Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS)

2024/25 Student-Led Open Competition Applicant Guidance for Students and Supervisors

Scottish
Graduate
School of
Social
Science

Sgoil Cheumnaichean Saidheans
Sòisealta na h-Alba

Contents

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.

Of the 16 institutions in Scotland that are partners of SGSSS, 14 are eligible to receive ESRC funding across 21 Units of Assessment (UoA). Each UoA is analogous to a subject area / discipline. Not all 14 institutions are eligible to hold studentships in all UoAs. A comprehensive list of the eligible institutions and UoAs can be found on the SGSSS website here. The two institutions who are not eligible to for funding (Queen's Margaret University and Robert Gordon University) are eligible for any training programming offered by SGSSS.

Where a university has high quality social science supervision capacity in a UoA then they will have a designated PGR lead (see here, scroll toward the bottom). Before applying to the Student-led Open Competition we ask that you contact the relevant PGR lead, 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 14 SGSSS institutions.

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.

Applying to admission into the institution of your choice & applying to the studentship funding

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 2025 (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.**

To check how this applies to the institution of your choice, email the HEI Admin Lead before starting your application, full list of Admin Leads can be found here.

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, as the quality of applications will always remain the primary assessment criterion

during the Competition. In addition, some highly ranked international students may not be able to receive an award due to the 30% cap.

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 1.7 (Funding Arrangements) closely.

1.3 Length of Award

The length of award that you receive depends on whether you need foundational or masters level training before you start the PhD proper. You can indicate on the application form the type of training that you expect to receive but each applicant is assessed by SGSSS to determine the most appropriate length of award based on previous study and experience. You may be asked to undertake a week-long foundational methods course, a Master's programme or elements of a Master's programme covering identified core methods gaps (social science methods gaps in quantitative, qualitative and research design skills). Once you start the PhD then you will receive 3.5 years of funding – this is based on the assumption that you undertake a 3ms placement (see here for further information on placements) and 3ms of training to cover additional training prioritised by the ESRC (including training to make the most out of your placement).

For more on lengths of award, visit here.

First Year Students Eligibility

If a first-year student (or part-time equivalent) is self-funding their PhD, or they are in receipt of financial support lower than that of an ESRC award[1], they can apply for ESRC funding. If successful, SGSSS will conduct an audit of the applicant's training requirements to determine if the student requires 2 or 3 years of funding. If a first-year student is awarded, the funding will **not include reimbursement costs** from the first year.

Part-Time Awards

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

When completing the application, applicants will be asked to indicate if they wish to complete the studentship on a full or part-time basis. Part-time students must spend **no less** than 50% of their working time (i.e. 18.75 hours, with 18.75 hours available for non-PhD activity) on their PhD research. To read more about this, review the ESRC funding guidance, linked above.

For any further questions, email team@sgsss.ac.uk before submitting your application.

---

[1] 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.

Where to reside during the duration of your studies

As per our ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide, (see pg. 5), 'all activity undertaken as part of the ESRC award must be carried out within the UK, except as part of overseas fieldwork which is an integral part of the study, conferences, or training. All students **must reside within a reasonable travel time of the Research Organisation** at which they are registered and we would expect there to be direct contact between the student and supervisor.'

For this reason, **we do not offer our studentships on a remote basis.**

1.4 Submission Expectations

In line with ESRC guidance, students applying to SGSSS studentships in the 2024/2025 cycle, will be required to submit **within their funding period**. There will no longer be a 'writing up' period, during which a student can submit.

1.5 Master's Programmes

For entry in 2025, students who are required to undertake a 1+3.5 award where their selected institution does not offer an ESRC approved Master's programme on the SGSSS Unit of Assessment, (this list is currently under revision by our team for students starting in October 2025; please check back in Spring 2025 or email team@sgsss.ac.uk for the new list) will be expected to take a 1+3.5 within their institution except in the cases mentioned in the SGSSS Masters Arrangement Form. This document must be completed in conjunction with the relevant SGSSS Deans of Graduate Studies Network representative at the institution where the Master's will be undertaken. Students should work with their supervisor to facilitate the completion of the Masters Arrangement Form.

1.6 Supervision

You must have support from a supervisory team to be eligible for 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, including those previously submitted through a SGSSS supervisor-led competition.

First supervisors must be located at one of our 14 partnered institutions eligible to receive ESRC funding across 21 REF Units of Assessment (UoA).

To be eligible to be first supervisor in any SGSSS competition, supervisors will
1. Meet any institutional requirements of first supervisors that are not covered below. Contact your HEI Admin lead for this information
2. Have undergone supervisor training within your institution within the last 5 years
3. Hold a research and teaching or research only contract expected to last for the duration of the proposed PhD project
4. Work in a department/school/subject area that is administratively aligned to an eligible UoA for your Higher Education Institution
5. Are a research active Social Scientist with output (papers and/or research funding) that is aligned to your unit of assessment

Second supervisors may work within any of the SGSSS 16 partner HEIs. We encourage applicants to consider co-supervision with different universities across our network. You can find full information about the SGSSS partner universities online here.

We require the first supervisor to complete a short set of questions to help us to confirm their eligibility and to indicate that they are content to be listed as a first supervisor. We encourage you to link your first supervisor to this webpage for more on the questions they will be asked to complete as part of your application (for more on this, also visit section 4).

Supervision across institutions

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 PGR Lead as soon as possible.

1.7 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 estimated packages for years 2024/25 onwards are:

Full award	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
Stipend[2]	£19,237	£19,795	£20,369	£20,960
Tuition Fees[3]	£4,786	£4,887	£4,989	£5,094
Overseas Fieldwork (if applicable)	£450	£450	£450	£450
RTSG	£940	£940	£940	£940

Please Note: 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, full fee waivers will be offered, however the number of fee waivers is limited to an institutional cap (30% of the total number of studentship awards). Applicants are 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.

1.8 Challenge-led Pathways - FAQ

Introduction

---

[2] All stipend figures are **approximations** based on a 2.9% increase year on year.
[3] All tuition fees figures are **approximations** based on a 2.1% increase year on year.

From 2024/25 our studentships will be organised around a set of key societal challenges (challenge-led pathways). We have also organised our students who started their PhD prior to 2024/25 into these challenge pathways. These challenges were developed so that they represent the kinds of social science research that our students do and to reflect the themes of the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

What does it mean to be part of a challenge-led pathway?

We want our pathways to give students the opportunity to develop capacity for interdisciplinary connections within the social sciences and beyond. In practical terms, we want our students to be able to communicate key disciplinary concepts and methods emerging from their own disciplines and specific research proposals to other researchers and to those outside academia. We also want students to learn from one another about new methods and theories and knowledge exchange networks. Each challenge pathway will be made up of students at different stages of their research and from different disciplines but with a broad interest in elements of a particular challenge. Training will be organised to encourage peer-to-peer learning and to bring in expertise from non- academic partners. Students from any discipline can apply to any challenge pathway.

What about my disciplinary training needs?

We have assessed the university environments in which you will be undertaking the subject specific elements of your masters training and where you will do your PhD research. All SGSSS funded students will be studying in schools/departments where there is recognised disciplinary excellence. Furthermore, you and your supervisor can include any disciplinary gaps in knowledge or skills in your Development Needs Analysis. We shape our wider training programme (cross-challenge pathway) according to needs identified and we will also help you to find training run elsewhere if it can't be delivered within Scotland.

What are the challenge-led pathways?

We have 6 challenge-led pathways. Below we set out a brief description of what they cover and give some examples of the kinds of research that our students are already doing. As a reminder, all social science methods are welcome for each challenge pathway and each challenge can be explored from perspectives across the social sciences – for example, the issues might be explored from a sociological, psychological, management, socio-legal, political, historical, linguistic, human geography, social anthropological, policy or economic stance – or in combination with another discipline outside the social sciences. Students on the pathway will come together virtually and face-to-face to share peer-learning on theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues with a focus on communication of ideas beyond the discipline. The prioritisation of learning would come from students' own development needs and those created collectively through early cohort development.

Challenge-Pathways

1. Communication, AI and New Technologies

This challenge pathway is interested in processes, challenges and solutions associated with how we communicate with each other and how new technologies (including but not limited to AI) are reshaping our world and our interactions with it. We will take a broad approach to the terms above and the pathway may include research looking at, for example: patterns and mechanisms of language, communication and interaction in changing worlds, employment, and industrial implications of smart technologies; lived experiences of health-care technologies; addressing pedagogical and communicative challenges of AI.

2. Environment, Migration and Demographic Change

This challenge pathway is concerned with global and local processes relating to environment, migration and demographic change including problems and solutions pertaining to the green economy and biodiversity. The scope for the challenge-led pathway is correspondingly broad and might cover research including, for example: anthropological study of community experiences, differences in the psychology and behaviour of relevant groups, the challenges of longitudinal analysis of demographic data, the concept of the circular economy, sociological theories of othering, the politics and economics of just transitions.

3. Governance and Institutions

This challenge pathway is interested in how institutions form, operate and impact on lives globally, nationally, and locally. Institutions are meant in the broadest sense to include international bodies, corporations and religions, governments, arms-length institutions of the state, civil society organisations, formal and informal movements. These might be studied separately or in comparison.

4. Health, Wellbeing and Communities

This challenge pathway brings together interests in research about distributions of health and wellbeing across the lifespan; how mental and physical health and wellbeing are understood, experienced, challenged and strengthened at multi-scalar levels. The pathway is also concerned with the social, political and economic functioning of communities.

5. Securities: Justice, Economies and Conflict

This challenge pathway is concerned with the societal challenges thrown up by processes relating to justice, economies and conflict at global, national and local levels; on inter- and intra-state problems and resolutions. The scope for the challenge-led pathway is correspondingly broad and might cover research including, for example: comparative studies of justice systems in relation to specific areas of legislation; histories of conflict resolution in particular geographies; studies of macro-economic shocks.

6. Social Inequalities

This challenge pathway brings together interests in a range of social inequality problems separately or intersecting) at global and national and local levels and in actions to resolve these. The scope for the pathway is broad and could cover, for example, research on the following kinds of topic: understanding changing patterns of inequality using big data; the lived experience of particular populations; evaluations of the contribution of specific solutions; critical analyses of social frameworks to better understand inequality problems.

How do I choose a challenge pathway (or help my student to choose)?

We recognise that many applications will align with more than one challenge pathway. In discussion with your supervisor you should decide which pathway fits best with your main ideas. You will not be disadvantaged by your choice of pathway in the selection process. There is no quota system in place for each pathway so you don't need to be concerned about the likely 'popularity' of any given challenge. Our intention is that the challenge pathways will be as broad and inclusive as possible so you don't need to be concerned that your application will be judged a poor fit – what we want to hear about in your application form is what *you* think will be the contribution of your thesis to the challenge area, what you hope to gain from your peers as part of being included within a cohort and what you can give in return. In addition, you will be able to switch pathways once if you feel that you have made the wrong choice in year 1 of your studentship and can also attend events held by other pathways if these are of particular interest and there is space.

What happens if I cannot choose any challenge pathway?

Because the challenge pathways were developed partly through a bottom-up process, looking at the research of our existing students, we are confident that the vast majority of likely proposals will fit at least one pathway. If, however, after reflection and discussion with your supervisor, you are unable to find a pathway description that fits your proposed work then you can signal this to us – you will not be penalised for this in the review process – the marking framework does not assess challenge fit. In your at-award Development Needs Analysis you will be able to discuss with us which pathway might offer the most fruitful learning conversations for you and your study.

1.9   Collaborative Partner Proposals (optional)

The ESRC welcomes studentships with collaborative partners. 'Collaborative' is defined broadly and covers studentships that are supported by private sector companies, public sector bodies or third sector organisations, i.e., non-academic partners. While many proposals feature work with non-academic partners, we are interested in if your studentship will be co-funded by said partner, i.e., they will contribute financially towards the costs of your studentship (please see the SGSSS Funding Arrangements document for details). We ask that you liaise with your prospective supervisor(s) to help with discussions between you and your potential collaborative partner, if applicable.

Should a collaborative partner want to make a financial contribution towards your proposed studentship, you will need to upload a *Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement*[4] as part of your online application. The *Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement* should describe how the partner will support the project and should include details of the following:

- How the research project aligns to the priorities of the partner organisation and of the nature of the collaboration already underway (for example, the role of the partner in identifying the research need and in developing the application).
- How the collaborative partner will support your supervision/development and your project.
- The agreed co-funding arrangement.
- Any agreed additional funding, i.e., this may include details of how the travel, subsistence and accommodation costs associated with your visits to the non-academic organisation will be covered.
- Any arrangements for special materials and facilities which will be made available to you.
- Any appropriate arrangements relating to Intellectual Property Rights.
- The details of any previous involvement in social science research by the collaborative partner. This should include any collaboration that has previously taken place, e.g., any former studentships they have co-funded.

If you would like to discuss and/or enquire more into collaborative studentships, how this would work and/or the application requirements, please contact SGSSS at team@sgsss.ac.uk.

1.10   Stuart Hall Foundation Fellowships (optional)

Scotland's two national graduate schools (SGSSS and SGSAH[5]) are delighted to be working with the Stuart Hall Foundation to offer up to six Stuart Hall Fellowships starting in October 2025.

Both SGSAH and SGSSS are committed to the public function of education and to addressing the barriers which exist to accessing higher education. The Fellowships, inspired by the life and work of Professor Stuart Hall and his research legacy in the areas of race, ethnicity, cultural and structural inequalities, will be used to provide opportunities for students from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds.

---

[4] This will act a s a precursor to the SGSSS Collaborative Agreement, used primarily within our supervisor-led Open Collaborative Competition, and will be required if successful.

[5] Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities: https://www.sgsah.ac.uk/

Applications for these Fellowships are sought from UK candidates from non-traditional or disadvantaged backgrounds who are under-represented at graduate level in the Arts and Humanities and the Social Sciences in Scotland, and with a preference for those whose planned research aligns broadly with one of Stuart Hall's many areas of interest: cultural studies, race, ethnicity and inequalities. Applicants can apply through SGSAH and SGSSS's DTP Open Studentship Competitions, with selected successful candidates invited to apply for a Stuart Hall Foundation Fellowship. Each Graduate School will award up to three Stuart Hall Foundation Fellowships, which will be attached to funded studentships (covering fees, stipend and a research training grant). The Fellowship can be held within disciplines across the social sciences, arts and humanities at selected Scottish HEIs which form part of the relevant Graduate School.

Recipients of these Fellowships will benefit from access to the [Stuart Hall Foundation Scholars and Fellows network programme](#), which includes regular events and opportunities to develop their career and research profile.
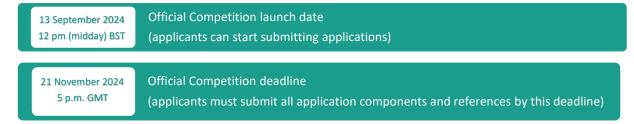
If you would like to be considered for the above opportunity, please answer "Yes" to the question, "If successful, do you wish to be considered for a Stuart Hall Foundation Fellowship?", which forms part of the online SGSSS Student-led Open Competition application form (via *SGSSS Apply*).

2. Applications

2.1 Competition Stages and Timeline

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

1. Application Stage (13 September to 21 November 2024)

This stage is when applicants submit all the required documents. Additionally, **applicants are responsible in assuring their recommenders have submitted their references** (2 required, see section 3 for more on references). They are **also responsible in checking their primary supervisors submit their supervisor questionnaire** (see section 4 for more).

13 September 2024 12 pm (midday) BST	Official Competition launch date (applicants can start submitting applications)
21 November 2024 5 p.m. GMT	Official Competition deadline (applicants must submit all application components and references by this deadline)

2. HEI Review (or Stage 1) (22 November 2024 to 13 February 2025)

This stage is when universities shortlist Stage 1 applications, meaning that successful students will proceed to Stage 2. The number of applications which an institution can shortlist depends on the size of its social science community. The shortlisted applicants must not breach the international cap (i.e. no more than 30% of shortlisted applicants should be international except for those universities who can shortlist only 2 applicants – in this case, only one can be international).

If you are found successful, you will be tasked with uploading the Supervisor Support and Disciplinary Statement templates. Institutions will be submitting their outcome results **on a rolling basis between this period. Note, HEIs have until the 13th February to submit their nominations into our application portal (however, most would have done this well before this date), but you as a candidate have until the 18 February to submit the two documents.**

22 November 2024 – 13 & 18 February 2025, 5 p.m. GMT	Stage 1 Review takes place. During this period, and as part of the next stage, if you are nominated, HEIs will request you to submit your **Supervisor Support Template** and **Disciplinary Statement** within Apply.

3. Challenge Pathway Review (or Stage 2) (21 February to 13 March 2025)

This stage is when each of the six challenge pathways considers applications shortlisted by universities (around ~180 applications in total). Each panel will be able to nominate 30% of applications to go forward to stage 3 – of these, only 30% can be international. Applications which do not align with a challenge will still be assessed within challenge pathways (the assessment framework ensures that these will not be disadvantaged and the Deputy Director for Studentships will moderate reviewer scores and comments for these applications to confirm that a no-detriment approach is followed).

10 April 2025, 12 p.m. GMT	Stage 2 Outcomes are released to applicants; if successful, applicants will not be asked to upload any additional documents.

4. Global Review (or Stage 3) (11 April to 06 May 2025)

This stage is when a final review panel consisting of Deans and members of the SGSSS Directorate meet to make the final award decisions. Studentships for 2025 entry are subject to confirmation of funding by the ESRC.

5. Outcome Announcement & Development Needs Analysis (DNA) Meetings (from 16 May 2025)

After the global panel meets, the Deputy Directors for Training and Studentships will meet to evaluate the award lengths for successful applicants. These decisions will be released via email to successful candidates on 16 May 2025. Preliminary awards will be released via SGSSS Apply where you as a candidate can log in to review and make submit your decision (you have 1 week from receipt to complete this). After accepting the award, applicants will be tasked with completing their Pre-DNA questionnaire. To read more about this DNA process, visit this document.

16 May 2025, 12 p.m. GMT	Stage 3 Outcomes & Preliminary Awards are released to applicants.

2.2 Overview of the Application Submission Process

Submitting your application

Below is an overview of the deadlines, steps, and information you will be required to submit/complete as part the Student-Led Open Competition.

The Application Portal – SGSSS Apply

1. Go to *SGSSS Apply* and click "Register" in the top right-hand corner of the screen, completing the details as prompted. *Please note, the application process on SGSSS Apply can be saved and as such does not need to be completed in a single sitting.*
2. Once registered you will be asked to "please update your eligibility profile". Please select either "Prospective ESRC-Funded PhD Student (SGSSS)"[6] or "Current Non ESRC-Funded PhD Student (non SGSSS)"[7], depending on your personal circumstances.
3. Next, you will be directed to your 'Application Dashboard' where you should see the programme, "SGSSS Student-led Open Competition 2024/25".
4. The first section you will be asked to complete is our **Equality Opportunities Monitoring Form**. Please note, this information is kept private and is not considered by reviewers during the competition process. For more on this, visit the section in the next page titled 'Equalities Opportunities Monitoring Form.
5. Next, complete the *"Student-led Open Competition – Applicant Information"* section. This will let you and us know if you are eligible to apply and/or if you are a **home** or **international** student (according to UKRI guidance).
6. Next, complete the *"Student-led Open Competition – Supervisory Team Details"* section. Your First Supervisor must be based at the institution to which you are applying
7. Next, complete the **"Student-led Open Competition – First Supervisor Details"** section. This section will be for your first supervisor to complete as it will confirm their eligibility with us. See section 4 more on this below.
8. Next, complete the **"Student-led Open Competition – Studentship Details"** section. In this section you will answer questions regarding the award length, challenge led pathways, project title, placements, DNA, etc.
9. Next, complete the **"Student-led Open Competition – Project Details"** section. In this section you will answer questions regarding the lay summary, preparedness to undertake and complete a PhD, research proposal, etc.
10. Next, complete the **"Student-led Open Competition References"** section by inputting the contact details for two referees. SGSSS Apply will automatically send your referees an email requesting

---

[6] You are not currently undertaking a PhD and are looking to apply for ESRC funding via SGSSS.

[7] You are currently undertaking a PhD (self-funded and/or in receipt of funding less than the funding offered by ESRC) and are looking to apply for ESRC funding via SGSSS. Please note, you must be at the start of your second year (pro-rated for part-time students) at the latest when your ESRC funding would start, i.e., you would be going into your second year in October 2023.

their submission of reference for you. It is important that you complete this step as soon as possible to allow your referees time to respond before the deadline. **Please see section 3 below for full details on references, including how to manage your reference requests.**

  a. If any of your references is no longer available to provide a reference & you would like to request a new reference and/or if you want to check if they have submitted this reference, use this visual guide. For any questions, contact us at team@sgsss.ac.uk

  b. We strongly advise you to complete this task as soon as possible as this will give your first supervisor the most amount of time to complete this eligibility questionnaire.

11. Next, upload your transcripts[8] (where available), as well as any confirmation of academic prizes, e.g., certificates and/or award letters, and your CV (academic where applicable) – all in pdf format.

Application Anonymisation

Please note, applications will be anonymised for reviewers and as such all documents you upload as part of your application **MUST BE REDACTED**, i.e., any documents you upload as part of your application must not contain your name and/or any identifiable information. We ask that you attempt to redact your documents yourself in the first instance and the application process contains instructions on how to hide such information in PDF files. However, if you require further help with this process, please contact SGSSS via team@sgsss.ac.uk at least 2 weeks in advance of the application deadline, quoting your application ID.

For more on anonymisation, use this quick guide.

Equal Opportunities Monitoring Form

SGSSS commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)
SGSSS believes in the benefits that come from diverse student, supervisor and staff populations. We are committed to facilitating inclusion and removing any barriers to participation during applications and throughout the PhD experience. We actively work against any forms of discrimination in relation to the Equality Act 2010 protected characteristics, alongside characteristics that are not covered by the Act.

Purpose of this form and how we use this data
Through the following form we collect a range of data that are used in an aggregated and anonymised format to monitor trends, identify potential areas for improvement and report statistics related to EDI to our funders. We ask that you complete the form as fully as possible, but you may of course skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.
This data is not used for application review: it will be held confidentially and separately from any applications you submit to us. Your individual information will not be passed on to academic departments, universities or to anyone else such as a supervisor. Data will only be kept until our Training Grant expires.

Support for individual disability related adjustments
The data supplied is very helpful to SGSSS for informing actions that may encourage people with disabilities to apply and participate in PhD study. As the information supplied is only used in an aggregated anonymised way however, it cannot be used by us to inform individual circumstances. SGSSS encourage students to consider disclosing disabilities, or other circumstances that may require support, to their supervisors and aligned university services, e.g. Disability Support Services. This will then enable appropriate and confidential discussion of what additional support measures may help you.

---

[8] Undergraduate transcripts and Master's transcripts (if applicable), combined as one pdf document.

Helpful information about Disabled Students' Allowance, is also available through our Handbook. For SGSSS events, we will request information on an event-by-event basis specific to the type of activity, so you can highlight any adjustments or requirements necessary to ensure your ability to participate.

Completing this form helps us and others to better understand issues of selection, participation and under-representation in postgraduate research. We are grateful for you time in completing it. For any questions, please email us at team@sgsss.ac.uk

Application Components:

Once you have created your *SGSSS Apply* account and the competition has launched, you will be able to start your 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;
- Your potential supervisor(s) name, email address and institution.

You will also be required to complete and/or upload the following as part of your online application submission. Please note, all uploads must be in **pdf format only** (Word documents will **not** be accepted).

1. Online application form (which includes a lay summary, section on preparedness and your research proposal);
2. CV ;
3. All relevant Undergraduate and Master's 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 referees, both provided as part of your Stage 1 application. Please note, an online 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 online application form).
6. Details of any difficult language training you propose to undertake during your research (advised within the application form).
7. A Masters Arrangement Form, if applicable.
8. A Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement, if applicable.

HEI Admin Review (Stage 1)

After the deadline, applications will be sent to HEIs, Higher Education Institutions. Below are the important dates and information for applicants during this waiting period.

Stage 1 Review – Important Information for Applicants:

Once the HEI has reached their decision, the HEI Admin Lead from the institution listed in your application will submit the Stage 1 results into our portal (both successful and unsuccessful), which will automatically trigger an outcome email to you with next steps. HEIs have until the 13 February 2025 to complete this task, however, for our smaller/medium size institutions, this may be done well in advance to this date as it is on a rolling basis.

If you are shortlisted, you will be invited to submit a Supervisor Statement Template and Disciplinary Statement via Apply.
Your deadline to submit the templates is 18 February. For any questions, email us at team@sgsss.ac.uk. We understand that this period is quite uneasy for candidates, but we kindly ask for your patience as these decisions will be released on a rolling basis.

Please note, some HEI Admin Leads may be in contact with you separately, in advance or post the outcome being released. This will vary per institution.

Please note that besides uploading the documents, applicants will not be able to make any further application updates, with the exception of updates to the supervisory team (when needed). If you are in this situation, please CC team@sgsss.ac.uk in any communications to the HEI Admin Lead of the corresponding institution you are applying to.

Supervisor Statement Template – this is a statement from your supervisory team. 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.**

Disciplinary Statement of Support **–** In no more than 250 words, provide a summary of how the proposed research will contribute to its underpinning discipline(s). You may wish to comment on theory, methods or other substantive contribution. **Full details on this in section 5 below.**

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 "Student-led Open Competition 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, or line manager from work, 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. **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 an online reference to support your application. 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 the online reference template. 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 have been returned via your application on *SGSSS Apply*. Please note, you will not be able to read your references, you will just be able to see when they have been completed.

5. **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.

6. **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, but it will also reduce instances where your application is incomplete and thus unable to progress through to the next stage of the competition.

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., 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). **We recommended you do not fully submit your application until both your references have been received, as once you fully submit your application you will no longer have the permissions to make changes to your reference requests** (please note, you must submit your application by 5pm, GMT, on 21 November2024 regardless of which references have been received).

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.

7. **What if my referee submits my reference late?**

We will not provide referees any additional time to submit their reference. This deadline is final and should references still be outstanding, applications will automatically be marked as unsuccessful.

4. Applications components submitted by Supervisors

At-Application First Supervisor Questions
As part of your initial application, you must provide us with your first supervisors details. This will trigger a notification to them prompting them to answer the following questions:

Please provide your first supervisor with the link to the supervisor eligibility page, here, so they can refer to the questions they will be asked in completing this task.

If your supervisor is not eligible and you would like to change their details on the portal and/or if you want to check if they have completed this task, use this visual guide. For any questions, contact us at team@sgsss.ac.uk

It is the responsibility of the applicant to assure their first supervisor submits their answers to these questions. Supervisors are encouraged to email us at team@sgsss.ac.uk if they have any questions.

Supervisor Statement of Support Template (for applicants nominated to Stage 2)
Separately, the supervisory teams of all shortlisted applicants shortlisted at Stage 1 of the Open Competition are required to submit a Supervisor Statement of Support Template. This statement is a key component of the application and of the assessment process. We suggest that supervisors refer to the Marking Framework when writing their statement. In particular, we are looking for clarification on how the proposed supervisory team will provide the student with an outstanding PhD experience that engages with appropriate advanced development opportunities. In addition, we are keen to find out about supervisors' own development needs so that SGSSS can develop its approach to supporting supervisors.

Once they have completed the Supervisor Statement of Support Template, they must return it to their prospective student who will upload as per the deadlines their host institution will indicate; late submissions will not be accepted. **As applications are anonymised for reviewers, you must not mention your student by name.**

To access the template, visit here. Please note, as of 13 September, we have not set a word limit on each of these sections, but will be releasing this information closer to the application deadline (21 November)

Template Questions (supervisory teams will be asked to answer the following)
- 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.
- 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.
- A summary of the potential development needs of the supervisory team.
- 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.
- A paragraph on the current and estimated progress of the applicant within their PhD, and confirmation that the supervisor agrees with the applicant's assessment of their PhD progress (this is a question within the online application form). This point is only applicable if the applicant is already undertaking a PhD in their first year or part-time equivalent.

5. Disciplinary Support Template

Additional to your supervisor statement of support template, if your application is shortlisted at Stage 1, you will be asked to submit the disciplinary support statement which is to be completed by the PGR Lead at your institution. For more on the list of the PGR Leads per HEI, visit this link.

6. Artificial Intelligence Statement

The Scottish Graduate School of Social Science emphasises the importance of academic integrity and personal intellect in developing all submissions. While AI tools may support the research and writing process, it is crucial that the studentship application is a reflection of the applicant's own intellectual endeavour and critical thinking.

Misrepresenting AI-generated content as original work is strictly prohibited. Any use of AI must be transparently acknowledged, ensuring that the final submission remains a true and honest representation of the applicant's own intellectual contributions.

As part of your application, you will be asked to confirm if you used AI when creating the application. If you confirm 'yes' we will ask to elaborate on your answer.

7. Studentship Marking Framework

To view the SGSSS Studentship Marking Framework, please visit Stage 1 Marking Framework here, and Stages 2& 3 here.

8. Appendix 1: Project Proposal Application Questions

Below are questions you will be asked to answer online via SGSSS Apply within the "Student-led Open Competition Application Form" section of your application, relating to your project proposal. Should you prefer to download a Word version of the below to use to develop you research proposal/application responses, please click here. **PLEASE NOTE, YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO UPLOAD THIS APPLICATION FORM - ALL APPLICATIONS MUST BE MADE USING THE ONLINE APPLICATION SYSTEM**, i.e., the Word version can be used to develop your application offline and to share with your supervisors for feedback. You will be able to copy across from the Word version to the online application system (*SGSSS Apply*).

1. Lay Summary
Please provide a lay summary that explains your project and its significance to society/academic discipline to a non-academic audience. (250 words max)

2. Preparedness to undertake and complete a PhD and to flourish as a result of PhD funding
Successfully undertaking a PhD requires not only academic ability but also resourcefulness, commitment and resilience. It involves a range of skills including the ability to communicate complex ideas (about why a research question is of societal and academic importance, why it can be addressed using particular methods and why your findings matter), planning and organisation (including within changing circumstances), working with others (inside and outside of universities) to increase the chances of your research making a difference. You may find it useful to refer to the Researcher Development Framework in thinking about this question.

Drawing on your own background (including your life experiences, journey to/through university, work experiences or volunteering) please provide a summary of why you are ready to undertake a PhD now and how you will flourish as a result of PhD funding. You might include, for example, personal challenges that you have overcome or achievements that you are proud of in your work, study or life experiences and how these map onto the skills required to flourish in a PhD programme. Challenges could include, but are not

limited to, protected characteristics, socio-economic status and of being first-in-a-generation to university or care-experienced. (400 words max)

3. Contributing to a positive and diverse PhD community

SGSSS aims to attract and support a positive and diverse PhD community where everyone can reach their full potential; Research and Development (R&D) is a supportive and fulfilling sector to work in; and is seen as a shared endeavour across society rather than only the concern of professional researchers. You may find it useful to refer to the UK Government's R&D People and Culture Strategy when thinking about this question.

Reflecting on your own background and/or proposed approach to PhD study and the opportunities which it will present, how will you support diversity and inclusion in the PhD community? (250 words max)

4. Research Proposal

The research proposal must be a detailed description of the intended research topic. It will form the basis for assessing the application. The proposal should be written in a clear and concise manner and applicants should be aware that applications will be reviewed by interdisciplinary panels so please make sure that you fully explain disciplinary specific concepts or techniques. **Your research project must be feasible within the funded PhD – from 2024 onwards all ESRC funded students must submit their thesis by the end of the funded period (previously students were given 12 additional unfunded months to submit the final draft). Feasibility will be considered carefully by reviewers.** The main body of the research proposal (excluding the bibliography) must not exceed 1,500 words.

Please also note that reviewers of this proposal will include those outwith your discipline.

The Research Proposal **MUST** include the following sections:

- Overview – a general introduction that succinctly sets out exactly what the project seeks to explore. This should also include the research question(s) to be addressed and the overall aim of the project.
- Context – situate the research within the relevant literature/s. This should include a brief summary of research already taken in the field, addressing key works and scholars. Specific attention should be paid to problems in the existing literature and ways in which your proposed research challenges/addresses these problems. You should also give an account of the theoretical issues relevant to your research, and whether you intend to test existing theories or develop new ones.
- Methodology – provide a detailed account of the methodology and/or methods that will be used. Specific attention should be paid, where relevant, to any innovative aspects of the proposed methodology.
- An indication of ethical issues associated with this proposal (including those that may impact on formal ethics committee approval and those requiring ongoing consideration in the field/during analysis) and proposed actions to mitigate these.
- You will be able to upload diagrams via SGSSS Apply, should you so wish.

5. Indicative Bibliography

Enter bibliography here. References within the research proposal should be Harvard Style and the bibliography should reflect this. Please only include references referred to in the research proposal.

6. Risk Assessment

Please set out the aspects of your proposal that are at particular risk of non-implementation and indicate the approaches that you will take to manage such risks to ensure that your timely **within the funded period** submission is not compromised. (250 words max)

7. Provisional Timeline

This section must only include an indicative timeline for your research. Any substantive discussion of your research in this box will not be considered by reviewers. Please note, your timetable should take account of the expectation that your PhD will be submitted at the end of your funded period.

8. Challenge-led Pathways

SGSSS delivers some of its PhD training in challenge-led pathways. These pathways bring together students across all social science disciplines to encourage cross-disciplinary and student-led learning relating to the main global and national challenges facing our society. Within your challenge-led pathway you will have the opportunity to discuss and learn about methodological, conceptual and theoretical issues from your peers, academic experts and experts from the public, private and third sectors. Please select the pathway (see section 1.6) that most closely fits with your application (we recognise that many applications will fit with multiple pathways but you will have the opportunity to identify other pathways of interest below). If you think that your research does not fit any of the named pathways then select 'none of the above' - THIS WILL NOT DISADVANTAGE YOU IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS.

9. Collaborative Partnership (optional)

The ESRC welcomes studentships with collaborative partners. 'Collaborative' is defined broadly and covers studentships that are supported by private sector companies, public sector bodies or third sector organisations, i.e., non-academic partners. While many proposals feature work with non-academic partners, here we are interested in if your studentship will be co-funded by said partner, i.e., they will contribute financially towards the costs of your studentship. We ask that you liaise with your prospective supervisor(s) to help with discussions between you and your potential collaborative partner, if applicable.

Private Sector

Depending on the size of the private sector organisation, this will determine the expected co-funding of the studentships costs as per the below:

1. Less than 10 employees would equal a 10% contribution towards studentship costs.
2. More than 10 employees but less than 50 would equal a 25% contribution towards studentship costs.
3. More than 50 employees but less than 250 would equal a 33% contribution towards studentship costs.
4. More than 250 employees would equal a 50% contribution towards studentship costs.

Public Sector

If the collaborative partner is the Scottish Government or a Scottish Public Body, then we expect co-funding to be at the rate of 33% for all studentship costs.

Charity/Third Sector

If the collaborative partner is charity or falls within the third sector, then we expect co-funding to be at the rate of 10% for all studentship costs.

If applicable, as part of an application we will require a letter from the collaborative partner called a *Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement*. This acts as a precursor to a formal *Collaborative Agreement* (this is required if successful in this competition).

The *Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement* should describe how the partner will support the project and should include details of the following:

- How the research project aligns to the priorities of the partner organisation and of the nature of the collaboration already underway (for example, the role of the partner in identifying the research need and in developing the application).
- How the collaborative partner will support your supervision/development and your project.
- The agreed co-funding arrangement.

- Any agreed additional funding, i.e., this may include details of how the travel, subsistence and accommodation costs associated with your visits to the non-academic organisation will be covered.
- Any arrangements for special materials and facilities which will be made available to you.
- Any appropriate arrangements relating to Intellectual Property Rights (IPR).
- The details of any previous involvement in social science research by the collaborative partner. This should include any collaboration that has previously taken place, e.g., any former studentships they have co-funded.

If this proposal will include a collaborative partner, please upload a *Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement.*

10. Additional Costs for Difficult Language Training, an Overseas Institutional Visit and/or Overseas Fieldwork

Please indicate if your proposal is expected to benefit from the following:

- Difficult Language Training
- Overseas Institutional Visit
- Overseas Fieldwork

Domestic Fieldwork

If this proposal does not involve overseas fieldwork, can you confirm that the proposed fieldwork is likely to be undertaken within the notional RTSG allowance of £940 per annum. If not, please explain why and specify any likely additional costs. Please specify how additional costs will be met. (150 words max)

9. Example Applications

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

For each, we have included the full application form from successful from our recent competition. Please refer section 1.7 above, for our current list of challenge-led pathways) and the Supervisor Statement of Support, both anonymised.

1. **PhD title: An Economic Approach to Machine Learning and Algorithm Bias**

   Key Information:

   - **Institution:** Heriot-Watt University
   - **Pathway:** Economics
   - **Hub:** Economies, Mind and Technologies

   Click here to view the Application Form and Supervisor Statement of Support.

2. **PhD title: Realising inclusive communicative practices in support services for refugees and other migrants: The role of translanguaging in a linguistically diverse third-sector organisation**

   Key Information:

   - **Institution:** University of Stirling
   - **Pathway:** Education
   - **Hub:** Society and Welfare

   Click here to view the Application Form and Supervisor Statement of Support.

3. **PhD title: Between the Life and Death of a River: Contested Knowledge in a Toxic Commons**

   Key Information:

   - **Institution:**   University of Edinburgh
   - **Pathway:**   Social Anthropology
   - **Hub:**   People and Place

Click here to view the Application Form and Supervisor Statement of Support.