Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS)

2026/27 Supervisor-Led Open Collaborative Competition

Applicant Guidance



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The closing date for applications is **15 October 2026 at 5pm**. The closing date will be strictly adhered to.

All applications must be submitted via the SGSSS online application system, SGSSS Apply.

SGSSS plans to communicate the outcome of the competition to successful and unsuccessful applicants on **4 December 2026.** As such, successful applicants will be able to start recruiting students during the first quarter of 2027.

1. Overview

1.1 Background

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is committed to supporting knowledge exchange and collaboration, to ensure that research has a positive impact on society and the economy. The ESRC's expectation is that 15% of the studentships led by Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) are collaborative studentships run in partnership with a non-academic partner organisation.

ESRC is conducting a Mid Term Review of all DTPs during late 2026, which SGSSS is looking forward to participating in. The outcome will be shared towards the end of the year, and confirmation of studentship awards made will be subject to that outcome.

The SGSSS is the UK's largest facilitator of funding, training and support for doctoral students in social science. By combining the expertise of 16 universities across Scotland, SGSSS facilitates world-class PhD research. SGSSS is funded by the ESRC, the Scottish Funding Council and partner Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

We are now inviting applications for the SGSSS Open Collaborative Studentship Competition that will see students start their projects in October 2027. The competition seeks a PhD studentship proposal that is developing through a collaboration between academics and a non-academic partner. The SGSSS defines "a "non-academic partner" broadly, so that this term encompasses collaboration with private sector companies, public sector bodies or third sector organisations. The collaborative partner may be based in the UK or overseas.

The key competition stages are outlined below:

1. Supervisors submit an application to SGSSS that they have co-developed with a non-academic partner organisation who will be named in the proposal.
2. An expert review panel convened by SGSSS reviews the applications.
3. Successful applicants are invited to start recruiting a student.
4. The supervisor informs the SGSSS of their preferred candidate, further to eligibility checks within their own University.
5. SGSSS approve the preferred candidate and specifies the necessary training required, thus determining the final award length offered.

Please note: As of 2024 intake, all ESRC funded students **are** expected to submit their PhD within the funded period – that is, the ESRC does not recognise **a** thesis-pending or 'writing-up' year. To support student wellbeing and to ensure that our universities are not penalised for non-completion (the ESRC reserves the right to withhold awards from institutions which do not comply), it is vitally important that project plans are feasible within the funded component of the PhD. This will be scrutinised by assessors. The research of the PhD must be done in three years. ESRC provide an additional 0.5 years (in the standard 3.5 year award) **to accommodate** "research in practice" placements (+ training) and new training for skills that ESRC wish PhD students to be exposed to.

Supervisors can only submit one application per supervisor-led competition – that is, a supervisor may apply once each to the Open Collaborative, the Skills Development Scotland Collaborative, and the Steers Competition. Please note, the single application requirement applies to any position within a supervisory team – that is, an applicant cannot apply to a competition as first supervisor on one application and second (or subsequent supervisor) on another application to the same competition. **Any application submitted to a supervisor-led competition must not be repurposed as a student-led application,** or vice-versa. Such applications will **be withdrawn from the competition.**

You can find more information on collaborative studentships on the SGSSS website here. In addition, the

ESRC has some general additional information on how they support collaboration on their website here.

1.2 Institutional eligibility and Challenge-led pathways

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. Social science PhD students at the two institutions who are not eligible to for funding (Queen Margaret University and Robert Gordon University) are eligible for training programmes offered by SGSSS.

To be eligible to be first supervisor in any SGSSS competition, supervisors will:

- Meet any institutional requirements of first supervisors that are not covered below. Please contact your HEI Administrative lead for this information;
- Have undergone supervisor training within your institution within the last five years;
- Hold a research and teaching or research-only contract expected to last for the duration of the proposed PhD project;
- Work in a department/school/subject area that is administratively aligned to an eligible Unit of Assessment (UoA) for your Higher Education Institution; and
- Be a research active Social Scientist with output (e.g. papers and/or research funding) that is aligned to your UoA.
- Where there is cross-institutional supervision, we expect that there are two supervisors based at the host institution.

In order to audit supervisor eligibility, as part of the application process, we ask all first supervisors to provide details of a paper or funded research project that adopts a social science perspective. For more on these questions, please visit this page.

Liaison with the relevant SGSSS PGR Lead at your institution is strongly encouraged. Details of previously funded projects can be found in **Appendix 1**.

Challenge-Led Pathways

From 2024 all SGSSS studentships have been organised around a set of key societal challenges ("challenge-led pathways"). These pathways 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. We will ask you to identify in your application form which challenge-led pathway you feel the project best fits with. Fit to challenge-led pathway is not used in our evaluation, rather, we use this information in the cohort building within challenge-led pathway student body.

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

SGSSS 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. SGSSS also want students to learn from one another about new methods and theories and knowledge exchange networks. Each challenge-led 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-led pathway.

What are the challenge-led pathways?

SGSSS have six challenge-led pathways. A brief description of each Pathway, what they cover, and examples of research our students are already doing is set out below. All social science methods are welcome for each challenge-led 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.

1. Communication, AI and New Technologies

This challenge-led 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-led 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-led 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-led 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-led 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-led 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?

We recognise that many applications will align with more than one challenge-led pathway. In discussion with your collaborative partner, you should decide which pathway fits best with the project. You will not be disadvantaged by your choice of pathway. There is no quota system in place for each pathway so you do not need to be concerned about the likely 'popularity' of any given challenge. Our intention is that the challenge-led pathways will be as broad and inclusive as possible, so you do not need to be concerned that your application will be judged a poor fit – what we want to hear is what you think the contribution of this PhD will be to the challenge area. Students will be able to switch pathways in year 1 of their studentship if they feel it is the wrong fit, and they 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?

The challenge-led pathways were developed partly through a "bottom-up" process, looking at the research of our existing students, so we are confident that the vast majority of likely proposals will fit at least one pathway. If, however, after reflection, 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, as the marking framework does not assess challenge fit. In your student's 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 student.

1.3 Funding Arrangements

Studentship Costs

To support the conversations that supervisors have with non-academic partners regarding the costs of a studentship, please see below for further information about the approximate full costs. Please note however, partner organisations are agreeing to pay a percentage of costs rather than a fixed amount and therefore the figures below are for illustrative purposes only.

A collaborative studentship should be advertised as both a +3.5 FTE (3.5 years for PhD, including training opportunities such as a placement) and a 1+3.5 FTE (Masters year plus 3.5 years for PhD including training opportunities such as a placement) award, and as both a part-time and full-time opportunity. The length will be finalised at the DNA meeting.

Estimates for 1+3.5 award (full-time basis):

Full award	2026/27*	2027/28*	2028/29*	2029/30*	2030/31*	TOTAL*
Stipend	£21,805	£22,437	£23,088	£23,758	£12,223	£103,311
Fees	£5,238	£5,348	£5,460	£5,575	£2,846	£24,467
OFW	£450	£450	£450	£450	£225	£2,025
RTSG	£940	£940	£940	£940	£470	£4,230
Cohort Development	£3,330	£0	£0	£0	£0	£3,330
Totals	£31,763	£29,175	£29,938	£30,723	£15,764	£137,363

*Assumed figures at a 2.9% increase for stipends and 2.1% for fees, year on year. Please note, the percentage increases are decided by UKRI annually who consider UK inflation rates (taking into account the UK Government's annual GDP deflator index) and market conditions. Due to the current economic situation in the UK, we anticipate the annual percentage increases are likely to vary from those assumed above.

Estimates for 3.5 award (full-time basis):

Full award	2026/27*	2027/28*	2028/29*	2029/30*	TOTAL*
Stipend	£21,805	£22,437	£23,088	£11,879	£79,209
Fees	£5,238	£5,348	£5,460	£2,788	£18,834
OFW	£450	£450	£450	£225	£1,575
RTSG	£940	£940	£940	£470	£3,290
Cohort Development	£3,330	£0	£0	£0	£3,330
Totals	£31,763	£29,175	£29,938	£15,362	£106,238

*Assumed figures at a 2.9% increase for stipends and 2.1% for fees, year on year. Please note, the percentage increases are decided by UKRI annually who consider UK inflation rates (taking into account the UK Government's annual GDP deflator index) and market conditions. Due to the current economic situation in the UK, we suspect that the annual percentage increases are likely to vary from those assumed above.

SGSSS Funding

SGSSS funding is as per the standard ESRC studentship package: fees (capped at a home fee level), maintenance stipend, Research Training Support Grant (RTSG), cohort development and overseas fieldwork support. Additional funding requirements, including travel, subsistence, and accommodation in connection with visits to the collaborating partner, will *not* be funded by SGSSS.

The SGSSS funding model has contributions from SGSSS, the host HEI and the non-academic partner. The contribution from the non-academic partner varies between 10% and 50% depending on sector and scale.

- 10% contribution from the non-academic partner: 25% contribution from host HEI and 65% from SGSSS
- 25% contribution from the non-academic partner: 25% contribution from host HEI and 50% from SGSSS
- 33% contribution from the non-academic partner: 17% contribution from host HEI and 50% from SGSSS
- 50% contribution from the non-academic partner: 0% contribution from host HEI and 50% from SGSSS

Please see here for full guidance on the different types of SGSSS funding arrangements available for each studentship competition/studentship type.

Collaborative Partner Contributions

There is an expectation that collaborative studentships include an element of monetary co-funding. This is to ensure that the collaborative partner is engaged with the studentship and that the project will be sustainable.

We understand that organisations will contribute in different ways to the studentships, and that a flat fee might make the projects inaccessible for some partners. Please see below for a guide to help supervisors identify the recommended contribution for a non-academic partner organisation.

Private Sector

Company size	Company turnover	Contribution	Approx. total cost of 1+3.5	Approx. total cost of 3.5
Micro < 10 employees	< £630K	10%	£13,736	£10,624

Small < 50 employees	< £10M	25%	£34,341	£23,560
Medium < 250 employees	< £50M	33%	£45,330	£35,058
Large > 250 employees	> £50M	50%	£68,682	£53,119

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 one-third of the full studentship and cohort-development costs.

Contribution	Approx. total cost of 1+3.5	Approx. total cost of 3.5
33%	£45,330	£35,058

Charity/Third Sector

Contribution	Approx. total cost of 1+3.5	Approx. total cost of 3.5
10%	£13,736	£10,624

In-kind Contributions

SGSSS consider applications with an in-kind contribution from the collaborative partner. In these cases, we would require information about the cash value equivalent of in-kind support. As such, the supervisor will need to make it clear in the application what type of in-kind support is being provided and how this can be quantified. Where a collaborative partner proposes to provide an in-kind contribution rather than a financial contribution, the HEI is therefore responsible for one third of the studentship costs as per the standard co-funding arrangement:

SGSSS: 67.0%; HEI: 33.0%; Collaborative Partner: 0.0%

Important: You may need to check and/or seek approval from your home institutions SGSSS Dean of Graduate Studies prior to discussing this type of contribution with your prospective collaborative partner. See below for more on HEI Funding Confirmation.

HEI Funding Confirmation

All applicants should seek funding confirmation (email or letter) from the home institution's SGSSS Dean of Graduate Studies, confirming that the institution will meet the required financial contribution, be it an in-kind studentship or co-funded by the collaborative partner (as per the various co-funding agreement possibilities detailed above). This confirmation will need to be uploaded as part of the application submission via SGSSS Apply.

Administration of Collaborative Partner Contributions

It is the responsibility of the HEI to agree the funding arrangements with the collaborative partner and to arrange for the funding to be paid to the HEI directly – SGSSS will only ever pay a HEI the SGSSS percentage of cost(s) for a studentship.

Cross-Institutional Supervision

SGSSS support cross-institutional supervision where the arrangements are in the best interests of students.

In these cases, the lead institution will be regarded as the host institution. The expectation is that the host institution will be responsible for covering the HEI contribution of the relevant funding split. The second institution will not be responsible for any proportion of the contribution. Further, the fees due will be transferred to the host institution with no expectation of a proportion of the fees going to the second institution.

Exceptions will be made where the cross-institutional supervision partnership is with one of our two institutions[1] that currently do not hold studentships. For these studentships, 33.0% of SGSSS contribution to fees will be made to the second institution as part of the SGSSS reconciliation process (with the remaining 67.0% going to the host institution).

Where there is cross-institutional supervision, we expect that there are two supervisors based at the host institution.

[1] For DTP 1: Abertay University, University of Highlands & Islands, Robert Gordon University, University of the West of Scotland; for DTP 2: Queen Margaret University and Robert Gordon University.

1.4 Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement/Collaborative Agreement

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 the formal Collaborative Agreement[2] which is required if you are awarded a studentship. 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 the supervision/development of the student and their project;
- The agreed co-funding arrangement;
- Any agreed additional funding, i.e., this may include details of how the travel, subsistence and accommodation costs incurred by the student associated with visits to the non-academic organisation will be covered;
- Any arrangements for special materials and facilities which will be made available to the student;
- Any appropriate arrangements relating to Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). Please see section 4 of the Collaborative Agreement template above and indicate your willingness to adhere to the terms. If not, please provide a detailed justification for any proposed changes; and
- The details of any previous involvement in social science research by the collaborating organisation. This should include any collaboration that has previously taken place (e.g., former studentship applications) between the two parties.

If you are awarded a studentship, SGSSS will send you the Collaborative Agreement template which will need to be completed and signed off by the lead institution and your collaborative partner by **12 March 2027.** Once a student has been appointed, they will also be required to also sign the agreement and submit the updated agreement by no later than **27 August 2027.**

[2] SGSSS has a standard Collaborative Agreement template which all successful supervisors and collaborative partners will need to complete.

2. Application Process

2.1 Supervisor Applications

Applications should be submitted by prospective first/lead supervisors meet the criteria listed on page 3 (see section 1.2 for more). SGSSS supports applications from academics at any stage in their careers, i.e., from early career researchers to more experienced supervisors. If an academic is applying as the first/lead supervisor, SGSSS require that they have one or more members on the supervisory team that are experienced in supervising PhD students to completion, i.e., a supervisor with at least two PhD completions. External Partners may be listed as third supervisors.

Since 2024, all PhD supervisors in receipt of ESRC funding are expected to participate in a SGSSS-led Development Needs Analysis (DNA) with their student. This DNA process is designed to help SGSSS identify training, support and networks that will support our successful supervisors and students. As part of the application, you will also be asked to identify any training needs that you feel you have to support the project. We will also ask you whether you have ideas at this stage about the placement that your student could undertake, although there is no expectation that projects will come with a placement pre-agreed as this will ultimately be a choice for the student.[3] If successful, we will invite the supervisory team and student to a meeting with SGSSS before the research begins to discuss the project and learn more about how the DTP can support you.

The application form is available here for download and completion. Please note, after an award has been made, the home institution will need to sign a Collaborative Agreement with the non-academic partner organisation, returning a copy of the completed partnership agreement to SGSSS (**no later than 12 March 2027**). SGSSS now has a standard Collaborative Agreement template which all successful supervisors and collaborative partners will be required to use. This will be shared with successful supervisors when awards are made.

2.1 Ethics Guidance

The SGSSS Open Collaborative Competition 2025/26 application form states that the case for support **MUST** include:

> 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.

We recognise that the 2,250 word limit constrains the level of detail available to applicants, but we expect to see consideration of ethical issues commensurate with the type of study being proposed. Where possible, applicants should indicate both the principles and practicalities of relevant ethical considerations and demonstrate how they are integral to all stages of the research. *All* research projects need to be considered in terms of ethics and integrity, even if they do not involve human participants.

Pointing to relevant experience of the supervisors and other sources of support will provide further reassurance that consideration has been given to the training needs of the research student, their personal safety and wellbeing, where relevant, and how emergent issues will be managed. Note that studies involving children or vulnerable populations, social media or involving overseas fieldwork may need particularly careful consideration. Proposals for the Open Collaborative Studentship Competition and others involving elements of co-production may also require special consideration in terms of

[3] As above, from 2024 it ,has been expected that ESRC funded students be given 0.5 years (FTE) as part of their award (standard length: 3.5)for training and "research in practice". Within the 0.5 period (six months), students will undertake a placement as part of their PhD (three months) and take part in new aspects of training that were not covered in previous guidelines (such as emerging methods, generic research management skills and research in practice training) (three months). The placement will be the equivalent of three months full-time, and could be a research post out with academia, a research post with a different University or research centre within academia, or a non-research post within academia (i.e. with a professional services team).

partners' roles and intellectual property. For guidance on how intellectual property rights should be handled, please see **Section 4** of the SGSSS Collaborative Agreement template here, noting the relevant sections.

In addition to guidance from your professional discipline-based association (e.g. BERA, BPS, BSA) and your home institution, many useful resources are provided by ESRC here. As their guidance notes, ethical considerations are "less about compliance and 'getting through' the ethics process, and more about mature, constructive and collaborative ethical deliberation, mutual learning and shared action aimed at maximising benefit and minimising harm." Some proposals may also benefit from EPSRC resources on responsible innovation available here.

Below are examples taken from research proposals where SGSSS considered the approach to ethics to be inadequate. In all cases, more information was required to assure the reviewers that supervisors had a good understanding of the ethical implications of the study and of the student's likely training needs. The amount of detail required will depend to some extent on the type of project proposed, but reviewers will want to be confident that supervisors will promote good practice in the areas of ethics and integrity.

"All data are fully anonymised and will be kept securely."

"Data collection will conform with strict protocols."

"The work does not involve human participants or ethical data and therefore does not require ethical review."

"There are no substantial ethical issues associated with this project."

"The supervisory team will ensure that the data are ethically obtained."

"We will apply for NHS ethical approval."

"Ethical approval will be sought from the faculty of X's ethics committee. We will follow the guidelines established by the British Association of X."

"The student will be trained to deal with ethical considerations through the department and other training."

2.2 Competition Timeline

Please see below a timeline with the key dates for the 2026/27 competition. Please note, before a student is appointed, the home institution will need to complete eligibility checks to establish if the nominated student is eligible for the award, and in what capacity, i.e., home or international student. In addition, the Collaborative Agreement must be completed, and a copy shared with SGSSS by **27 August 2027.**

2.2 Studentship Recruitment

Dates and Times	SGSSS Supervisor-led Open Collaborative Studentship Competition Timeline 2026/27
Competition Launch	
18 August (Tuesday)	Launch of Competition. Applicants can access SGSSS Apply to register and/or submit applications
2 September, 11-12 pm (Wednesday)	All interested applicants are welcomed to attend our webinar for this competition and our Steers Competition on this day. Recording will be available after the session. Link can be found on the website: https://www.sgsss.ac.uk/studentships/collaborative-competition/
15 October, 5 pm (Thursday)	Deadline for applications via SGSSS Apply
Outcome of Competition	
04 December, by 5pm (Friday)	SGSSS to communicate the outcome of the Competition to all applicants (successful and unsuccessful), confirming awards

Student Eligibility

As per guidance published by UKRI, a minimum of 70% of all studentships awarded by SGSSS must 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 should always remain the primary assessment criterion during the competition.

Residential Criteria

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

- Be a UK national (meeting residency requirements), or
- Have settled status, or
- Have pre-settled status (meeting residency requirements), or

- Have indefinite leave to remain or enter.

If a student does not meet the above criteria they are assessed as an international student.

The ESRC is committed to equality and diversity of opportunity. For widening access purposes, all collaborative studentship opportunities should be offered as a +3.5 or 1+3.5 award and for full-time or part-time study. The 1+3.5 award should be designed to support students that do not have a Masters degree prior to appointment, i.e. Masters year plus 3 years for the PhD.

Important information regarding recruiting international students (only applicable to the universities listed below (this guidance was included on 08 September 2026):

SGSSS studentship awards include funding which covers home fees. Please be aware that if a student is categorised as liable for international fee status, the following universities will likely charge them the difference between the home and international fee level:

- **University of Glasgow,**
- **University of Dundee,**
- **Glasgow Caledonian University,**
- **Heriot-Watt University, and**
- **University of Stirling.**

That means if they accept the studentship at one of these universities, they will be liable to pay additional fee costs, and funding will not be available from SGSSS beyond the home fee level already covered. Please note that for visa purposes, you will have to demonstrate that you can pay the difference in fees (the exact amount will vary by university, but this could be around £15,000-£20,000 per annum).

Supervisors should clearly identify how they plan to advertise and recruit a student as part of their initial application. If successfully awarded a studentship, supervisors will need to consider the following guidance during the recruitment process:

Regulations on appointing students

- All studentships should be fairly advertised and abide by the recruitment processes within the first supervisor's institution. The expectation is that student recruitment would start in early 2027. Exact dates will be confirmed if your project is found successful.
- SGSSS will advertise all opportunities on its website, however in prior years some awards have proved difficult to fill. As such, please ensure you commit to advertising as widely as possible to ensure the best choice of well-qualified student candidates. Please consider in advance whether your HEI or collaborative partner would be willing to pay for further advertisements.
- The first supervisor's instution **must** ensure the nominated student's eligibility, i.e., home or international status is correct. This is vital to allow SGSSS to adhere to the ESRC's 30% cap on international students. We strongly recommend that eligibility checks take place after candidates have been shortlisted and before they are invited for interview. The ESRC residency criteria is available within the ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide.
- The SGSSS **must** approve all student appointments before they are confirmed. The ESRC continually monitors SGSSS processes, and it is critical that students entering directly onto doctoral programmes meet the required ESRC core training criteria.
- **As there is a 30% cap on recruiting international students, only 30% of the awarded studentships to our supervisor-led awards will be able to have an international student. In the event that international student nominations exceed 30% of the total studentships, SGSSS will award places to the pool of first-ranked international students using a lottery. The detailed guidance will be provided to you at the time of award. It will include information on the student**

recruitment timeline, how to review applications, as how to nominate students, amongst other information.

2.3 ESRC Approved Masters Provision

When you come to recruit a student to fill the studentship award, if successful, they may be required to undertake a 1+3.5 FTE award (Masters year plus 3.5 years for PhD). If this is the case and the home institution does not offer an ESRC approved Masters programme on the desired SGSSS Unit of Assessment, the student will be required to undertake their Masters at another SGSSS institution where an approved ESRC Masters programme is available (before transferring to their home institution for the remainder of the PhD programme). If this could apply to your student, i.e., your institution does not have an ESRC approved Masters programme aligned to the pathway you are applying under, you must upload a completed Masters Arrangement Form as part of your application. This must be completed in conjunction with the relevant SGSSS Dean of Graduate Studies representative at the institution where the Masters will be undertaken.

Please Note:

- SGSSS will undertake a training requirement assessment for all nominated students, determining the length of the award applicable (1+3.5, +3.5 FTE etc.). For more details on possible award lengths, please see the guidance here.

3. Open Collaborative Marking Framework

Each application is to be assessed according to three categories with a total score out of 25. These categories are.

1. Research Proposal – Score out of 10 (40%)
2. Supervision & Training – Score out of 10 (40%)
3. Collaboration – Score out of 5 (20%)

The table below details the marking framework descriptors for each category.

SGSSS Open Collaborative Competition Marking Framework 2026/27

Score	Research Proposal (OUT OF 10)	Supervision & Training (OUT OF 10)	Collaboration (OUT OF 5)
	Descriptors: Please note that the descriptors can be used with discretion where there is a good case to do so		
10	An excellent proposal and scoring well in terms of both cogency and originality. All components – overview, context, methodology, and impact – will be well thought out and clearly expressed. PLUS Proposal is exceptionally good in all of its components AND Fulfils criteria 9 to 7 below	Supervision arrangements represent a near-perfect fit with the proposed research in relation to methods, substantive topic area and academic/policy networks. The supervisory team includes at least one experienced supervisor with recognised expertise in the field (SGSSS is very supportive of the inclusion of a less experienced supervisor for capacity building reasons). There is excellent fit between the research and the wider department/school/college. The supervisory team demonstrates excellence in their commitment to helping the student address their development needs over the course of the PhD and in their existing plans to meet these within and outside the home HEI. They have also engaged very well with the identification of their own development needs.	
9	Proposal is highly original and innovative, at the cutting edge of developments substantively and methodologically AND Fulfils criteria 8 to 7 below		

8	Proposal contains clear awareness of the potential impact of the research AND Fulfils criterion 7 below	Supervision arrangements represent a very good fit with the proposed research in relation to methods, substantive topic area and academic/policy networks. The supervisory team includes at least one experienced supervisor with a strong reputation for research in this field. There is very good fit between the research and the wider department/school/college. The supervisory team demonstrates very good commitment to helping the student address their development needs over the course of the PhD and in their existing plans to meet these within and outside the home HEI. They have also engaged well with the identification of their own development needs.	
7	A well-defined proposal with researchable questions, appropriately identified sources, an awareness of the theoretical and empirical background to the research and an appropriate methodology cognisant of ethical issues. The proposal should display an awareness of the research of the economic and societal relevance feasible within 3 years of a funded PhD including appropriate risk assessment.		
6	A good and promising proposal but with identifiable weaknesses. Some, but not all, components of the proposal will be problematic, ill- expressed, or show a lack of knowledge. PLUS A good proposal with only minor but still identifiable weaknesses. The research question will be clear, the methodology appropriate and clearly presented, and most of the appropriate literature identified.	Supervision arrangements represent a good fit with the proposed research in relation to methods, substantive topic area and academic/policy networks. The supervisory team includes at least one experienced supervisor with a good reputation for research in this field. There is good fit between the research and the wider department/school/college. The supervisory team demonstrates good commitment to helping the student address their development needs over the course of the PhD and have articulated their existing plans to meet these within and outside the home HEI. They have also	

5	A promising proposal that suffers from several weaknesses. The methodology is appropriate but ill-expressed. The proposal is only weakly grounded in relevant literature.	engaged with the identification of their own development needs.	The proposed collaboration represents an ideal fit with the proposal, demonstrates significant and well-resourced engagement of the collaborating partner planned throughout the PhD.
4	A proposal with one serious weakness or several minor ones, which suggests gaps in knowledge and a weak grasp of the proposed methodology and its suitability.	Supervision arrangements are appropriate though the fit is not as strong as it could be but at least one supervisor has some experience in the area of the proposed research in relation to methods, substantive topic area and academic/policy networks. There is some fit between the research and the wider department/school/college although the relationship might be rather weak. The supervisory team demonstrates some but not strong commitment to helping the student address their development needs over the course of the PhD and have some plans to meet these within and outside the home HEI. Their identification of their own development needs is weak .	The proposed collaboration represents a very good fit with the proposal, demonstrates very good and well-resourced engagement of the collaborating partner planned throughout the PhD.
3	A proposal with significant weaknesses in multiple components, little appreciation of possible methodologies, and/or awareness of relevant literature.		The proposed collaboration represents a good fit with the proposal, demonstrates adequately resourced engagement (financial or in-kind) of the collaborating partner.
2	A problematic proposal that would need considerable additional work before being fundable. All components of the proposal will require further work and/or demonstrate little or no background or interest in their subject.	There is a poor fit between the proposal and supervisor experience and/or the wider department/school/college AND/OR consideration of likely development needs (supervisor and student) and how they will be addressed is cursory/generic.	The proposed collaboration represents an adequate fit with the proposal but fails to demonstrate good engagement of the collaborating partner throughout the PhD.
1			The proposed collaboration represents a poor fit with the proposal, demonstrates weak or no evidence of the engagement of the collaborating partner throughout the PhD.

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4. Appendix: Example Applications

The below three examples feature extracts from applications to the Open Collaborative Competition submitted during the 2025/26 cycle, where PhD projects started from October 2026. We have included a summary of the project information and then the abstract taken directly from the applications.

Project 1: How can telephone CPR instructions be more effective and less distressing? Exploring the views of lay-responders with recent lived experience.

Key Information

- **Supervisor:** Professor Julia Allan
- **University:** University of Stirling
- **Non-academic partner:** Sudden Adult Death Trust (SADS UK)
- **Unit of Assessment (UoA):** A4 - Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience
- **Challenge-led pathway**: Health, Wellbeing and Communities

Abstract

Out-of-hospital cardiac arrest (OHCA) is common and serious: UK survival is only ~10%. Immediate cardio-pulmonary-resuscitation (CPR) increases survival but is often not provided, even when ambulance services provide telephone instructions. Lay-responders encounter barriers to delivering CPR AND can experience significant distress. Currently, there is NO high-quality evidence about how telephone-CPR instructions are perceived by lay-responders. Social support theory, which posits emotional, practical, informational and appraisal support may help to optimise CPR instructions.

Aim: To investigate lay responders' recollections and interpretations of CPR instructions to identify what was helpful/unhelpful in (i) achieving timely CPR and (ii) minimising caller distress.

Design: Comparative qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and analysis of ambulance-call transcripts.

Population: Adults who received telephone CPR instructions in previous 3 months recruited via: 1) survivor charities (including SADS UK), 2) attending ambulance clinicians and 3) social media.

Sample: A purposive sample of ~40 participants will be interviewed, aiming for diversity and, following the principle of information power, sufficient to conduct a theory-based analysis

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews will explore lay-responders' recollections of the CPR instructions received; aspects they found helpful/unhelpful/surprising/distressing both at the time and since, including suggestions for modifications. Where participants consent, they will be asked to review the call transcript and 'think aloud/narrate' what they thought and felt throughout the call. Objective records have been used widely in social science to enhance memory and prompt detailed reflection on events but not previously in this context. The acceptability of this method will be explored with participants, making an important methodological contribution.

Analysis: Data will be analysed thematically, both inductively and deductively, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step analytical process and informed by Social Support Theory6. Where participants' consent, comparative analyses will also compare participants' recollections with the objective record and experiences of "new enhanced (behaviourally-informed)" CPR instructions with standard instructions.

Project 2: Empirical studies of behavioural and distributional effects of Scottish Income Tax

Key Information

- **Supervisor:** Dr João Sousa
- **University:** University of Strathclyde
- **Non-academic partner:** Scottish Government
- **Unit of Assessment (UoA):** C17 - Business and Management Studies
- **Challenge-led pathway**: Social Inequalities

Abstract

This project will provide a comprehensive empirical analysis of the behavioural and distributional effects of Scottish Income Tax divergence from the rest of the UK. Since 2018, Scotland has introduced distinctive tax rates and bands, creating a quasi-experimental setting to understand how tax affects work incentives, income adjustment behaviours, and household welfare. With National Insurance thresholds remaining aligned across the UK while income tax thresholds diverge, and relevant elements of the benefit system such as Child Benefit and the High Income Child Benefit Charge, are reserved to the UK Government, understanding the combined effects on different household types is crucial for evidence-based policymaking.

The research will address some core questions, such as:

- How the Scottish tax-benefit system affect household-level work incentives, particularly for second earners
- What behavioural responses occur around key thresholds such as the higher-rate threshold and High Income Child Benefit Charge?
- How cost-of-living variations by household type and location inform debates on tax competitiveness and fairness?

Using rich administrative and survey microdata from HMRC and DWP, the project will employ advanced quasi-experimental methods, leveraging Scotland as a treatment group with the rest of the UK as a comparison.

The collaboration with the Scottish Government is central to this project's success. Two three-month placements will provide the student with access to restricted administrative data, opportunities to engage with policy practitioners, and experience translating academic research into policy-relevant outputs. The student will be embedded within Strathclyde's Fraser of Allander Institute, a leading economic research centre with established expertise in Scottish tax analysis and strong knowledge exchange capabilities.

Outputs will include research papers for peer-reviewed journals, policy briefs, and knowledge exchange activities through the Fraser of Allander Institute's influential platforms, ensuring maximum impact for both academic and policy audiences.

Project 3: Neurodivergent students' access to education: the role of social inequalities, child and family factors.

Key Information

- **Supervisor:** Dr Katie Cebula
- **University:** University of Edinburgh
- **Non-academic partner:** Mindroom
- **Unit of Assessment (UoA):** C23 - Education
- **Challenge-led pathway**: Social Inequalities

Abstract

Neurodivergent children (e.g. autistic/with ADHD) experience difficulties in accessing school, with non-attendance a significant concern. Reasons for these absences include experiences of bullying and sensory overwhelm in schools. Social inequality is also a factor, with neurodivergent pupils living in poverty significantly more likely to be absent than those from more affluent families. The consequences of non-attendance can be severe, with long-term implications for children's mental health, academic attainment, and career prospects. Families play a key role in children's school attendance. However, although previous research reports associations between school attendance and family factors (e.g. parental employment and mental health) these findings come largely from small-scale surveys. Additionally, there is a lack of longitudinal information, for example on how parental mental ill-health might both contribute to, and be a consequence of, children's school absences. Furthermore, whilst administrative educational and health datasets provide important information on this topic, young people themselves have had very limited voice in administrative data research, despite the fact that it is their lives reflected within it.

This innovative PhD brings together a multidisciplinary supervisory team (Psychology, Public Health, Education) with two partner organisations: Mindroom and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation who offer a wealth of expertise on neurodiversity and poverty respectively. The PhD comprises a systematic review with analysis of educational and health administrative data in order to enhance knowledge of neurodivergent children's school absences, the role of poverty, and the contributory and outcome family factors. Neurodivergent young people will have central involvement in study design, and in the interpretation and communication of study findings/recommendations. The PhD offers the student a rich opportunity to develop research, co-production and knowledge exchange skills. The involvement of young people and the partner organisations mean that the research is well-positioned to make a tangible positive difference to families of neurodivergent young people.