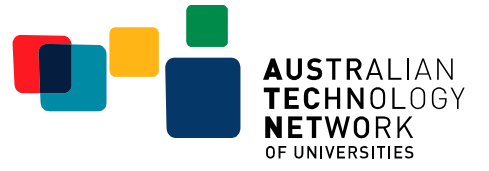
Another unique aspect of the research will be to focus on improving mental health as a key to motivating people to protect themselves from lifestyle-related disease. Depression and lack of motivation are obvious barriers to people actually adopting the healthy lifestyles

promoted by public health campaigns. If this link is not investigated, Governments risk wasting millions of dollars on health campaigns without knowing what they might achieve, or even *if* they achieve anything.

Industry is critical in this partnership with food manufacturers recognising the potential for bio-active nutrients to elevate mood and enhance cognitive function. The food industry can see the marketing potential of presenting their products as part of a healthy lifestyle ‘package’ including regular exercise.

The Centre’s ultimate goal is to find answers which can be adopted quickly and easily by food manufacturers and public health agencies, and which can be a feasible, even enjoyable, part of people’s everyday lives.

The bigger challenge is to ensure that any future system for allocating research funding supports such crucial goals, instead of neglecting them.



**BUILDING  
PARTNERSHIPS  
FINDING  
SOLUTIONS**