Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Higher Education Partnerships Investment – Call for Proposals Guidelines, Eligibility and Selection Criteria

Instructions for Organisations: Please read the call for Proposals Guidelines, Eligibility and Selection Criteria before completing the Invitation to Submit an Activity Proposal.

Section 1: Background and Introduction

The next phase of Pacific higher education partnerships will aim to better equip Pacific researchers and tertiary institutions to produce research needed to solve Pacific development challenges. Funding for this program is estimated at up to AUD$22 million over four years (2026-2030), which may include DFAT program management and evaluation costs. DFAT reserves the right to adjust the funding until grant agreements are finalised.

Section 2: Program objectives and design process

The proposed goal, objectives, 'End of Program Outcomes' (EOPOs) and 'Intermediate Outcomes' are indicative only and would be tested and refined during a comprehensive design process (as detailed further below).

- Program Goal: A peaceful, stable and prosperous Pacific equipped to respond to the challenges of our time.
- Program objective: To better equip Pacific researchers and tertiary institutions to produce the research needed to solve Pacific development challenges.

Proposed End of Program Outcomes:

- EOPO1 (Individual capacity building): Pacific researchers (including women and people from disadvantaged groups) are better equipped to lead, drive and undertake high quality, policy-relevant research.
- EOPO2 (Institutional capacity building): Pacific universities and research institutions are better equipped to manage and drive high quality and locally relevant research agendas, including participating in research networks and supporting diverse researchers.
- EOPO3 (Regional partnerships): Higher education and research partnerships between the Pacific and Australia are strengthened, expanded and more sustainable.
- EOPO4 (Communications): Pacific research and analysis is more effectively communicated, including to policy makers and diverse Pacific and Australian audiences.

Cross cutting Intermediate Outcomes:

- IO1 (GEDSI): Women, people with disability and other disadvantaged groups have greater opportunities to lead, participate in and determine research priorities within the program.
- IO2 (Climate): Researchers and institutions undertake climate-focused research on Pacific-relevant challenges.
- IO3 (Localisation and sustainability): Pacific Islanders have opportunities to shape the research agenda, through inclusive and culturally appropriate consultation.

- IO4 (Partnership): Pacific researchers and institutions benefit from collaboration, networking and knowledge sharing arrangements with a broad range of Australian higher education/research institutes.

Design process:

At this proposal stage, applicants are expected to detail their key ideas, focus areas and ways of working for a proposed Pacific Higher Education Partnerships program as well as to demonstrate their organisational capacity, vision and resourcing, in line with the selection criteria.

Based on this, a preferred partner will be engaged to lead a full design process for the program, in coordination with DFAT, and produce a design document which meets DFAT design standards for a "partner-led design" (see DFAT Design and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Standards: https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-design-monitoring-evaluation-learning-standards.pdf). A summarised version of the full design document will be produced into a standard template (see: Investment design summary template, https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/partner-led-investment-design-summary-template) and assessed through DFAT's internal quality assurance processes.

The preferred partner will receive an initial grant tranche of funding to produce a design document, with further funding tranches for implementation contingent upon a successful design which meets DFAT standards and objectives. It is anticipated this initial funding may be used by the partner to engage internal and external expertise to assist with the design process, such as design, monitoring, evaluation and learning, and GEDSI (gender equality, disability and social inclusion) technical experts.

Section 3: Eligibility Criteria

- Applications are open to Australian higher education providers or consortia with an Australian higher education provider Lead Organisation. Consortia that include international organisations are eligible, if there is an Australian higher education provider as the Lead Organisation.
- Organisations submitting proposals must not have any reason preventing them from operating in Australia and the Pacific.
- Organisations should note that individuals with conflicting commitments, and current and former DFAT employees, must not be included in the Activity Proposal or as individuals who may be engaged by the applicant if selected through the assessment process described in this Guideline. DFAT may reject any Activity Proposal which does not disclose the fact that a proposed team member has an existing or continuing commitment to another project or activity.
- Activity Proposals compiled with the assistance of current DFAT employees or former DFAT employees will be excluded from consideration.
- 'Former DFAT employee' means a person who was previously employed by DFAT, whose employment ceased within the last 9 months, and who was substantially involved in the design, preparation, appraisal, review and or daily management of the program to which this grant relates.

- Consortium proposals must be accompanied by a letter from each partner providing information about their proposed roles, describing the proposed relationship between the Lead Organisation and partner organisation(s), and expressing the intent to collaborate.

- All eligible organisations and consortia must demonstrate sufficient financial and organisational capacity to deliver the proposal. DFAT reserves the right to consider administrative efficiency of proposed consortia arrangements as a delivery mechanism.
- DFAT reserves the right to reassess any proposal if, following submission, the membership of the successful consortium proposal changes, including withdrawing consortium member(s).
- The Lead Organisation in a consortium will be accountable for all funds, and for managing annual budget, governance mechanisms and work planning processes. The Grant Agreement shall be signed with the Lead Organisation, and the Lead Organisation is responsible to DFAT for the performance of the consortium under the Grant Agreement to achieve agreed objectives.
- If shortlisted, applicants will be expected to meet DFAT due diligence requirements through assessment undertaken by DFAT and/ or third-party assessor.

3.2 Proposal Requirements

Eligible proposals must:

- Be completed in accordance with the 'invitation to submit an activity proposal' in PDF (preferred) or Microsoft Office suite application files acceptable.
- The proposed program activities must not exceed A$22 million over 4 years of Australian Government funding (i.e. excluding co-financing amounts). Total funding commitments will be finalised during grant negotiations. DFAT reserves the right to reduce the available envelope of funding prior to finalisation of a grant agreement.

Section 4: Application process and indicative timeline

The indicative timeline for this competitive grants process is summarised below:

Event	Timing
Call for proposals issued	December 2025
Deadline for proposals to be submitted	Early March 2026
Proposals assessed	March 2026
Preferred grantee notified	April 2026
Design phase commences	May 2026
[Subject to performance in design phase] implementation phase commences	October 2026

4.2 Applicant briefings

- DFAT will hold one applicant briefing for potential respondents: Friday 6 February 2026, 11:00–12:00 AEDT.
- DFAT reserves the right to cancel or reschedule an applicant briefing.
- The applicant briefing will be an opportunity for interested organisations to ask questions on the grant structure, submission process and implementation.

- All questions, answers, and presentations from the briefings will be published on the DFAT website (http://dfat.gov.au/aboutus/businessopportunities/tenders/Pages/business-notifications.aspx), so that organisations unable to attend have equal access to information.
- Organisations planning to attend either applicant briefing must RSVP to the DFAT Contact Officer (Pacificedupartnerships@dfat.gov.au) by close of business 30 January 2026.

4.3 Deadline for proposal submission

- The deadline for proposal submission is included in the Invitation to Submit (Section 2).
- Assessment will be a one-step process, so a full proposal must be submitted for assessment.

4.4 Conformance check

- Proposals received by the deadline will first be checked to be conforming bids by DFAT to ensure the organisation/s and proposed project meet the eligibility criteria detailed in Section 3. At DFAT's sole discretion, those proposals deemed nonconforming will be excluded, and those applicants will be advised by DFAT at this stage.
- Conforming proposals will be assessed by an expert panel selected by DFAT.

The panel will assess proposals against the Selection Criteria described in Section 5.

4.5 Assessment and Past Performance Information

- The panel will provide the DFAT delegate with a report that:
    a. summarises the panel's assessment of each eligible proposal against the Selection Criteria; and
    b. recommends a preferred applicant and lists other suitable applicants in ranked order for the DFAT delegate's consideration and approval.
- The panel is conducted on a confidential basis, and panel members must not discuss matters relating to the assessment of any proposal with any external party. Applicants must not seek contact with any members of the panel, and any such contact will be considered a breach of confidentiality and may result in DFAT rejecting the proposal of the applicant concerned.
- In making its assessment of a proposal, the panel may have regard to other factors relevant to the suitability, capacity and qualifications of an applicant organisation including but not limited to:
    a. checking with other persons or organisations as DFAT chooses, the accuracy of information in the proposal and quality of previous work performed including the resourcing of previous work;
    b. interviewing representatives of applicant institutions; and
    c. information obtained from any legitimate, verifiable source, which is relevant to DFAT's assessment of the capacity of applicant institutions to implement proposals as submitted. Such information may be the result of inquiries made by DFAT.
- Previous performance information may only be provided to panel members where it is considered relevant. Panel members may not introduce irrelevant issues or hearsay into the assessment, or base their assessment on information that cannot be substantiated.

4.6 Debriefing of applicants

- Applicants are entitled to request written feedback on the results of the assessment of their proposals once a Grant Agreement/Funding Order has been signed with the successful applicant. This feedback will provide information on scores achieved against individual criterion and comments from the panel.
- DFAT will not enter into discussion or communications on the content of the feedback once issued.

4.7 Complaints

- DFAT's Complaints Handling Procedures Relating to Procurement will apply. https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/complaints-handling-procedures-procurement.

Section 5: Assessment

5.1 Assessment outcome

Through this process, DFAT will select one grantee (or Lead Organisation) which will receive funding to produce a full program design of the higher education investment. Funding for implementation of the program is not guaranteed, and is subject to the grantee successfully producing a program design which meets DFAT design standards (see: https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-design-monitoring-evaluation-learning-standards.pdf) and program objectives. Applicants should not underestimate the work required to meet these standards and could consider seeking external expertise on how to ensure the program design meets DFATs standards.

5.2 Selection Criteria

Proposals will be assessed based on the following selection criteria.

Selection Criteria – maximum 20 pages

1. **Organisational expertise and achieving development impact (45%)**
    1.1 Demonstrated understanding of Pacific higher education and research challenges and demonstrated capability to achieve development outcomes (30%)
    - How would your institution/consortium seek to improve Pacific research and scholarship capability for both Pacific researchers and Pacific higher education institutions? Are there any specific research/development issues you would seek to prioritize in the program?
    - Draw on your existing partnerships and understanding of Pacific development challenges and opportunities where appropriate.
    1.2 Demonstrated capacity to communicate research with influence, including an understanding of research to policy knowledge needs and effective communication mediums. (15%)
    - How will your institution/consortia ensure research is communicated effectively to, and meets the needs of a range of Australian and Pacific stakeholders, including policymakers?

2. **Effective partnerships and ways of working (40%)**
   2.1 Demonstrated capacity to build and maintain effective partnership arrangements with different institutions, and coordinate efforts to achieve shared outcomes. (20%)
   - The program seeks to strengthen and expand Australian higher education partnerships with Pacific counterparts.
        How will your institution/consortia facilitate greater collaboration between Australian institutions and Pacific counterparts, including maintaining and building mutually beneficial research partnerships within the program?
   2.2 Demonstrated understanding of ways of working in the Pacific to achieve locally-led, sustainable development impact. (20%)
   - In line with Australia's International Development Policy focus on locally-led development*, how will your institution/consortia ensure program activities respond to Pacific priorities, partnerships respect local ways of knowing and being, and the research agenda is shaped by Pacific stakeholders as well as Australian interests.
   - *Resource available at: DFAT, Guidance Note: Locally led development. Online: https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-guidance-note-locally-led-development.pdf

3. **Value for money (15%)**
   3.1 Demonstrated intent to co-contribute to the program through financial and/or other resourcing and ability to leverage DFAT funding for greater impact. (15%)
   - How will your institution/consortia provide value-for-money? Will the applicant provide co-funding or other resources to the program? What in-kind contributions will be provided by the applicant? Are there opportunities to leverage other funding or resources to support achievement of program outcomes?