

Cite this: *Chem. Sci.*, 2024, 15, 12047

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# Modulating Ni–S coordination in Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub> to promote electrocatalytic oxidation of 5-hydroxymethylfurfural at ampere-level current density†

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Electricity-driven oxidation of 5-hydroxymethylfurfural (HMF) to 2,5-furandicarboxylic acid (FDCA) is a highly attractive strategy for biomass transformation. However, achieving industrial-grade current densities remains a great challenge. Herein, by modulating the water content in a solvothermal system, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF with stabilized and shorter Ni–S bonds as well as a tunable coordination environment of Ni sites was fabricated. The prepared Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was highly efficient for electrocatalytic oxidation of HMF to produce FDCA, and the FDCA yield and Faraday efficiency could reach 98.8% and 97.6% at the HMF complete conversion. More importantly, an industrial-grade current density of 1000 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> could be achieved at a potential of only 1.45 V vs. RHE for HMFOR and the current density could exceed 500 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> with other bio-based compounds as the reactants. The excellent performance of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF originated from the shorter Ni–S bonds and its better electrochemical properties, which significantly promoted the dehydrogenation step of oxidizing HMF. Besides, the gram-scale FDCA production could be realized on Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF in a MEA reactor. This work provides a robust electrocatalyst with high potential for practical applications for the electrocatalytic oxidation of biomass-derived compounds.

Received 27th May 2024  
Accepted 26th June 2024

DOI: 10.1039/d4sc03470h

rsc.li/chemical-science

## Introduction

In order to mitigate the environmental problems and energy crisis caused by the overconsumption of fossil resources, there is an urgent need to find alternative resources that should be renewable and abundantly available.<sup>1</sup> Biomass, the world's most abundant renewable carbon-based resource, is a promising alternative to fossil resources. Generally, biomass can be converted into high-value chemicals,<sup>2,3</sup> fuel products (*e.g.*, bio-oils),<sup>4</sup> and functional bio-based materials.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, 5-hydroxymethylfurfural (HMF), a highly attractive platform molecule prepared from biomass-based carbohydrates (*e.g.*,

cellulose, and glucose),<sup>6</sup> has great potential in the production of high value-added fine chemicals,<sup>7</sup> such as 2,5-furandicarboxylic acid (FDCA), 2,5-furandicarboxaldehyde (DFF), 2,5-dimethyl furan (DMF), *etc.* Of these HMF-derived compounds, FDCA has been employed as the renewable monomer for the synthesis of polyethylene 2,5-furandicarboxylate (PEF), which has been considered an environmentally friendly alternative to petroleum-derived and widely-used polyethylene terephthalate (PET).<sup>8,9</sup> Therefore, selective conversion of HMF to produce FDCA has become a hotspot in recent years.<sup>10–12</sup>

Generally, FDCA could be synthesized from oxidation of HMF *via* the conventional thermal catalysis.<sup>13</sup> However, thermal catalysis was usually carried out under harsh reaction conditions (*i.e.*, high temperature, and/or high oxygen pressure).<sup>14,15</sup> Recently, electrocatalytic oxidation of HMF (HMFOR) for the production of FDCA has been developed, which exhibits inherent advantages such as mild conditions, no need for precious metals and oxidants, as well as environmental friendliness. More importantly, HMFOR has favorable thermodynamic properties compared to the OER and can be coupled with different cathodic reduction reactions to obtain various high value-added products (*e.g.*, H<sub>2</sub><sup>16,17</sup> and CO<sup>18</sup>). Currently, the main challenge for HMFOR remains the development of robust catalysts for practical applications. In previous studies, transition metal materials, especially nickel-based catalysts, were the

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d4sc03470h>

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most used electrocatalysts<sup>19</sup> because Ni sites (by the adsorption of hydroxide or being converted into hydroxide) could promote HMF oxidation by proton-coupled electron transfer processes. HMFOR generally requires a redox mediator as a sacrificial agent (e.g., TEMPO) for the conversion of HMF to FDCA under neutral or weakly acidic conditions.<sup>20,21</sup> However, the Ni-based catalysts reported in recent articles can efficiently convert HMF to FDCA through an indirect oxidation mechanism without the need for a sacrificial agent.<sup>22</sup> Although many Ni-based catalysts have been developed for HMFOR, the developed catalysts unfortunately underwent severe and uncontrollable surface reconstruction to form oxides or hydroxides under alkaline conditions, which might result in a significant decrease in catalytic activity.<sup>23</sup> More challengingly, there were only a few catalytic systems that could conduct HMFOR in a high concentration of HMF (>50 mM) at industrial-scale current densities (>500 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>), and the systems reaching ampere-scale current densities were even less.<sup>24,25</sup> Therefore, it is highly essential to construct robust and stable nickel-based electrocatalysts to realize HMFOR at high current densities.

The electro-catalytic performance of Ni-based catalysts was significantly affected by the electronic environment of Ni sites. Generally, the orbital hybridization of Ni sites could be modulated by changing the type and ratio of coordination bonds of the active sites, resulting in a delicate regulation of the electronic structure.<sup>26,27</sup> Thus, modifying the coordination structure of Ni sites was a promising strategy to improve the activity of Ni-based catalysts for HMFOR. Besides, the electrochemical performance of the electrodes could also be improved by introducing heteroatoms (e.g., S, N and P) to optimize the electrode surface properties.<sup>28</sup> Poor catalytic efficiency was often obtained due to excessive adsorption of substrates on the electrode surface with a very strong positive electric field.<sup>29</sup> It has been reported that the S<sup>2-</sup> anion of good electronegativity could reduce the strength of the positive electric field on the electrode surface, thereby promoting the desorption of the product as well as the adsorption and desorption of the probable intermediates.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, according to the Lewis acid–base theory, there was a M–X coordination (M and X represent the metal and the heteroatoms, respectively.) formed between the metal and the heteroatom.<sup>31</sup> In this way, the Lewis acid–base electron pair could boost the activation of the catalyst and reduce the reaction potential barrier on the catalytic electrode effectively.<sup>32</sup> Based on the discussions above, robust and stable Ni-based electrocatalytic materials to generate high current densities for HMFOR could be potentially constructed by finely tuning the coordination structure of Ni sites.

In this work, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub> nanosheets on the surface of nickel foam (NF) were synthesized by a one-step solvothermal method. The synthesized Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF with shorter Ni–S coordination offered the possibility of sustained and rapid electron transfer during the reaction as well as the deprotonation of HMF and showed high catalytic efficiency for HMFOR, in which the HMF conversion, the FDCA yield, and the Faraday efficiency (FE) of FDCA could reach close to 100%, 98.8% and 97.6%, respectively. More importantly, an ultra-high current density (1000 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>) could be achieved at a potential of only 1.45 V vs. RHE. The fact

of achieving industrial current density and the high stability represented the major breakthrough, thus making the developed catalyst have great potential in practical applications.

## Results and discussion

The desired Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was prepared by a one-step solvothermal route as illustrated in Fig. 1a, where thioacetamide (TAA) was employed as the sulfur source. The morphology of the prepared Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was characterized using field emission scanning electron microscopy (FE-SEM). As shown in Fig. S1a and S1b,† after the solvothermal process, the NF framework was well maintained, and Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub> nanosheets were arranged neatly on the NF surface to form three-dimensional porous nanospheres (Fig. 1b–f). In comparison, the morphology of the Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF changed from nanospheres to nanodendrites when water was introduced into the synthetic system, and the size of dendrites became larger with the increase of the introduced water (Fig. S2–S5†). The transmission electron microscopy (TEM) image showed that the prepared Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was composed of nanosheets (Fig. 1e). Importantly, the lattice crystal for Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub> could be clearly observed (Fig. 1f and g), where 0.208 nm belonged to the (202) plane of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>, indicating the successful synthesis of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub> on NF.

The fine structure of the prepared Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was further characterized by X-ray diffraction (XRD), Raman spectroscopy, and X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS). As presented in XRD patterns (Fig. 2a), both Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF and Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-1 showed the characteristic peaks of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub> (PDF # 44-1418) and Ni (PDF # 04-0850), while Ni(OH)<sub>2</sub>/NF possessed the characteristic peaks of Ni(OH)<sub>2</sub> (PDF # 38-0715) and Ni (PDF # 04-0850). More importantly, the peak intensity for Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub> in Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was greater than that in Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-1, suggesting that Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was more fully vulcanized and crystallized, which endowed Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF with a higher electronic conductivity. Moreover, the Raman spectrum was used to identify the molecular vibrational information of functional groups on the electrode surface. In Raman spectra of the prepared electrodes (Fig. 2b), the characteristic Ni–S vibrational modes were observed in the range of 100–800 cm<sup>-1</sup> for each electrode, further confirming the formation of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub> during the solvothermal process. Notably, the intensity of the Ni–S bond decreased gradually as the water ratio increased in the reaction solvent, suggesting that the content of the Ni–S bond could be modulated by adjusting the water ratio in the solvothermal system. Considering the important role of surface species and their electronic state in electrocatalysis, the electronic states and the surface chemical compositions of the prepared materials were determined by XPS. XPS survey spectra (Fig. S6†) confirmed the coexistence of Ni, S, and O elements in the obtained materials. In the high-resolution XPS spectra of Ni 2p (Fig. 2c), characteristic peaks of Ni<sup>2+</sup> at 855.7 (Ni<sup>2+</sup> 2p<sub>3/2</sub>) and 873.7 eV (Ni<sup>2+</sup> 2p<sub>1/2</sub>) accompanied by oscillating satellite peaks were observed. Besides, there was an extra peak assigned to the Ni–S bond at 852.3 eV.<sup>30,33</sup> More importantly, the binding energy of Ni 2p increased with the increase of the water ratio in the solvothermal system, suggesting that the Ni sites in the Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF were more negatively charged. In the XPS spectra of S 2p, two



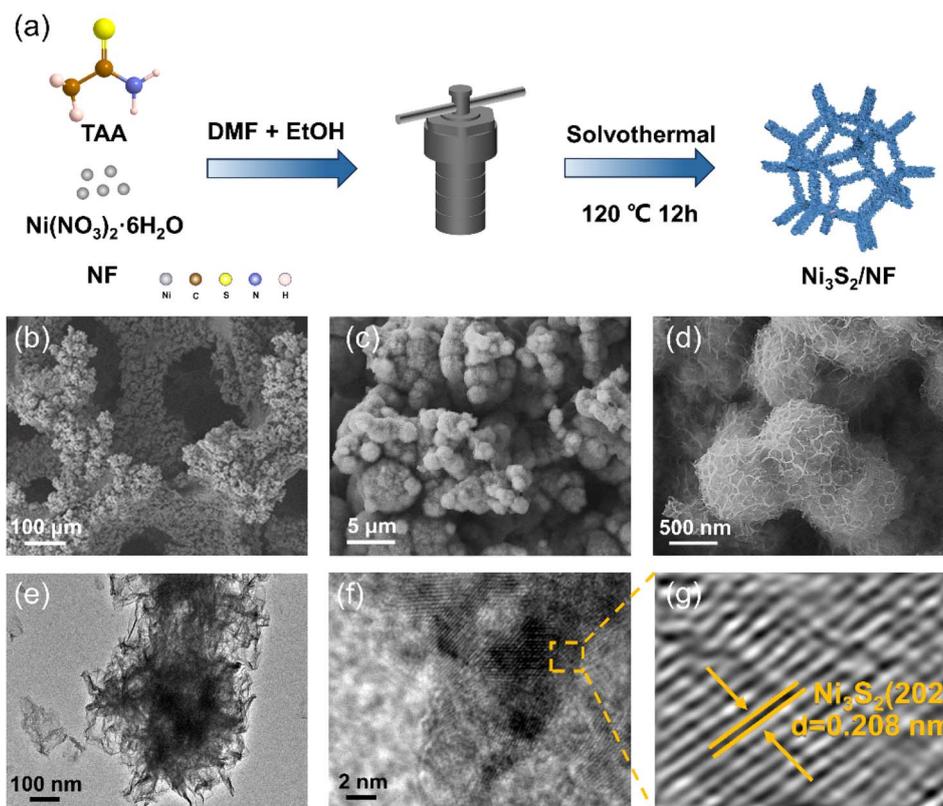


Fig. 1 (a) The process of preparing the desired  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ , (b–d) SEM images of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ , (e) TEM image of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ , and (f and g) HRTEM images of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ .

peaks at 162.1 eV and 163.5 eV, which were assigned to  $\text{S}^{2-} 2\text{p}_{3/2}$  and  $\text{S}^{2-} 2\text{p}_{1/2}$ , respectively, could be observed. Notably, the peak of S 2p in  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  moved towards lower binding energy with the increase of the water ratio in the solvothermal system (Fig. 2d), implying that  $\text{S}^{2-}$  in  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  was more negatively charged. Based on the XPS results of Ni 2p and S 2p, the electronic interaction between Ni species and S species in the prepared materials could be tuned by the water ratio in the solvothermal system, and this interaction in  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  was the strongest. Additionally, the ratio of S–O/Ni–S bonds increased from 0 to 1.180 when the water ratio in the solvothermal system increased from 0 to 100% (Table S1†), indicating the controllable modification of the material structure by the water ratio in the solvothermal system. With the increase of water proportion in the solvothermal system, water molecules would occupy more Ni–ligand sites, resulting in the generation of S–O bonds on the surface of the prepared materials.<sup>34</sup> Actually, the intensity of the Ni–S bonds would significantly increase when the surface of each material was etched by  $\text{Ar}^+$  ions for 100 s (Fig. S7 and S8†), further confirming that the surface structure of the obtained materials was tunable. Comparing the O 1s spectra of the samples (Fig. S9†), three characteristic peaks appear near 531.7, 530.6 eV and 529.4 eV attributed to the adsorbed water and oxides on the catalyst surface, O–H bonds and Ni–O bonds. Owing to the fact that the sample has been in contact with air, this leads to the oxidation of the surface metal to form Ni–O bonds.  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  has the lowest intensity of the characteristic

peak belonging to the Ni–O bond, meaning that oxygen content is limited compared to the other prepared catalysts. The above results indicate that the  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  has been prepared successfully. Additionally, the electronic and coordination structures of Ni were further analyzed by the X-ray absorption fine structure (XAFS) of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$ . The Ni K-edge X-ray absorption near-edge structure (XANES) spectra (Fig. 2e) of the materials showed that the near-edge energy of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  was between those of Ni foil and  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2$ , implying that the valence state of Ni in  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  was higher than that in Ni foil while lower than that in  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2$ . The Fourier-transformed (FT)  $k^3$ -weighted extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS) showed that there were Ni–S coordination peaks in  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$  at 2.28 and 2.35 Å in R-space (Fig. 2f), respectively, which were in good agreement with the Ni–S bond reported in the literature.<sup>35,36</sup> Meanwhile, the EXAFS fitting curves in R-space matched well with the experimental spectra of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$  (Fig. S10 and Table S2†). Notably, the bond length of Ni–S in  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  was shorter than that in  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$ , implying the higher bond dissociation energy of Ni–S and the more robust structure of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2$  in  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ .

The electrochemical performance of the prepared electrodes for the OER and HMFOR was investigated using an H-type electrolytic cell in 1.0 M KOH solution with and without 50 mM HMF. Before electrochemical testing, the electrodes were activated by cyclic voltammetry (CV) at a scan rate of 50  $\text{mV s}^{-1}$  (Fig. S11†). In the LSV curves (Fig. 3a), a small peak



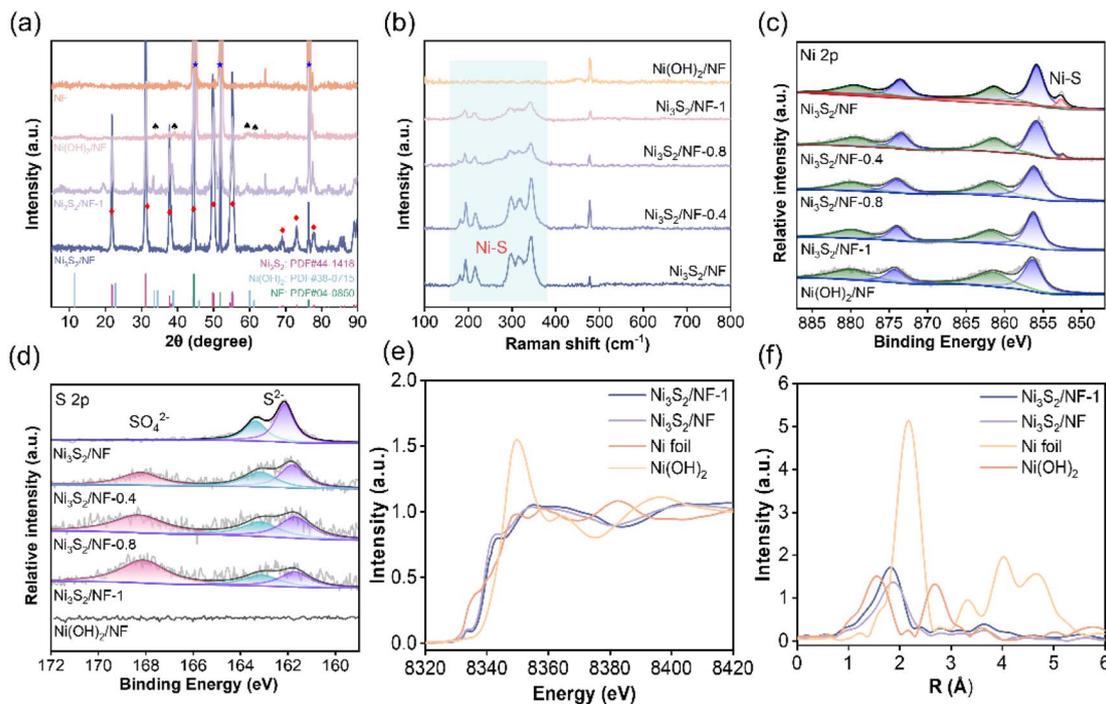


Fig. 2 (a) XRD patterns, (b) Raman spectra, (c) XPS spectra of Ni 2p, (d) XPS spectra of S 2p, (e) Ni K-edge XANES, and (f) Ni K-edge Fourier transformed EXAFS spectra in the R space.

appeared at the potential of 1.38 V *vs.* RHE for the OER, representing the oxidation of Ni<sup>2+</sup> to Ni<sup>3+</sup> as well as the adsorption of OH<sup>-</sup>. In comparison, the onset potential for HMFOR was lower than that of the OER, indicating that HMFOR was thermodynamically more favorable than the OER. Subsequently, the catalytic performance of the prepared electrodes for HMFOR was systematically investigated. It was observed that the current densities of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-0.4, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-0.8, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-1 and Ni(OH)<sub>2</sub>/NF decrease continuously (Fig. 3b and c), and the tendency was consistent with the content of S–O bond in the electrodes. Especially, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF could achieve a current density of 1000 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> at a potential of only 1.45 V *vs.* RHE. To the best of our knowledge, this current density was the maximum that could be achieved with non-precious metal electrodes in alkaline electrolyte (Fig. 3d and Table S3†). To analyze different catalytic performance, Tafel plots for different electrodes were collected (Fig. 3e). As expected, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF had the lowest Tafel slope (63.5 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>) compared with Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-0.4 (91.43 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>), Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-0.8 (98.49 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>), Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-1 (103.64 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>) and Ni(OH)<sub>2</sub>/NF (156.56 mV dec<sup>-1</sup>), indicating the superior catalytic kinetics for HMFOR over Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF. The lowest Tafel slope of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was probably caused by the stronger interaction between Ni and S species, which led to an optimized electronic configuration, thus enhancing the corresponding charge transfer process. Furthermore, the double layer capacitance (*C*<sub>dl</sub>) was calculated from CV curves in the non-faradaic region (Fig. S12†) to estimate the electrochemically active surface area (ECSA) of the electrodes. Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF exhibited the highest ECSA (Fig. 3f), which could provide more electrochemically active sites for the HMFOR. Meanwhile, the

interfacial charge transfer resistance was investigated based on electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS). After being fitted with an equivalent circuit model (Fig. S13†), the Nyquist plot of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF in 1 M KOH without HMF was more than five times larger than that after the addition of 50 mM HMF (Fig. S14†), suggesting that the OER had much larger charge transfer resistance (*R*<sub>ct</sub>) than HMFOR. More importantly, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF exhibited a smaller *R*<sub>ct</sub> value in comparison with Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-0.4, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-0.8, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-1 and Ni(OH)<sub>2</sub>/NF (Fig. 3g), indicating a faster charge transfer at the interface of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF. Generally, most of the reported electrode materials tended to have a larger surface area than the geometry of the substrate electrode, resulting in a bias in the evaluation of apparent *versus* intrinsic activity.<sup>37–39</sup> To reveal the inherent correlation between structural features and the catalytic activity of different electrodes, the turnover frequency (TOF) was evaluated (Fig. 3h), and the number of active sites was estimated by integration of the redox peak because the oxidation process of HMF involved a redox cycle between Ni<sup>2+</sup> and Ni<sup>3+</sup> (Fig. S15†).<sup>40</sup> Based on the results in Fig. 3h and S13†, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF not only had more active sites but also possessed the highest TOF. Based on the discussions above, we could deduce that the good performance of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF probably originated from its high content of Ni–S bonds, which contributed to the exposure of the active sites, thereby enhancing the intrinsic activity of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF for HMFOR. Encouraged by the excellent electrocatalytic performance of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF for HMFOR, the electrooxidation of other bio-based compounds containing aldehyde or hydroxyl groups was evaluated. Based on the results in Fig. 3i and S16† after adding 50 mM benzaldehyde (BZH), 5-hydroxymethyl furoic acid



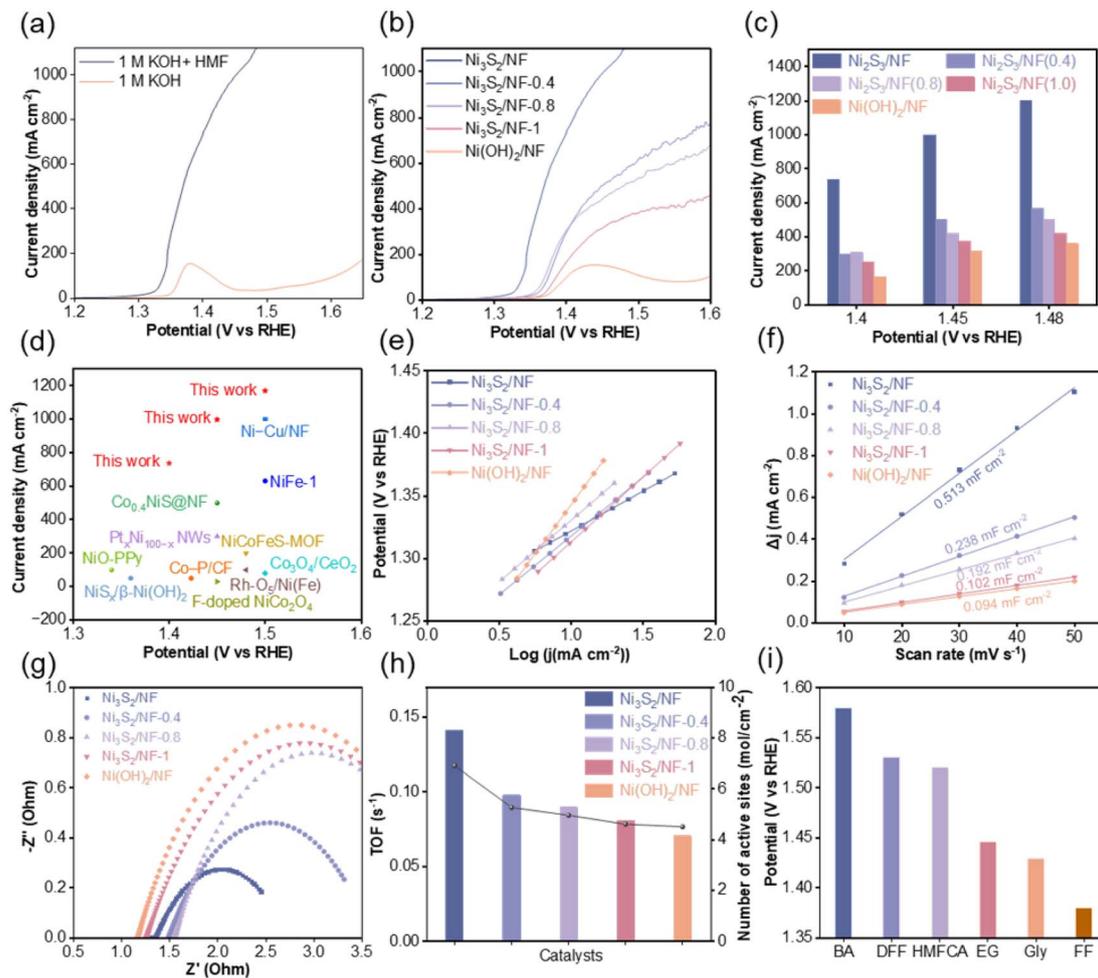


Fig. 3 Electrochemical performance of the prepared materials. (a) Linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) curves of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  in 1 M KOH with and without 50 mM HMF, (b) LSV curves of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-0.4$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-0.8$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$  and  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2/\text{NF}$  for HMFOR, (c) comparison of the current densities of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-0.4$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-0.8$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$  and  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2/\text{NF}$  at different potentials, (d) comparison of HMFOR performance with previously reported electrocatalysts, (e) Tafel plots, (f) change of current density plotted against the scan rate for  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-0.4$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-0.8$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$  and  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2/\text{NF}$ , (g) Nyquist plots, (h) calculated TOFs, and (i) potentials for oxidation of different substrates containing hydroxyl and aldehyde groups at  $500 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$ .

(HMFCA), 2,5-diformylfuran (DFF), ethylene glycol (EG), glycerol (Gly) and furfural (FF) into 1 M KOH solution, the onset potentials were all lower than that for the OER, indicating that the oxidation of these compounds was thermodynamically more favorable than the OER. More importantly, for the electrooxidation of all the mentioned compounds,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  could achieve a current density of  $500 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  below the potential of 1.6 V vs. RHE. These results above not only confirmed the outstanding catalytic activity of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  but also demonstrated its versatility for the oxidation of diverse substrates.

The reason for the excellent performance of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  in HMFOR was systematically analyzed. As well-accepted, the adsorption of HMF molecules on the electrode surface played a crucial role in determining the HMFOR performance.<sup>41</sup> Generally, the open-circuit potentials (OCP) could reflect the capacity of HMF adsorption in the Helmholtz layer on the electrode surface. After adding 50 mM HMF in the reaction system, the OCP values of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$ , and  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2/\text{NF}$

were 402, 341, and 330 mV, respectively, implying that  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  with robust Ni-S coordination had the strongest adsorption capacity for HMF. Besides, the surface structures of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  were monitored using potential-dependent *operando* Raman spectra to reveal the variation of active sites during the reaction. In the control experiments,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  was used as the working electrode and the surface changes of the electrode were monitored at different potentials in 1 M KOH without or with 50 mM HMF. In general,  $\text{Ni}^{3+}-\text{OH}$  was considered to be the active species of both the OER and HMFOR.<sup>42</sup> For the OER, the characteristic Raman peaks were observed at 476 and  $556 \text{ cm}^{-1}$  attributed to bending and stretching vibrations of  $\text{Ni}^{3+}-\text{OH}$  when the potential increased to 1.40 V vs. RHE (Fig. 4b), matching perfectly with the appearance of an oxidation peak in the potential range of 1.35–1.4 V vs. RHE (Fig. 3a). In comparison, after adding 50 mM HMF into 1 M KOH solution, the two peaks were not observed until the potential exceeded 1.45 V vs. RHE, probably because the generated  $\text{Ni}^{3+}-\text{OH}$  before 1.45 V vs.



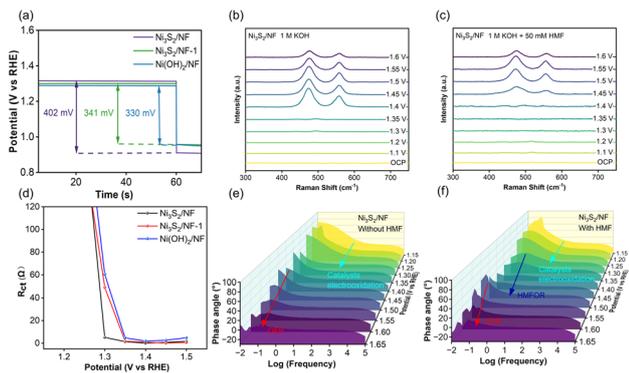


Fig. 4 (a) OCP curves of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$  and  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2/\text{NF}$  in 1 M KOH and 50 mM HMF injected subsequently, (b) *in situ* Raman spectroscopy of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  in KOH, (c) *in situ* Raman spectroscopy of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  in 1 M KOH containing 50 mM HMF, (d)  $R_{\text{ct}}$  values of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ ,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$  and  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2/\text{NF}$  during HMFOR, (e) Bode plots of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  in 1 M KOH, and (f) Bode plots of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  in 1 M KOH containing 50 mM HMF.

RHE was rapidly consumed. In other words,  $\text{Ni}^{2+}$  was electro-oxidized to form  $\text{Ni}^{3+}\text{-OH}$  sites, which would be rapidly consumed by the spontaneous HMFOR through the interaction between  $\text{Ni}^{3+}\text{-OH}$  and HMF adsorbed on the electrode, which was independent of the applied potential (Fig. 4c). In order to gain more insight into the behavior of the catalyst–electrolyte interface, *operando* EIS was utilized to further analyze the differences between the OER and HMFOR.<sup>43</sup> For HMFOR, the  $R_{\text{ct}}$  of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  decreased sharply after the potential exceeded 1.3 V vs. RHE and was smaller than that of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}-1$  and  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2/\text{NF}$  (Fig. 4d), suggesting the faster charge transfer rate of HMFOR on  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ . However, the  $R_{\text{ct}}$  increased slightly after the potential of 1.45 V vs. RHE, which was attributed to the competition between the HMFOR and OER. Besides, the semi-circle radius of the Nyquist plot (Fig. S17†) showed that the impedance of the OER was consistently larger than that of HMFOR, implying the faster charge transfer rate of HMFOR. Based on the above discussions,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  had the highest electrochemical surface area, lowest charge transfer resistance, and strongest adsorption capacity for HMF. These advantages could significantly improve the oxidation efficiency of HMF to generate FDCA. Thereby, much better performance in HMF electrooxidation could be achieved over  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  in comparison with other materials.

According to previous reports, the signals in the middle and high frequency regions ( $10^1\text{--}10^5$  Hz) corresponded to electron transfers between the interior and interface of the electrode, which were indicative of deprotonation/oxidation (*i.e.*, HMFOR). The signals in the low-frequency region ( $10^{-2}\text{--}10^0$  Hz) were related to interfacial reactions involving non-uniform charge distribution (*i.e.*, OER).<sup>44,45</sup> In the absence of HMF (Fig. 4e), the intensity of peaks appearing in the high-frequency region decreased whereas it increased in the low-frequency region with the increase of the applied potentials, implying the structural transformation and occurrence of the OER.<sup>46</sup> After adding HMF, new peaks, appearing at potentials of 1.3–1.5 V vs.

RHE in the middle-frequency region, were attributed to the dehydrogenation of HMF (Fig. 4f). Compared with the peaks belonging to the OER only at the potential over 1.5 V vs. RHE, the peaks for HMFOR at lower potentials further confirmed the favorable HMFOR on  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ . *In situ* examinations verified the superiority of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2$  with strong Ni–S bonds for charge transfer during HMFOR compared to that on  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2$ .

Selectivity of the targeted products is a key aspect of biomass upgrading. As is well-known, there were two main pathways in the electrooxidation of HMF due to the co-existence of carbonyl and hydroxyl groups (Fig. 5a). In pathway 1, the aldehyde group on HMF was first oxidized to generate 5-hydroxymethyl 2-furan carboxylic acid (HMFCFA) as the reaction intermediate. In pathway 2, 2,5-dicarboxyfuran (DFF) was generated as the reaction intermediate by the preferential oxidation of the hydroxymethyl group on HMF. Subsequently, both HMFCFA and DFF were further oxidized to form FFCA, which was ultimately converted to FDCA. To confirm the predominant pathway, the concentrations of HMF and the products were monitored by high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) and quantitatively calculated based on the standard curves (Fig. S18†). With the prolonging of the electrolysis time, the concentration of HMF gradually decreased and the concentration of FDCA gradually increased, indicating that HMF was successfully converted into FDCA (Fig. 5c and d). Simultaneously, HMFCFA and FFCA were identified during the electrolysis process, but negligible amounts of DFF could be detected, indicating that the electrooxidation of HMF on  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  mainly proceeded through the pathway 1 (Fig. 5a). Finally, nearly complete conversion of HMF was achieved with a FDCA yield of 98.8% and a Faraday efficiency of 97.6% when the charge was accumulated up to 580C. Additionally, the current density continuously decreased during the electrocatalysis process until the charge reached 580C (Fig. S19†), resulting from the continuous consumption of HMF. More importantly, the cycling stability test revealed that the  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  electrode could be recycled for six consecutive electrocatalytic cycles, and the HMF conversion (99.4–99.8%), the FDCA selectivity (97.9–99.6%) and FDCA Faraday efficiency (95.6–98.1%) varied within a highly narrow range. Meanwhile, the used  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  was characterized by SEM, XPS and XRD techniques (Fig. S20–S22†), and the results showed that the properties of the  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  were very similar to those of the fresh electrode. Particularly, the XPS spectra of S 2p in the used  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  remained almost devoid of S–O bonds, demonstrating the solidity of Ni–S coordination. The above results confirmed the outstanding stability (both catalytic activity and its structure) of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ , and its surface was not electrochemically reconfigured to hydroxide or oxyhydroxides as in previously reported work. To further reveal the possibility for the practical application of the  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ , a membrane electrode assembly (MEA) reactor of alkaline electrolysis with  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  and NF as the anode and cathode was fabricated for the HMFOR. When employing 1 M KOH with 50 mM HMF as the electrolyte, the current density of the HMFOR//HER was much higher than that of the OER//HER, indicating that substitution of the OER for HMFOR was



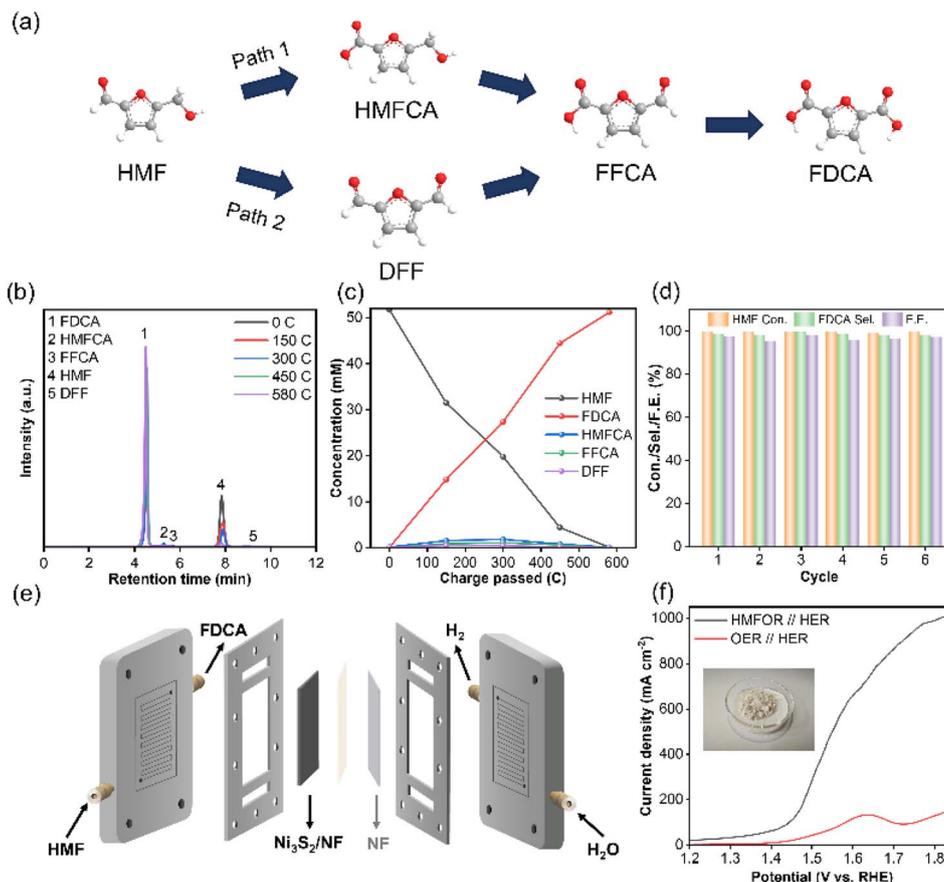


Fig. 5 The chronoamperometric electrolysis measurements of HMFOR using Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF at 1.4 V vs. RHE. (a) The possible pathways of HMF oxidation to FDCA, (b) HPLC chromatogram traces of the electrolyte during the electrochemical oxidation of HMF, (c) the concentration changes of HMF and its oxidation products during HMF electrooxidation, (d) HMF conversion, selectivity and FE of FDCA during HMF electrooxidation at a potential of 1.4 V vs. RHE in 6 successive cycles, (e) schematic representation of the MEA reactor, and (f) LSV curves of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF in 1 M KOH with and without 50 mM HMF in the MEA reactor.

favorable as a means to reduce energy consumption (Fig. 5f). Especially, industrial-grade current density of more than 500 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> could be achieved at an input voltage of 1.55 V vs. RHE. More importantly, 2.002 g FDCA could be obtained from the electrolyte after acidification and the purity of the generated FDCA was more than 99%, which could be proved by HPLC (Fig. 5f and S23†).

Density functional theory (DFT) calculations were finally used to theoretically uncover the differences in structure as well as reactivity regarding Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub> with robust Ni–S coordination and Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>-1 of being conventionally oxygen-embedded. Based on the above experimental results, the optimal theoretical models for Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF and Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-1 were constructed (Fig. 6a and b), and the density of electronic states (DOS) of these two catalysts were analyzed to obtain the differences in the electronic structure (Fig. 6b). Compared with Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-1, Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF had higher TDOS near the Fermi energy, suggesting an enhanced intrinsic conductivity of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF and thus facilitating the electron transfer in the electrocatalytic process. In order to further demonstrate the bonding strength in both catalysts, the crystal orbital Hamilton population (COHP) was used to quantitatively analyze

the Ni–S bond interactions.<sup>47</sup> As shown in Fig. 5c, d, and S24†, the COHP value of Ni–S in Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was –4.01, which was more negative than that in Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-1 (–3.06). Besides DFT, the behavior of HMFOR on the catalysts was further stimulated by the calculations on the HMF dehydrogenation. HMFOR was a stepwise deprotonation process, in which the oxidation of the aldehyde group of HMF in alkaline electrolyte required hydration to form a diol group and then gradual dehydrogenation to generate a carboxyl group. The kinetic energy barriers for proton transfer from HMF to the Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF surface with adsorbed hydroxyl groups were calculated. As shown in Fig. 6f and g, HMF was adsorbed on the Ni sites while the adsorbed OH acted as a proton transfer receptor, followed by detachment of H from HMF which combines with OH to generate water. The energy barrier of hydrogen transfer on Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF was 1.35 eV, which was lower than that of Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF-1 (1.59 eV), suggesting that Ni<sub>3</sub>S<sub>2</sub>/NF enhanced the deprotonation ability of HMF and thus facilitated the oxidation of HMF. All these calculation results were in agreement with the experimental observations for electrocatalytic oxidation of HMF.



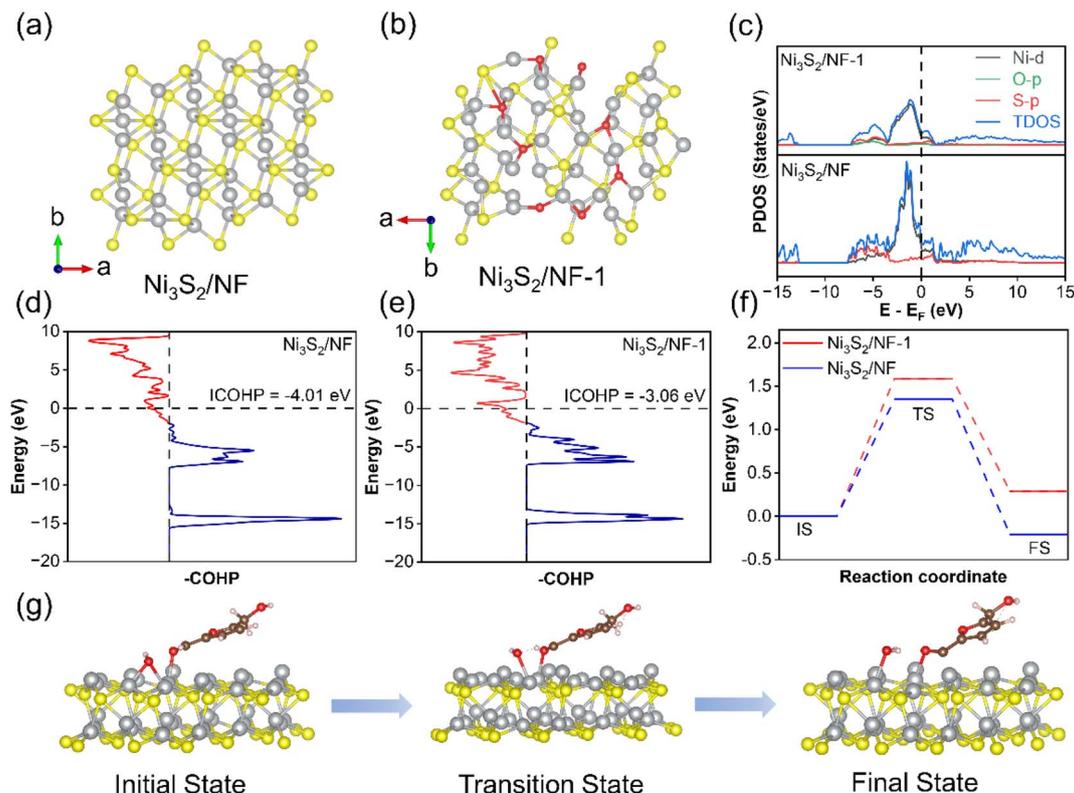


Fig. 6 (a and b) Theoretical models of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF-1}$ , (c) the density of states (DOS) of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF-1}$ , (d and e) crystal orbital Hamilton population (COHP) of Ni-S bonds of  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF-1}$  (the bonding and antibonding states of the Ni-S bonding interactions are shown in blue and red, respectively), (f) energy changes in the deprotonation process on  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  and  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF-1}$ , and (g) the initial, transition and final states in the deprotonation process.

## Conclusions

In summary,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2$  nanosheets supported on NF were fabricated directly by a one-step solvothermal method, and the Ni-S coordination in these materials could be controllably tuned by changing the water content in the solvothermal system. The as-prepared materials as electrodes could catalyze the electro-oxidation of HMF to produce FDCA. It was observed that the catalytic activity of the obtained electrodes increased with the decrease of the water content in the solvothermal system of preparing the catalysts, and  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  showed the best performance for the reaction with current densities up to  $1000 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  at a potential of only 1.45 V vs. RHE. The HMF conversion was almost 100% with a FDCA yield of 98.8% and a Faraday efficiency of 97.6% on  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$ . Besides, industrial-scale current densities exceeding  $500 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  could also be achieved in the electrooxidation of other bio-based compounds, including benzaldehyde, 5-hydroxymethyl furoic acid, 2,5-diformylfuran, ethylene glycol, glycerol and furfural. Systematic investigations revealed that  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  had higher electronic conductivity, lower charge transfer resistance, and higher electrochemical surface area, which all could promote its catalytic performance on the HMFOR. More importantly,  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  could be applied in a MEA reactor, which allowed the gram-scale FDCA production with a purity of more than 99%. We believe that the constructed  $\text{Ni}_3\text{S}_2/\text{NF}$  has great potential for practical applications for the synthesis of FDCA from electrocatalytic oxidation of HMF.

## Data availability

The data supporting this article have been uploaded as part of the ESI.†

## Author contributions

Lan Chen: methodology, investigation, data curation, writing the original draft. Zhaohui Yang: methodology, investigation, writing the original draft. Chuanyu Yan: conceptualization, supervision. Yijun Yin: methodology, investigation. Zhimin Xue: conceptualization, writing – review & editing supervision. Yiting Yao: methodology, investigation, data curation. Shao Wang: methodology. Fanfei Sun: investigation, data curation. Tiancheng Mu: conceptualization, methodology, supervision.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the financial support by Natural Science Foundation of Beijing (2242010), the Forestry and Grassland Science and Technology Innovation Youth Top Talent Project of China (No. 2020132609), and National Natural



Science Foundation of China (22238011). We thank the staff at the BL20U1 beamline of the Shanghai Synchrotron Radiation Facilities (SSRF) for assistance with the EXAFS measurements.

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