



Supporting, delivering and facilitating high quality opportunities and training by engaging with students, staff and partners to positively impact the social science community in Scotland

# Starting Your Journey Towards a PhD 2025/26

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Scottish Graduate School  
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Sgoil Cheumnaichean Saidheans  
Sòisealta na h-Alba



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council



Scottish Funding Council  
Promoting further and higher education

# Today we'll cover

- Different types of PhD student
- Main funding sources in Social Sciences
- What is SGSSS?
- How does the application process work?
- Insights from current students





# Housekeeping

- There are lots of you so we've kept your cameras and microphones off
- We'll take questions at the end of the presentation and then during the student Q&A
- Please post any questions in the chat. If someone else posts something relevant to you, give it a 'thumbs up' rather than posting the same question.



# What is SGSSS?

- 1 of 15 ESRC Doctoral Training Partnerships across UK
- National provider of studentships & training for social science PhD students
- Draws on expertise of all Scottish Universities
- Training, opportunities and internships **for all doctoral researchers** in Scotland in social science, regardless of funding or institution
- 700+ hours of comprehensive training programme







# Before we start – demystifying the acronyms!

- **SGSSS:** Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences
- **DTP:** Doctoral Training Partnership
- **PGR:** Postgraduate Research (PhD)
- **ESRC:** Economic and Social Research Council
- **UKRI:** UK Research and Innovation
- **Challenge-Led Pathway**
- **UoA:** subject area or discipline

# Types of Social Science PhD student



# A Flavour of the different types of Social Science PGR student

- Different disciplines – from economics through to social anthropology, linguistics to economic and social history, social policy to human geography and sometimes overlapping with other sciences or arts and humanities.
- Different types of programme - full time and part-time.
- Different levels of prior academic experience - straight from undergraduate or postgraduate or after a time away from academic study.
- Different lengths of award - for full time students this means a PhD (in ESRC language known as a +3.5) or a Masters plus a PhD (in ESRC language known as a 1+3.5).
- Different kinds of funding - university scholarships, private or third sector scholarships, self-funding, employer funding, research council funding.
- Different ways to apply – develop a research proposal (with support from a supervisor), apply for a specific project.



# (.... what actually is a Social Science PhD?)

- A PhD in the social sciences is a programme of independent and original research usually addressing an area of societal or economic concern. It serves as an apprenticeship for a career in research-related fields. It usually takes 3 years and produces a thesis of around 70-100,000 words.
- It tends to be undertaken with the supervision of two or three academics who have some expertise of your subject area.
- It entails formal and informal development of advanced methods and disciplinary specific skills and of a range of generic skills that will enable you to shape future career choices in and beyond academia.
- It requires hard work, critical and creative thinking, communication skills and RESILIENCE in meeting challenges. It's (mostly) rewarding and when you get to the end, it will be one of your greatest achievements.





# Main funding sources in Social Sciences

# ESRC/SGSSS Funding



- ESRC are the largest UK funding organisation for research and postgraduate training in the economic and social sciences. They are part of UKRI
- Funding is distributed through Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)
- Approx. 50 opportunities available each year at Scottish Universities via SGSSS
- Scholarship covers your fees and provides a monthly stipend (approx £20,780 per year for 2024/25)
- Additional funding for training, conference attendance and fieldwork (£940 pa) with a supplementary fund for projects with overseas fieldwork
- Access to extra funding to undertake overseas institutional visits and placements with non-academic or academic organisations
- Support for any additional funds that a person studying for a doctorate might need as a result of a disability, mental health problem or specific learning difficulty.



# Other main sources of funding in the social sciences

- **Fully-Funded:**

Internal funding from a University (check university websites – usually match ESRC rates, but not always)

Carnegie Scholarship (need to be applying to a Scottish institution and have a first-class honours degree from a Scottish institution)

- **Partially-funded:**

There are many sources of partial funding for things like fieldwork, conferences, extra time to complete your thesis etc. It takes some individual research, but whatever extra costs you envision there is likely a pot of funding for it somewhere.

- **Self-funded:**

Students who are not receiving any substantial funding and are therefore paying for a PhD themselves using a combination of student loans (which must be repaid) savings or earnings.





# How could I become an SGSSS funded student?

## Two different routes

- Apply for a specific PhD project funded through our Supervisor-led Competitions. These will be available from early 2026.
- Apply through our Student-led Open Competition with a research proposal written by you (with the support of a supervisor). Deadline of 24th November 2025 (but you will need to start planning now and check that your selected university does not have its own internal deadlines).



# Residential Eligibility for an SGSSS studentship

- Take Home Messages:
  - International students can apply to all of our studentship opportunities, including the Student-led Open Competition.
  - We can award up to 30% of our studentships to international students.
  - Successful **international** students receive the same award as **home** students (fees, stipend etc.)

The rules on residential eligibility come from UKRI. To establish if you are a home or international student, please see our eligibility webpage for guidance

(<https://www.sgsss.ac.uk/studentships/eligibility/>).

SGSSS ensure that the 30% cap for international students is adhered to at each stage of our competition processes.

Managing the cap in our supervisor led competitions

- New approach
- Full information will be provided to you when applying for a supervisor-led award

# Applying for a pre-existing Supervisor-led PhD project with SGSSS





# Supervisor-led Competitions

## Studentships

### Steers Projects

3 awards in each of the following steers

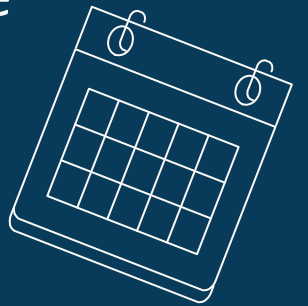
- Advanced Quantitative Methods
- Data Set
- Interdisciplinary

### Collaborative Projects

Approx. 15 awards

### Dates for your diary

- **Mid February 2026:** Projects advertised on SGSSS website
- **April / May 2026:** Interviews start to take place





# Applying to the SGSSS Student-led Open Competition



# Student-led Competition

## Studentships

Please note institutions may set their own internal deadlines

### ESRC Open Competition

Approx. 25 Awards

- ✓ Students apply to one challenge-led pathway
- ✓ Can only apply to one university
- ✓ You need to apply to SGSSS and to the relevant university

### Dates for your diary

- **10<sup>th</sup> September 2025:** Competition open for applications (launch)
- **7th November:** Applicant Drop-In Session (visit our website for details)
- **24th November:** Deadline for applications (proposal, transcripts, CV, equal opportunities data, eligibility checker and both references)
- **November 2025 – February 2026:** HEIs will begin reviewing after 25th November and have until 16 February to review and nominate. Should you be successful you will be invited to submit your Supervisor Statement Template and Disciplinary Template. Your deadline to upload these documents is 19 February 2026.





# Student led competition (the open competition) - what do you need to do/know? Part 1

- You need to work out where you want to do your PhD and with whom? This might be a question of geography, research specialism or particular academics that you'd like to work with (but remember that supervision is a team effort).
- You can apply to only one university and you need to check that your chosen university covers your [main disciplinary interests](#).
- Register with **SGSSS Apply** (our online platform).
- Start to think about which referees to use and check that they are happy for you to give their contact details - let them know what they will need to do and when they need to do it.
- Then you should write a draft research proposal (to save time, you can use the guidance provided on our website and have a look at exemplar proposals from previous years). Make sure that you carefully read all the guidance for this year (warning: it's quite detailed!):

<https://www.sgsss.ac.uk/studentships/open-competition/>

# Challenge-Led Pathways



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.

<https://www.sgsss.ac.uk/about-us/challenge-led-pathways/>

<b>Communication, AI, and New Technologies</b>	<b>Environment, Migration, and Demographic Change</b>
<b>Governance and Institutions</b>	<b>Health, Wellbeing and Communities</b>
<b>Securities: Justice, Economies, and Conflict</b>	<b>Social Inequalities</b>



# Student led competition (the open competition) - what do you need to do/know? Part 2

At this point you will want to be in touch with a possible supervisor (you might know who you want to supervise you *or* you might have to check university subject area/staff pages).

Expect to chase emails and to have to spend time honing your proposal once you do get a suitable supervisor.

Once you submit through **SGSSS Apply** then you will need to wait to see if you are selected by your university (HEI Review Stage) and be ready to make any upload the Supervisor Statement Template and Disciplinary Statement Template by or before **19<sup>th</sup> February 2026**.

After that, your application will be considered in two further review stages by assessors from other universities and other disciplines.



# Our thoughts on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)



# Valuing diversity in PhD applications

SGSSS are passionate about improving equality diversity and inclusion (EDI) amongst PhD awards

Our commitment to EDI is reflected in the value that reviewers place on diversity, so don't be afraid to include such details in your application. Remember:

- Experiences outside of academia are highly valued.
- Reflections on personal challenges are welcome and encouraged. The 'preparedness' question on the application form is designed to allow this.
- We want to know about your background and/or proposed approach to PhD study and how you will support diversity and inclusion in the PhD community.
- Reviewers (and supervisors) are looking for the 'whole person' ideally suited to the project – not a list of grades or a perfect CV

Diverse researchers make for better quality research!