Applied Research and Innovation (ARI) Project: Round 3 Application Guidelines

Holmesglen Institute
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This guide is designed for Victorian TAFE professionals across both Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) who are applying for the Applied Research and Innovation (ARI) Project Grant, Round 3.

It serves as a comprehensive roadmap, consolidating strategic objectives with practical application requirements to ensure your proposal aligns with the ARI project standards for rapid innovation in the Care Economy.

Contents

Vision

To position TAFE as a cornerstone of the applied research and innovation ecosystem, driving impactful change and progress across the Care Economy. By fostering a supportive and collaborative environment.

We aim to:

- **Empower TAFE Researchers: Enable partnership with TAFE Network providers, educational institutions, industry, and community organisations.**

- **Enhance Quality & Diversity: Address real-world challenges and opportunities within the Care Economy through applied research.**

- **Deliver Tangible Innovation: Advance industry practices, enrich community outcomes, and elevate teaching and learning programs across the VET sector.**

Mission

To provide the structural support and resources necessary to establish a robust applied research program that drives innovation within the Care Economy.

We will:

- **Develop and sustain an enabling research infrastructure that fosters cross-sector collaboration.**

- **Build applied research capability, equipping researchers with the tools and skills needed to address emerging challenges.**

- **Support the development of impactful, evidence-based solutions to strengthen industry practices and educational experiences.**

- **Promote a culture of innovation as an integral component of the VET sector's contributions to the economy.**

Why Round 3 is Different?

Unlike previous rounds focused on broad-scale research, Round 3 is a targeted initiative for **rapid innovation** through agile, high-impact projects. It prioritises immediate practical application and requires direct collaboration with **Small-to-Medium Enterprises (SMEs)** to solve pressing challenges within the Victorian training ecosystem.

> **❗ ELIGIBILITY NOTE: If you were a recipient of Round 1 or 2 ARI grants, you are ineligible to apply for Round 3 to ensure a wide distribution of opportunity.**

Key Dates and Funding:

Round Opens:	Monday, 16 February 2026
Applications Close:	Monday, 16 March 2026, 5pm (COB)
Project Window:	6-month window for delivery
Final Report Due:	Tuesday, 1 December 2026
Grant Amount:	$50,000

Round 3 Focus Areas and Requirements

Proposals must focus on practical testing, evaluation, or refinement of existing or emerging initiatives rather than exploratory research. Success requires addressing all of the following:

Core Focus Areas:

1. **Rapid Innovation:** Fast-tracked projects such as pilot studies (e.g., Testing a virtual reality module in a single classroom) or formative evaluations (e.g., real-time feedback on a clinical placement program).
2. **SME Partnership:** Active involvement in design, delivery, and evaluation—not just as advisors.
3. **Network Alignment:** Strengthening pathways between VET and Higher Education (HE).
4. **Care Economy Focus:** Alignment with TAFE Victoria Care Economy priorities and training offerings.

In Scope: Project Definitions and Examples

To ensure alignment with Round 3 objectives, projects must focus on applied research with tangible outcomes. The following project types are encouraged:

1. **Pilot Study:** A small-scale, time-limited project designed to test feasibility, delivery, or effectiveness prior to broader implementation.
   Example: Testing a specific virtual reality learning module in a single classroom to assess student engagement before a wider roll-out.
2. **Formative Evaluation:** A structured assessment conducted during the delivery of a teaching or learning initiative to improve its effectiveness.
   Example: Collecting and analysing real-time feedback from industry partners on the usability of a new clinical placement logbook.
3. **Policy Evaluation:** A focused assessment of an organisational or sector policy to determine its impact on education or workforce outcomes.
   Example: Evaluating a workplace-based assessment policy to determine if it improves student readiness for the aged care workforce.

   Note: Policy evaluations must lead to refined teaching or learning outcomes that benefit the TAFE network.
4. **Evaluative Report:** A formal, evidence-based report assessing the outcomes of an educational programme, policy, or teaching practice, providing clear recommendations for improvement or scale-up.

Out of scope:

To ensure the **$50,000 investment** yields immediate, practical results, Round 3 funding excludes purely academic or theoretical inquiry. **The following are not eligible:**

- **Exploratory Research:** Research intended to define an unclear problem. Applicants must already have a well-defined challenge (via SME co-design) and be ready to test a solution.
- **Longitudinal Studies:** Research tracking subjects over years. All outcomes must be realised within the 6-month delivery window.
- **Theory Building:** Development of abstract frameworks lacking a tangible product, process, or service for the SME partner.

> ⓘ **Key Requirement:** Proposals must focus on "implementation-ready" projects that deliver actionable outcomes for the Care Economy.

Partnering with the Care Economy

Small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) across the Australian Care Economy—including aged care, disability, early childhood, and community services—frequently face operational bottlenecks and workforce pressures. These seed grants act as a catalyst for change by aiming to:

- **Test Practical Solutions:** Develop and pilot immediate, small-scale interventions to improve care quality or business efficiency.

- **Provide Proof-of-Concept:** Create foundational outcomes that demonstrate the potential for larger-scale application across the care sector.

- **Inform Training Design:** Use real-world industry insights to help shape Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education curriculum, ensuring training stays relevant to industry needs.

Care Economy Small-to-Medium Enterprise (SME) Eligibility
E.g., Allied Health; Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); Social & Community Services.

Strategic Priorities

Robust Small-to-Medium Enterprise (SME) Partnerships.	TAFE Network Alignment	Pathways Integration: Bridging the gap between VET and Higher Education

Collaboration Roadmap

Step 1: Problem Identification

TAFE Researcher Action: Facilitate a session to identify a single, clear, actionable problem.
SME Partner Action: Articulate the problem in operational terms, focusing on business impact.

Step 2: Solution Design

TAFE Researcher Action: Propose a methodology leading to a practical solution within the timeline.
SME Partner Action: Confirm the outcome will genuinely solve the problem and is feasible.

Step 3: Resource Commitment

TAFE Researcher Action: Finalise budget and outline value of SME's contribution.
SME Partner Action: Commit staff time, data/site access, or cash via Letter of Support

Small-to-Medium Enterprise (SME) Letter of Support

All applications must include a formal Letter of Support from the small-to-medium enterprise (SME) partner. 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.

- **Resource Commitment and Contributions:** Explicitly states the Total Estimated Monetary Value in AUD of all contributions. Must include a clear, itemised breakdown specifying the Type of Contribution (In-Kind or Financial), a Description of the Resource Provided, and the Estimated Monetary Value (AUD) for each item.

- **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).

Example SME Letter of Support Template:

This draft is provided as an example of required content. The final letter must be on the SME's official letterhead and signed by a Senior Representative.

To: The Applied Research and Innovation (ARI) Project Grant Committee Subject: Support for Project: [Project Title]

Commitment and Alignment: We confirm that [SME Name] has co-designed this proposal with [TAFE Name]. We have identified the following operational challenge: [Insert clear problem statement]. As the primary beneficiary, we confirm this research addresses a core business impact.

Resource Commitment: We commit the following resources, with a total estimated monetary value of $[Total AUD Value]:
- In-Kind: [e.g., Staff time for co-design and pilot testing] — Value: $[Value]
- In-Kind: [e.g., Access to facilities, data systems, or site access] — Value: $[Value]

Implementation & IP: We commit to hosting the research, piloting the solution, and formally embedding the validated solution into our Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). We acknowledge and agree to the non-exclusive, royalty-free IP arrangement for our internal operations and TAFE teaching purposes.

Sincerely, [Name & Signature of Senior SME Representative] [Title] | [ABN]

Application 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 TAFE is the lead applicant and that the project clearly addresses a challenge within the Care Economy.

- **Mandatory Partnership:** Confirmation of a strong Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) partnership.

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 criteria (40%).

- **Capacity and Resources:** The review specifically assesses if the project plan clearly details risk management and SME contributions. It also evaluates how the project supports the leadership and research capacity development of the TAFE Lead and the broader project team.

- **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.

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.

See Assessment Criteria and Marking Rubricon matrix on following page.

Phase 3: Notification of Outcome

All applicants will be notified of their outcome in writing once the RPAC has finalised its recommendations.

- **Successful Applicants:** Will receive an official Letter of Offer outlining the funding conditions and next steps for project commencement.

- **Unsuccessful Applicants:** Will receive formal notification of the decision.

❗ **Commitment to Feedback:** To support the ongoing development of research capacity within the TAFE network, both successful and unsuccessful applicants will receive written feedback. This will highlight the proposal's strengths and identify specific areas for development to assist with future applications.

Assessment Criteria and Marking Rubric

Applications are scored out of a total of 100 points.
Any application scoring 50 points or below will not be recommended for funding.

Assessment Criterion and Weighting	Comprehensive Key Focus
Project Impact (40%)	**Strategic Impact and SME Mandate:** Proposals must provide an actionable, real-world solution for the SME partner. High-scoring applications will demonstrate clear scalability across the broader TAFE network and strong alignment with bridging VET and HE pathways, specifically within the Care Economy.
Team Capability (25%)	**Workforce Development:** Evaluation of the team's expertise to deliver results within a strict 6-month window. This includes a clear plan for supporting the lead researcher's professional development and evidence of the ability to effectively manage a high-stakes SME partnership.
Research Proposal (20%)	**Quality and Feasibility:** A rigorous, sound methodology that is realistic for a 6-month project. The $50,000 budget must be fully justified, showing value for money and a clear link between activities and costs, supported by realistic risk management.
Evidence of Need (15%)	**SME Validation:** The proposal must move beyond generalisations. The problem must be clearly defined and explicitly validated by the SME partner as a genuine, pressing operational challenge they currently face.

Score Band	91–100	86–90	76–85	51–75	0–50
Rating and Recommendation Summary	**Outstanding (Unconditional):** Exceptional quality across all criteria; serves as a best-practice model for the TAFE Network.	**Excellent (Strongly Support):** High-quality proposal with robust industry alignment and effective partnership design.	**Very Good (Conditionally Support):** A sound, compelling project. Recommended for funding pending minor refinements to sharpen delivery.	**Good (Developmental):** Shows a solid foundational idea. Not recommended for funding this round; requires further detail on methodology or SME integration.	**Foundational (Early-Stage):** Identifies a meaningful area of interest but lacks structure. Not recommended; encouraged for future development.

Example Project Plan

Applied research in the Victorian TAFE sector is defined by its practical, industry-linked nature. **This is an example only.**

Month 1: Inception Phase
Activity: Finalise SME agreements and secure ethics approval.

Month 2: Discovery Phase
Activity: Baseline data collection and co-design tools with SME.

Month 3 - 4: Implementation Phase
Activity: Run pilot study and conduct formative evaluations.

Month 5: Analysis and Refinement
Activity: Synthesise findings and refine teaching materials or policy.

Month 6: Finalisation
**Activity:** Final evaluative report and knowledge sharing.

Pre-Submission Checklist

- Completed Application Form (respecting word limits).

- Evidence of SME Partnership (on official letterhead with ABN).

- Detailed 6-Month Project Plan.

- Budget Proposal for the $50,000 grant.

- Project Team CVs (relevant research and industry experience).

- Ethics Status and rationale provided.
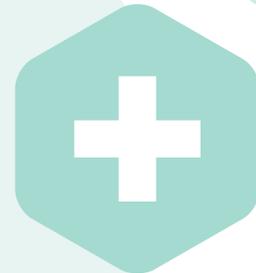
Research Ethics and Compliance
Ethics Tips for Applicants
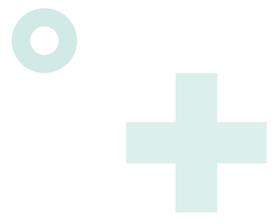
Why Ethics Matters in Applied Research
Ethics approval ensures research involving people is conducted responsibly, protecting participants and meeting national standards. It is mandatory for projects involving human participants or their data, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations. 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.

For more details, contact the Applied Research Project Team

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.)

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 or any other aspect of the application, please contact:

The Applied Research and Innovation Project Team
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T: + 61 3 9564 1886

Holmesglen Institute

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holmesglen.edu.au

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.