

**CAPE HIGHER EDUCATION CONSORTIUM (CHEC) /
WESTERN CAPE GOVERNMENT (WCG)
JOINT TASK TEAM (JTT)**

CALL FOR RESEARCH PROPOSALS

2026/2027

1. BACKGROUND TO THIS CALL

The Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) is a strategic partnership between the four public universities of the Western Cape — the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Stellenbosch University (SU), and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). The partnership's founding purpose is to transform the Western Cape into a Learning Region: an ecosystem in which knowledge production, institutional collaboration, and applied research drive inclusive social and economic development. The CHEC annual research grant is the partnership's primary instrument for advancing this mission. The research call for the 2026 financial year, from 1 April 2026 to 31 March 2027, includes two topics.

2. THE TWO THEMATIC AREAS

2.1. Thematic Area One: Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology-enhanced approaches to addressing complex socio-economic challenges in the Western Cape

The Western Cape Government is interested in understanding the value of artificial intelligence (AI) and related digital technologies across its public sector institutions - in service delivery, policy analysis, infrastructure management, health, and education. However, while the potential of AI to improve government performance is frequently asserted, rigorous independent evidence on whether, how, and under what conditions AI produces sustained public-sector gains in South African contexts remains limited.

Critically, existing research shows that AI does not automatically generate productivity improvements. The 2026 call, therefore, focuses on AI as a methodological instrument that must be rigorously evaluated within well-defined socioeconomic domains and in relation to the complex, adaptive social systems within which it operates and reshapes over time.

Two critical questions are posed under this theme.

- Under what conditions, and through which mechanisms, do AI-driven and automated digital technologies produce measurable, equitable, and sustainable improvements in public-sector service delivery outcomes in the Western Cape?
- What institutional, regulatory, ethical, and collaborative conditions must be established for AI applications in Western Cape public institutions to be

responsible, accountable, and aligned with the constitutional values of equity and human dignity?

Applicants may address one or both above questions; proposals addressing both must demonstrate a clear and credible methodological bridge between them.

The WCG has indicated the following areas as its most critical development priorities:

- Youth Employment and Economic Inclusion
- Education, Literacy and Early Childhood Development
- Public Infrastructure, Urban Planning and Environmental Management
- Health Services and Social Care
- Responsible AI Governance in the Public Sector.

2.2. Thematic Area Two: Post-school education, alternative pathways and articulation for skills development

Given recently published statistics on the number of applications for student enrolment at the universities in South Africa, including those at the four public universities in the Western Cape province, along with reports on the number of student placements available at these institutions, greater attention needs to be given to alternative learning pathways for young people. While key national legislation since the promulgation of the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 speaks to a single system (with three sub-frameworks) and to issues such as Credit Articulation and Transfer (CAT), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), the implementation of alternative learning pathways and articulation has been limited.

The WCG is interested in better understanding the factors underlying the success stories of non-traditional learning pathways articulation.

The following questions are posed for researchers:

- What principles can be drawn from successful examples of institutional, regional or partnership models to address constraints and strengthen alternative post-school learning pathways in the Western Cape within the current national frameworks?
- What are the practical implications of these principles for all partners in our future endeavours to ensure that young people find and engage in alternative learning pathways for skills development, accreditation and employment?

3. PROPOSALS – APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

3.1. Minimum requirements in proposals

All proposals must:

- Be submitted on the template provided in Appendix 1.
- Include information about both the main researchers and the WCG partner.

- Include a description of research approaches, activities and methods.
- Explain the way(s) in which the project and its outcomes respond to the research objectives.
- Provide a work plan that aligns with project objectives. The work plan must take into account the deadlines for project deliverables and the final reports.

3.2. Research budget

This call is intended to attract proposals up to a total amount of R 150,000 per project.

The proposed budget needs to be justified in terms of project activities and outcomes / outputs. The costs of salaries, equipment and travel beyond the Western Cape cannot be funded.

It is expected that the funds will be used for work completed within the university by staff or students under the supervision of staff, rather than outsourcing the research activities to external third parties.

Any additional funding received and / or expected from other sources (e.g. the NRF) must be fully declared in the application.

3.3. Evaluation of proposals

A two-stage process will be followed in the evaluation and selection of proposals for this award.

Institutional researchers interested in applying for the CHEC / WCG funding need to submit a completed proposal (using the template) to the member of the Joint Task Team at their university for internal review by **Monday 4 May 2026**. The name and email address of the institutional representative is given below:

- UCT: Sonwabo Ngcelwane (sonwabo.ngcelwane@uct.ac.za)

Proposals selected in the first stage will then be considered by the JTT and selected members of the Community of Experts (COE), comprising thought leaders and experts from government, academia, and industry, will assess proposals.

The following two criteria will be foregrounded in evaluating the proposals:

- Proposals must exhibit the capability to be applied in real-world scenarios.
- Proposals incorporating research partners from business and industry as well as the WCG will be preferred. Where necessary, requests to the Joint Task Team to assist with facilitating connections between university and WCG Departments and staff should be sent to debbie@chec.ac.za as soon as possible.

See Appendix 2 for all the questions that will be considered during the evaluation process.

The JTT reserves the right to engage with researchers and, where necessary, discuss the modification of the costing of particular aspects of the work.

4. REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

The funding is for a period of a year. A progress report will be required by the end of November 2026 and a project report is required at the end of May 2027. Both reports should be submitted to the institutional representatives. Note that the reports should be accessible to both academic and non-academic audiences. Guidelines for these reports are attached in Appendix 3 and Appendix 4.

In the unlikely event that no final report is received, the researchers will be expected to repay the monies allocated.

See below:

Appendix 1: Application template

Appendix 2: Questions to guide the evaluation process

Appendix 3: Guidelines for progress reports

Appendix 4: Guidelines for the final project report

Appendix 1

Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) / Western Cape Government (WCG)
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JOINT RESEARCH PROGRAMME 2025/2026

Project Funding Application

1. Project title

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2. Main Researcher's Details

Surname		Initials		Title	
University					
Faculty		Dept. / Unit			
E-mail		Tel (office)			
		Mobile			

3. Additional University Researcher's Details

Surname		Initials		Title	
University					
Faculty		Dept. / Unit			
E-mail		Tel (office)			
		Mobile			

4. Main Provincial Partner's Details

Surname		Initials		Title	
Department					
E-mail		Telephone			

5. Provide details of your proposed research project

<p><i>Summarise your collective qualifications and experience – explain how these are relevant to the project.</i></p>	
<p><i>Describe how the project responds to the research call</i></p>	
<p><i>Research design and methods</i></p>	
<p><i>Envisaged outputs and outcomes</i></p>	

<p>List project partners and describe their role(s) in the project</p>	<p>(i) Partners</p> <p>(ii) Western Cape Government Partners</p> <p>(iii) Industry / business Partners</p>
<p>Time-frame and project work plan</p>	

6. Budget: requests

<p>Kindly adhere to below description of budget line items</p>		
<p>Each and every budget ITEM should be motivated in such a way that it justifies the amount/s requested.</p>		
<p>Budget items must be fully described and aligned with the project work-plan provided in Section 3 above.</p>		
	<p>Description of budget line item</p>	<p>Amount</p>
<p>a.</p>		
<p>b.</p>		
<p>c.</p>		
<p>d.</p>		
<p>e.</p>		
<p>f.</p>		
<p>TOTAL</p>		

7. Other sources of funding received / expected

Please list other sources of funding you have received and expect to receive for this project.

Please complete this table		
	Other sources of funding received for this project	Amount
a.		
b.		
c.		
d.		
e.		
f.		
TOTAL		

Appendix 2

ADJUDICATION OF RESEARCH PROPOSALS

WCG - CHEC Projects

Key questions to be addressed when evaluating and selecting proposals:

1. **Inclusion of a diverse and useful set of representatives:** Does the proposal demonstrate existing relationships with business and industry? Does it include research partners in the WCG?
2. **Responsiveness to the call's priorities:** Will the study address the sectors and themes identified in the call?
3. **Research Methodology / Methods / Activities:** Do the methods align with sound research practice? Are they also aligned with the research call question / objectives?
4. **Envisaged outputs and outcomes:** Will the envisaged outputs and outcomes speak to the needs of the different stakeholders, e.g. will the outputs and outcomes result in recommendations for the WCG, CHEC, universities and other sectors in the development of a regional innovation system?
5. **Time-frame and workplan:** Is the work plan realistic - and will it result in the desired outcomes?
6. **Budget:** Are budget items clearly motivated? Are there any inappropriate budget items (such as funding for augmenting salaries covered by the core establishment of the university)?

Appendix 3

Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) / Western Cape Government (WCG)

Guidelines for Progress Reports

It is requested that the following information be provided in the **progress report** of approximately 5 - 8 pages. It is important that this report be accessible to a wide audience, including academics, government officials, and practitioners.

1. COVER PAGE

Researcher's name, department / unit, faculty, university, contact addresses and phone numbers.

WCG partner's name and position, contact addresses and phone numbers.

Title of project.

2. ABSTRACT

In addition to a summary of the key aspects of the project, the abstract should highlight the value of the project to knowledge generation in universities and its linkages to the priorities of the WCG.

3. INTRODUCTION AND AIMS / QUESTIONS

Reference to the objectives and outcomes specified in the funding proposal should be included in this section.

4. COMPLETED ACTIVITIES

A short summary of the completed activities should be provided.

5. CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Briefly refer to any challenges experienced and outline the solutions to these.

6. BUDGET

Please reflect the actual spend to date against the budget included in the original proposal.

Appendix 4

Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) / Western Cape Government (WCG)

Guidelines for Final Project Reports

It is requested that the following information be provided in the **final report** of approximately 8 – 10 pages. It is important that this report be accessible to a wide audience, including academics, government officials, and practitioners.

1. COVER PAGE

Researcher's name, department / unit, faculty, university, contact addresses and phone numbers.

WCG partner's name and position, contact addresses and phone numbers.

Title of project.

2. ABSTRACT

In addition to a summary of the key aspects of the project, the abstract should highlight the value of the project to knowledge generation in universities and its linkages to the priorities of the WCG.

3. INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT AIMS / QUESTIONS

Reference to the objectives and outcomes specified in the funding proposal should be included in this section.

4. RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

A short summary of the approach and methods used should be included, but detailed descriptions of highly technical processes may be omitted.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOLLOW-UP ACTION

This is the most critical aspect of the report in that it needs to synthesise the findings, draw conclusions and suggest follow-up actions, e.g. for further research, policy development and implementation.

6. BUDGET

Please reflect the actual spend against the budget included in the original proposal.