

ACSES CAPACITY BUILDING GRANTS PROGRAM

# Leadership and capacity building for impact-driven equity and widening participation initiatives

The Australian Catholic University

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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

Equity evaluation at the Australian Catholic University (ACU) has tended to centre on meeting compliance and reporting requirements for Higher Education Partnership Participation Program (HEPPP) funded projects. As is common for universities with national operations, ACU was navigating the complexity and challenges of embedding a consistent and strategic evaluation approach across campuses located in three states and one territory.

This project provided an opportunity to strengthen foundational evaluation capability and support ACU's readiness to implement the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF). It also enabled clearer alignment between widening participation (WP) activities, faculty planning processes, and ACU's institutional equity priorities.

The workshops introduced a draft university-wide evaluation framework for ACU's *Widening Participation Plan 2023–2033* (WPP). The framework aligns with SEHEEF and supports a broader systems change agenda aimed at embedding equity and inclusion more deeply across the institution.

Importantly, the workshops engaged staff across multiple levels and work areas, senior leaders, program teams, and the Equity and Widening Participation Committee, helping build shared understanding and confidence in using evaluation to inform planning and decision-making.

The project also introduced systems thinking alongside evaluative thinking, supporting ACU's dual approach to evaluation: using evidence to assess program impact and to drive broader systems-level change. This integration reflects ACU's commitment to embedding equity and inclusion institutionally and to strengthening its long-term capability to measure and demonstrate impact.

## 1.1 Project delivery and adaptations

### 1.1.1 Workshops and targeted coaching

Three interactive workshops were delivered in line with the original proposal—one in Melbourne (targeting senior managers and leaders) and two in Sydney (targeting the Equity & Inclusion program team and the Equity and Widening Participation Committee). The aim was to build evaluation capability at multiple levels of the organisation in support of ACU's WPP and implementation of SEHEEF.

While the intended focus and audience remained consistent, several purposeful enhancements were introduced in response to emerging needs and opportunities.

A key adaptation was the explicit integration of systems thinking alongside evaluative thinking. This strategic addition deepened participants' understanding of evaluation not only as a tool for measuring program outcomes, but also as a lever for identifying the systemic conditions, structures, relationships, and mindsets that influence equity impact. This approach encouraged participants to use evaluation to inform broader institutional learning and strategic decision-making in relation to equity.

Table 1: Workshop Delivery Summary—Overview

Timeline and participation	
Aspect	Details
Delivery dates	21–27 May 2025
Locations	Melbourne and Sydney campuses
Workshops delivered	3 (Senior Leaders, WP Committee, Program Team)
Total participants	56
Roles represented	Faculty managers, WP leaders, equity practitioners, senior executives, project leads, state-based program teams
Experience levels	From no evaluation experience to advanced strategic planners

Workshop objectives and tools	
Objectives	Key tools and frameworks introduced
Build foundational evaluation and systems thinking capability	- WPP Evaluation Framework (impact levels, theory of change, program logic, and assumptions)
Strengthen confidence in theory of change and logic modelling	- Uni Step-Up Theory of Change and Program Logic
Embed alignment with SEHEEF and WPP	- Evaluation Rubric - Strategy Sketch Pad - Evaluation Questions Planner

Workshop design and delivery	
Shared activities	Description
Chair circles	Lived experience reflections to ground evaluation in context
Gallery walks	Visual engagement with policy (for example, SEHEEF), tools, and evaluation concepts
Program logic mapping	Collaborative exercises identifying inputs, outcomes, assumptions
Systems conditions mapping	Identification of systemic barriers and equity levers
Rubric-based strategy alignment	Planning sessions linking activities to long-term equity outcomes
Audience-specific focus	Tailored content
Senior leaders and managers	Evaluation leadership, strategic alignment, systems thinking
E&WP Committee and senior leaders	Evaluation values, shared language, resource prioritisation
E&I program team	Data collection strategy, logic modelling, SEHEEF-aligned impact evaluation

To build on the momentum of the initial workshops, a second phase of capacity building was delivered through twelve targeted coaching sessions with faculty and directorate leaders and managers who had attended the workshops. Leaders and managers were encouraged to include key relevant team members in these 45-minute online sessions, which focused on applying the evaluation tools to real-world planning and program contexts. The sessions were scheduled between mid-July and early August 2025.

Prior to each session, facilitators reviewed existing widening participation faculty and work area plans and prepared tailored examples to demonstrate how current activities could be aligned with ACU's equity and widening participation evaluation tools, including the Program Logic Model, Theory of Change, and evaluation rubric. A key objective was to encourage a focus on long-term outcomes and support the use of program logics to guide planning, monitoring, and evaluation for systems change.

This phase offered practical, just-in-time support to embed evaluation in planning processes, build staff confidence, address concerns, and identify areas for further capacity building.

### 1.1.2 Application and embedding

Following the success of the initial workshops and coaching sessions, remaining funds were used to extend the initiative into a second phase focused on real-world application and deeper institutional embedding.

Informed by participant feedback, this phase responded to expressed need for more time, guidance, and structured opportunities to consolidate learning. It also aligned with senior leaders' interest in faculty-level integration and the university's aim of building a coordinated, system-wide approach to evaluation.

The facilitator re-engaged key teams through tailored, team-based support that included:

- Introducing and applying finalised evaluation tools in live planning and program contexts.
- Building confidence through reflective dialogue, peer learning, and coaching.
- Supporting senior leaders to embed evaluation into work area planning and reporting.
- Strengthened alignment with institutional WP goals and SEHEEF requirements.

The follow-up phase ensured full use of awarded funds while advancing the project's long-term intent, supporting sustainable, strategic, and collaborative evaluation practice.

## 1.2 Challenges

A key challenge was the varied levels of evaluation knowledge and confidence across participant groups. Staff came from different roles and contexts, which required flexible facilitation and tailored examples to ensure the content was relevant and accessible for all.

Another challenge was that ACU's evaluation framework was being finalised alongside delivery of the workshops. This required close coordination to introduce tools that were clear, aligned with SEHEEF, and ready for practical use.

Despite these challenges, the workshops and coaching sessions were well attended and highly valued. Participants reported strong engagement, practical learning, and a desire for continued support—indicating that the project successfully met diverse needs while building shared capability and momentum for ongoing evaluation practice.

## 2. Outputs

### 2.1 Workshops

The workshops delivered through this project generated a range of tangible and intangible outputs that collectively progressed evaluation capacity across the University. These outputs include:

#### 2.1.1 Workshop delivery and participation

Three tailored workshops were delivered to distinct stakeholder groups: senior leaders and managers, ACU's Equity and Widening Participation Committee, and program-level staff involved in HEPPP-funded initiatives. Across these sessions, participants completed a post-event survey, with high levels of satisfaction (73% rated their experience as excellent and 23% as good).

#### 2.1.2 Development and introduction of evaluation tools

Participants were introduced to key evaluation tools, including a university-specific theory of change, a program logic template, an evaluation rubric, and an impact framework aligned with SEHEEF. These tools were well received. Some teams have begun adapting and using these tools to inform local program planning and improvement.

#### 2.1.3 Increased evaluation literacy and confidence

The workshops supported participants to engage with concepts such as evaluative thinking, assumption testing, program logic development, and systems thinking.

Evaluation is a process that is continually refined and not something done lightly.  
(Senior leader)

#### 2.1.4 Peer learning and collaborative reflection

The gallery walk, case study analysis, and structured team-based activities enabled high levels of peer learning, with 75% of survey respondents reporting "a great deal" of learning from others. Participants revisited material throughout the day to inform discussions, reflecting the value of interactive, dialogue-based methods.

#### 2.1.5 Early signs of mindset shift and strategic alignment

The project surfaced a strong demand for continued engagement. Participants identified the need for:

- More time and space to apply learning.
- Ongoing support in designing evaluations.
- Opportunities to co-develop and refine tools.
- Greater cross-university communication and leadership engagement.

These outputs demonstrate that the project has not only delivered its planned activities, but also created the conditions for deeper, sustained capacity building. The workshops seeded important mindsets, introduced actionable tools, and laid the groundwork for embedding evaluation into the University's equity planning, program delivery, and strategic decision-making.

Evaluations are extremely important to do to support/justify making improvements in programs. (Program team member)

## 2.2 Post-workshop coaching

A total of 37 staff participated in these sessions which took place between July 16 and August 6, 2025. The following Faculties, Directorate, and organisational units participated in the coaching session:

- Faculty Health Sciences
- Faculty Education & Arts
- Faculty Theology & Philosophy
- Faculty Law & Business
- ACU Engagement
- Student Experience
- Student Administration
- Centre for Education & Innovation
- Equity & Inclusion Program Team
- Identity & Mission
- Libraries
- Education Pathways

The information and coaching sessions encouraged leaders and managers to integrate evaluation tools into planning processes and improve the clarity and alignment between local initiatives and institutional equity and widening participation goals, with the goal of developing more strategic, outcomes-focused program design and capacity to measure impact.

## 3. Impact

The project has had a meaningful and measurable impact on building ACU's institutional capacity to evaluate equity initiatives. Through the delivery of three interactive, tailored workshops and a targeted second phase of coaching, the initiative strengthened participants' knowledge and confidence, enabling them to embed evaluation into the planning, delivery, and continuous improvement of ACU's widening participation programs, strategies, and initiatives.

### 3.1 Building evaluation knowledge, mindsets, and practices

Participants developed confidence in core evaluation concepts, including program logic, assumption testing, evaluative thinking, and systems thinking, and were introduced to practical tools such as ACU's theory of change, program logic template, evaluation rubric, and strategy sketch pad. These tools were not only used during the workshops but were quickly taken up in day-to-day practice. Examples include:

- The Deputy Provost reported applying the program logic approach the very next day to a non-WP context, highlighting the broader institutional relevance of the capacity being built.
- Program teams began developing viable data collection strategies, connecting evaluations directly to impact measurement and service refinement.
- Senior leaders and managers reported the rubric and sketch pad stimulated deeper reflection on strategy, equity goals, and systems-level change, suggesting these tools could be integrated into work area planning cycles going forward.

These examples demonstrate that capability building extended beyond conceptual learning, it translated into practical uptake, with evaluation being used to inform program improvement and institutional decision-making.

### 3.2 Embedding evaluation in strategic thinking and structures

Participants, particularly senior leaders and the Equity and Widening Participation committee, reported a shift toward viewing evaluation as a strategic process tied to decision-making, resource allocation, and long-term equity outcomes. This indicates the early development of evaluative and systemic thinking, an essential foundation for sustainable WP practice and a key objective of the project. The workshops also initiated a shared language and common set of tools across faculties and directorates, strengthening consistency and reducing duplication.

In summary, this project has contributed to progressing ACU's capacity to evaluate equity initiatives by equipping staff with the tools, skills, and mindsets to approach evaluation as a

strategic, collaborative, and transformative practice. It has laid the groundwork for continued growth through practical application, peer learning, and system-level alignment. These outcomes not only support ACU's implementation of SEHEEF but also enhance the university's broader ability to deliver and sustain equity impact.

### 3.3 From workshop to practice: Embedding evaluation tools in work area planning

A key impact of the workshops has been the uptake and application of the evaluation tools in widening participation work area planning across the university. In the second phase of the project, twelve targeted one-hour coaching and mentoring meetings were provided with various faculties and directorates. These sessions aimed to support teams using the new evaluation tools to design initiatives and lay the foundations for meaningful monitoring and evaluation.

This proactive engagement highlights growing evaluation confidence and signals a shift towards more systematic and strategic use of evidence in equity planning.

As evidence of an early cultural shift, here are some examples of immediate follow-up actions initiated by workshop and coaching participants:

- Faculty of Health Sciences: Engaged a facilitator to support teams in developing program logics that synthesise institutional priorities, including First Nations, Equity & Widening Participation, Education & Student Success.
- Faculty of Education & Arts: Requested establishment of a Teams site to support outcome-based planning focused on equity and widening participation.
- Student Experience Directorate: Invited coaches to present the rubric and planning tools at a capacity-building workshop on planning skills.
- Libraries: Expressed desire to adopt a rubric model for collaborative planning in other strategic areas for the unit.
- Student Engagement: Independently scheduled a team workshop to incorporate evaluative and system thinking tools into next planning cycle.
- Education Pathways: Quickly established a working team to progress assessment of systemic barriers to inform planning.