

ACSES CAPACITY BUILDING GRANTS PROGRAM

Fostering evaluative capacity for widening participation practitioners in the primary school context

University of Canberra

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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

Before this capacity-building project commenced, the University of Canberra had an established history of delivering widening participation (WP) programs for primary school students (K–6) in small rural and regional schools. Over time, the Aspire UC team had strengthened its evaluation approach and moved beyond traditional surveys by developing an improved pre- and post-program survey integrated with a storyboard activity, including a series of interviews about the storyboards. This combined method offered deeper insight into how the program was influencing their aspirations and future thinking.

Despite these advancements, further expertise was needed to strengthen our capacity for impact evaluation. While the enhanced survey–storyboard method, including interviews, provided a robust and developmentally appropriate approach to capturing children’s aspirations and future thinking, it was not designed to test attribution or establish causal relationships between program participation and observed changes. The team also recognised the need to deepen its understanding of child-centred evaluation techniques and build confidence in applying evidence-based methodologies suitable for early and middle childhood. This included a deliberate shift toward the impact-evaluation space, moving to approaches capable of more robustly capturing changes in children’s confidence, aspirations, sense of belonging, and engagement attributable to their participation in Aspire UC programs.

This recognition formed the foundation for seeking capacity-building support: to ensure that Aspire UC’s evaluation practices were not only improved but genuinely aligned with best practice in engaging children’s voices and measuring program impact across the K–6 age range.

The project consisted of a series of planning meetings, four workshops, a site visit to a primary school, and the development of a practical “how-to” manual to guide the evaluation of UC’s student equity programs, along with a plan for impact evaluation. During the project, key responsibilities included:

- strategic engagement to establish workshop content and structure co-design and co-facilitation of four half-day workshops
- development of the Evaluation Guidance Manual and supporting resources
- development of a plan for Impact Evaluation
- liaison with the Aspire UC team and the internal evaluation advisor
- administrative support.

The project was a collaboration between UC Student Equity and Participation (which includes the Aspire UC team) and two UC academic staff from the Faculty of Health.

Table 1: Aspire UC Evaluation Co-Design and Implementation Timeline

Output	Objective	Features included	Staff involved	Date/timeline
Meeting 1	Introductions, discussions about evaluation at UC	Discuss the background details, UC data capabilities, and general overall introduction to evaluation and the UC team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager of Student Equity • Equity & Impact Specialist • Mel Triantafyllou (Research Assistant & PhD student in Health) • Dr Zelalem Mengesha (Academic from Faculty of Health) 	9 May
Workshop 1	Create an evaluation plan for the Aspire UC Program	Evaluation plan to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • background • aims • feasible indicators and measures across the levels (incorporating the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework [SEHEEF] continuous quality improvement [CQI] planning tool as a base) • program logic model • evaluation approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager of Student Equity • Equity & Impact Specialist • Mel Triantafyllou (Research Assistant & PhD student in Health) • Dr Zelalem Mengesha (Academic from Faculty of Health) 	29 May
Workshop 2	Complete evaluation plan for the Aspire UC Program	Evaluation plan to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • background • aims • feasible indicators and measures across the levels (using the SEHEEF CQI planning tool) • Program Logic Model • evaluation approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager of Student Equity • Equity & Impact Specialist • Mel Triantafyllou (Research Assistant & PhD student in Health) • Dr Zelalem Mengesha (Academic from Faculty of Health) 	10 June
Site visit	Attend one primary school recruited in Aspire UC program.	Attend site, observe how the program works “in real life”, and gain an understanding of the Aspire UC program school’s lived experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manager of Student Equity • Mel Triantafyllou (Research Assistant & PhD student in Health) • Dr Zelalem Mengesha (Academic from 	17 June

Output	Objective	Features included	Staff involved	Date/timeline
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty of Health) Outreach staff and casual student Aspirations Agents 	
Workshop 3	Co-design evaluation plan and the approach to the impact evaluation.	Impact evaluation approach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> data collection data sources analysis interpretation results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manager of Student Equity Equity & Impact specialist Mel Triantafyllou (Research Assistant & PhD student in Health) Dr Zelalem Mengesha (Academic from Faculty of Health) Outreach Staff 	4 July
Workshop 4	Co-design impact evaluation plan and the approach to the evaluation.	Evaluation approach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> data collection data sources analysis interpretation results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manager of Student Equity Equity & Impact Specialist Mel Triantafyllou (Research Assistant & PhD student in Health) Dr Zelalem Mengesha (Academic from Faculty of Health) Outreach Staff 	25 July
'How to' manual/ guidance for evaluation at UC	Develop UC-specific manual for practitioner use and ongoing evaluative capacity development.	Specific to present UC context and ongoing evaluation of widening participation programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mel Triantafyllou (Research Assistant & PhD student in Health) Reviewed by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manager of Student Equity Equity & Impact Specialist Dr Zelalem Mengesha (Academic from Faculty of Health) 	July–Nov
Final report	As per funding agreement, final report is required in December 2025.	This will include the content required as part of the funding agreement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manager of Student Equity Equity & Impact Specialist 	Dec 19

2. Outputs

2.1 Refined evaluation framework for Aspire UC

The project built on UC's existing evaluation foundations by further refining the Aspire UC evaluation plan through a collaborative co-design process. This included strengthening the program logic model, sharpening the program's aims, and refining feasible indicators and measures aligned to the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF). Importantly, the project also created the dedicated time and capacity needed for the team to focus on evaluation practice for K–6 outreach programs—work that precedes the traditional “pre-access” stage, which in policy and practice is largely focused on secondary students, and therefore represents an earlier, formative phase of aspiration and pathway development. As such, this work requires additional support and protected time to undertake. These improvements enhanced clarity, coherence, and evaluative alignment, supporting more consistent and outcomes-focused data collection across the program.

2.2 Progress toward child-centred evaluation approaches

Although the project aimed to strengthen collective understanding of developmentally appropriate evaluation methods for primary-aged children, this component did not progress as intended through the workshop activities. The external facilitators were unable to provide the depth of expertise required, and no substantial development of child-friendly methods occurred within the workshop series.

While the project strengthened several core components of the evaluation framework, including impact evaluation design, there was limited scope within the workshop timeframe to explore developmentally appropriate evaluation methods for primary-aged children in depth. This represents an important area for continued refinement and future capacity building.

Aspire UC had already established child-centred methods prior to the capacity-building workshops, including the use of pre–post storyboards and student interviews to capture changes in aspirations, agency, belonging, and pathway understanding. The co-design process further clarified the key constructs underpinning these tools and strengthened alignment between qualitative measures and the broader evaluation framework.

Dedicated time to reflect with experienced equity practitioners, who bring deep understanding of children's developmental stages and classroom realities proved particularly valuable. These opportunities to unpack practical and methodological considerations helped refine the child-centred approach and strengthened confidence in its ongoing development.

In parallel with the workshops, approaches to child-centred evaluation continued to evolve through ongoing reflection, practitioner experience, and UC's emerging evaluation needs. This work has helped clarify the methodological considerations required and has

strengthened UC's readiness to further develop rigorous child-centred evaluation in the next phase.

2.3 Development of an impact evaluation plan

The project resulted in the first preliminary plan for an impact evaluation of Aspire UC. While this requires further refinement, it clarified the methodological components, data sources, and evaluative focus areas needed for a future robust design.

2.4 Development of an evaluation guide

The project resulted in the development of a structured evaluation guide tailored to the Aspire UC Small Schools program and early-stage widening participation outreach. While extensive evaluation literature exists, this guide translates those principles into a practical, context-specific framework to support ongoing evaluative practice and future refinement.

2.5 Delivery of Project Outputs

All major project outputs were successfully delivered, including four workshops, a refined evaluation plan, a draft impact evaluation approach, a site visit, the evaluation guidance manual, and the final report. The project remained aligned with the scope outlined in the original proposal while adapting to evolving timelines and contextual considerations.

3. Impact

Enhanced evaluative literacy among staff was strengthened through the project, with equity practitioners developing a clearer understanding of key evaluation concepts and outcomes-focused approaches. The workshops introduced practical tools and reinforced foundational knowledge, supporting the team's capacity to undertake more consistent and evidence-informed evaluation of equity programs at UC. Early progress was made toward building impact evaluation capability through the development of a preliminary impact evaluation plan, establishing a foundation for future advancement. The plan clarified feasible pathways for assessing changes in children's aspirations, confidence, belonging, and engagement attributable to the Aspire UC outreach program. Advancing this work will benefit from additional specialised methodological input and appropriate resourcing to support rigorous implementation.

Beyond institutional benefit, the development of the quasi-experimental evaluation plan and the tailored K–6 evaluation guide has potential value for the broader widening participation sector. Early-stage outreach in primary contexts remains under-theorised and under-evaluated nationally, with limited guidance available on developmentally appropriate impact measurement. By articulating a structured approach to child-centred evaluation and adapting sector frameworks such as SEHEEF for early-stage use, this project contributes practical models that may inform similar outreach initiatives operating in regional and low SES school settings.

Improved alignment with sector expectations was achieved by increasing institutional awareness of the methodological standards required to evaluate widening participation programs, particularly those involving younger children. This positions UC more strongly for future cross-institutional evaluation, supports compliance with national frameworks, and enhances alignment with SEHEEF. However, a key challenge remains: the SEHEEF pre-access domain is largely designed for secondary school contexts, making it less suited to evaluating programs that begin as early as kindergarten. The capacity-building grant has provided dedicated time and resourcing to deepen our engagement with child-centred evaluation approaches and to adapt sector frameworks in ways that are developmentally appropriate for early-stage outreach.

An important outcome of the project was increased clarity about the level of methodological depth and resourcing required to undertake rigorous impact evaluation in student equity contexts. Given the specialised and resource-intensive nature of this work, advancing the next phase will require dedicated expertise and sustained investment to ensure high-quality implementation.

The collaborative workshop model facilitated shared learning by bringing together Aspire UC outreach practitioners and academic staff, creating a space for reciprocal exchange. Participants contributed diverse perspectives including program delivery experience, equity expertise, and academic insights, which collectively informed the design and refinement of evaluation approaches.

Staff learned through co-design and practical application by actively participating in developing the program logic, identifying indicators, discussing data collection methods, and

shaping evaluative tools, with this hands-on involvement promoting deeper learning than conceptual training alone. This was further strengthened through experiential learning during the school site visit, which provided valuable contextual insight into how Aspire UC is experienced in practice and helped link evaluation concepts with lived school contexts, supporting more meaningful and developmentally appropriate evaluation design for K–6 settings.

Reflection on project timelines and the methodological complexity of rigorous evaluation prompted valuable discussions about quality, feasibility, and appropriate levels of methodological depth. This reflective process strengthened the team’s evaluative awareness and practical understanding of what is required to deliver robust impact evaluation in this context.

By involving multiple staff across the project, a growing sense of shared ownership over evaluation practice emerged. This collective engagement helped build a stronger, more cohesive approach to evaluation across the team. Together, these developments contribute meaningfully to UC’s long-term institutional capacity to evaluate equity initiatives.