Scottish Graduate School of Social Science
Sgoil Cheumnaichean Saidheans Sòisealta na h-Alba

SGSSS Student-led Open Competition – Challenge-Led Pathways

Our Challenge-led Pathways – What do you need to know before completing your application.

Introduction

From 2024 our training pathways will be organised around a set of key societal challenges. 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. 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.