

Equity Frontiers Program: Quasi- Experimental Design Projects

2025 Round - Guidelines



ACSES

Australian Centre
for Student Equity
and Success



Curtin University

acses.edu.au

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success acknowledges Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in our work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.

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1. The Equity Frontiers Quasi-Experimental Design Program

1.1 Introduction

The Equity Frontiers Program funds trials to test the effectiveness of initiatives and programs designed to improve higher education access and success for students who are historically under-represented in Australian higher education.

Here, we are specifically calling for projects using quasi-experimental designs (QED) approaches. Where randomisation isn't possible, QEDs are a highly practical and ethical alternative to generate valuable, evidence-based insights. Quasi-experimental designs do not require randomisation but attempt to mimic an experimental approach by comparing observed outcomes with another broadly comparable group, or by analytically creating a "counterfactual" that is as close to the intervention group as possible.

Within the Impact through QED Program, we seek to:

1. strengthen research and evaluation capacity within the student equity sector
2. encourage collaboration in adopting QEDs to undertake Quantitative Impact Evaluations of higher education equity initiatives
3. promote transparency and knowledge sharing within the sector by building stronger evidence base and sharing these impact studies via the [ACSES Trials Registry](#).

Some areas of potential areas of analysis are:

- Outreach/widening participation programs
- Enabling programs
- Adjustments made for people with disabilities
- First year support programs
- Wellbeing initiatives
- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) initiatives
- Student mentoring or transition programs
- Financial support (for example, scholarships)
- Alternative pathways to higher education

1.2 Eligibility

- The project must be led by a Table A institution, as listed in the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* ("Table A providers").
- Other institutions or organisations may be included as collaborators.

- Applicants can submit, or be listed on, more than one proposal, but funding a researcher for more than one project at a time will only occur in exceptional circumstances.

1.3 Program funding

- The maximum funding available per project is \$150,000.
- Whilst not mandated, cash and in-kind contributions from applicant organisations are a consideration in final funding decisions.

1.4 Project duration and timeline

- Submissions of Proposals close 31 July 2025.
- Announcements on funding will be made by 29 August 2025.
- Projects must be commenced no later than 3 November 2025.
- Projects must be concluded and acquitted, and the final report submitted before 31 March 2027.

1.5 Contact

Any questions, should be addressed to:

Associate Professor Tim Pitman
Director – Trials and Evaluation Program
Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success
Curtin University
GPO Box U1987 PERTH WA 6845
Email: acses@curtin.edu.au

1.6 Submission details

The *Guidelines* (this document) and the *Proposal Template* are available [on our website](#).

Proposals should be submitted electronically.

Submissions should include in the subject line: **Equity Frontiers Program: Quasi-Experimental Design Projects**

Address the email to the attention of Tim Pitman, Director – Trials and Evaluation Program

Email: acses@curtin.edu.au

2. Project requirements

2.1 Higher education lifecycle

The project must address one or more stages of the higher education student lifecycle:

- Pre-access
- Access
- Participation
- Attainment and transition out

2.2 Target group(s)

The project should focus on at least one of the following priority groups:

- First Nations students
- Students with disabilities
- Students from low socio-economic status backgrounds
- Students from regional, remote, or rural locations

Other student groups will also be considered, subject to the rationale put forward for their consideration.

2.3 Outcomes being measured

The analysis should be on one or more of the following higher education outcomes

- Higher education access (for example, applications, offers, acceptances, enrolments)
- Higher education success (participation, retention, achievement, success)
- Post-graduation success (completion, attainment, graduate destinations, graduate outcomes)

Other outcomes will also be considered, subject to the rationale put forward for their consideration.

2.4 QED approaches

Analysis should take the form of quasi-experimental evaluation approaches.

Quasi-experimental designs attempt to mimic an experimental approach by comparing observed outcomes to those of another broadly comparable group, or by analytically creating a “counterfactual” that is as close to the intervention group as possible.

Potential QED approaches include (but are not limited to) Difference-in-Differences (DiD); Propensity Score Matching (PSM); Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD); or Interrupted Time Series (ITS).

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses and the approach chosen should be the one well suited to evaluating the impact of the higher education equity program, activity, or initiative being examined.

2.5 Data sources

This program prioritises existing data sources, for example:

- institutional administrative data
- demonstrably objective data collected through activities
- Person Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA)
- data collected through another project and available for re-analysis (for example, QILT data).

ACSES will consider applications that involve the collection of new data, however any costs associated with its collection must fall within the maximum funding available per application (\$150,000). Any risks involved with sourcing the new data (for example, availability) is an assessable criterion.

2.6 Project team

The project team should include members with the requisite skills and knowledge to undertake all aspects of the project.

2.7 Publications

All funded projects will be required to produce a research design protocol, using the ACSES protocol template, prior to the commencement of the project. ACSES will provide a technical review of the protocol.

All funded projects will also be required to produce a final report upon completion of the project. It is expected that the data analysis and report will be reviewed for technical accuracy and robustness, and the final report will be edited and proof-read prior to submission.

ACSES will provide a technical review of the report. ACSES reserves the right to request an independent supplementary analysis of suitably anonymised data.

The protocols and final reports will be made available on the [ACSES Trials Registry](#).

3. Application and selection process

3.1 ACSES selection process

ACSES has established the Equity Frontiers Grants Committee (EFGC), which provides oversight for this funding scheme. The EFGC includes academics and equity practitioners from a range of Australian universities. Committee members include those with experience in QED approaches to evaluation.

There are three stages to the selection process:

Stage 1: ACSES staff will assess each submitted Proposal for eligibility and relevance to the aims of the program. ACSES reserves the right to reject submissions not meeting one or either.

Stage 2: Eligible submissions will be sent to the EFGC for assessment. The Committee will evaluate all proposals against the selection criteria, before making recommendations to ACSES.

Stage 3: ACSES staff will make a final determination on which proposals to fund, considering the relative strengths of each application, overlap with existing projects, and the amount of funding available.

3.2 Selection criteria

Applicants must address each of the selection criteria, as listed below and provided in their proposals.

For this scheme, the Committee will evaluate all proposals against the selection criteria, before making recommendations to ACSES.

If necessary, applications will also be ranked, should the number of suitable applications exceed the funding available.

Selection criteria	Detail
Impact potential and focus	<p>The proposed project seeks to answer an impact evaluation question, adopting a quasi-experimental design.</p> <p>The impact evaluation question is relevant to higher education equity.</p> <p>The evaluation question, and related hypotheses, are focused on evaluating the impact of the initiative.</p>

	<p>The study design uses statistics to estimate the impact of the initiative against a comparable control group, using an appropriate quasi-experimental approach.</p> <p>The proposal describes what potential there is for the project findings to impact policy and/or practice.</p> <p>Total budget aligns with the overall quality and depth of the project.</p>
Credible	<p>The analysis is sufficiently powered to statistically detect the expected level of change among equity groups in the initiative's expected outcomes.</p> <p>The study design identifies the relevant confounders, and plans to manage these through randomisation, controls, and/or statistical adjustments.</p> <p>The study approach will likely minimise potential biases, such as selection, performance, and attrition biases.</p>
Valid and reliable	<p>The outcomes are clearly defined and measurable.</p> <p>The outcome measures are not overly aligned to the content of the initiative.</p> <p>The outcome measures will likely capture what they intend to measure with the relevant equity groups.</p> <p>The outcome measures are reliable and likely produce the same results over repeated assessments.</p> <p>The relevant equity groups are included in the interpretation of results.</p>
Experience and management	<p>The project team demonstrates expertise and experience undertaking all aspects of the evaluation, with the experience to undertake all aspects of the project. This information must be explicated in the application.</p> <p>A mitigation strategy is provided, demonstrating adequate attention to potential risks in the evaluation.</p>

4. Other information

4.1 Budget

The following are eligible expenditure items:

- personnel, including researchers, professional, implementation, technical, and support staff
- data collection, extraction, and analysis costs
- quality assurance costs, which include editing and proof-reading costs of the final report.

All requests for funding should be reasonable and for items directly associated with the project.

The following are ineligible expenditure items:

- overhead costs (costs associated with university infrastructure and other institutional overhead costs)
- costs associated with attending conferences (NB: If ACSES request that project members attend an ACSES-sponsored or ACSES-approved event, then additional funding will be provided).

4.2 Goods and Services Tax (GST)

GST applies to services provided to ACSES. ACSES will cover the cost of the GST component as long as:

- the contractor has been assigned an Australian Business Number (ABN) and is registered for GST purposes with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO); and
- tax invoices are submitted in accordance with the guidelines established by the ATO and clearly identify the GST component of the service.

The ATO has stated that all businesses require an ABN, regardless of whether the business is required to register for GST or not.

ACSES requires all researchers/research organisations to submit invoices that clearly state their ABN and that clearly identify the GST component of the service provided to ACSES. If an ABN is not stated, we are obliged to withhold 46.5% of the payment and remit this to the ATO.

4.3 Privacy

ACSES will take all reasonable measures to ensure that any personal information contained in a proposal will be dealt with in accordance with the provisions of the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth).

No applicant shall provide any information, make any statement, or issue any document or other written or printed material concerning their application to any media without the prior written approval of ACSES.

4.4 Ethics

Projects undertaken by staff employed by the higher education sector are guided by the *National Health and Medical Research Council/Universities Australia Joint Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* and individual university policy and procedures.

Project teams are required to satisfy and abide with all relevant national data standards and local/institutional data governance requirements. Teams should consider whether ethics committee approval or waivers of consent are required.

4.5 ACSES contracts

Acceptance of a proposal will be subject to negotiation and execution of the funding agreement and contract. A draft version of this can be made available by ACSES upon request.

ACSES may accept the whole or part of the proposal offered. The final project will be defined in negotiation with the successful applicants.