Australian Government
Department of Education

Needs-based Funding and Outreach Funding Program - Reporting

Questions from information session on 5 May 2026

Can 2026 Needs-based Funding (NBF) funds be spent across multiple years or rolled over, and how should this be reported?

As funding is provided annually, providers should prioritise using each year's allocated funding for activities that support students enrolled in that year rather than planning to spread NBF funding across future years.

If funds are not fully spent, they can be carried over, but providers must clearly report this. Reporting must include the amount unspent, reasons for the underspend, and how and when the funding will be used. This should be documented in the relevant NBF and Outreach reporting templates and/or the Letter of Assurance.

The department will work with providers to support any rollovers, but providers are expected to minimise carryovers and prioritise timely use of funds.

How will accountability be ensured if funding for Indigenous students is not reported separately?

Accountability is maintained through the NBF and Outreach reporting where providers are required to outline all expenditure, activities and programs that support First Nations students, as well as other priority cohorts. Providers are encouraged to engage with their Indigenous governance bodies to ensure that supports for First Nations students are aligned across the institution.

Can the definition of low socioeconomic status (low SES) for NBF be applied flexibly (e.g. using self-identification or indicators such as receipt of means-tested government benefits)?

For NBF funding purposes, low SES is defined as students first address being in the lowest quartile (25%) of the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Education and Occupation.

However, the delivery of supports is not designed to be exclusionary and there is no mandatory verification method for supports provided to low SES students. Other indicators, such as self-identification, students from regional and remote areas or students receiving government benefits, may be appropriate alternative methods to guide the delivery of supports and services. Similarly, providers may target their programs or use terminology that students can relate to rather than defining them as low SES supports.

Providers must document and be able to articulate their chosen approach recognising there may be differences between providers and programs allowing for flexibility. Regardless of the programs delivered and identification method used by providers, only the formal definition is used to determine funding amounts.

For 2026 transition arrangements, can NBF-funded outreach target regional or remote students, even if the provider is not a designated regional campus?

Providers may use funding provided for the Outreach program for pre-access and outreach initiatives, including those aimed at regional and remote students, regardless of the provider's regional classification.

Where a provider has a funding shortfall between planned outreach activities and the total funding provided by the Outreach program, the provider may use a portion of their NBF funding for the continuation of existing outreach efforts. The total NBF funding used for these activities must not exceed 2025 outreach expenditure (less any 2026 Outreach program allocation). In this circumstance, the program requirements for the Outreach program continue to apply, which includes activities aimed at students from low-SES backgrounds, First Nations students and those from regional and remote areas.

Does “access” refer specifically to enrolled students?

“Access” generally refers to the pre-entry, application, and admission stage of the student lifecycle. In cases where prospective students have decided to enrol but have not completed the process, these activities may fall under either outreach/pre-access or NBF, depending on the context.

Providers should use judgement in determining the most appropriate classification based on engagement and what best supports the student’s transition into higher education. It may also be appropriate that a combination of NBF and Outreach is used deliver these programs, depending on the activity.

Are Fee-Free Uni-Ready (FFUR) courses considered pre-access activities, and can NBF be used to support students in these programs (e.g. scholarships)?

NBF Equity cannot be used for scholarships or other direct support for students enrolled in Fee-Free Uni-Ready (FFUR), enabling or pathway programs. Students enrolled in FFUR courses are not eligible for the equity components of NBF as these are non-award courses and are funded at a level that recognises the supports required for these students. Additionally, FFUR courses are not considered an eligible activity for the purpose of the Outreach program.

FFUR enrolments at eligible regional campuses may attract the regional component of NBF. This recognises the higher costs associated with delivery at regional locations and applies to FFUR enrolments.
There may be incidental benefits for FFUR students where NBF activities, primarily designed to support the NBF identified cohorts, have university wide benefits.

Can NBF be used to offset general administrative or departmental costs (for example equity or First Nations departments)?

NBF can support staffing and delivery costs for equity and First Nations programs, where these are clearly linked to specific services or initiatives for priority students. However, it should not be used to offset general departmental operating costs. Funding should focus on delivery or expansion of targeted programs and supports designed for the primary benefit of this cohort, rather than subsidising business as usual activities.

Can operating and on-costs (e.g. employment costs) be included in NBF?

The 2026 NBF legislative instrument does not explicitly exclude on-costs. However, it is noted that the purpose of NBF is to fund supports for students from low SES backgrounds and First Nations students to participate, remain, and succeed in higher education, as well as supporting regional campuses.

University-wide on-costs would typically be excluded from NBF. However, operating and on-costs, including staffing and employment-related expenses, where these are directly attributable to the delivery of eligible programs and supports for NBF and/or Outreach cohorts, may meet the requirements of the programs.

Providers are urged to consider whether attributing NBF or Outreach program funding in this way is the best way to support students to successfully undertake higher education studies.

Do staffing and people costs include evaluation staff?

Staffing costs may include staff undertaking evaluation activities where these directly relate to funded programs and eligible student cohorts. In 2026, this is expected to be limited to targeted or small-scale evaluations, noting this is the first year of the program.

Standalone or academic research activities are not eligible under NBF or Outreach.

Who is authorised to sign the declaration and the Letter of Assurance for NBF reporting?

Both the declaration and the Letter of Assurance must be signed by a certifying officer, who is responsible for confirming the accuracy and completeness of the report and compliance with all relevant legislation, guidelines, and grant conditions.

The certifying officer must be an authorised representative or delegate of the university. This may include:

- Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Director of Operations, or Business Manager; or
- Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, or Executive Director.

The NBF Guidelines do not specify who must sign the Letter of Assurance, but the 2026 Handbook requires a certifying officer’s details. For the regional component, it should be signed by the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) or an authorised delegate with the appropriate authority.

Further information on reporting fields:

Column K: The reporting is structured with one line per program or activity, including the key outcomes, indicators, and lessons learnt. If a program has multiple outcomes, these should be captured together within the same line rather than repeated across multiple entries. Any additional details or supporting information can be included in Column O.

Column J: Column J is a mandatory field in NBF reporting and is intended to improve transparency of funding sources and reduce follow-up queries from the department. While previously optional, it is now required to demonstrate full program costs. Contributions from other funding sources are permitted, provided the NBF and Outreach expenditure is clearly identifiable, not duplicated and appropriately reported.

Capturing this upfront helps identify co-funding arrangements and support more accurate reporting.

Only financial contributions from other funding sources should be reported in Column J. If in-kind contributions are used to deliver an activity, these should be described in Column O, with additional context provided as needed. What providers include in the total column J will vary by provider. Noting that it might be difficult to determine percentage of overheads, HR costs and flow on costs, providers are only expected to include the known broader program costs beyond NBF or the Outreach Funding Program (the Outreach program).

Column L and M: “Other participants” refers to individuals who are not part of the target equity cohort but still participate in or benefit from the activity. This reflects an inclusive approach, where activities are primarily designed for the target cohort but allow broader participation while maintaining a clear focus on NBF and Outreach objectives.