

Equity Frontiers Program: Theory-Based Impact Evaluation Projects

2027 Round – Guidelines

Universities For All

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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 Theory-Based Impact Evaluation Program

1.1 Introduction

The Equity Frontiers Program supports the evaluation of initiatives aimed at improving access to and success in higher education for students who have been historically under-represented in Australian higher education.

This grant scheme supports theory-based impact evaluation (TBIE) projects that examine whether equity initiatives work, how and why they work, and for whom and under what circumstances they work. TBIE goes beyond assessing whether outcomes were achieved by exploring the processes, mechanisms and contextual conditions that contribute to impact. The findings provide practical insights that can be used to strengthen program design, support continuous improvement and inform decisions about replication and scale.

Through funding TBIE projects, the TBIE Program aims to:

1. **Understand what works** by determining whether equity initiatives achieve their intended outcomes and make a meaningful difference.
2. **Understand how and why programs work** by identifying the processes, mechanisms, and activities that contribute to observed outcomes.
3. **Identify what works for whom and in what circumstances** by recognising that effectiveness may differ across contexts, settings, and equity groups.
4. **Strengthen program design and delivery** by using evaluation findings to refine and improve existing and future equity initiatives.
5. **Build evaluation capability** by strengthening the capacity of universities, researchers, and practitioners to undertake rigorous, theory-informed, and practically useful evaluation.
6. **Generate actionable evidence** that can inform future investment decisions, policy development, and practice across the higher education sector.

1.2 Eligibility

- The project must be led by a Table A institution listed in the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*.
- Other institutions or organisations may participate as collaborating partners.
- Applicants may submit more than one proposal and may participate in multiple applications. However, ACSES will only fund an individual researcher to work on more than one project at the same time in exceptional circumstances.
- Projects proposing to use randomised controlled trial (RCT) or quasi-experimental design (QED) approaches, otherwise referred to as Quantitative Impact Evaluation, are not eligible for funding under this scheme.

1.3 Program funding

- Funding of up to \$75,000 is available for each project.
- Funding is provided for the evaluation component only and cannot be used to fund the design, development, or delivery of the equity initiative itself.
- Applicant cash and in-kind contributions are not mandatory. However, the level and nature of any applicant contributions will be considered when making final funding decisions.
- ACSES anticipates funding approximately 3–4 projects. The final number funded may vary depending on the quality of applications received and the budgets requested.

1.4 Key dates

Milestone	Date
Grant scheme opens	Thursday, 1 October 2026
Closing date for applications	Friday, 30 October 2026 – 4pm (AWST)*
Consideration by the Assessment Panel	2–13 November 2026
Notification of outcomes	Mid November 2026
Funding agreement negotiation	December 2026 to end January 2027
Project work	February 2027 to January 2028
Project completion and acquittals	Friday, 26 March 2028

1.5 Contact

Any questions, should be addressed to:

Associate Professor Tim Pitman, Director – Trials and Evaluation Program

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.

Include in the subject line: **Equity Frontiers Program: Theory Based Impact Evaluation 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 Australian students
- students with disability
- students from low socio-economic status backgrounds
- students from regional, remote, or rural locations.

Other student groups will also be considered for inclusion, 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, or on the supporting outcomes that are expected to influence these 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 TBIE approaches

Analysis should take the form of an appropriate TBIE approach. Its key elements include:

- A clear theory of change, i.e. articulating how the initiative (the equity program or activity) is expected to lead to its intended outcomes.
- Clear evaluation questions defining what the evaluation is seeking to understand, including whether the program works, how and why it works, and for whom.

- A credible and appropriate design for testing the theory of change and assessing its contribution to outcomes.
- Appropriate methods and evidence (quantitative and/or qualitative) that are fit for the purpose of the evaluation.
- The contextual factors that may have influenced the effectiveness of the equity initiative.
- A causal explanation—assessing the evidence for how and why the program contributed to observed outcomes, including alternative explanations.
- Learning and application—identify what worked, for whom and under what circumstances, and translate findings into practical improvements and lessons for the broader sector.

2.5 Data sources

Data, evidence, and availability are critical to a successful TBIE. Applicants should clearly identify the data and other sources of evidence needed to answer their evaluation questions, where these data will come from, and whether they are accessible within the timeframe of the evaluation.

This should include consideration of the necessary ethics processes required to collect and analyse the data.

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 Final report

All funded projects will 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 final reports will be made available on the ACSES website.

3. Application and selection process

3.1 ACSES selection process

ACSES has established the Equity Frontiers Grants Committee (EFGC), which provides independent, expert advice this funding scheme. The EFGC includes academics and equity practitioners from a range of Australian universities. Committee members include those with experience in TBIE 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 assess applications against the published assessment criteria, consider the relative strengths and weaknesses of proposals, and provide clear, evidence-based advice on the merits and significance of applications for funding. This may result in request for further information and/or recommendations to change aspects of the project.

Stage 3: ACSES staff will make a final determination on which proposals to fund, considering the relative strengths of each application, strategic alignment of projects with ACSES's current priorities, 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.

Selection criteria	Detail	Weighting
Theory of Change	Clarity of the program theory, including how and why the intervention is expected to lead to its intended outcomes.	20%
Evaluation design and methodology	Quality and appropriateness of the proposed evaluation design, methods, measures and approach to assessing impact.	30%
Data and Feasibility	Availability and quality of data, access to participants and other evidence sources, and feasibility within the proposed timeframe and budget.	20%

Experience and management	Relevant expertise, partnerships, understanding of context and capacity to deliver the evaluation	15%
Significance and knowledge transfer	Extent to which proposal addresses a documented equity challenge and evidence gap, and potential for findings to inform program improvement, policy, practice and broader sector learning.	15%

4. Other information

4.1 Budget

The following are eligible expenditure items:

- personnel
- 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:

- costs for developing, designing, or delivering the equity initiative itself—funding is for the evaluation only
- 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.

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.