NSW Department of Education

Closing the Gap Stage 2 Innovation Fund

Round 2 Grant Guidelines

November 2026

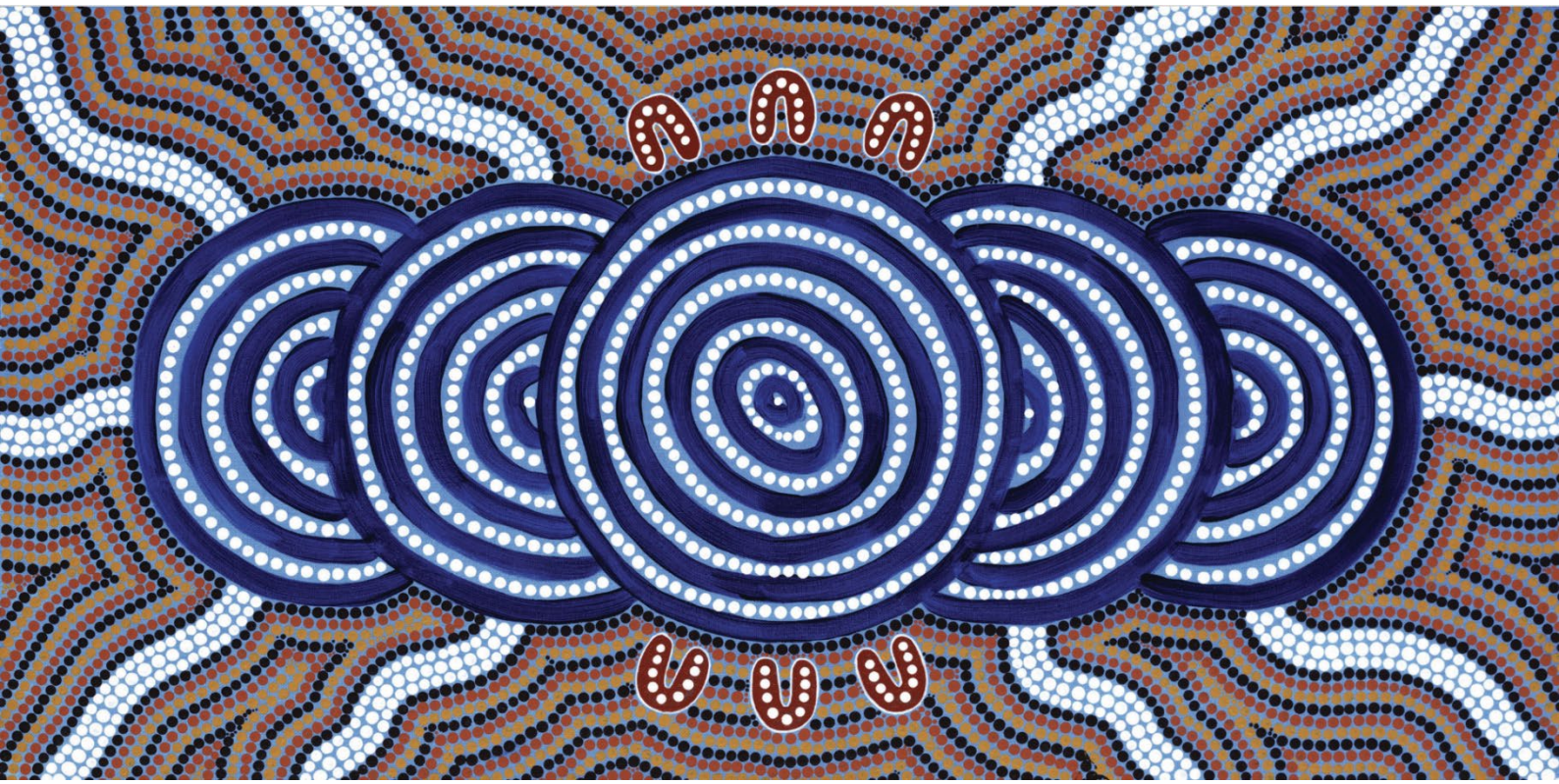
Skills NSW

NSW GOVERNMENT

Acknowledgement of Country

The NSW Department of Education acknowledges that across NSW we live and work on Aboriginal land, and on the many Countries that are within that footprint. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationship to Country.

These guidelines are intended to support Aboriginal self-determination in vocational education and training (VET), and to strengthen the Aboriginal Community Controlled training sector in NSW.



Artwork by Craig Layer. Title: Ceremonies

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Grant program details	
Opening date and time	5pm, 5 November 2026
Closing date and time	11:59pm, 30 November 2026
Application outcome date	February 2027
Project delivery timeframe (for successful applications)	From execution of the funding Deed to 31 December 2028
Evaluation timeframe (for successful applications)	From execution of the funding Deed to 31 December 2028
Decision-maker	Deputy Secretary (or delegate)
NSW Government Agency	NSW Department of Education
Type of grant opportunity (Stage 1)	Open, competitive
Type of grant opportunity (Stage 2)	Closed, non-competitive
Grant value (total available funding for the grant and the available individual grant amounts, excluding GST)	Up to $7 million (excluding GST) to be allocated. Applicants can apply for up to $2 million in total (excluding GST).
Enquiries	NSA-CtG@det.nsw.edu.au

Contents

1 **Overview of the grant program** 6
1.1 Guiding principles 6
1.2 Purpose and objectives 7
1.3 CTG Innovation Fund focus areas 8
1.3.1 Focus area 1: Building and connecting to culturally responsive learning and support environments 8
1.3.2 Focus area 2: Responsive and place-based skills, post-school pathways to further training or employment 8
1.3.3 Focus area 3: Outreach initiatives and activities for at-risk learners 9
1.4 **Considerations for developing your application** 10
1.4.1 Project alignment 10
1.4.2 Stakeholder engagement 10
1.4.3 Project design 10
1.4.4 Budget and expected benefits 10
1.4.5 Project costs 10
1.5 Grant value 11
2 **Selection criteria** 11
2.1 Eligibility criteria 11
2.1.1 Eligible applicants 11
2.1.2 Eligible projects 12
2.1.3 Ineligible projects 12
2.1.4 Evidence requirements 12
2.2 Assessment criteria 13
3 **Application process** 15
3.1 Overview of application process 15
3.2 How to apply 15
3.3 Support available to applicants 16
4 **Assessment process** 17
4.1 Assessment of grant applications 17
4.1.1 Stage 1 – Application, initial proposal submitted and eligibility and capability check (open and competitive) 17
4.1.2 Stage 2 – Co-design and final funding approvals (targeted and closed) 18
4.1.3 Notification of application outcome 18
4.2 Publication of grants information 18
5 **Successful grant applications** 19
5.1 Funding agreement 19
5.2 Variations to approved projects 19
5.3 Grant payment 20

5.4 Unspent funds 20
5.5 Indicative reporting and acquittal requirements 21
5.6 Evaluation 21
6 Additional information and resources 22
6.1 Complaint handling 22
6.2 Access to information 22
6.3 Ethical conduct 22
6.3.1 Conflict of interest management 22
6.3.2 Confidentiality 23

1 Overview of the grant program

The Closing the Gap (CTG) Innovation Fund is a grant program established under the National Skills Agreement (NSA) Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap, agreed between the Australian and NSW Governments in November 2025.

The program is administered by the NSW Department of Education (the department) and supports place-based, innovative initiatives led by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and First Nations Owned (FNO) Registered Training Organisations (RTO), or in partnership with these organisations.

The Innovation Fund is designed to support the delivery of culturally responsive training environments for Aboriginal students and to improve their access to, participation in and completion of skills development and training pathways.

This grant is open to ACCOs and FNO RTOs that have not been invited and are not eligible to participate in the Growth and Sustainability Fund and Innovation Funds Grants. Conversely, Aboriginal Community Controlled (ACC) RTOs invited to participate in the Growth and Sustainability and Innovation Funds Grants are not eligible to apply for funding under this grant.

Funded projects are expected to:

- improve access to culturally responsive skills development and training for Aboriginal students
- strengthen the capacity and capability of ACCO and FNO RTO organisations
- increase Aboriginal students' participation, retention and completion in training
- support clear and sustainable post-school pathways to further training into employment
- enable innovative, community-led, culturally responsive and place-based solutions.

Round 2 will prioritise initiatives that strengthen post-school pathways into training or employment in at least one of these critical skill areas:

- advanced manufacturing
- agriculture and agrifood
- care and support economy
- construction
- digital and cyber security
- net zero

This grant program has funding available through to December 2028.

These Closing the Gap Stage 2 Innovation Fund Grant Guidelines (the guidelines) apply to Round 2 of the Innovation Fund. Applicants should read the guidelines in full to understand the eligibility requirements, assessment criteria and application process before submitting an application.

1.1 Guiding principles

We will deliver the Innovation Fund in line with the following principles, recognising the leadership, knowledge and expertise of Aboriginal communities and organisations. These principles guide how we work with Aboriginal organisations and communities in the design, assessment and delivery of the Innovation Fund:

1. **Aboriginal leadership and community control**

We recognise and respect the leadership of ACCOs and FNO RTOs. We support Aboriginal self-determination by enabling communities and organisations to lead the design and delivery of initiatives that reflect their priorities.

2. Culturally safe and responsive approaches

We are committed to supporting culturally responsive environments for Aboriginal students. We recognise the importance of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing and support their inclusion in all aspects of project design, delivery and evaluation.

3. Place-based and community-informed solutions

We recognise that Aboriginal communities are best placed to identify their own needs, strengths and priorities. We support place-based approaches that are informed by meaningful and ongoing community engagement.

4. Collaboration and co-design

We work in partnership with Aboriginal organisations and communities to support the co-design and refinement of projects. We value shared decision-making and collaborative approaches that strengthen outcomes.

5. Innovation and learning

We support innovative and flexible approaches that respond to community need and improve outcomes for Aboriginal students. We recognise that innovation involves learning and adaptation over time.

6. Outcomes that matter to communities

We focus on outcomes that are meaningful to Aboriginal students and communities, including participation, completion, wellbeing and pathways to employment. We support approaches that deliver lasting and sustainable benefits.

7. Accountability and respect

We are committed to the responsible and transparent use of public funds. We work with funding recipients to ensure accountability requirements are clear, proportionate and respectful, while supporting delivery of agreed outcomes.

1.2 Purpose and objectives

The purpose of the Innovation Fund is to support delivery of the NSA CTG Implementation Plan by funding innovative, place-based initiatives that improve outcomes for Aboriginal students.

The Innovation Fund aligns with and supports the following NSW Government priorities:

- NSW Closing the Gap Priority Reforms, including:
  - Priority Reform 1: Formal partnerships and shared decision-making
  - Priority Reform 2: Strengthening the community-controlled sector
- NSW Closing the Gap targets relating to education, training and employment outcomes
- NSW Skills Plan 2024-28: Building Skills and Shaping success priorities.

The objectives of the program are to:

- improve access to culturally responsive skills development and training for Aboriginal students
- strengthen the capacity and capability of ACCOs and FNO RTOs
- increase Aboriginal students' participation, retention and completion in training
- support clear and sustainable post-school pathways to further training into employment

- enable innovative, community-led, culturally responsive and place-based solutions.

1.3 CTG Innovation Fund focus areas

The CTG Innovation Fund seeks proposals that address one or more of the following focus areas.

1.3.1 Focus area 1: Building and connecting to culturally responsive learning and support environments

This focus area is seeking initiatives that strengthen culturally responsive learning environments and improve Aboriginal students' sense of belonging and engagement in skills and training.

Problem statements

- How do you create culturally responsive learning environments that ensure all Aboriginal learners feel a sense of belonging?
- How do we build organisations' capacity to enable better access to high quality, best-practice learning environments for Aboriginal learners?

Kinds of initiatives that may be supported

- Development or enhancement of culturally responsive learning environments focused on post-school training, education or employment pathways
- Initiatives that strengthen organisational capability to deliver culturally responsive training
- Initiatives that involve place-based hands-on post-school learning

Examples of previously supported initiatives (this list is indicative not exhaustive)

- Delivery of language training program with paid trainees who will transition into impendent educators in language
- Delivery of culturally safe paid accredited training and real employment pathways into horticultural workforce

  Engaging Aboriginal students in the co-design, construction and maintenance of native gardens and land with employment pathways

1.3.2 Focus area 2: Responsive and place-based skills, post-school pathways to further training or employment

This focus area is seeking initiatives that empower Aboriginal students to identify their skills, pursue training pathways and connect with employment opportunities.

Alignment with NSW Skills Plan critical skill areas

Round 2 prioritises initiatives that generate post-school pathways to training or employment in these critical skill areas:

- advanced manufacturing
- agriculture and agrifood
- care and support economy
- construction
- digital and cyber security
- net zero

Problem statements

- How can we empower Aboriginal learners to identify their skills and create pathways that better connect Aboriginal learners and employers in critical skill areas?
- What innovative training products might support Aboriginal learners to better engage and improve longer-term qualification attainment rates?
- How can we develop and promote clearer aspiration-based pathways, so Aboriginal learners can make informed decisions about their training employment options?

Examples of initiatives that may be supported

- Wrap around support to post-school training pathways
- Foundation skills development programs
- Initiatives connecting students with employers or industry partners
- Provision of paid traineeships
- Training and employment in the one pathway model with combined hands-on practical experience with "classroom" learning

Examples of previously supported initiatives

- Expanding a proven, community-led, non-accredited adult literacy program into digital and foundation skills
- Deploying a community-controlled mobile vocational education and training (VET) access pilot to empower regional and remote learners
- Delivery of culturally safe paid accredited training and real employment pathways into horticultural workforce
- Training number of cohorts to build pathways to major infrastructure and renewable energy projects

1.3.3 Focus area 3: Outreach initiatives and activities for at-risk learners

This focus area is seeking initiatives that increase participation in training among students facing barriers to engagement.

Problem statements

- How do we improve place-based, face-to-face participation of Aboriginal students with skills and training opportunities, including but not limited to regional and remote areas?
- How can we support Aboriginal students who have transport barriers to access training and employment opportunities?

Examples of initiatives that may be supported

- Outreach initiatives connecting communities with training opportunities
- Programs supporting participation in training and employment pathways
- Initiatives addressing practical barriers to accessing training
- Partnerships to make use of existing community and education sites

Provide or coordinate transport or assistance in obtaining learners permits and driver licences.**Examples of previously supported initiatives (this list is indicative not exhaustive)**

- Delivery of a new Aboriginal-led, place-based learner pathway across Wagga Wagga and the Riverina focusing on justice-connected learners
- Delivery of a place-based initiative that supports Aboriginal learners to engage in culturally safe learning environments

Note: Examples of initiatives listed above are indicative only. Applicants are encouraged to propose innovative approaches that align with the objectives of the CTG Innovation Fund.

1.4 Considerations for developing your application

1.4.1 Project alignment

- How does your proposed project align with the objectives as outlined in section 1.2 Purpose and Objectives?
- How will the proposed project enhance access to and delivery of culturally responsive post-school skills development and training?

1.4.2 Stakeholder engagement

- What stakeholder engagement has informed your project design?
- How have you collaborated with local community organisations, governance groups, ACCo or FNO RTOs?
- What input have you gathered from potential participants regarding their needs and preferences? This could be historical knowledge or from conversations with local community groups.

This engagement may draw on existing relationships, historical knowledge or discussions with local community groups.

1.4.3 Project design

- What are the key objectives and activities of your proposed project?

1.4.4 Budget and expected benefits

Applicants should provide a clear and realistic budget breakdown, including:

- key project costs (see 1.5.6 for eligible project costs)
- expected outcomes from the project
- how the project contributes to strengthening the ACCO and FNO RTO training sector.

Please refer to Section 1.5.6 on eligible and ineligible funding costs when developing the budget.

1.4.5 Project costs

Funding can be used for:

- staff costs (including wages, travel, meals, support workers/ activity delivery provider wages, project coordination staff) for the planning and delivery of the program
- trainee wages for participants
- reasonable travel costs for participants
- reasonable costs of hiring/leasing facilities for training purposes.

Funding cannot be used for:

- capital purchases – any type of building, construction or capital works, including renovations to a building, housing-related costs or the purchase of land

- activities that are considered part of an organisation's standard operations or 'business as usual'.

1.5 Grant value

- Total program funding across all funding rounds: up to $36.4 million (NSA allocation)
- Round 2 Innovation Grant funding: up to $7 million – the NSW Government is not required to exhaust the total funding pool and may amend the amount of available funds
- Funding duration: up to 31 December 2028. Multi-year project funding may be requested. Project length may, if appropriate, exceed December 2028; however, funding beyond the NSA funding period and the confirmed NSA budget allocation is not guaranteed.

Funding may include:

- project delivery costs
- co-design/development costs.

No co-contribution is required; however, in-kind contributions are encouraged.

2 Selection criteria

Selection criteria for the Innovation Fund consist of both eligibility criteria and assessment criteria.

Applicants must meet all eligibility requirements and address all assessment criteria to be considered for funding. Stage 1 assessment against the selection criteria will incorporate both qualitative and quantitative evidence aligned with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

2.1 Eligibility criteria

2.1.1 Eligible applicants

- ACC RTOs are ineligible noting they are eligible for the Sustainability & Growth and Innovation Fund (closed and targeted) grants.

To be eligible you must:

- be an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) or a First Nations Owned (FNO) Registered Training Organisation
- be an Australian legal entity with an ABN/ACN
- be currently operating in NSW
- have the legal capacity to enter into a funding agreement with the NSW Government
- demonstrate the capacity and capability to deliver the proposed project
- deliver services supporting Aboriginal students.

For partnerships (where applications involve multiple organisations):

- the lead applicant must be an ACCO or an FNO RTO organisation
- the lead applicant will be responsible for entering into the funding agreement and meeting all reporting requirements
- partnerships must demonstrate clear roles.

Applicants must provide evidence of eligibility, which may include:

- incorporation and governance documents
- evidence of Aboriginal ownership or control
- letters of support from community or partners.

2.1.2 Eligible projects

To be eligible, projects must be delivered in NSW and to NSW students, and:

- align with the objectives of the Innovation Fund, CTG and NSA priorities for NSW
- improve access to, participation in or completion of training for Aboriginal students in the vocational education and training (VET) sector
- support the delivery of culturally responsive training environments for Aboriginal students
- demonstrate engagement with Aboriginal communities.

Examples of eligible projects include but are not limited to:

- culturally responsive mentoring and career advice
- accredited and non-accredited training or pathway, skills development (including foundation skills)
- employability skills development programs for Aboriginal people.

2.1.3 Ineligible projects

Projects will not be considered if they:

- are not led by an ACCO or FNO RTO
- do not align with the objectives of the Innovation Fund
- duplicate existing NSW Government-funded programs (including Smart & Skilled and other CTG initiatives)
- request funding for business-as-usual activities
- include retrospective costs or activities already completed
- relate to major capital/infrastructure projects.

2.1.4 Evidence requirements

Applicants must provide sufficient evidence to demonstrate that they meet the eligibility criteria. The minimum evidence requirements are outlined below. The department may ask for additional evidence at any time to support the application.

Table 1: Evidence required for eligibility criteria

Eligibility requirement	Minimum evidence required	Notes
Legal entity status	Valid ABN and/or ACN	Must be current and match the applying organisation
ACCO or FNO RTO status	Evidence of Aboriginal ownership or control (e.g. constitution, governance documents, ORIC registration, statutory declaration) FNOs must be a Registered Training Organisation that is	The department may request additional information to verify status if required

	approved to deliver nationally recognised training by the Australian Skills Quality Authority	
Operating in NSW	Organisation address and/or evidence of service delivery in NSW	May include business registration, service locations or project delivery plan
Capacity to enter into a funding agreement	Confirmation within application form	Additional documentation may be requested if required
Capacity and capability to deliver the project	Description of organisational capability and/or relevant experience (or access to partnerships and expertise)	This may be further assessed under the assessment criteria. This could include evidence of delivery of programs or projects, community referrals and/or organisational business capacity.
Deliver services supporting Aboriginal students	Description of current or proposed services supporting Aboriginal students	Does not require prior delivery if capability can be demonstrated
Partnerships (if applicable)	Letters of support and/or partnership agreements outlining roles and responsibilities	Must clearly identify lead applicant (ACCO or FNO RTO)

2.2 Assessment criteria

Eligible applications will be assessed against the criteria below.

Applicants must address all assessment criteria in their proposal and provide all required information in their application submission.

Applicants that do not address the following criteria may be excluded from the application process at the department's discretion. Each application, as part of an application response, must:

- provide responses to all questions in the application form
- appropriately and adequately address any conflicts of interest
- attach all additional documents required as specified in the application form
- address the following assessment criteria in their application form.

The assessment process is designed to identify feasible concepts for future co-design. Applications will be assessed against the criteria below.

Table 2: Evidence required for assessment criteria

Criteria	Specific information and evidence required
Criterion 1: Alignment with CTG priorities The extent to which the proposed project aligns with the objectives of the	You should demonstrate this by: • explaining how your project aligns with the objectives of the Innovation Fund • identifying which CTG priorities, reforms or targets your project contributes to

Innovation Fund and broader CTG priorities.	• describing how your project will improve outcomes for Aboriginal students. Evidence may include: • project rationale linked to CTG priorities • description of target cohorts and expected outcomes.
Criterion 2: Community engagement and partnership The extent to which the project is informed by and connected to Aboriginal communities and supported by partnerships. The expected benefits for Aboriginal learners.	You should demonstrate this by: • explaining how Aboriginal leadership and community perspectives are reflected in the project • explaining the expected benefits for Aboriginal learners. Evidence may include: • letters of support • description of consultation undertaken • partnership details or agreements.
Criterion 3: Pathways to further training or employment The extent to which the project has clear post-school pathways to further training or employment with a priority to the critical skills areas.	You should demonstrate this by: • clearly describing pathways to further training or employment, including identifying potential partnerships (i.e. registered training organisations / employers) • clearly outlining how the pathways will intersect with the critical skills areas (see section 1.4) • clearly outlining targets for pathway outcomes (i.e. number of learners at each stage of the pathway) Evidence may include: • letters of support from potential partners to deliver
Criterion 4: Innovation and impact The extent to which the project proposes a new, innovative or enhanced approach and delivers meaningful outcomes. Avoidance of duplication with existing funding.	You should demonstrate this by: • clearly describing the problem or need your project is addressing • explaining what is innovative about your approach (new or adapted) • outlining the expected outcomes and impact for Aboriginal students and communities. Evidence may include: • description of current gaps or challenges • rationale for the proposed approach • defined outcomes or success measures.
Criterion 5: Organisational readiness and capacity to deliver The extent to which the applicant has the capacity and capability to deliver the project.	You should demonstrate this by: • providing examples of relevant organisational experience • describing your approach to delivering the project • providing a high-level timeline and key milestones. Evidence may include:

	• examples of previous projects • organisational capability information • proposed delivery plan including timeline and key milestones.
Criterion 6: Value for money and sustainability beyond the funding period The extent to which the project represents value for money and sustainability to delivery beyond the funding period.	You should demonstrate this by: • providing an indicative budget, including total funding amount requested and key cost categories • explaining how project activities will lead to the expected outcomes • describing how outcomes may be sustained beyond the funding period. Evidence may include: • indicative budget summary • explanation of cost drivers • sustainability approach.

3 Application process

3.1 Overview of application process

All applications will be assessed in a fair, transparent and consistent manner.

We recognise the time and effort required to prepare an application and are committed to ensuring the assessment process is respectful, proportionate and accessible to Aboriginal organisations.

3.2 How to apply

Applications must be submitted electronically through the department SmartyGrants portal before the closing date and time. Please note that the SmartyGrants portal will lock at the closing date and time.

Electronically submitted files must be free from viruses and should be checked using an up-to-date virus-checking program before submission. The NSW Government may decline to consider an application that cannot be effectively evaluated because it is incomplete or corrupt.

Applicants must complete the application in its entirety and must not amend any of the questions provided.

- Log in or register if you do not already have a current SmartyGrants account. Registration for SmartyGrants is free of charge.
- Applications can be submitted either in written form or in video form.
- Complete the application, including attaching all required supporting documentation.
- You must respond to all mandatory questions in the application form. The word limit is specified under each of the questions, and you will not be able to include content over the word limit.
- For written submissions, responses must be in a Microsoft Office compatible format (e.g. '.docx' and '.xlsx' formats) or pdf format.

- Up to 5 files (max file size 25 megabytes) can be added as part of the application response. If you have more than 5 files to lodge, you can either:
- manually combine or compress several files into one file
- upload parts of your application in groups of 5 files.

Video submissions

- Video submissions may be submitted rather than a written submission.
- A maximum of one video per question and video length is a maximum 5 minutes.
- For video submissions, responses must be in the format (MP4, MOV, WMV, AVI, AVCHD, MKV, FLV, F4V, SWF, WEBM, HTML5, MPEG-2).
- Please name your video files using the following naming convention for ease of identifying the video: ORGANISATION NAME – QUESTION NUMBER. File names must not contain \ / : * ? < > | characters.
- Please do not include promotional material, copyrighted material and links to file sharing services such as Dropbox or Google Drive in your video submission.
- Ensure the video submission directly answers the questions in the application process.
- Please ensure the speaker is located in a well-lit area with minimal background noise and a clear audio feed to the camera.
- Please allocate enough time to test your submission and practice uploading your videos well in advance of the application closing date and time.
- A successful upload will be confirmed with an onscreen receipt displaying details of what has been received (including file names, time and date received and receipt number). You may screen shot and retain the receipt information for your records.
- If you have issues with upload times, you can speed this up by submitting one video at a time.
- After each video is successfully submitted and you have received a receipt number, you can click back on your internet browser to lodge your next video.

NSW Government reserves the right to:

- extend the application period and/or accept late applications in exceptional circumstances or in circumstances that would not impact on the integrity of the program
- not consider applications that are incomplete, include false or misleading information or have not been submitted through the SmartyGrants platform by the due date and time
- vary, amend or terminate the application process.

Applicants are required to keep a copy of their application and any supporting documents.

If your application has been successfully submitted, you will receive an automated email notification from SmartyGrants, acknowledging receipt of your application. Please retain this receipt for your records.

Please allow sufficient time to complete the application and upload all necessary documents.

3.3 Support available to applicants

Technical assistance

If you require assistance with lodging your application via the SmartyGrants portal, you can contact the SmartyGrants help hub via:

- SmartyGrants applicant help hub website
- +61 3 9320 6888 or

- service@smartygrants.com.au

Questions about the Innovation Fund

- Applicants should refer requests for information or clarification regarding this grant opportunity to: NSA-CtG@det.nsw.edu.au.
- The department is available to support applicants with general Innovation Fund grant advice and technical support to submit the applications.
- The department is unable to provide specific advice about individual applications e.g. eligibility of applicant or project.

Any information given to an applicant to clarify any aspects of this grant opportunity will also be given to all other applicants if, in the opinion of the department, it would be unfair not to do so. All support provided to applicants will be documented in accordance with probity requirements.

4 Assessment process

4.1 Assessment of grant applications

The Innovation Fund follows a transparent assessment process consisting of 2 stages. This structure ensures that we identify concepts with the highest potential for impact before working collaboratively to refine them for delivery.

4.1.1 Stage 1 – Application, initial proposal submitted and eligibility and capability check (open and competitive)

In the first stage, applications are reviewed by an independent assessment panel to ensure the proposal meets the foundational requirements of the fund.

- **Eligibility review:** All applications will first be assessed against the eligibility criteria, including applicant and project eligibility. Applications that meet eligibility requirements will then be assessed against the assessment criteria.
- **Assessment criteria evaluation:** The panel will evaluate eligible applications against the assessment criteria. Eligible applications will be assessed by an assessment panel, which will include representatives from NSW Government agencies. The panel may also seek input from subject matter experts, where required. The process will be supported by an independent probity advisor.
- **Outcome**: Recommended applicants will be invited to participate in the Stage 2 co-design phase.

During the assessment process

- Applicants may be contacted to clarify aspects of their application or provide additional information to support assessment.
- Any additional information requested by the department must be provided within the specified timeframe.
- Unsolicited information that materially changes the original application after the closing date may not be considered.

Assessment panel considerations

- While all eligible applications meeting assessment criteria are considered for funding, the panel may recommend adjustments such as partial funding where appropriate.
- Consideration will take into account alignment with program objectives, priorities, and available funding, duplication of existing programs and regional spread of applications.

Assessment process considerations

Applicants should note that:

- the NSW Government often receives a high number of applications, reflecting strong interest and demand
- while meeting the published criteria is important, funding cannot be guaranteed for every application
- even if your application is successful, the NSW Government may allocate a grant or funding amount that is less than what you requested.

4.1.2 Stage 2 – Co-design and final funding approvals (targeted and closed)

This is a collaborative co-design process focused on refining project and funding details and finalising funding deeds for successful proposals. Stage 2 is targeted and non-competitive and only applicants invited from Stage 1 will be able to participate in this Stage 2.

- **Joint development:** this stage ensures proposals are robust and clearly aligned with desired CTG outcomes and reporting requirements.
- **Refining details:** both parties work to develop and refine the project scope, milestones and reporting. This phase is used to determine the recommended amount of funding within the allocated budget.
- **Final execution:** approval for the projects and funding will include the assessment panel and department executives. The successful completion of this phase results in the execution of a formal funding deed. Please note that projects that cannot meet the agreed expectations for deliverables may not proceed to a final deed.

The department may consider at any assessment stage in the program:

- an applicant's previous experience delivering similar projects
- performance in managing previous government-funded projects (where applicable)
- whether the applicant has any outstanding acquittals or reporting obligations.

The department may also review the applicant's relevant experience, past performance managing government-funded projects and any outstanding reporting or acquittal obligations.

This approach ensures fairness, transparency and collaboration throughout the grant process.

4.1.3 Notification of application outcome

The department will notify all applicants of the outcome of their application in writing via email.

For any concerns about your organisation's application, or if you would like the opportunity for feedback regarding your organisation's application, please email mail to: NSA-CtG@det.nsw.edu.au within 20 business days of notification of your application's outcome. within 20 business days of notification of your application's outcome.

4.2 Publication of grants information

The Grants Administration Guide (the guide) requires that certain information is published in relation to grants awarded no later than 45 calendar days after the grant agreement takes effect (see section 6.5 of the guide and Appendix A to the guide). This information is also open access information under the Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009 (NSW) (GIPA Act) and must be made publicly available unless there is an overriding public interest against disclosure of the information.

In accordance with these requirements, relevant information about the grants awarded will be made available on the NSW Government Grants and Funding Finder as soon as possible after the grant funding is approved or declined.

All records in relation to this decision will be managed in accordance with the requirements of the State Records Act 1998 (NSW).

5 Successful grant applications

5.1 Funding agreement

The Innovation Fund funding agreement includes general/standard terms and conditions that cannot be changed. The funding amount approved through the assessment process represents the maximum funding available for each project.

Successful applicants will be required to:

- execute the funding agreement with the NSW Government by the required date. The NSW Government reserves the right to withdraw the funding offer if the applicant does not comply with this requirement.
- agree to publicly disclose information about the project, including the applicant's name, project name and funding amount, on the Grants and funding | NSW Government website.
- comply with all reporting requirements, including progress reports, milestone reporting and participation in monitoring and evaluation activities. This may include online or in-person meetings, surveys and evidence demonstrating how the project contributes to program objectives.
- acknowledge NSW Government funding in all project-related public announcements and communications
- seek publishing approvals where required and understand that the NSW Government may use project information for media, promotional materials, case studies and press releases
- incur project expenditure only during the activity period and after the funding agreement is executed
- repay unspent funds or funds that cannot be verified as spent in accordance with the funding agreement
- understand that project variations will only be considered in limited circumstances and must be approved by the department in writing
- accept responsibility for any cost overruns
- allow audits or program evaluations of the project, including record-keeping for up to 7 years for assurance purposes
- not make any financial commitments until the funding agreement is executed
- understand termination rights and other conditions set out in the funding agreement.

5.2 Variations to approved projects

Where changes to project scope, activities or deliverables are identified during or after the co-design process, these must be managed in accordance with the terms of the funding agreement.

This may include formal variations, which will be considered on a case-by-case basis and must:

- align with the objectives of the Innovation Fund

- remain within the approved funding allocation
- be approved by the department in accordance with governance requirements.

5.3 Grant payment

Grant funding will be provided to successful applicants through progressive payments, aligned to project milestones and deliverables.

An initial payment may be made upon execution of the funding agreement to support project establishment.

Subsequent payments will be made in instalments and will be:

- linked to achievement of agreed milestones and deliverables
- subject to the provision of satisfactory progress reports as required
- detailed in the funding agreement following the co-design process.

Payment schedules, including the number and timing of instalments, will be determined on a case-by-case basis, reflecting the scale, complexity and delivery approach of each project.

Milestones and deliverables

Milestones and deliverables will be agreed between the department and the funding recipient during the co-design process and formalised in the funding agreement.

These may include, but are not limited to:

- project establishment activities
- delivery of training or support initiatives
- achievement of key outputs or outcomes
- submission of progress or final reports.

Reporting requirements linked to payments

Payments may be contingent on the recipient:

- demonstrating progress against agreed milestones
- submitting progress reports to department's satisfaction, in line with the funding agreement
- meeting any other conditions specified in the funding agreement.

The department reserves the right to withhold or adjust payments where milestones or reporting requirements are not met.

5.4 Unspent funds

Funding recipients are required to use grant funds only for approved project purposes and within the activity period specified in the funding agreement.

If a project is completed and there are unspent funds remaining, funding recipients will be required to return unspent funds to the NSW Government, unless otherwise approved in writing by the department.

Funding recipients must clearly report any unspent funds as part of their final acquittal and provide an explanation for the variance between the approved budget and actual expenditure.

Requests to use unspent funds

In limited circumstances, funding recipients may request approval to use unspent funds to extend or enhance the project scope, rather than returning the funds.

Requests must:

- be submitted in writing to the department prior to the project end date (or within a timeframe specified in the funding agreement)
- clearly outline the proposed changes to scope, including updated activities, timelines and budget
- demonstrate how the proposed use of funds aligns with the objectives of the Innovation Fund
- provide supporting evidence, which may include updated outcomes, benefits or social and/or economic impact of the proposed changes.

The department will assess requests on a case-by-case basis. Approval is not guaranteed and will depend on factors such as alignment with program objectives, value for money and feasibility within program timeframes.

5.5 Indicative reporting and acquittal requirements

Funding recipients will be required to:

- provide regular progress reports (minimum quarterly) outlining project progress and expenditure
- attend regular contract meetings
- submit a final report outlining project outcomes, learnings and recommendations
- submit a final acquittal report
- collect and report on agreed performance indicators.

These indicators may include:

- Aboriginal student participation and engagement
- retention, completion and progression in training
- pathways to employment and employment outcomes (where applicable)
- student wellbeing, confidence and cultural responsiveness
- community benefit and social impact.

Projects must incorporate both:

- quantitative data
- qualitative, community-defined measures of success.

Applicants are expected to embed Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing in both project delivery and evaluation.

5.6 Evaluation

The Innovation Fund will be evaluated to assess how the funded projects contribute to the program's purpose and objectives. Evaluation will occur at both the project and program level.

Project-level evaluation

Funding recipients will be required to:

- agree on outcomes and success measures during the co-design process
- report on progress, milestones and outcomes
- provide evidence of project impacts (e.g. data, case studies or stakeholder feedback)
- participate in evaluation activities, such as surveys or interviews.

The department will evaluate the overall program to assess its effectiveness, outcomes and lessons learnt.

Evaluation approaches will be proportionate, flexible and culturally appropriate. Findings may be used for reporting, program improvement, and sharing learnings.

6 Additional information and resources

6.1 Complaint handling

For any concerns about your organisation's application, please write to NSA-CtG@det.nsw.edu.au. If you do not agree with the way the department has handled the concern/issue, you may wish to contact the NSW Ombudsman via www.ombo.nsw.gov.au.

Should you have concerns in relation to the probity of the process, you can contact the program's Probity Advisor directly: Sarah Mullins, Partner O'Connor Marsden & Associates Pty Ltd M: 0413 443 374 E: smullins@ocmau.com

6.2 Access to information

The GIPA Act provides the proactive release of government information by agencies and gives members of the public an enforceable right to access government information held by an agency (which includes Ministerial offices). Access to government information is only to be restricted if there is an overriding public interest against disclosure.

The NSW Legislative Council has the power to order the production of State papers by the Executive Government. Standing Order 52 provides that the House may order documents to be tabled by the Government in the House. The Cabinet Office coordinates the preparation of the papers – that is, the return to order. The return to order may contain privileged and public documents. Privileged documents are available only to members of the Legislative Council.

Note that documents submitted as part of a grant application may be subject to an application under the *GIPA Act* or an order for papers under Standing Order 52.

6.3 Ethical conduct

6.3.1 Conflict of interest management

A conflict of interest exists when a person might reasonably perceive that the personal interests of a key decision maker of the funded organisation could be favoured over the duties to the funded organisation.

Applicants will be asked to declare, as part of their application and as part of continuous disclosure required by the terms and conditions, any perceived or existing situation which could or does give rise to a conflict of interest. If applicants later identify that there is an actual, apparent or potential conflict of interest or that one might arise in relation to a grant application, they must inform the NSW Department of Education in writing immediately. All key decision makers of your organisation including persons who will be responsible for expending the funds (such as board/committee members, the CEO (or equivalent) and managers of the project) must also declare any conflicts of interest.

With respect to this Fund, applicants must not:

- do anything which could place a public official in a conflict of interest

- offer gifts or inducements to any public official.

6.3.2 Confidentiality

The guidelines should outline any confidentiality requirements with respect to the outcomes of the application process.

Successful applicants are required to keep the outcome of the application process until the Government makes a public announcement.

Each party agrees it must maintain the confidentiality of all commercially sensitive or confidential information it receives from the other party, unless it obtains the consent of that other party to disclose the information.

This does not apply if the information disclosed is publicly available at the time of the disclosure; and/or is required to be disclosed under the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009(NSW)* or process or requirement of Parliament, law or a court; or is required to be disclosed for the purpose of preparing a party's financial statement.