Student-led Open Competition Guidance for Students 2021/22 v1

SCOTTISH GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE (SGSSS)
STUDENT-LED OPEN COMPETITION 2021/22
APPLICANT GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS

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Please note, there are two primary deadlines that applicants need to be aware of:
• Thursday, 9 December 2021 at 5pm: this is the deadline for Stage 1 Applications.
• Wednesday, 9 February 2022 at 5pm: this is the deadline for Stage 2 Applications (shortlisted candidates only).

All applications must be submitted via the SGSSS online application platform, SGSSS Apply.
For the full Student-led Open Competition timeline, please click here.
1. Overview

This document will provide the application guidance required to submit a Student-led Open Competition application and should be read in full, prior to submitting an application.

The studentship awards made through the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science Doctoral Training Partnership (SGSSS-DTP) Student-led Open Competition are co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and partner universities (institutions) and are governed by the ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide.

The SGSSS is not a University, but rather a partnership of 16 institutions in Scotland, of which 12 are accredited to receive ESRC funding across 15 pathways. A pathway is analogous to a subject area/discipline. Not all 12 institutions are accredited for all 15 pathways. A comprehensive list of the institutions and the pathways in which they are accredited can be found on the SGSSS website here.

Each pathway has a designated representative at each institution within the pathway (Pathway Representative - Rep). Before applying to the Student-led Open Competition we ask that you contact the relevant Pathway Rep, as well as your potential PhD supervisor(s). You should discuss your research proposal with them and inform them that you wish to apply for an ESRC studentship via SGSSS. Please note, you must have engaged with your proposed supervisor(s) before applying to the Open Competition. Confirmation of this is required at application stage.

You may apply for an ESRC studentship through only one of the 12 SGSSS institutions however you may apply to multiple pathways within that one institution (up to a maximum of 5 pathways). For example, you may apply to the Education pathway at Aberdeen and the Human Geography, Environment and Urban Planning pathway at Aberdeen; but not the Education pathway at Aberdeen and the Human Geography, Environment and Urban Planning pathway at Dundee. If you apply to more than one pathway within an institution then you must complete a separate application for each pathway.

1.1 Before Applying

Before applying, even if you have the support and approval of a supervisor, we would ask you to consult the eligibility criteria in order to ensure that you are eligible to receive funding from the ESRC. Please see section 1.2 below for full details.

Although you can apply for an ESRC-funded studentship before securing an offer from the institution of your choice, you must have secured an unconditional offer by the time the studentship will start in October 2022 (some institutions start their academic year in September). Please note, SGSSS play no role in institutional admissions process and each institution will have varying application processes, including when you need to secure your institutional offer. In some cases, you will have to have secured a conditional offer prior to applying for an ESRC award, whereas in other institutions you can secure an offer once you have been awarded a funded studentship. It is your responsibility to find out what the process is within your selected institution.

1.2 Eligibility

As per guidance published by UKRI in 2020, a minimum of 70% of all studentships awarded by SGSSS will be made to home students, while a maximum of 30% of all studentships awarded can be made to international students. Please note, it is not a requirement for 30% of studentships to be awarded to international students.

1 See here for our member institutions.
international students, as the quality of applications will always remain the primary assessment criterion during the Competition.

**Residential Criteria**

To be classed as a home student, applicants must meet the following criteria:

- Be a UK national (meeting residency requirements), or
- Have settled status, or
- Have pre-settled status (meeting residency requirements), or
- Have indefinite leave to remain or enter.

If you do not meet the criteria above, you will be classed as an international student.

To establish if you would be classed as a home student, please see pages 4 and 5 of the UKRI eligibility guidance [here](#).

Before applying, international students should make sure to read section 1.8 (Funding Arrangements) closely.

### 1.3 Length of Award

The length of award depends on the extent to which you meet core methods training requirements set out by ESRC. If you are applying for a +3 studentship, you must have already met the minimum ESRC training requirements. If not then you may choose to apply for a 1+3 award instead. Please see [here](#) for guidance in determining which is the appropriate length of award for you. Please also discuss this with your supervisor(s) and your Pathway Rep before applying.

Please note, SGSSS will also conduct an audit of the training needs of all final applicants – this means in some circumstances we may determine a fractional award, such as a 3.25² or a 3.5³, is required where we identify that you have some, but not all, of the core methods training required by ESRC. In some rare cases we may decide an applicant who holds a Master’s degree that is too far removed from the social sciences and/or the subject area of the research proposal, is required to undertake another Master’s programme to ensure the ESRC training requirements are met (as this is a condition of funding).

If a first year student (or part-time equivalent) is self-funding their PhD, or they are in receipt of financial support not in excess of an ESRC award⁴, they can apply for ESRC funding. If successful, the study already undertaken will not be considered and the studentship will start over. Dependent on the applicant’s training requirements, SGSSS may even add additional time (see above).

Part-time awards are permitted and the funding and award lengths are pro-rated accordingly, in accordance with the [ESRC funding guidance](#).

### 1.4 Master’s Programmes

Students who are required to undertake a 1+3 award where their selected institution does not offer an [ESRC approved Master’s programme](#) on the desired pathway, are required to undertake their Master’s in another accredited institution (within the SGSSS-DTP) before transferring to their ‘home’ institution for the PhD programme. If this applies to you, then you must upload a [SGSSS Masters Arrangement Form](#), completed in conjunction with the relevant [SGSSS Deans of Graduate Studies](#).

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² Three years and three months.
³ Three years and six months.
⁴ See page 10 and 11 of the [ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide](#) for details on financial support not in excess of an ESRC award, and/or if you have undertaken one year (or less) of a PhD.
Network representative at the institution where the Master’s will be undertaken. Students should work with their Pathway Rep and supervisor(s) to facilitate the completion of the Masters Arrangement Form.

1.5 Supervision

You must have support from a first supervisor to be eligible to apply to this competition.

Students must be the lead authors of submitted proposals with guidance provided by the proposed supervisory team. Proposals should not be submitted that have been led or written by a supervisor.

First supervisors must be located at the institution to which you are applying; however, a second supervisor/joint supervisor may be attached to the project from any of the 16 partner institutions that form the SGSSS, either with or without pathway accreditation. If you are proposing a jointly supervised project between two institutions, both supervisors (see section 4) should jointly write the Supervisor Statement of Support. They should refer to the explicit benefits of the proposed cross-institutional arrangement. If you are interested in proposing such an arrangement please discuss this with the relevant Pathway Rep as soon as possible.

1.6 Interdisciplinary Proposals

The ESRC welcomes interdisciplinary studentships, as many of the most pressing research challenges are interdisciplinary in nature, both within the social sciences and other areas of research. For that reason, we ask you to indicate (within the relevant section of the application form) whether your proposed research is deemed interdisciplinary, or not. To meet the criteria for this label, the proposed research should include substantive interaction between relevant disciplines and incorporate training that is not constrained to one disciplinary approach. Please discuss this with your supervisor and Pathway Rep where relevant and for guidance if required. Please also specify which other research council Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) your proposed work aligns to and what additional training would be offered by this DTP. For guidance on the ESRC requirements for interdisciplinary awards, please see here (page 2).

1.7 Collaborative Partner Proposals

Should you wish to include a collaborative partner within your project, i.e. your research would be supported by a non-academic partner in the public, private or third sector, please include the details within the research proposal section of your application form. We ask that, in addition to the above, you detail if the collaborative partner will be making a financial or in-kind contribution towards the studentship as per the various SGSSS funding arrangements. Please liaise with your supervisor(s) should you require guidance on how to navigate such an agreement. Please note, a collaborative partner can be based abroad, however they cannot be an academic organisation.

1.8 Funding Arrangements

Home Students

For home students, the SGSSS-DTP funding operates within the standard ESRC studentship package:

1. Tuition Fees;
2. Maintenance stipend;
3. Research Training Support Grant (RTSG);
4. Overseas fieldwork support (where applicable to the student’s project).
The ESRC studentship packages for years 2022/23 onwards are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Funding Type</th>
<th>2022/23</th>
<th>2023/24</th>
<th>2024/25</th>
<th>2025/26</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stipend*</td>
<td>£15,890</td>
<td>£16,176</td>
<td>£16,467</td>
<td>£16,767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition Fees*</td>
<td>£4,581</td>
<td>£4,663</td>
<td>£4,747</td>
<td>£4,833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTSG</td>
<td>£750</td>
<td>£750</td>
<td>£750</td>
<td>£750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas Fieldwork (if applicable)</td>
<td>£450</td>
<td>£450</td>
<td>£450</td>
<td>£450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These are approximations based on annual increases of 1.8%.

Please Note: From 2019/20, each SGSSS studentship has and will be co-funded by the student’s home institution (SGSSS-DTP institutions) for a minimum of one-third (33.0%). This co-funding agreement is already in place and no action is required by students to facilitate this.

**International Students**

The funding arrangements for international students are the same as that of home students, i.e. you are eligible for the full ESRC studentship package and are not required to pay any additional international tuition fees (top up fees). This is because all of our partner institutions have agreed to waive the difference between home and international tuition fees.

Please Note: If you are applying to the University of Stirling, whilst fee waivers will be offered, this will be up to an internal institutional cap of 30%. Applicants are strongly advised to seek confirmation of the funding position from the University of Stirling directly by contacting the HEI Admin Lead at ias@stir.ac.uk.
2. Applications

2.1 Competition Stages and Timeline

There are four rigorous review stages during the Student-led Open Competition. You will be updated after each relevant review stage until you are either awarded a studentship or your application is unsuccessful. For the full Student-led Open Competition timeline, please click here.

1. HEI Review Stage (1 October 2021 to 15 February 2022)

This stage is when institutions shortlist Stage 1 applications, resulting in students being invited to submit a Stage 2 application. Each institution can nominate four applications per pathway for which it is eligible. Of the four applications, up to two may be international applicants.

2. Pathway Review Stage (16 February to 10 March 2022)

This stage is when pathways (made up of the relevant Pathway Reps from different institutions) shortlist Stage 2 applications. Each pathway can nominate six applications per accredited pathway. Of the six applications, up to two may be international applicants. Please note, the Economics pathway is able to nominate up to three international applicants as the ESRC are allowing a higher international allocation for this pathway, i.e. the cap is 50%, rather than 30%.

3. Hub Review Stage (11 March to 6 April 2022)

This stage is when our three Hubs (each Hub is made up of five relevant pathways) nominate 45 applications (15 per Hub) from the nominated applications at the Pathway Review Stage. Each Hub can nominate five international applicants out of their 15 nominations.

4. Global Review Stage (7 April to 13 May 2022)

This stage is when a final review panel consisting of Deans and members of the SGSSS Directorate meet to make the final award decisions. In 2021/22, approx. 34 applications, of the nominated 45 applications, will be funded. Of the 34 studentship awards, approx. 10 can be made to international applicants. On 13 May, the outcome of the competition will be announced to applicants.

Important dates to note are:

- **9 December 2021 at 5pm**
  Deadline for Stage 1 applications. Outcome of HEI Review Stage communicated on **31 January 2022**

- **9 February 2022 at 5pm**
  Deadline for Stage 2 applications. Outcome of Pathway Review Stage communicated on **10 March 2022**

- **6 April 2022**
  Outcome of Hub Review Stage communicated

- **13 May 2022**
  Outcome of Global Review Stage communicated and awards made

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5 See [here](#) for details of our three Hubs.
2.2 Overview of the Application Submission Process

Below is a high-level process for applicants submitting an application to the Student-led Open Competition.

Stage 1 Applications:

1. Register for SGSSS Apply as a “Prospective ESRC-Funded PhD student (SGSSS)” or “Current Non ESRC-Funded PhD Student (non SGSSS)”, depending on your individual circumstances.
2. Click here to access the SGSSS Student-led Open Competition program, or locate this on your Application Dashboard via SGSSS Apply.
3. Next, complete the “Student-led Open Competition Pre-Application Questions” section. This will let you and us know if you are eligible to apply and/or if you are a home or international student.
4. Next, complete the “Student-led Open Competition Institution” section. You can only apply to one institution, so when you select this it will become locked in.
5. Next, complete the “Student-Led Competition Applicant Information” section. This is where you will input some basic information about your research proposal, supervisory team and the studentship award you are looking to apply for, e.g. award length and if you want to study full or part-time etc.
6. Next, complete the “References” section by inputting the contact details for two referees. SGSSS will contact your referees automatically to request that they provide a reference for you. Please see section 3 below for full details on references, including how to manage your reference requests.
7. Lastly, upload your completed Application Form along with your transcripts (where available) and your CV (academic where applicable). Please note, all uploads must be in pdf format.

Stage 2 Applications:

1. Once the initial HEI Review Stage is complete, applicants will be notified if they have been shortlisted or not (by 5pm on 31 January 2022).
2. Shortlisted applicants will then be invited (31 January 2022) to upload a Supervisor Statement of Support and to make any final minor amendments to their applications before the deadline of 5pm on 9 February 2022.

Please note, there are two primary deadlines that applicants need to be aware of:

- Thursday, 9 December 2021 at 5pm: this is the deadline for Stage 1 Applications
- Wednesday, 9 February 2022 at 5pm: this is the deadline for Stage 2 Applications (shortlisted candidates only).

Late or incomplete applications, at either stage, will not be considered.

2.3 Stage 1 Application Process (further detail)

Stage 1 applications can be submitted at any point from the competition opening date, 1 October 2021, until the deadline, 5pm on 9 December 2021.

The SGSSS Apply application process can be saved and as such does not need to be completed in a single sitting. If you plan to apply to multiple pathways you must submit a new individual application for each pathway. Please note, there is a 5 application maximum and in addition, you can only apply to a single selected institution, i.e. you can submit up to 5 applications for 5 different pathways, however all applications must be for a single institution (and the pathways need to be accredited at that institution; see here for details on which pathways are accredited at each institution within SGSSS DTP).
To register on SGSSS Apply:

- Go to [SGSSS Apply](#) and click “Register” in the top right-hand corner of the screen, completing the details as prompted.
- Once registered you will be asked to “please update your eligibility profile”. Please select either “Prospective ESRC-Funded PhD Student (SGSSS)” or “Current Non ESRC-Funded PhD Student (non SGSSS)”, depending on your personal circumstances.
- You will then be asked to enter your “Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion” information. Please note, this information is kept private and is not considered by reviewers during the competition process.
- Next you will be directed to your ‘Application Dashboard’ where you should see the program, “SGSSS Student-led Open Competition”.

To submit application:

Once you have created your SGSSS Apply account and the competition has launched (1 October), you will be able to start a Stage 1 application. As part of this process, you will need to have the following details:

- Information regarding nationality, residency and visas;
- Institution and pathway(s) to which you are applying.

You will also be required to upload the following as part of your application submission, in PDF format only (Word documents will not be accepted).

1. Application Form (which includes a lay summary, section on preparedness and your research proposal).
2. CV (academic where applicable).
3. All relevant Undergraduate and Masters level degree transcripts (and translations, if not originally in English) – provisional transcripts are sufficient if you are yet to complete your degree.
4. Contact details for two references, both provided as part of your Stage 1 application. Please note, a reference template will automatically be sent to your referees for completion. For full details on references, including how to manage your references, please see section 3, below.
5. Details of any overseas fieldwork you propose to undertake during your research (advised within the Application Form).
6. Details of any difficult language training you propose to undertake during your research (advised within the Application Form).

### 2.4 Stage 2 Application Process (further detail)

If you have been shortlisted you will be invited to submit a Stage 2 application on 31 January 2022. From this date you will have until 5pm on Wednesday, 9 February to complete your Stage 2 application. All that is required at this stage is to upload your Supervisor Statement of Support and to make any final, minor amendments to your Stage 1 application.

1. Supervisor Statement of Support – this is a statement from your prospective first supervisor. If a cross-institutional supervision arrangement is being proposed then the statement should be jointly written and signed. Full details of what is required can be found within section 3 below.

After the deadline of 9 February 2022, SGSSS will work to select the best students who have applied to study within each pathway.

Unsuccessful candidates will be informed if they have not progressed to the next review stage of the competition at the end of the previous review stage. We expect decisions on who has been selected to receive studentships (and, if relevant, who is being held on a reserve list) to be communicated by Friday, 13 May 2022. If you have any queries regarding the above-described application process, please email team@sgsss.ac.uk.
3. References

Each applicant is required to provide the details of two referees during the Stage 1 application process. To do this, applicants need to click into the “References” section within the online application process via SGSSS Apply.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the purpose of references?
   We ask for references as this is an opportunity for an academic known to you to provide our reviewers with an overview of you as an individual, as well as how you perform academically (or within your workplace). In addition, a reference is a good way for reviewers to try to gauge if you are ready to undertake a PhD.

2. What is SGSSS asking within the reference template, which will be sent to my referees?
   “Please provide an assessment of the applicant’s preparedness to undertake and complete a PhD and to flourish as a result of PhD funding, bearing in mind their academic work and other life experiences.”

3. Who can provide my references?
   Where possible your references should include an academic familiar with your work (can be, but does not have to be, a member of your supervisory team). Both references can be from academics but you may include a work reference, especially if you have been out of academia for more than 5 years.

4. I am applying to more than one pathway, what do I need to do regarding my references?
   If you are applying to more than one pathway you must request two references for each application, regardless if they are the same referees. The reason for this is that the application system attaches a completed reference to the application associated with the request. Although this might seem awkward for your referee(s), the reference completion process is very straightforward (see next question for details).

5. What happens when I submit my referees’ details as part of my application via SGSSS Apply?
   Once you submit your two referees’ details (full name and email address) online via SGSSS Apply, the system will automatically send them an email invite asking that they complete and upload a reference template (Microsoft Word document provided). They then need to follow the link detailed within the email to create an SGSSS Apply “recommender” account (this takes a few minutes), at which point they can then complete and upload the reference template provided (must convert to pdf format first). Once completed and submitted online by your referee, the reference will be attached to your application automatically. You will receive an email confirming when this has been done. In addition, you will be able to see when your references has been returned via your application on SGSSS Apply. Please note, you will not be able to read your returned references, you will just be able to see when they have been returned.

6. When should I request my references?
   As you can request your references well before you submit your full application (please see question 7 below), we encourage you to submit both of your referees' details as soon as possible to allow them as much time as possible to respond. If you only request your references a week or so before the application deadline, this may not be enough time for your referees to respond, whereas if you do this a month before the deadline, you are giving yourself a higher chance that your references will come in by the deadline and your application can progress to the next stage.
7. I am concerned one or both of my referees might not respond to my reference request; what should I do?

As an automatic reference request will be issued to your referees via SGSSS Apply as soon as you submit their details online, it is imperative that you have sought their permission before you send them a reference request. Not only is this polite, it will reduce instances where your application is incomplete and thus unable to progress through the competition stages.

If you have sought permission from your referees and you are still worried one or both may not complete the reference template on time or may forget etc., you can manage your reference requests yourself via your application within SGSSS Apply. The system will allow you to send reminders to your referees as well as change who your referees are (by withdrawing your reference request and deleting it, before submitting a new reference request). **Please note, you can only manage your reference requests if you HAVE NOT fully submitted your application. Once you fully submit your application, you will no longer have the permissions to make changes to your reference requests.**

As the application system will allow you to prepare the rest of your application, i.e. you can save your application and return as many times as you like without fully submitting it, it is possible to manage your references and have your application ready for submission well before the application deadline.

8. What if my referee submits my reference late?

We will allow referees an additional 4 days to submit references (2 working days) after the application deadline of Thursday, 9 December 2021. As such, referees will have until 5pm on Monday, 13 December 2021 to submit completed references. This deadline is final and should references still be missing after this secondary deadline, applications will automatically be marked as unsuccessful.

9. I have been shortlisted after submitting my Stage 1 application and now I need to submit my stage 2 application. As part of my Stage 1 application feedback I have been asked to request a new referee provide one of my references and/or that an existing referee provide more detail on their reference); how do I do this?

If you are invited to submit a stage 2 application then your application on SGSSS Apply will automatically become editable again to allow you to upload your Supervisor Statement of Support and make any other minor amendments to your application, e.g. updating a reference. As such, you will again have the permissions to manage your references (delete existing references and request new/revised references). Please note however, the window to submit a stage 2 application is very short (31 January to 5pm on 9 February 2022) and as such, you may risk having an incomplete application if your new/existing referee fails to submit your new/amended reference by the deadline. If this happens then your application will be deemed as incomplete and you will not be able to progress to the next stage. To try circumvent this happening, please communicate with your referee in advance to make sure they understand the timescales involved **before** you delete an existing reference from your application (as once it is deleted we cannot recall it).
4. Supervisor Statement of Support

All applicants shortlisted to submit a Stage 2 application are required to submit a Supervisor Statement of Support provided by their prospective supervisor(s). The Supervisor Statement of Support is a key component of the application and of the assessment process. We suggest supervisors refer to the Open Competition Guidance for Supervisors (specifically the Marking Framework) when writing their statement of support, as the purpose of this statement is primarily to detail the ways in which you, the applicant, will fit within your institution’s overarching research environment (i.e. within the relevant department/school/college) and how you will be supported. In particular, we are looking for clarification on how the proposed supervisory team will provide you with an outstanding PhD experience that engages with appropriate advanced training opportunities.

If you are shortlisted, i.e. invited to submit a Stage 2 application, you will need to upload the Supervisor Statement of Support as part of your Stage 2 application by Spm on Wednesday, 9 February 2022. Late submissions will not be accepted.

Supervisor statements should follow the style and content guidance provided below:

**Style Guide**
- The statement must be in PDF format.
- The statement must display the letterhead of the supervisor’s home institution.
- The statement must clearly state the name and position of the supervisor(s).
- The statement must contain, as a subject line, the name of the student that the reference concerns (e.g. Amna Singh), the SGSSS pathway (e.g. Human Geography), and the host institution (e.g. University of Glasgow).
- Statements should not exceed two sides of A4.

**Content Guide** (statements should include all of the below)
- Proposed supervisory arrangements including second supervisor(s) and their relevance to the project, as well as contingency supervisory arrangements. Where the supervisory team is cross-institutional, the added benefits to the student and their proposed research should be detailed. Please note, the statement should be co-written and signed by both supervisors.
- A consideration of the research environment at the host institution, with specific reference to the fit between the department and the proposed topic of research.
- ** New for 2021/22 – a consideration of how the supervisory team and the broader research environment supports the development of an inclusive and diverse PhD community.
- Detail of the potential research training courses/programmes offered by the host institution that would benefit the applicant; consideration of broader advanced training that will likely be required including, but not limited to, that provided by SGSSS.
- An assessment of the potential impact of the proposed research and its significance to the academic discipline(s) concerned.
- Details of the supervisory team’s experience of supervision. This should include the number of students supervised by each supervisor (including ongoing supervision) and their completion rates where applicable, i.e. we would like to know the proportion of students who have completed within four years (or equivalent for part-time students). In addition, we are interested to know of any specific research experience relevant to the student’s proposed project, including any particular methodological experience or training.
- Confirmation that the proposal is the applicant’s own work, although you many have provided advice on the content.
- Confirmation that the first supervisor has attended supervisory training within their institution within the last 5 years.
5. Marking Framework (new for 2021/22)

To view the Student-led Open Competition Marking Framework 2021/22, please click here. Please note, this single Marking Framework replaces the two Marking Frameworks from prior years (1+3 and +3).
6. Example Applications

Please see the two examples below for what makes a good Student-led Open Competition application.

For each, we have included the full application form (slight differences to the 2021/22 form) and the Supervisor Statement of Support, both anonymised.

1. PhD title: Monetary policy rules under model uncertainty

   Key Information
   
   • **Institution**: University of Strathclyde
   • **Pathway**: Economics
   • **Hub**: Economies, Mind and Technologies

   Click [here](#) to view the Application Form and Supervisor Statement of Support.

2. PhD title: Pro-environmental Voluntary Simplicity: the Lived Experience within Family and Domestic Life

   Key Information
   
   • **Institution**: University of Edinburgh
   • **Pathway**: Sociology
   • **Hub**: Society and Welfare

   Click [here](#) to view the Application Form and Supervisor Statement of Support.