NSW Department of Education

Innovation Fund Round 2

Frequently Asked Questions



NSW GOVERNMENT

This FAQs document must be read in conjunction with the Innovation Fund Round 2 Closing the Gap (CTG) Grant Guidelines:

About the Innovation Fund

What is the Innovation Fund?

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 (RTOs), 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 Grants'. Conversely, Aboriginal Community Controlled (ACC) RTOs invited to participate in the Growth and Sustainability and Innovation Grant Funds 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 and 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:

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- 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.

The 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.

Where can I find more information about the Innovation Fund?

Applicants can refer to the Innovation Fund CTG Grant Guidelines.

Is support available to help applicants complete the application?

The department can provide general grant advice and basic technical support regarding the SmartyGrants portal via **NSA-CtG@det.nsw.edu.au**. For platform-specific issues, contact the SmartyGrants applicant help hub on 03 9320 6888 or by emailing **service@smartygrants.com.au**.

Please note: The department cannot provide specific advice about individual applications, such as pre-determining the eligibility of an applicant or project.

The department cannot write, edit or proofread your application submission.

For further information, see the Grant Guidelines Section 3.3 (Support available to applicants).

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What are the CTG Innovation Fund focus areas?

- Building and connecting to culturally responsive learning and support environments.
- Responsive and place-based skills, employment and career development support.
- Outreach initiatives and activities for at risk learners.

Does my project need to clearly align with a focus area?

Yes your application must align with at least one of the 3 focus areas.

Can I apply for other government programs or initiatives too?

If you intend to apply for other government programs or initiatives, you need to make this clear in your application.

How do I submit an application?

Applications must be submitted electronically through the SmartyGrants **portal** by Monday 30 November 2026. The SmartyGrants portal will lock at the closing date and time.

Refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 3.2 (How to Apply) for detailed information on how to apply.

Where can I find applicant help or FAQ's on SmartyGrants?

Visit: **applicanthelp.smartygrants.com.au/applicant-faq's**

Innovation Fund

Eligibility

Who can apply?

To be eligible you must:

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- be an Aboriginal Community Controlled or First Nations Owned organisation, including ACC or FNO Registered Training Organisations, that has not been invited to apply for Round 2 of the Growth and Sustainability Fund.
- be an Australian legal entity with an ABN
- 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 more than one organisation):

- the lead applicant must be an ACCO or FNO 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.

What is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation?

As per the **National Agreement on Closing the Gap**, ACCOs are defined as organisations that deliver services that build the strength and empowerment of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities and people and are:

- incorporated under relevant legislation and not-for-profit
- controlled and operated by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- connected to community, or communities, in which they deliver the services
- governed by a majority Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander governing body.

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Do applicants need prior experience delivering similar projects?

Yes. Applications must demonstrate capacity and capability to deliver the project demonstrating relevant experience (or access to partnerships and expertise).

Are partnership projects eligible?

Yes. Partnerships are encouraged. Collaborative proposals involving multiple organisations are encouraged to maximise impact. The lead applicant must meet eligibility requirements. Refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 2.1.1 (Eligible applicants) for further details on eligibility and partnerships, but note that:

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

What types of projects are eligible?

To be eligible, projects must:

align with the objectives of the Innovation Fund and **Closing the Gap** and **National Skills Agreement priorities** for NSW

- improve access to, participation in or completion of training for Aboriginal students in the VET sector
- support the delivery of culturally responsive training environments for Aboriginal students
- demonstrate engagement with Aboriginal communities
- be located in NSW.

Refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 2.1.2 (Eligible projects) for further information.

What is considered 'innovative' under this fund?

Examples of innovative approaches include projects that:

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- trial new ideas or models or implement improved approaches
- apply creative solutions to barriers to training access, participation or completion
- demonstrate potential for measurable impact and scalability
- build on existing practices to introduce meaningful improvements.

Refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 2.1.2 (Eligible projects) for further information.

Can funding be used for existing programs or only new initiatives?

The funding cannot be used for existing programs; funding should only be used for new or expanded/adapted initiatives.

Can I submit an application for a proposed project that is not directly related to training or pathways?

No. Projects must be directly related to training or pathways and meet the eligibility requirements.

Will I need to provide proof to show that our organisation meets the eligibility requirements?

Yes. You must confirm that you meet the eligibility requirements.

Can our organisation submit more than one application?

Yes. An organisation can apply for funding for more than one project, but they must submit applications for each project separately through the SmartyGrants portal.

Can I apply again if I was unsuccessful in the previous Innovation Fund Grant round?

Yes. You can apply again if you were unsuccessful in the previous round, as long as you meet the eligibility requirements.

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Can I submit an application if I have an outstanding acquittal for another grant?

Yes. You can submit an application if you have an outstanding acquittal for another grant; however, if you are successful, a contract will not be issued and payments will not be made until all acquittals have been completed.

Will late applications be accepted?

Late applications will only be considered in exceptional circumstances (e.g. pandemic or natural disaster) and at the discretion of the NSW Department of Education where the integrity and competitiveness of the program would not be impacted.

Funding and project timing

Is there a minimum or maximum funding amount?

The value of grants to be allocated in Round 2 is up to $7 million. Applicants may request a minimum funding amount of $50,000 and maximum of $2 million.

What are in-kind contributions and are they required?

In-kind contributions are contributions of goods and services other than money such as venue use, volunteer time or use of equipment. In-kind contributions towards the project are encouraged but not required.

Do we need to contribute our own funds?

No. Co-contributions or matched funding are not required.

Do I need to get quotes for everything?

No. Quotes are not required at the application stage. However you should provide reasonable cost estimates based on typical prices.

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When do applications open and close?

The application round opens at 5pm on Thursday 5 November 2026 and closes at 11:59pm on Monday 30 November 2026.

When can the project take place?

Projects must start after execution of funding deed and be completed by 31 December 2028. Project planning will be discussed as part of co-design.

Will there be additional funding rounds?

No future Innovation Fund grants are planned. It is expected that this will be the final round of the Innovation Fund; however, this may change due to budget availability in the future.

How will payments be made?

Please refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 5.3 (Grant payment) for further information about payments.

When will funding deeds be issued?

Please refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 5.1 (Funding agreement) for further information about funding deeds

What is a funding deed?

A funding deed is a legal agreement between the NSW Department of Education and the successful applicant. It sets out the terms and conditions for receiving and using the grant funding.

Project delivery and reporting

What are the project delivery timeframes for successful applicants?

Projects must commence after execution of the funding deed and be completed by December 2028.

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

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.

What reporting requirements will apply?

Please refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 5.5 (Indicative reporting and acquittal requirements) for further information about reporting.

Are reporting requirements linked to funding payments?

Payments will be contingent on the recipient:

- demonstrating progress against agreed milestones
- submitting progress reports to the 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.

Unspent funds and variations

What happens if not all funding is spent?

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

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Can unspent funds be reallocated?

Please refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 5.4 (Unspent funds) for further information about budget reallocation.

What happens if a project needs to change or a budget variation needs to be requested?

Please refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 5.2 (Variations to approved projects) for more information about project and budget variations.

Application and assessment

Is there a word limit for each application question?

Yes. The table below outlines the word limits for each section of the application.

Pitch	Word document or PDF – 2,000 words word limit. PowerPoint presentation – 15 slides maximum.
Textbox responses	Each textbox response in the application form must be no longer than 500 words.

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Do I have to submit a pitch for my proposed project?

Yes. The pitch is mandatory and must be submitted for your application to be assessed. This can be submitted as a 5-minute video or Microsoft Office compatible format document/PDF.

Your pitch should address the questions in the table below, as well as address one or more of the focus areas.

Your pitch should address the following	Questions to consider
• Alignment with the objectives of the Innovation Fund, CTG and NSA priorities • Improve access to, participation in or completion of training for Aboriginal students in the Vocational Education and Training sector • Support the delivery of culturally safe training environments for Aboriginal students • Address one or more of the following focus areas: ○ Focus area 1: Building and connecting to culturally responsive learning and supportive environments. ○ Focus area 2: Responsive and place-based skills, employment and career development support. ○ Focus area 3: Outreach initiatives and activities for at risk learners.	• What are the key objectives and activities of your proposed project? • How does the project respond to priority areas, regions, cohorts or sectors identified under the NSW Skills Plan? • What are the main project costs and what are the expected benefits and outcomes of the project? • How will the project contribute to strengthening the ACCO and FNO training sector?

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Do I need to address all or only relevant focus areas in my application?

You are not required to address all the focus areas, only the ones that are relevant to your proposed project. For example, your proposed project may address focus areas 1 and 2 but not focus area 3. Refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 1.3 (CTG focus areas) for further information about the focus areas.

What are the file upload requirements?

Upload the supporting documents requested in the form. Follow the portal prompts for file types and size limits.

What are the requirements for video submissions?

Refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 3.2 (How to apply) for further information on video submissions.

What file types can I upload for my application?

Written submission	• For written submissions, responses must be in a Microsoft Office compatible format (e.g. '.docx' and '.xlsx') or pdf format. • Up to 5 files can be added as part of the application. If you have more than 5 files to lodge, you can either: ○ manually combine or compress several files into one ○ upload parts of your application in groups of 5 files.
Video submission	• A maximum of one video per question. Video length should not exceed 5 minutes. • For video submissions, responses must be in one of the following formats: MP4, MOV, WMV, AVI, AVCHD, MKV, FLV, F4V, SWF, WEBM, HTML5, MPEG-2.

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What do I need to include in my application?

Your application must include:

- an online form completed via SmartyGrants
- all additional documents required as specified in the application form.

Are letters of support required?

Refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 4 (Assessment process)

How will my application be assessed?

Eligible applications will be competitively assessed against a number of criteria which are outlined in the Grant program guidelines.

What makes a strong application?

A strong application is clear, specific and well planned. It should show alignment with the program objectives and include relevant support material, realistic activities and outcomes, and a reasonable budget that matches the written proposal.

When writing the application, you may wish to consider the following.

- Ensure the rationale for your proposal is appropriate for the funding round and that your project meets the eligibility criteria.
- Consider how your proposal aligns with one or more of the focus areas and ensure that it clearly addresses the relevant assessment criteria.
- Ensure each response directly addresses the question being asked and clearly responds to the specific criteria assessed in that section.
- Use plain English and avoid flowery language and jargon. If you are using AI to help draft your application ensure that you retain your own voice and that the responses are clear, concise and specific to your project.
- Substantiate your claims with clear examples, evidence and relevant support material.

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- Confirm that your timeline, budget and proposed activities are consistent, realistic and aligned.
- Be specific about the activities you will undertake as well as the expected outcomes.
- Avoid assuming prior knowledge of your work and ensure your application clearly explains your proposal without leaving gaps for interpretation.

Additional tips and tricks

- Having a third party look over your application before it is submitted can be helpful to see it from a different perspective.
- Consider your proposal through the eyes of an assessor who may not be familiar with your past work; ensure that the rationale and projected outcomes are easily understood.

Can I use generative AI to write my application?

The department recognises that generative AI can help support the application writing process. However, it cannot also present significant issues in terms of incorrect information and poor use of AI in the grant writing process can weaken an application.

The department does not prohibit the use of AI in the development of applications but expects that organisations will disclose where they have used AI. Additionally, make sure that the information in your application is correct and properly represents your organisation and proposal.

What makes a strong budget?

A strong budget is:

- realistic
- clear
- aligned with the project and matching the scale of the activity
- supported by notes where needed, especially when clarifying larger items.

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Do I need to include GST in my budget?

No. Budgets should not include GST.

Application process and support

How do I apply?

Before you start

We encourage you to review the eligibility and assessment criteria before starting your application. This will help you understand the requirements of the program and determine whether your project is suitable.

Accessing SmartyGrants

- If you are a new user, you will need to register and create a password before starting your application.
- If you are already registered, you can log in using your existing username and password.

Viewing the application form

- Please note that SmartyGrants uses conditional logic. This means that you won't be able to view all sections of the application when you first begin. Additional pages and questions will become visible as you move through the form and complete the various sections, and which sections you fill in will also depend on your responses.

Can I change or edit my application after it has been submitted?

Yes. If you need to make changes after submitting your application, please contact the department via nsa-ctg@det.nsw.edu.au to request that your SmartyGrants application be reopened. You must resubmit the application before the closing date and time.

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Can I withdraw my application?

Yes. You may withdraw your application at any time before the closing date by contacting the Department of Education. Withdrawn applications will not be considered for assessment.

Can I apply outside of SmartyGrants?

No. Applications must be submitted via SmartyGrants.

Can I submit a hard copy application via post?

No. Applications must be submitted online through the SmartyGrants portal.

Can I review the application form in advance?

Yes. You may read through the form before starting your application.

Can the Department of Education review my draft application?

No. Departmental staff can provide information on the guidelines and eligibility, but they cannot give feedback on draft applications.

This grant isn't right for my project. What other funding is available?

If your project is not suitable for this grant round, we encourage you to explore current and future funding opportunities listed here.

What if I make a mistake in my application? How do I change or update my application after it has been submitted?

Email NSA-CtG@det.nsw.edu.au as soon as possible. After the closing time, changes are not allowed.

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How can I confirm that my SmartyGrants application form has been submitted?

Once you click Submit in SmartyGrants, you'll receive a confirmation email. The confirmation email will contain a PDF copy of your submission. Please check that you receive the confirmation email and keep it for your records.

If you do not receive a confirmation email, your form may not have been successfully submitted. You should also check your junk mail for the confirmation email.

You can also log into the online system and click 'My Submissions' to view all submitted and unsubmitted forms. Successful submissions can be identified by a green tick in a circle.

If I submit a video, will I receive a confirmation that this has been submitted?

You will receive confirmation on the screen. Make sure you take screenshot of this confirmation for your records.

How do I get in touch?

For technical assistance, or if you have a question that is not listed in these FAQs, you can contact the Department of Education via:

Email: NSA-CtG@det.nsw.edu.au

Outcomes

What happens after I submit?

Applications go through:

- an eligibility check
- assessment by independent assessment panel.

When will applicants be notified?

The department will notify all applicants of the outcome of their applications in writing via email. Public announcement of the decision may be made and information about grants

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awarded will be published on the NSW Government Grants and Funding website within 45 days of executing the funding agreement.

What does the co-design phase involve?

Please refer to the Grant Guidelines Section 4.1.2 (Stage 2 – Co-design and final funding approvals (targeted and closed)) for further information about the co-design process.

If I am unsuccessful, can I receive feedback on my application?

Yes. To receive feedback, please write to **NSA-CtG@det.nsw.edu.au** within 20 business days of notification of your application's outcome.

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