

ACSES CAPACITY BUILDING GRANTS PROGRAM

Building capacity to evaluate scalable school outreach mentoring programs

The University of Queensland
Monash University

2026

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Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success

Tel: +61 8 9266 1573

Email: acses@curtin.edu.au

Web: www.acses.edu.au

Building 100

Curtin University

Kent St, Bentley WA 6102 | GPO Box U1987, Perth WA 6845

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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.

1. Approach

1.1 Starting point

Mentoring programs are popular outreach activities that support priority learners to access knowledge and lived experience about university. Since 2012, Monash University (MU) has conducted the Access Monash Mentoring program, which targets Year 11 and 12 students from under-represented groups in Victoria and Tasmania. The program matches young people with a current university student to help them grow the skills and knowledge needed to support their transition and success at university. While this program has operated for more than a decade and has successfully implemented continuous quality improvement (CQI), it has been subject to sporadic impact evaluation (IE).

The University of Queensland (UQ) Widening Participation Team has delivered the Young Achievers Program (YAP) since 2009. The program works with schools and communities across Queensland to remove barriers to education and positively impact the lives of academically motivated students, their families, and communities. YAP empowers students to pursue their academic and career goals and recognises the value of their lived experience. The mentoring component of the Young Achievers Program provides targeted support to Year 11 and 12 students, extending through to their first semester at university. Whilst the program can only serve a limited number of participants due to the scholarship allocated to each student, the team recognise the impact mentoring has on student success and want to implement a mentoring solution at scale that supports larger cohorts of secondary school students across Queensland. The University of Queensland also enjoys close relationships with regional study hubs in regional Queensland, that Monash may learn from to form partnerships in Victoria.

1.2 Rationale

This capability building initiative was designed to enable a cross-institutional collaboration to share knowledge and best practices between two selective universities and identify opportunities for scalability of a mentoring program for senior school students who are experiencing educational disadvantage. Moreover, we aimed to provide professional development and training activities for key staff involved in the design and delivery of mentoring programs to enable impact evaluation of these programs across the two universities.

The grant funds would enable Monash University to support the University of Queensland in implementing a new mentoring program at scale from 2026, leveraging insights from the Access Monash Mentoring program and The University of Queensland's Young Achievers Program. By aligning the design and evaluation of both programs over time, this partnership would eventually result in a shared approach to evaluation, providing the basis for a joint impact evaluation.

1.3 Workshops and campus visits

This initiative built evaluative capability in the two participating institutions through its collaborative design, peer learning, and expert support. While there was an element of explicit teaching about evaluation, including impact evaluation, the greatest benefits resulted from the learning-by-doing approach with the support from evaluation experts and peers.

The project was designed as a workshop series to enable content delivery and structured discussions at the whole team level complemented by reciprocal campus visits of the Outreach teams—including their respective evaluation specialist—to allow the visiting team to experience outreach activities in real time. The campus visits also significantly deepened interpersonal relationships and open sharing between the two teams.

1.4 Challenges and project pivot

The student equity policy and funding changes being implemented in 2026 had implications for Monash University's participation in the project as the funding arrangements for the Access Monash Mentoring program remained unclear until late 2025. Thus, Monash could not commit to a scaled-up evaluation approach in 2026. A decision was made for UQ to progress with a feasibility study of an impact evaluation of peer mentoring programs in 2026 with a view for Monash to join the evaluation from 2027. The study is led by Dr Alex O'Connell from the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at the University of Queensland.

1.5 Timeline (2025)

- 28 March: Outcome.
- 3 April Appointed Dr Nadine Zacharias from Equity by Design as the evaluation expert to work with teams to develop the evaluation framework and capability building workshop series.
- 19–21 May: UQ team visited Monash for workshops 1 and 2 which aimed to understand the two programs and develop a Program Logic Model (PLM) for both programs.
- 23–26 June: The MU team visited UQ to experience their regional study hubs program and regional schools' outreach, attend UQ outreach activities, meet with the QLD Consortium lead, meet with Institute of Social Science Research (ISSR) staff, and engage in a best practice sharing session with the broader widening participation team.
- 27 August: Successful application for a feasibility study for 2026, led by Dr Alex O'Donnell at the Institute of Social Science Research (ISSR), funded by ACSES.
- 27 August: Workshop 3 which focused on using the PLMs to undertake CQI evaluation approaches and on survey design principles and approaches.
- Ongoing: Meetings with the evaluation expert and ACSES to develop the joint evaluation framework and approach.

- 16–18 September: UQ outreach team visited Monash to observe outreach activities in regional and metro settings and share best practice.
- Ongoing: Develop a shared evaluation plan for the mentoring programs, including an ethics application for the evaluation of the UQ Connect Mentoring Program and a rescoped Access Monash Mentoring Program.
- 13 November: Final workshop to share program design and evaluation approaches for 2026, and to reflect on the learnings from and benefit of the collaborative project.
- 18 November: Ethics application submitted to UQ Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).
- 30 November: Project end.
- 19 December: Delivering project report and evaluation framework.
- Subject to interest: Possible sharing of evaluation post one year of implementation at UQ.

2. Outputs

2.1 Capability building activities

The workshop series was deliberately designed to build practitioner knowledge and capabilities in equity program evaluation. Participants engaged in the following activities:

- all-team workshops and campus visits
- close partnership between evaluation specialists
- engagement with ACSES on the design of a full trial versus a feasibility study
- preparation of a successful grant application for a feasibility study through ethics
- preparation of an ethics application for the feasibility study at UQ
- preparation of ethics application for the Queensland Department of Education.

2.2 Key deliverables

The grant supported the development of numerous tangible outputs:

- agreed evaluation approach for mentoring programs, including shared documentation outlining the key processes and evidence base behind the mentoring program interventions
- shared survey instrument
- successful application for a feasibility study to be undertaken by the University of Queensland in 2026
- ethics application submitted to UQ's Human Research Ethics Committee
- revised Program Logic Models for all UQ Widening Participation initiatives, including design of survey instruments for activities that previously had no evaluation included
- revised Program Logic Models for Monash University's Outreach and Peer Mentoring programs
- creation of paid roles for students participating as mentors at Monash University
- shared learnings about the Young Achievers program have led to a successful bid to plan a University Preparedness program at Monash University
- sharing practice has led a review of scholarship offerings for low socio-economic students at Monash University.

3. Impact

3.1 Key objectives

This initiative built evaluative capability in the two participating institutions through its collaborative design, peer learning, and expert support. While there was an element of explicit teaching about evaluation—including impact evaluation—the greatest benefits resulted from the learning-by-doing approach with the support from evaluation experts and peers.

The project achieved a wide range of objectives:

1. Engaging Equity by Design to undertake an (impact) evaluability assessment of Monash Access Mentoring including:
 - conduct a systematic assessment of Monash Access Mentoring for evaluation, including developing a Program Logic and Theory of Change
 - assess existing mentoring data and collection methods
 - identify gaps in current approach to measurement
 - assess whether program goals and outcomes are clearly defined and measurable
 - determine if appropriate baseline data exists.
2. Develop an evaluation framework and/or implementation plan to assess the impact of Access UQ Mentoring:
 - create structured approaches to measure effectiveness of at-scale mentoring program with consideration to distance from campuses
 - establish clear indicators and metrics for student success
 - design data collection methodologies / review existing methodologies in the case of Access Monash Mentoring. This will include arrangement to obtain informed consents from schools and parents
 - establish program monitoring processes
 - develop reporting templates and schedules for reporting
 - create a Program Logic Model
 - identify key stakeholders and their roles.
3. Build staffing capacity across Monash and The University of Queensland to:
 - train staff in evaluation methodologies and alignment with SEHEEF
 - increase confidence in implementing SEHEEF across programs
 - develop evaluation skills via workshops with external evaluator
 - create shared evaluation resources, instruments and measures
 - establish a peer network for ongoing support
 - identify existing internal staff to support data analysis
 - develop sustainable evaluation processes
 - develop partnerships with Regional Study Hubs.
4. Cross-institutional collaboration and embedding capacity in staff will include (partially achieved due to the funding challenges at Monash):
 - cross institutional evaluation methodologies

- create shared measurement systems
 - identify common challenges and solutions for program delivery and evaluation
 - create long term evaluation strategies
 - develop best practice and build network of evaluation staff.
5. Sector-wide impact:
- contribute to sector wide knowledge on mentoring
 - shared measurement systems for mentoring programs
 - increase staff culture of evidence-based practice.

3.2 Participant reflections

At the end of workshop 4, participants were invited to reflect on the impact of engaging in the evaluation capability building program. These reflections echo the themes above and speak to the success of the project.

Opportunity to interrogate our practice:

It was reassuring to discover that the successful work already being done on the front line can now be given credibility through formal evaluation and research, adding an evidence base to proven practices. (Participant 1)

Both [teams] taking inspiration or learnings from each other to implement improvements to the programs over the next year and ongoing, including more thorough and ongoing evaluation. (Participant 2)

This series of workshops has been a great reminder that evaluating the impact of equity programs is essential to understanding whether our initiatives are truly reducing barriers and improving outcomes for underrepresented students. Running the same programs year after year is easy but genuine equity requires us to be willing to learn, listen, and improve. (Participant 3)

Connection and ongoing collaboration:

There was valuable opportunity to collaborate with [another] university and share ideas, fostering partnerships that enhanced the overall learning experience. (Participant 2)

We've gained so much at Monash in terms of shared knowledge and practices including moving to paid mentoring, career tasters, and seeing each other's widening participation (WP) practice. (Participant 3)

Greater team capacity in CQI evaluation and using evaluation to improve program design:

Helpful with the workload of educating the team about evaluation, including the need to constantly update our practices (this is not a one and done kind of project). (Participant 3)

PLM on a page template will now be used across [the wider team] as opposed to using smartsheets, it's much easier to digest and communicate. (Participant 1)

It was good to spend a good amount of time developing a Program Logic Model, which involved identifying clear objectives and outcomes while applying a top-down approach to the work we do. (Participant 2)

Since the session on moving from PLM to CQI there has been a big uplift in the wider team making their own surveys and thinking critically about program evaluation. Prior to the workshop, surveys were an afterthought and often left to me to make for the team. But since the workshop, this has shifted and the team are taking charge to make their own surveys, so it's a collaboration between myself and the team. This resulted in a particular activity being evaluated for the first time in 15 years of delivery which is huge. (Participant 4)

The feedback also suggests that the two evaluation specialists benefited enormously from the collaboration and significantly developed their skill sets and confidence:

This has improved my confidence in navigating a new role in evaluations/reporting; formed new resources and surveys for the wider programs; provided an opportunity for sound boarding in a previously isolating role. (Participant 6)

I've gained a great evaluation buddy. Being the data and reporting person can be quite isolating, so It's lovely to connect with a colleague once a month to share and learn from each other. This will result in shared survey instruments using validated scales. (Participant 7)

Prior to this collaboration I was very unsure where/how to start with program impact evaluation, in particular in applying for grants/ethics (despite attending many workshops/webinars on how to do it). This collaboration has built my capacity in stepping towards impact evaluation and increased my confidence in seeking advice/starting trials. (Participant 2)

Lots of conversations with ACSES about what's possible and not possible, which have helped grow my understanding. I'm so excited to see where [...] the feasibility study [goes]. (Participant 3)

One participant reflected on the fact that there were only two institutions involved in the collaboration which they thought led to much richer sharing compared to discussions in a large group setting, such as the Go8 level. This illustrates that the flexibility provided by ACSES to design bespoke capability building projects was critical to their success.

3.3 Next steps

The grant has enabled us to develop and implement an evaluation framework for 2026. Data from a potential 2027 impact evaluation could be made available from September 2027. Historical data from Monash's Access Monash Mentoring program may be available where it aligns with the evaluation framework.

The new evaluation framework and approach will create a sustainable and standardised model for ongoing program assessment that can be consistently applied year after year. Staff have developed expertise in implementing these evaluation tools and processes, creating institutional knowledge and embedded evaluation practices. As evaluation practices

become part of delivery, it will foster a culture of continuous improvement and increase staff capability in evidence-based decision making.

The capacity-building initiative is likely to provide significant benefits across the sector by exploring the feasibility of a trial of school–university mentoring programs. The development of a Theory of Change and Trial protocol will enable other universities to apply this work in their local context.