

Applied Research and Innovation Project

Round 2 Application Guide





This guide is designed for Early-Career Researchers from Victorian TAFE Institutes applying for the Applied Research and Innovation Project grant, Round 2.

It compiles essential application requirements, deadlines, and guidance to help you craft a successful proposal focused on the Care Economy and the mandatory Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) partnership.

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Key Dates and Overview



Component	Detail
Eligibility	Researchers from Victorian TAFE Institutes
Mandate	Applied research projects in the Care Economy with a mandatory Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) partner
Grant Amount	\$50,000 – \$100,000
Project Duration	6 - 12 months
Application Deadline	Wednesday 17 December 2025 (5pm)
Project Completion	All funded projects must be completed by February 2027

Why Partner with an SME in the Care Economy?

Engaging with a Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) in the Care Economy is crucial because the sector is vital to the Australian economy and society, directly impacting the well-being of the community. These enterprises, which include aged care, disability support, and childcare providers, often face real-world operational challenges such as workforce shortages, high staff turnover, and efficiency gaps.

By applying your TAFE’s research and innovation expertise directly to an SME’s specific problem, this grant aims to:

- **Generate immediate, practical solutions** that improve the quality of care and business practices.
- **Create tangible, scalable outcomes** that can be transferred across the broader Care Economy sector.
- **Strengthen the vocational education and training (VET) pathway** by embedding applied research directly into industry practice and curriculum innovation.



Eligible SME Partner Requirements

Requirement	Details
Sector	Must operate within the Care Economy (e.g., small independent aged care facility, community-based disability service, small childcare provider).
Size	Generally fewer than 200 employees and/or less than \$50 million in annual turnover (Australian standard definition).
Role	Must be the primary beneficiary of the research outcome and the source of the core problem or opportunity to be investigated.

Co-Design Process: TAFE and SME Collaboration

Step	TAFE Researcher Action	SME Partner Action
1 Problem Identification	Facilitate a session to identify a single, clear, actionable problem the SME faces.	Articulate the problem in clear, operational terms, focusing on business impact.
2 Solution Design	Propose an applied research methodology that leads to a demonstrable, practical solution within the 6 - 12-month timeline.	Confirm the proposed outcome will genuinely solve the business problem and is feasible to implement.
3 Resource Commitment	Finalise the project budget, clearly outlining the value of the SME's required contribution.	Commit resources (staff time, data access, site access, cash contribution) and formalise this via the Letter of Support .

SME Letter of Support Requirements

The letter must confirm the SME's commitment, quantify their resources, and explicitly link the project to their operational needs.

Commitment and Formatting:

Must be on the SME's official letterhead, clearly addressed to the ARI Project Grant Committee, and signed by a Senior SME Representative (e.g., CEO, Director).



Project Alignment and Problem Statement:

Must confirm the operational challenge was identified through a co-design process and clearly state the core problem the research addresses. Confirms the SME is the primary beneficiary.

Resource Commitment and Contributions:

Please ensure the budget template for Resource Commitment and Contributions is fully completed. It must clearly state the total estimated monetary value (in AUD) of all contributions and include an itemised breakdown for each item, specifying:

- (1) the type of contribution (In-Kind or Financial),
- (2) a description of the resource provided, and
- (3) the estimated monetary value (AUD).

Implementation and Integration:

Commits to **hosting** the research, **piloting** the solution, and formally **embedding** the validated solution into the organisation's Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).

Intellectual Property (IP):

Acknowledges and agrees to the proposed IP arrangement (non-exclusive, royalty-free licence for internal business operations for the SME, allowing the TAFE to use the IP for VET teaching and dissemination).





Crafting a Successful Grant Application

This section of the guide corresponds directly to the required fields and response sections of the official Applied Research and Innovation Project Grant Application Form.

Hint: Use the word limits provided in the form.

Form Section 1: Applicant Information

These sections cover fundamental project details; Proposed Project Partners, Project Team Members, and Project Duration and Timeline.

Project Duration and Timeline (Section 1):

Please outline the proposed timeline, key milestones, and deliverables for your project. Your plan must clearly fit within the 6 -12-month timeframe. A table format is encouraged to clearly structure this information.



Form Section 3: Project Impact and Implementation

This is the most heavily weighted section. Your response must demonstrate the immediate benefit to the SME and the potential for sector-wide impact.

Applied Impact and Contribution to the Care Economy (Section 3.1)

(Max 400 words)

Detail the project's strategic fit by addressing problem-solving and outcomes.

Applied Problem Solving and SME Relevance:

- Define the specific problem, gap, or opportunity within the Care Economy.

Example: Define - The problem is a 40% staff turnover rate in the first year for personal care workers (PCWs) within the SME, significantly exceeding the industry average of 25%.

- Explain how this challenge was identified in consultation with the mandatory SME partner.

Example: Explain - The TAFE team facilitated staff and management focus groups (co-design), which isolated poor early-career mentorship (a lack of clear upskilling pathways) as the primary cause, shifting the focus from pay to professional development.

- Detail how your TAFE's expertise will develop a practical, applied solution for that partner.

Example: Detail - Our VET-based applied research team will use its expertise in adult learning and curriculum design to develop a digital, micro-credentialled mentorship program to provide PCWs with targeted support and formal recognition for on-the-job skill acquisition.

Tangible Outcomes and Sector Benefit:

- Describe the expected tangible outputs (e.g., prototype, training module, refined process).
- Describe the immediate benefits these will deliver to the collaborating SME.
- Explain the potential for these outcomes to be scaled or transferred across the broader Care Economy sector.

Implementation Pathways (Section 3.2)

(Max 400 words)

This section explains how your project results will be put into practice and who will benefit. The main partners are your research team and the mandatory SME, who will help design the project and be the first to use the solution. Your plan should show the following:

Key Stakeholders and End-Users:

- The main partners are your Academic Research Team and the mandatory SME, who will help design the project and be the first to apply the solution. SME staff are the primary users, care recipients are the ultimate beneficiaries, and the wider Care Economy sector and funding body also benefit.

Credible Pathways for Implementation:

- Your plan should show that the research outputs are practical, ready to use, and scalable across the sector.

Co-Design and Validation:

- Work with the SME to agree on the problem and research questions so the solution meets real needs.

Applied Pilot and Integration:

- Test the solution in the SME's workplace and, once proven, make it part of their standard processes.

Example: A validated micro-credential added to SME onboarding and annual training to ensure sustainability.

Sector Scale:

- Share what works by creating practical resources like toolkits or policy briefs so other care businesses can adopt the solution.
- This approach ensures your research is useful immediately, sustainable for the SME, and scalable across the Care Economy.

Form Section 4: Research Quality, Training, and Development

This section assesses the rigour of your plan and its impact on VET.

Research Plan and Methodology (Section 4.1)

(Max 300 words):

- **Methodology:** Describe the research approach, methodology, and key milestones.
- **Alignment:** Explain how the project aligns with industry needs and ensures research credibility.

Education and Training Opportunities (Section 4.2)

(Max 300 words):

- Detail how the project contributes to education, training, and workforce development.

Example: Detail - We will create a publicly available toolkit enabling other TAFEs to adapt the mentorship content for their own Care courses, directly supporting the upskilling of 50 current TAFE trainers within the first year after project completion.

- Explain potential curriculum innovation or student upskilling opportunities that may arise from the research outcomes.





Form Section 5: Project Team and Risk

Focus on the capacity of your team to deliver the project and how you will manage potential challenges.

Project Team Expertise (Section 5.1)

(Max 300 words):

- Outline the skills, knowledge, and experience of the project team members, explaining how the team composition supports successful project delivery.
- Early Career Development and SME Support: The assessment will specifically review how the project plan facilitates the Early-Career TAFE researcher's leadership and capacity development.
- *Attachment Requirement: CVs for each member must be submitted, demonstrating expertise in applied research and/or the care economy.*

Risk Management (Section 5.2)

(Max 300 words):

- Risk Identification: Identify potential project risks (e.g., financial, personnel, timeline, safety).
- Mitigation Strategies: Describe clear strategies to address identified risks.

Example: To counter the risk of personnel turnover within the SME partner, a backup internal champion will be identified and briefed on the project from the commencement of the research.

Form Section 6: Budget Summary and Commitment

Ensure your financial request is justified and your partner's contribution is clearly quantified.

Requested Grant Amount and Justification (Section 6.1)

(Max 150 words):

- State the total amount requested (\$50,000 – \$100,000) and provide a high-level summary justifying the request.

Attachment Requirement: The full itemised breakdown must be completed in the mandatory Budget Proforma document and uploaded.

SME and Partner Contributions (Section 6.2)

(Max 150 words):

- Summarise the confirmed financial and/or in-kind contributions provided by the mandatory SME partner and any other collaborators.

The project grant should cover the project costs, and the grant funds will cover the requested amount. However, if you or your SME partner wish to contribute more to the overall project value, this is welcome.

- In-Kind Contribution: This refers to goods, services, or resources the partner provides without charging the grant funds, such as staff time, access to facilities, or use of their data systems. This is not a mandatory requirement for the SME, but it is an opportunity for them to demonstrate their commitment to the project

Note: The SME Letter of Support must quantify the estimated monetary value of the SME's total contribution.



Form Section 7: Research Ethics and Compliance

Ethics Tips for Applicants

Why Ethics Matters in Applied Research

Ethics approval ensures research involving people is conducted responsibly, protecting participants and meeting national standards. It is mandatory for projects involving human participants or their data, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations. Approval must be obtained before research begins - retrospective approval is not permitted.

Low-Risk Ethics Explained

Research is considered low risk when the only foreseeable risk is discomfort (for example, mild anxiety during an interview or completing a survey). Higher-risk projects involve potential harm or significant burden and require a more detailed review.

External Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Option

If your TAFE institute does not have its own registered Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), you must apply through an external HREC registered with the NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council) to meet national standards. Providers such as Bellberry Limited offer external ethics review and provide helpful guides for low-risk applications.

Example of Low-Risk Research

A Victorian TAFE project conducting short interviews with aged care staff about workplace practices, where the only risk is mild discomfort during discussion, would be classified as low risk.

Research Ethics and Compliance (Section 7.1)

(Max 200 words):

- **Confirmation:** Confirm whether your project involves human participants or requires other ethical or regulatory clearance.
- **Status/Rationale:** State the ethics status (e.g., approved, submitted, intended to submit) or briefly explain the rationale for exemption.

Note: Final grant agreements are conditional upon submission of all required approvals before the project commences.

Ethics Checklist

Use this checklist to ensure your project meets ethics requirements:

☐	Does your project involve human participants or their data? (Includes surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, or use of personal information.)
☐	Have you confirmed if ethics approval is required? (Almost all human research needs at least low-risk ethics clearance.)
☐	Is your HREC NHMRC-registered? (If your TAFE institute does not have its own registered HREC, you must apply through an external HREC registered with the NHMRC, such as Bellberry.)
☐	Have you budgeted for ethics approval fees? (Include an allocation in your budget for low-risk ethics review.)
☐	Have you factored ethics review time into your project timeline? (Approval must be obtained before research begins - retrospective approval is not permitted.)
☐	Do you know where to apply if your TAFE lacks an HREC? (External providers like Bellberry offer NHMRC-registered ethics review and guides for low-risk applications.)

For more details, refer to the Application Guide, visit the Applied Research and Innovation website FAQs, or contact the Applied Research Project Team.





Application and Assessment Process

How will my application be assessed?

Your application undergoes a rigorous, two-phase assessment process to ensure alignment with the program's strategic goals.

Phase 1: Initial Eligibility Check

Holmesglen confirms that the application meets all mandatory requirements, including:

- **TAFE Leadership and Alignment:** Verification that a Victorian TAFE is the lead applicant and that the project clearly addresses a challenge within the Care Economy.
- **Mandatory Partnership:** An Early-Career Researcher working in collaboration with a Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) to address industry challenges, foster innovation, and deliver measurable outcomes.

Phase 2: Research Project Advisory Committee (RPAC) Review and Scoring

Eligible applications are forwarded to the RPAC for detailed assessment:

- **Scoring:** Applications are scored against the weighted assessment criteria, focusing heavily on Strategic Impact and SME Mandate (40%).
- **Capacity and Resources:** The review will assess whether the project strongly supports the development of the Early-Career Researcher and whether the plan clearly outlines risk management strategies and SME contributions.
- **Clarification:** The RPAC may contact the applicant to request additional information or clarification as part of the assessment process.
- **Strengthening Applications:** The ARI Project Team may work with applicants to explore opportunities for strengthening their application, which could lead to a re-submission.
- **Recommendation:** Final funding recommendations are presented to the RPAC for approval.

Probity Note: The RPAC reserves the right to exercise its judgement on the appropriateness of funding eligibility in respect to contentious, topical, or contemporary issues, or where the project may be perceived to conflict with Applied Research and Innovation project objectives. RPAC decisions are final.

Unsuccessful Applications

The assessment is rigorous and objective. Common reasons an application may not be recommended for funding include:

- The project is **ineligible** (e.g., non-compliant with the mandatory Early-Career TAFE researcher or SME partnership requirements).
- The application scored **50% or below** (Refer to the Assessment and Scoring Criteria (pp.13–15)).

Assessment Criteria and Scoring

All applications will be assessed against four core criteria, reflecting the mandatory focus on Strategic Impact and SME Mandate (40%). Applications that score 50% (50 points or less) or below will not be recommended for funding. The total maximum score is 100.

Assessment Criterion	Weighting	Maximum Score	Key Focus (Round 2 Mandate)
Project Impact	40%	40	Strategic Impact and SME Mandate: Actionable solution for the SME that can be scaled across the sector, linked to VET outcomes and Care Economy reform.
Team Capability	25%	25	Capability, Capacity, and Workforce Development: Focus on Early-Career TAFE researcher leadership, team expertise, and capacity to deliver the project.
Research Proposal	20%	20	Research Quality and Feasibility: Evidence-based, highly feasible plan within the 6 - 12-month timeframe, sound budget, and comprehensive risk management.
Evidence of Need	15%	15	Significance and Endorsement: Problem must be clearly identified and validated by the SME Partner.
Total	100%	100	



Project Marking Rubric (Score Descriptors)

Applications are scored against the weighted criteria using a 4-point scale for internal assessment.

Score (Internal)	Rating	Performance Description (Meets Round 2 Mandate)
4	Excellent (Exceeds Expectations)	Proposal is outstanding; it addresses all required elements and exceeds the Round 2 mandate.
3	Strong (Meets Expectations)	Proposal is strong and comprehensive; it addresses all required elements and clearly meets the Round 2 mandate.
2	Adequate (Requires Improvement)	Proposal is acceptable; it addresses most elements but only partially meets the Round 2 mandate.
1	Does Not Yet Meet Requirements	Proposal is deficient; it fails to address key elements or is non-compliant with the Round 2 mandate.

Overall Score Band and Funding Recommendation

Score Band (%)	Rating	Recommendation Summary
91 – 100	Outstanding	Recommended Unconditionally (Highest quality, at the forefront of applied research.)
86 – 90	Excellent	Strongly Support Recommendation of Funding (High quality and strongly competitive.)
76 – 85	Very Good	Conditionally Support Recommendation of Funding (Interesting, sound, and compelling.)
51 – 75	Good	Unsupportive of Recommending for Funding (Sound but lacks a compelling element or contains moderate weaknesses.)
0 – 50	Uncompetitive	Not Recommended for Funding (Has significant weaknesses, is deficient, or is ineligible.)

High-Level Scoring Benchmarks

Category	Outstanding (91-100)	Good (51-75)	Uncompetitive (0-50)
Evidence of Need (15%)	Clearly addresses SME-validated challenge. Multiple letters of support/endorsement. Strong collaboration.	Challenge is vague; only some detail provided. Basic letter of support included. Some engagement or collaboration.	Challenge lacks detail or is too broad. No letter of support. No Victorian TAFE endorsement or support.
Research Proposal (20%)	Excellent applied research design (methods highly appropriate) with clear objectives. Clear budget including SME contribution. Excellent risk management.	Design is generally sound but may lack clarity and/or contain notable weaknesses. Some detail on budget and planning.	Inadequate planning. Project description lacks clarity or has major flaws in design. Budget is unclear/incomplete, or costs exceed value.
Project Impact (40%)	Highly significant, substantial changes in knowledge/practice/policy, directly benefiting the SME and the TAFE network. Strong alignment to Care Economy reform.	Demonstrates marginal importance. Benefits are generally clear but minimal impact on other TAFEs. Could result in appreciable improvements.	Low benefit/impact. Unlikely to impact others across the sector. Does not address a significant, evidence-based problem.
Team Capability (25%)	Excellent project planning. Highly feasible with Early-Career TAFE researcher leadership strongly supported. Access to excellent technical resources/expertise.	Some project planning and aims provided. Basic outline of costs. Has detail on some relevant risks considered.	Sparse detail on planning. Does not have access to the necessary resources or expertise. Potential risks not adequately considered.

Pre-Submission Checklist: Essential Documents and Content

Use this checklist to ensure your application is complete and addresses all mandatory requirements before the deadline.

Required Document/ Content	Status	Notes
Application Form (All Sections Completed)	☐	All word limits adhered to.
Project Completion Date	☐	Project period lies within the 6 - 12-month window (concluding no later than February 2027).
SME Partner Eligibility	☐	SME is in the Care Economy and meets the size requirement.
SME Letter of Support	☐	Quantifies the estimated value of all financial/in-kind contributions.
Budget Proforma Document	☐	Full, itemised breakdown completed and aligns with the budget summary.
Project Team CVs	☐	CVs for each research team member are included.
Applied Impact	☐	Problem was clearly co-designed with the SME and linked to TAFE expertise.
Implementation Plan	☐	Clear path from pilot integration into SME's SOPs to sector scale.
Risk Management	☐	Risks identified and concrete mitigation strategies described.
Ethics Status	☐	Status (e.g., submitted, approved, exempt) and rationale provided.

Contact the ARI Project Team

If you are currently preparing your application using this guide and need further assistance with clarifying the SME partnership requirements, understanding the Early-Career TAFE researcher criteria, or any other aspect of the application, please contact:

The Applied Research and Innovation Project Team

E: appliedresearch@holmesglen.edu.au

T: + 61 3 9564 1886

[www.holmesglen.edu.au/about-us/research/
centre-for-applied-research-and-innovation/
Applied-Research-and-Innovation-Project](http://www.holmesglen.edu.au/about-us/research/centre-for-applied-research-and-innovation/Applied-Research-and-Innovation-Project)



Holmesglen Institute

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In the spirit of reconciliation, Holmesglen recognises and celebrates the Traditional Owners of the lands throughout Victoria and beyond on which we educate and train. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and acknowledge our emerging leaders.