

SGSSS SDS Collaborative Studentship Competition 2025/26

PhD Programme Topic Descriptions

This document outlines the four topics identified by Skills Development Scotland (SDS) for the 2025/26 competition call.

1.	<p>Proposed Title: Understanding rural skills challenges and opportunities in Scotland</p> <p>Background</p> <p>Rural areas can face significant skills challenges. These can include the recruitment and retention of skilled workers; the availability of training provision; opportunities for upskilling and retraining; and geographical barriers and transport issues. Alongside these challenges are opportunities from digital technology and the expansion of green energy in rural areas. SDS seeks to understand the nature of these challenges and opportunities and what can be done to support individuals, employers and training providers in rural areas. We are particularly interested in the issues facing those in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.</p> <p>Aims and Objectives</p> <p>The main aim of this PhD will be to increase our understanding of rural skills challenges and opportunities in Scotland with a focus on the Highland and Islands. Specific objectives will be to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using existing sources, outline the current picture of economic activity in rural Scotland including key growth sectors; skills gaps and shortages; the future demand for labour; and the role of small business and rural entrepreneurship in addressing skills challenges. • Carry out an extensive review of regional, national and international policies and strategies in relation to rural skills challenges. This can include international comparisons and specific case studies. • Identify the most significant workforce challenges such as access to training; retaining and attracting talent to the area; increasing workforce participation (older workers, women returners); upskilling and reskilling the workforce. • Understand the effectiveness of current training provision such as apprenticeships; work-based learning; college provision; the role of universities; and the potential of digital solutions in meeting the needs of rural communities. • Identify recommendations for supporting rural areas in collaboration with employers; educators; training providers and other stakeholders. <p>Research Methods</p>
----	--

	<p>We are open to suggestions of methodological approaches. Our view is that this topic would benefit from a mixed method approach. The main geographic focus should be on the Highlands and Islands. Policy considerations for SDS should be a key component of this PhD and reflected in the methods and plans for knowledge exchange. Comparisons with approaches adopted in other rural areas outwith Scotland would be beneficial. The PhD student will be able to draw on extensive labour market intelligence from SDS.</p> <p>Benefits and outcomes for SDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A robust understanding of how SDS can support the rural skills system. • Insight and intelligence to support Workforce North and the Careers Collaborative.
--	---

2.	<p>Proposed Title: Impact of artificial intelligence in disrupting occupational pathways</p> <p>Background</p> <p>Current thinking suggests that artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to significantly disrupt occupational pathways through automation, job displacement and the creation of new jobs. AI is likely to have differential impacts depending on sector or industry and will vary by geography and socio-demographic group. AI has the potential to offer both solutions and challenges to occupational pathways. SDS is interested in how the skills system in Scotland should respond to the opportunities and challenges presented by AI.</p> <p>Aims and Objectives</p> <p>The main aim of this PhD is to increase our understanding of the impact of AI on occupational pathways and how the skills system should respond. Specific objectives are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out an extensive review of the evidence on the impact of AI across the skills system, including international comparisons. • Identify the types of skills and jobs that will be needed in the future and what this means for careers development. • Understand the opportunities presented by AI including reskilling; impacts on productivity and innovation. • Understand responses to AI from the perspective of employers; educators; policy makers. • Understand individual responses to AI across different socio-demographic groups. • Identify possible policy and practice responses that will address the opportunities and challenges presented by AI. <p>Research Methods</p> <p>We are open to suggestions of methodological approaches. Our view is that this topic would benefit from a mixed method approach. Policy considerations for SDS should be a key component of this PhD and reflected in the methods and plans for knowledge exchange.</p>
----	---

	Benefits and outcomes for SDS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An in depth understanding of how AI could impact occupational pathways and the skills system. • Policy and practice insights on how to support customers and employers adapt to AI.
--	---

3.	<p>Proposed Title: What works in supporting secondary school non-attenders</p> <p>Background</p> <p>Following the coronavirus pandemic, there has been an increase in young people disengaging from secondary school. This can take the form of non-attendance, or disengagement whilst at school. Many factors contribute to school non-attendance at the individual, school, household and societal level including mental health; learning difficulties; caring responsibilities; enjoyment of school; discrimination and an overall perception of a lack of support. Addressing school non-engagement requires a multi-agency approach and SDS seeks to understand the role of career development in addressing school non-engagement.</p> <p>Aims and Objectives</p> <p>The main aim of this PhD is to understand what works in supporting secondary school non-attenders and the role of career development within this. Specific objectives would be to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out an extensive review on the evidence on the causes of secondary school non-attendance, including international comparisons. • Outline the scale and nature of disengagement – which young people are most likely to disengage, why they disengage and the key drivers of disengagement. • Identify the longer-term effects of school non-attendance such as career outcomes. • Understand the role of key partners, stakeholders, and influencers in addressing this issue, including educators, parents and carers. • Understand what approaches are effective in supporting this group of young people including peer support; group work; one to one; mentoring. Including who delivers these and where. <p>Research Methods</p> <p>We are open to suggestions of methodological approaches. Our view is that this topic would benefit from a mixed method approach. Policy considerations for SDS should be a key component of this PhD and reflected in the methods and plans for knowledge exchange. The PhD student will be able to draw on SDS's extensive research with young people.</p> <p>Benefits and outcomes for SDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence based outputs and insight to inform practice in this area.
----	---

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying the relative importance of career development approaches in addressing this issue, ensuring that other drivers and their importance are emphasised
--	--

4.	<p>Proposed Title: The role of behaviour science in supporting career development</p> <p>Background</p> <p>Behavioural science offers the potential to provide valuable insights on how individuals make decisions in relation to their careers and the decision-making process. For example, it has the potential to improve outcomes by addressing cognitive biases in decision making or helping individuals make more informed decisions about their career paths. Skills Development Scotland seeks to more fully understand the role of behavioural science in shaping career decisions.</p> <p>Aims and Objectives</p> <p>The main aim of this PhD is to increase our understanding of how behavioural science approaches can be used to inform career development practice and delivery. Specific objectives would be to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carry out a comprehensive review of behavioural science approaches and theories in the context of career decision making. Explore how career decisions may be based on biases or misconceptions about skills or strengths and how cognitive biases can impact career decision making. Identify which behavioural interventions such as nudging are most effective supporting individuals to make informed career choices. Understand the policy and practice implications of behavioural science approaches in a careers development context. <p>Research Methods</p> <p>We are open to suggestions of methodological approaches. Our view is that this topic would benefit from a mixed method approach. Policy considerations for SDS should be a key component of this PhD and reflected in the methods and plans for knowledge exchange. The PhD student will be able to draw on SDS's extensive research with young people.</p> <p>Benefits and outcomes for SDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide robust evidence to support our work with young people in schools. Inform SDS approaches to career development and support the work of the Careers Collaborative.
----	---