First Nations Fellowship Program

2027 Round: Guidelines

Universities For All

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ACSES Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

Curtin University

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) 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 First Nations Fellowship Program

1.1 Introduction

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) is pleased to launch the 2027 First Nations Fellowship Program.

The First Nations Fellowship Program will provide fully funded fellowships for First Nations (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander) Australians working as researchers and practitioners in higher education, to complete a project that will inform an area of Australian higher education practice and policy in relation to domestic students, via a combination of research, research translation, best practice implementation, evaluation, and knowledge transfer.

The Fellowship is open to First Nations Australian staff of Australian universities listed as Table A providers under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*.

First Nations Fellows will have the opportunity to engage with the students, practitioners, administrators, and researchers in higher education equity.

In addition, as part of their program, First Nations Fellows are encouraged to propose an engagement at an organisation that furthers their project work. This can take the form of a presentation, workshop, or placement.

The value of the Fellowship will be up to $230,000 (ex-GST) for one year.

1.2 Contact and submission details

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Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success
Curtin University
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Email: acses@curtin.edu.au (**Subject:** 2027 First Nations Fellowship Program)
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1.3 Key dates

Applications open	Wednesday, 4 November 2026
Closing date for applications	**Wednesday, 17 February 2027 – 4pm (AWST)**
Acknowledging receipt of applications	Wednesday, 17 February 2027
Assessment of proposals by internal ACSES Team and External Expert Advisory Panel	22 February to 15 March 2027
First Nations and Equity Fellowship Selection Panels – Shortlisting meetings	18 March 2027
Interviews	29 March – 2 April 2027
Confirmation of selected Fellow	2 April 2027
Notification of outcomes of selection process	Wednesday, 7 April 2027
Funding agreement negotiation & execution	April – late-May 2027
Project work	May 2027 – May 2028
Project completion and financial acquittals	May 2028 – June 2028

2. Aims and obligations

2.1 Aims

The First Nations Fellowship Program will fund proposals that:

- strengthen the quality, capability, scale, and capacity of Australia's First Nations researchers and practitioners
- strengthen Australia's overall capacity in higher education practice and implementation in relation to equity issues
- enable ground-breaking, robust, high-quality, and internationally competitive research that will build the peer-reviewed evidence base and contribute to evidence-based policy development and practice.
- facilitate interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to higher education equity research and practice
- demonstrate leadership in translating high quality contributions by First Nations researchers to inform practice, and developing, implementing, enhancing, and promoting institutional evidence-based best practice that improves access to and participation in Australian higher education
- raise the profile of higher education institutions' efforts to widen participation and support outcomes in higher education
- produce practical and accessible outputs that support the adoption or implementation of research findings, such as policy guidance, practice frameworks, implementation resources, evaluation tools, or institutional recommendations
- produce outcomes that can be applied nationally and/or be adopted by universities, including outcomes that are potentially portable across institutions and scalable across Australian higher education
- establish and build on national and international partnerships and collaboration in widening higher education participation.

2.2 Obligations

As part of the First Nations Fellowship Program, ACSES undertakes to:

- provide an exemplary support for Fellows through the creation of an *Expert Reference Group*.
- build world class capacity and capability among First Nations higher education researchers to develop Australia's next generation of research leaders
- develop First Nations Fellows' research skills, so that they can improve the understanding of research outcomes by equity practitioners, thus developing practitioners capable of better practice leadership at a national level
- develop a national skills base to successfully translate and implement research outcomes and provide evidence for the delivery of programs for Australian higher education students
- develop First Nations Fellows' connection to the national policy environment, providing skills and opportunities for communicating with policy makers.

3. Responsibilities

3.1 The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

ACSES's responsibilities in relation to the First Nations Fellowship Program, include:

- Managing the application and selection process, including conducting an internal review of applications, convening an external Expert Advisory Panel to assess and rank shortlisted applications, conducting interviews with selected applicants, and making the final selection of First Nations Fellow (see Section 5.3).
- Entering into a funding agreement with each First Nations Fellow.
- Liaising with potential applicants to provide preliminary information and advice.
- Liaising with the First Nations Fellow, once selected, to negotiate and clarify the detail of specific aspects of the proposed projects (including timeline, milestones, objectives, and deliverables), which includes assisting in designing an individual program for each Fellow based on individual needs. This may include, but is not limited to, research methodologies, statistical and analytical approaches, media/research communication training, understanding the policy landscape, and evidence-based policy formulation.
- Assisting in facilitating an *Expert Reference Group* for the First Nations Fellowship.
- Monitoring the progress of the projects, once underway, and assisting in facilitating collaboration, consultation, and testing of the Fellow's project findings, outcomes, and recommendations with the Australian Government Department of Education, as required.
- Supporting and disseminating the work of First Nations Fellows through a production process (including peer review and proofreading processes) that ensures Fellows' reports are of quality acceptable to the Australian Government and higher education sector.
- Conducting an evaluation of the outcomes of the First Nations Fellowship Program.

3.2 First Nations Fellow's home institution

The responsibilities of the First Nations Fellow's home institution include:

- entering into formal agreements with:
    - ACSES to cover project funding and milestones
    - other organisations, where this is required to cover details of the Fellow's placement
- managing the receipt of funding for the First Nations Fellowship from ACSES
- maintaining responsibility for payments to the Fellow, including existing employee arrangements, such as workers' compensation insurance.

3.3 Organisations engaging with the First Nations Fellow

The responsibilities of the organisations hosting First Nations Fellows include:

- confirming suitability to host the engagement activity of a First Nations Fellow, particularly in the case of more involved engagements, such as short-term placements
- in the case of short-term placements, facilitate the Fellow's access to departmental personnel, and provide general IT access, building access and a physical place of work, while maintaining responsibility for issues pertaining to occupational health and safety
- providing advice and feedback on the Fellow's reports and outputs, where sought.

3.4 Australian Government Department of Education

The responsibilities of the Department of Education include:

- managing the Conditions of Grant for delivery of the First Nations Fellowship Program with ACSES
- whenever possible, facilitate access to relevant departmental data
- assist with the placement of a Fellow within the Department, where deemed appropriate as part of their engagement with the sector (Section 4.2).

4. Conditions of Grant

4.1 Eligibility and application process

First Nations Fellowships are open to First Nations Australian staff at eligible higher education institutions.

4.1.1 Confirmation of First Nations Australian identity

Applicants for the First Nations Fellowships should be able to confirm that they:

- are of First Nations (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander) Australian descent
- identify as a First Nations Australian person
- are accepted by a First Nations Australian community as a First Nations Australian, where confirmation can be provided by:
    - an official letter from a Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC)
    - an official letter of confirmation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage from a registered Aboriginal community organisation.

In addition, where an official letter of confirmation is not available, applicants can provide a statutory declaration outlining the circumstances under which they cannot provide evidence from a LALC or registered Aboriginal community organisation, and in turn, provide evidence and examples for confirmation of First Nations Australian status.

4.1.2 Eligible institutions

The Fellowship is open to staff employed by any Australian university listed as a Table A provider under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*.

Applicants must have the strong support of their home institution for a project that supports the aims and obligations of the First Nations Fellows Program set out in Section 2.

4.1.3 Conflict of Interest declaration

Applicants must complete the Conflicts of Interest (COI) Register provided in the *Application Pack*.

4.1.4 Other ACSES Fellowships

Recipients of an ACSES or NCSEHE Equity Fellowship or First Nations Fellowship from previous rounds are ineligible to apply for a 2027 First Nations Fellowship.

Applications may not be submitted to *both* the 2027 ACSES First Nations Fellowship and Equity Fellowship Programs.

4.1.5 Other ACSES opportunities for higher degree by research (HDR) students

The First Nations Fellowship is generally not intended to support current or prospective higher degree by research (HDR) projects. ACSES offers support to HDR students via its HDR Stipends Program, details of which are available on the ACSES website.

4.1.6 ACSES contracts

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

ACSES may accept all or part of a proposal. The final scope and requirements of the project will be determined through negotiation with the successful applicant. ACSES reserves the right to withdraw the funding offer and cancel the proposed project if a funding agreement and contract are not executed within two months of the draft agreement being issued.

4.2 Engagement

Applicants for the First Nations Fellowship Program are encouraged to engage with a suitable organisation dealing with issues of equity practice, research, or policy, either in or directly affecting, Australian higher education. These include, but are not restricted to:

- the Australian Government Department of Education
- State and Territory education departments
- First Nations organisations directly dealing with issues of equity practice, research, or policy in Australian higher education
- other agencies, institutes, and organisations engaged with issues addressing First Nations and/or equity status in access, participation, and outcomes across Australian higher education.

Engagement can include one or more of a variety of activities, including a seminar, workshop, or a short-term placement.

Applicants will need to explain why a particular engagement is suitable as a component of the Fellowship and provide an indication of the organisation's capacity to support a visiting Fellow over a relatively short timeframe.

The purpose of an engagement component is to facilitate knowledge transfer and to enhance the ties and understanding between organisations within Australian higher education.

First Nations Fellows are expected to act as a source of advice and knowledge transfer for the staff of the hosting organisation, particularly those in the higher education and related areas.

The nature and length of the engagement, including any work schedule and pattern of attendance, should be specified in the application.

Where necessary, ACSES will confer with the First Nations Fellow's home institution and the hosting organisation to enter a formal agreement covering the details of more involved engagement activities, such as placements.

4.3 Submission of a final report and outputs

The First Nations Fellowship will culminate with the submission and finalisation of a Fellowship report by late-May 2028.

In addition to the final report, the First Nations Fellow must produce at least one practical and accessible output designed to support the application of the findings. This may include policy guidance, a practice framework, an implementation resource, an evaluation tool, an institutional action plan, or another output agreed with ACSES.

Following completion of the Fellowship, ACSES will undertake follow-up activities with the Fellow to assess the uptake, application, and impact of the findings and outputs. This will include consideration of how the research has informed policy or practice, evidence of adoption or implementation, and any further action required to support knowledge translation and sector-wide impact.

4.4 Assessment criteria

Criterion	Detail	Weight
Alignment with the aims and objectives of the First Nations Fellowship Program	The extent to which the proposed project demonstrates alignment with the aims and objectives of the First Nations Fellowship Program as outlined in Section 2 of the document including: • strengthen the quality, capability, scale, and capacity of Australia's First Nations researchers and practitioners • facilitate interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to higher education equity research and practice • demonstrate leadership in translating high quality contributions by First Nations researchers to inform practice, and	30%

Criterion	Detail	Weight
	developing, implementing, enhancing, and promoting institutional evidence based best practice that improves access to and participation in Australian higher education • produce outcomes that can be applied nationally and/or be adopted by universities. This includes outcomes that are both potentially portable across institutions and settings as well as scalable across Australian higher education.	
Capacity of the applicant to play a continuing, significant leadership role in equity in higher education research and practice	The applicant demonstrates a: • submission providing confirmation of First Nations Australian identity • track record of academic and/or professional track record relative to opportunity • record of leadership in research, equity practice and/or policy, relative to opportunity • capacity for development and potential career trajectory • capacity to make a significant ongoing leadership contribution at a national level to higher education research and practice.	30%
Demonstrated impact of the First Nations Fellowship	The applicant demonstrates the: • significance and scale of the issues identified • potential value to the sector of the proposed activities, knowledge gain, and knowledge transfer • viability of the activities and the proposed methodology for achieving the planned outputs and impact • pathway from research to action, identifying how the findings will be used, by whom, and to support what change • quality and feasibility of the proposed knowledge-translation activities and practical outputs	20%

Criterion	Detail	Weight
	• potential to produce publications that are of sufficient quality to be accepted by a peer-reviewed journal.	
Value for money	The extent to which the proposal achieves value with public money and delivers outcomes commensurate with, or exceeding, the level of investment, considering the: • outcomes of the Fellowship proposal in relation to the amount of funding sought • extent to which the proposed budget is appropriate, clearly justified, and transparent • demonstrated potential to achieve the project outcomes in a high quality and cost-effective manner • in-kind contributions from the applicant's institution.	20%

4.5 Use of First Nations Fellowship funding

Fellowship funding is provided to cover:

- the relinquishing by the Fellow of all, or part of, their normal institutional duties during the period of the Fellowship (normally expected to be 12 months' full-time equivalent, but subject to negotiation of some flexibility and timing, depending on individual circumstances)
- on-costs associated with the Fellow's normal salary level
- quality assurance costs, including professional copy-editing costs—to be included in your budget.
- travel and accommodation expenses to cover any period of placement, and travel nationally or internationally as appropriate to the project
- other costs to be incurred in relation to the specific project to be undertaken
- attendance at face-to-face meetings convened by ACSES.

Fellowship funding will not cover:

- institutional infrastructure charges or overheads
- computing hardware or software

4.6 Reporting and accountability

Throughout the project, the First Nations Fellow will report on progress to ACSES, including the submission of a progress report. The progress report must include an update on knowledge-translation activities, including engagement with intended users and beneficiaries, development or testing of practical outputs, emerging opportunities for adoption or implementation, and any barriers to translating the findings into policy or practice.

At the conclusion of their project in May 2028, the First Nations Fellow will provide to ACSES the final report, setting out in full, activities undertaken during the Fellowship, the outcomes, the impact, and any materials generated.

The final report will be reviewed externally before it is published on the ACSES website and made publicly available. Report submission dates will be negotiated with the successful Fellows and recorded in the funding agreement.

First Nations Fellows will also be asked to provide drafts and details of any other publications or materials produced that are connected to their Fellowship. Where possible, support from ACSES and the First Nations Fellowship Program should be acknowledged in all such output.

Following completion of the Fellowship, ACSES will undertake follow-up activities with the Fellow to assess the uptake, application, and impact of the findings and outputs. This will include consideration of how the research has informed policy or practice, evidence of adoption or implementation, and any further action required to support knowledge translation and sector-wide impact.

Fellows will also be required to give a short report of any placement with a hosting organisation.

4.7 Use of generative AI

First Nations Fellows remain fully responsible for the integrity, accuracy, originality, and appropriate referencing of all work produced with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence (generative AI).

Any substantive use of generative AI—including in research design, data collection or analysis, coding, writing, or the production of images and other outputs—must be transparently disclosed, identifying the tool used and how it was used.

Generative AI must be used consistently with applicable research ethics, privacy, confidentiality, data-security, copyright, and research-integrity requirements. Routine tools used only for spelling, grammar, or basic editing do not require disclosure.

Generative AI tools cannot be listed as co-authors or treated as responsible for research design, conduct, analysis, or outputs.

4.8 Project definition and payment

Acceptance of a proposal will be subject to negotiation and execution of the funding agreement and contract. ACSES may accept the whole or part of the proposal offered. The final project will be defined in negotiation with the successful applicants.

Payments will be made to the home institution in three instalments, one upon execution of the funding agreement (50%), one on acceptance of the progress report (25%), and one on acceptance of the final report (25%). The institution will be responsible for making payments to the First Nations Fellow.

5. Application and selection information

5.1 Application instructions

The *Application Pack* and *Guidelines* (this document) for the 2027 Round of the ACSES First Nations Fellowship are available on the ACSES website.

5.1.1 Accessibility

At ACSES, we are committed to continuous improvement in all of our work—including accessibility. We will continuously strive to provide an inclusive experience to make our content accessible to users of all abilities, including those with disabilities.

To ensure your submission is accessible, please run an accessibility checker on your work before submitting it and resolve any identified issues. For further guidance on creating accessible materials please see Disability Gateway: "Create accessible materials – print and digital documents".

Please include a short statement confirming you have undertaken an accessibility review of your application and addressed any issues arising and commit to incorporating principles of accessibility in your research and practice.

5.2 Lodgement and processing

Please email your application to acses@curtin.edu.au by **4pm (AWST time) Wednesday, 17 February 2027.**

Receipt of all applications will be acknowledged by email to the applicant, signatory of the institution's letter of support, and institutional contact officer.

5.3 The selection process

Eligible applications will be assessed by a panel comprising external reviewers with relevant methodological, sector, or student equity expertise. The panel will assess applications against the published criteria and make recommendations to ACSES. ACSES may seek clarification or negotiate project scope, deliverables, timing, or funding before a funding agreement is executed.

The Expert Advisory Panel's assessment will inform, but will not determine, the final funding decision. ACSES reserves the right not to fund a proposal where proposals do not sufficiently meet the requirements of the Program.