Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS)

2025/26 Supervisor-Led Steers Competition

Applicant Guidance

Contents

Stage 1

The deadline for the submission of a Stage 1 application (Expression of Interest) is **24 September 2025 at 5pm**. Applicants will be informed of the outcome of Stage 1 on 20 October 2025.

Stage 2

The deadline for the submission of a Stage 2 application (full application) is **17 November 2025 at 5pm**. Applicants will be informed of the outcome of Stage 2 on **10 February 2026**. As such, successful applicants will be in a position to start recruiting students during the first quarter of 2025.

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

1. Overview

1.1 Background

The SGSSS is the UK's largest facilitator of funding, training and support for doctoral students in social science. By combining the expertise of sixteen universities across Scotland, the school facilitates world-class PhD research. The school is jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

In line with the ESRC's core commitment to enhancing social science capability and building capacity in priority areas, the SGSSS is running a **two stage** Supervisor-led Competition awarding studentships in the following priority areas (steers):

- Advanced Quantitative Methods (AQM)
- Datasets
- Interdisciplinary (research which straddles other research council remits)

Up to **three** awards will be allocated per steer during the 2025/26 competition with students starting their studentships in October 2026.

The key competition stages are outlined below:

1. Supervisors submit a Stage 1 application (Expression of Interest).
2. The SGSSS Directorate review all Stage 1 applications.
3. Shortlisted supervisors are invited to submit a Stage 2 application (full application).
4. A cross-institutional group of expert reviewers and a subsequent Steers panel review and select successful Stage 2 applications.
5. Successful Stage 2 applicants are informed of the outcome of their applications and are invited to start student recruitment.
6. Supervisor informs SGSSS of their preferred candidate, further to eligibility checks within their own University.
7. SGSSS approve the preferred candidate and specify the necessary training requirements for the student, subject to their eligibility checks, thus determining the final award length offered.

Please note, supervisors can only submit one application per supervisor-led competition – that is, a supervisor may apply once 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, with any applications to the Student-led Open Competition, which are assessed to be resubmissions of a supervisor-led application being withdrawn from the competition**

For the Steers Competition we allow a supervisor to submit the same application to more than one steer during the application cycle. This should only be done if there is a strong and clear case that the application meets the aims of more than one steer and should not be done on a speculative basis.

1.2 Funding Arrangements

SGSSS Funding

SGSSS-DTP funding consists of the standard ESRC studentship package: fees, maintenance, Research Training Support Grant (RTSG), cohort development and overseas travel allowance.

The SGSSS funding model states that all steer studentships awarded will be co-funded by the host institution to the value of one third as follows:

SGSSS: 67%; HEI: 33%

The exception to the one-third HEI contribution is where the award is for a collaborative studentship with a financial contribution from a non-academic partner. For these awards the contribution from the host institution is reduced as follows:

- 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.

Cross-Institutional Supervision

We 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 institutional 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 four institutions[1] that currently do not hold studentships. For these studentships, 33% of fee income will go to the second institution as part of the SGSSS reconciliation process (with the remaining 67% going to the host institution).

Institutional Funding Confirmation

All shortlisted Stage 2 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. This confirmation will need to be uploaded as part of the Stage 2 application submission via SGSSS Apply. Please note, this is not required when submitting a Stage 1 application.

[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.

2. Application Process

2.1 Application Guidance

Applications should be submitted by prospective first/lead supervisors meet the criteria listed in pg. 5 (see guidance below for more). SGSSS supports applications from academics at any stage in their careers, i.e., from early career researchers to more experienced supervisors. What we do ask however, is if a less experienced academic is applying as the first/lead supervisor, 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.

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.

Each university will hold and update a register of eligibility.

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. Be a research active Social Scientist with output (papers and/or research funding) that is aligned to your unit of assessment

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**.

As of the 2024 intake, all ESRC funded students will be expected to submit their PhD within the funded period for research (3 years or part-time equivalent) – that is, the ESRC will no longer recognise the 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 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 3 years. ESRC provide an additional 0.5 years but this is not for PhD research it comprises research in practice (+ training) and new skills that ESRC wish PhD students to be exposed to.

2.1.1 Advanced Quantitative Methods (AQM)

This competition aims to encourage the development of advanced quantitative methods skills in relation to the norms of the discipline. Applicants are advised to read the ESRC Guidance on Steers and Targets which provides the requirements of an AQM award.

Stage 1

Applicants are invited to submit a co-produced Stage 1 application (Expression of Interest). The brevity of a Stage 1 application is to encourage rapid and creative responses from interested colleagues. It should articulate the primary conceptual idea and methodology of the proposal and demonstrate how it meets the AQM criteria. The Stage 1 application form can be found here and should be submitted via SGSSS Apply by 5pm on **24 September 2025.**

Please Note: When assessing applications, equal weight will be given to the research proposal and the supervisory team/research environment; both must demonstrably fit the steer – see the Marking Framework for details. The highest scoring applicants will be asked to submit a full proposal as outlined in Stage 2.

Stage 2

Shortlisted applicants will be asked to submit a Stage 2 application (full application) via *SGSSS Apply*. The same weighting will be applied to the assessment of applications as at Stage 1. The top **three** proposals will then be funded and supervisors will be required to advertise studentships widely. The Stage 2 application form can be found here and should be submitted via SGSSS Apply by 5pm on **17 November 2025.**

2.1.2 Datasets

This competition aims to encourage the development of data skills as applied to secondary data analysis. Applicants are advised to read the ESRC Guidance on Steers and Targets which provides the requirements of a datasets award. In addition to the ESRC Guidance on Steers and Targets criteria, where applications involve the use of datasets created through applicant's own research, you should evidence that:

- The primary project funding period has ended;
- At least one publication deriving from the funded project has appeared in a peer-reviewed journal; and,
- The project through which the dataset has been generated has been externally funded and awarded through a peer-review process.

Stage 1

Applicants are invited to submit a co-produced Stage 1 application (Expression of Interest). The brevity of a Stage 1 application is to encourage rapid and creative responses from interested colleagues. It should articulate the primary conceptual idea and methodology of the proposal and demonstrate how it meets the datasets criteria. The Stage 1 application form can be found here and should be submitted via SGSSS Apply by 5pm on **24 September 2025.**

Please Note: When assessing applications, equal weight will be given to the research proposal and the supervisory team/research environment; both must demonstrably fit the steer – see the Marking Framework for details. The highest scoring applicants will be asked to submit a full proposal as outlined in Stage 2.

Stage 2

Selected applicants will be asked to submit a full Stage 2 application via *SGSSS Apply*. The same weighting will be applied to the assessment of applications as at Stage 1. The top **three** proposals will then be funded and supervisors will be required to advertise studentships widely. The Stage 2 application form can be found here and should be submitted via SGSSS Apply by 5pm on **17 November 2025.**

If you are applying for a datasets award, please confirm the following within your Stage 2 application: you are confident that the necessary data outlined in the proposal will be available to the student in a timely fashion AND where there are costs associated with accessing the data (including required specialist subsets), how these costs will be met.

2.1.3 Interdisciplinary

This competition aims to encourage conceptual and methodological creativity. Co-funding from another Doctoral Training Partnership is not required however applicants are advised to read the ESRC Guidance on Steers and Targets which details the requirements of an interdisciplinary award.

Stage 1

Applicants are invited to submit a co-produced Stage 1 application (Expression of Interest). The supervisory team should consist of a first supervisor within the social sciences and a second supervisor outwith the social sciences who demonstrably works within the remit of another research council. The brevity of a Stage 1 application is to encourage rapid and creative responses from interested colleagues. It should articulate the primary conceptual idea and methodology of the proposal and demonstrate how it meets the interdisciplinary brief. The Stage 1 application form can be found here and should be submitted via SGSSS Apply by 5pm on **24 September 2025.**

Please Note: When assessing applications, equal weight will be given to the research proposal and the supervisory team/research environment; both must demonstrably fit the steer - see the Marking Framework for details. The highest scoring applicants will be asked to submit a full proposal as outlined in Stage 2.

Stage 2

Shortlisted applicants will be invited to submit a Stage 2 application (full application) via *SGSSS Apply*. The same weighting will be applied to the assessment of applications as at Stage 1. The top **three** proposals will then be funded and supervisors will be required to advertise studentships widely. The Stage 2 application form can be found here and should be submitted via SGSSS Apply by 5pm on **17 November 2025.**

2.2 Ethics Guidance

The Steers Competition Stage 2 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 consider, of which is stion.

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 UKRI 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, we include some examples taken from research proposals where we 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."

Please note that there is no specific requirement to address ethics during Stage 1, however, in most cases we would expect to see an indication of an awareness of the need for ethical considerations in the section on key strengths of the proposed supervisory team and/or the case for support.

2.3 Example Projects (funded in 24/25 competition cycle)

Details of the following recently funded projects can be found in **Appendix 1**.

Advanced Quantitative Methods

- Understanding the complex place-based factors associated with the spread of COVID-19 infection amongst populations in the UK
- Connecting the dots: investigating how multiple sources of disadvantage intersect and shape attitudes towards school, work and post-school destinations
- Integrating Behavioural Theories into Simulation Models to Advance the Health Policy Evaluation Approach in Value-Based Health and Care

Datasets

- Public transport and social welfare: The impact of bus connectivity on employment outcomes for low-income populations
- Disabled People's Lived Experiences of Benefit Reform and the Costs of Disability
- Evaluating the impact of minimum unit pricing on alcohol consumption and harm using record linked datasets

Interdisciplinary

- Adaptive Reading Technologies
- Leveraging gridded population data to advance risk assessment for geohazards.
- Contributing cross cultural meaning to sentiment analysis: a case study of qualitative data sets on youth and uncertainty from Ethiopia and Nepal

2.4 Competition Timeline

Please find below the Supervisor-led Steers Studentship Competition 2025/26 timeline. Individual institutions may wish to deploy earlier internal deadlines for Stage 1 and Stage 2 applications.

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.
For a full copy of the timeline, click this link.

6. Studentships

6.1 Student Eligibility

In October 2020, the eligibility criteria for ESRC funding changed for studentships commencing from 2021 onwards.

As per guidance published by UKRI, 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 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 to be assessed as an international student.

6.2 Student Recruitment

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 Master's degree prior to appointment, i.e. Master's year plus 3 years for the PhD. The length will be finalised at the DNA meeting and there is a possibility for it to be fractional (i.e., 4 (3.5 plus 6 months of training).

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 2026. Exact dates will be confirmed if your project is found successful.
- The SGSSS will advertise all opportunities via FindAPhD.com, 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 institution or collaborative partner would be willing to pay for further advertisements.
- The first supervisor's institution **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.[2]
- 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.

IMPORTANT: Please note, full student recruitment guidance will be disseminated to successful applicants. This guidance will detail the student recruitment timeline, how to review applications as well as how to nominate students, amongst other information.

6.3 ESRC Approved Master's 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 award. If this is the case and the home institution does not have an ESRC approved Master's programme aligned to the relevant SGSSS Unit of Assessment, the student will be required to undertake their Masters at another SGSSS-DTP institution where an approved ESRC Master's 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 Master's 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 etc.). For more details on possible award lengths, please see the guidance here.

[2] The ESRC residency criteria is available within the ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide.

7. Steers Marking Framework

Each application is to be assessed according to two categories with a total score out of 20. These categories are:

1. Research Proposal – Score out of 10 (50%) **Please note that attention to feasibility of research proposal to be completed within the funded PhD is exceptionally important since the ESRC have announced that the thesis-pending or 'writing-up' year will no longer be acceptable – ie, submission within a fourth unfunded year will be counted as a late submission). The research of the PhD must be done in 3 years. ESRC provide an additional 0.5 years but this is not for PhD research it comprises a research-in-practice placement (and associated training) and new skills that ESRC wish PhD students to be exposed to.**
2. Supervision & Training – Score out of 10 (50%)

SGSSS Steers Competition Marking Framework 2025/26

Score	Research Proposal (OUT OF 10) PLEASE NOTE: YOU SHOULD CONSIDER FIT WITH STEER CRITERIA IN ASSESSING THE PROPOSAL	Supervision & Training (OUT OF 10) PLEASE NOTE: YOU SHOULD CONSIDER FIT WITH STEER CRITERIA IN ASSESSING THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SUPERVISORY TEAM AND PLANS FOR ADVANCED TRAINING DURING THE COURSE OF THE PHD
	Descriptors can be used with discretion where there is a good case to do so	
10	An excellent proposal (MEETING THE STEER CRITERIA) 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. **SEE ABOVE** (Descriptor represents a score of 9 to 10)
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 3.5 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 engaged with the identification of their own development needs.
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.	
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.
3	A proposal with significant weaknesses in multiple components, little appreciation of possible methodologies, and/or awareness of relevant literature.	
1-2	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.

Click here to download as a standalone document.

8. Appendix 1: Example Applications

Advanced Quantitative Methods

Dr Zhiqiang Feng	**UoA:** Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences **Challenge Pathway:** Health, Wellbeing and Communities	**University of Edinburgh**

Understanding the complex place-based factors associated with the spread of COVID-19 infection amongst populations in the UK

This proposal addresses the important challenge of understanding the complex place-based factors associated with the spread of COVID-19 infection amongst populations in the UK, using high quality, contemporaneous statistics. A better understanding of these factors can inform planning of prevention and treatment programmes aiming to design local conditions that are more prepared for, and resilient to, future crises associated with pandemics. However little research has been conducted exploring the impact of place-based factors on COVID-19 infection using linked survey and administrative data for the whole UK.

This study aims to make an original contribution to knowledge about community level risk factors affecting COVID-19 infection, focusing on the following questions:

1. Were area-level factors, measured using recently published data from the 2021-2 census and other contemporary sources, associated with risk of COVID-19 infection recorded in the CIS for individuals sampled from across the UK?
2. Did local area-level factors predict risk of infection independently of individual attributes, and/or were there interactions between area and individual variables as predictors of infection?
3. Were those area-level factors associated with COVID-19 infection also associated with social and work-related contacts? If so, did these reported contacts mediate the associations between area-level factors and individuals' infection risk?
4. Did the association between area-level factors and COVID-19 infection vary over time, at different phases of the pandemic and between countries of the UK? Bayesian multilevel models will be used in exploring complex interrelationships between individual and local area conditions as risk factors for this disease.

This proposal is closely aligned with the Health, Wellbeing and Communities pathway and ESRC priorities including 'understanding the impact of COVID-19', 'securing better health, ageing and wellbeing' and 'tackling infections.' The findings will be disseminated through engagement with academic communities and with public and voluntary sector agencies.

Dr Adriana Duta	**UoA:** Education **Challenge Pathway:** Social Inequalities	**University of Edinburgh**

Connecting the dots: investigating how multiple sources of disadvantage intersect and shape attitudes towards school, work and post-school destinations

The nature of, and context around, post-school transitions can vary greatly between individuals and have lifelong implications. Attitudes towards school and work and decisions made at such transition points, such as whether to take up an apprenticeship, directly enter the labour market, or continue with further or higher education, are significantly shaped by multiple factors related to the (dis)advantage of the family and the geographical area in which children and young people grow up. Although the nature of (dis)advantage is multifaceted and changes over time, we have a limited understanding of the multidimensional nature of (dis)advantage, of how the different facets of (dis)advantage interact with each other, cross-sectionally and longitudinally, whether some combinations of (dis)advantage are more consequential than others for young people's attitudes to school, work and post-school destinations, and if the timing and order of these experiences across the life-course play a key role too.

This project will use data from Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) in conjunction with Skills Development Scotland (SDS) data on Pupil Voice Survey and Young People's Career Ambitions and it will be the first project with such data to take a longitudinal and multidimensional approach involving advanced quantitative methods, such as Multilevel Analysis of Individual Heterogeneity and Discriminatory Accuracy (MAIHDA) and Multichannel Sequence Analysis, so as to enhance our understanding of the intersectionality of different sources of (dis)advantage across childhood and teenagerhood.

This will allow us to examine multidimensionality of (dis)advantage and how this shapes attitudes towards school, work and post-school destinations. This research will enhance a more granular and longitudinal understanding of (dis)advantage and its impact on young people's educational and occupational outcomes.

Professor Susan Howick	**UoA:** Business and Management Studies **Challenge Pathway:** Health, Wellbeing, and Communities	**University of Strathclyde**

Integrating Behavioural Theories into Simulation Models to Advance the Health Policy Evaluation Approach in Value-Based Health and Care

This research aims to develop an innovative framework that integrates health-seeking behaviour—the actions individuals take when they perceive a health problem, grounded in behavioural theories, into simulation models used for health systems management. Simulation models are powerful tools for supporting decision-making, allowing for the design, construction, and manipulation of a representation (i.e. a model) of real-world systems to analyse their dynamic behaviours. However, they often overlook the complexities of human behaviour and its influence on higher-level system performance, such as healthcare access and service utilisation, limiting their effectiveness in evaluating health policies. By incorporating health-seeking behaviour, this research will fill a critical gap in existing simulation methods.

The research will begin by building a base-case model, excluding theory-based behaviours, using stakeholder input and secondary data. Subsequently, models that integrate health-seeking behaviour informed by different behavioural theories will be developed and tested. These models will be evaluated under different intervention scenarios to explore how the integration of behaviour and specific behaviour change interventions affect system performance, particularly in terms of access and utilisation of primary and community health services.

In collaboration with the Social Marketing Gateway (SMG)–a consultancy company specialising in social marketing and behavioural change in healthcare–and public health agencies, the project will refine these models to create a practical framework that can guide decision-making in health systems management and healthcare policy. This work supports Scotland's vision of value-based healthcare, prioritising person-centred approaches and addressing pressures on community health services. The research will provide practical and methodological contributions. The framework will offer healthcare decision-makers better tools for designing effective interventions, while also expanding the methodological toolkit for integrating behavioural insights into simulation models. Beyond healthcare, the framework could be adapted to other areas of social science where human behaviour impacts system performance, fostering further interdisciplinary research.

Datasets

Dr J Rafael Verduzco Torres	**UoA:** Architecture, Built Environments and Planning **Challenge Pathway:** Social Inequalities	**University of Glasgow**

Public transport and social welfare: The impact of bus connectivity on employment outcomes for low-income populations

Public transport systems enable access to economic opportunities, services and social networks particularly for lower-income populations who cannot afford to own a private car. Buses play a particularly important role, but services have

declined substantially over the past decade in the UK. Since the 1980s, services have been provided through a market-driven model with limited scope for local political control or influence. A significant change of direction is being signalled with the UK Parliament 'Bus Service Bill' announced in September 2024. Along with Scotland's Transport Act 2019, there is a move to empower local authorities by bringing bus services under greater public control.

While most city regions in the UK have experienced long-term decline in services, others, like London and Manchester, have stand out for implementing significant reforms under a public- driven governance model. This contrasting landscape offers a unique opportunity to investigate two distinct public transport governance approaches and their social welfare implications. The project aims to investigate the impact of sustained reductions in bus services under the market-driven model on low-income populations, as well as the potential benefits of targeted transport policy interventions under the public-driven model on welfare outcomes related to the labour market.

The changes under both governance models also allow to study the impacts on welfare outcomes through 'natural experiments.' This project will combine the unique longitudinal public transport timetable dataset from the Urban Big Data Centre (UBDC) with aggregated administrative data and longitudinal survey data. Timetable data allows for modelling realistic transport conditions to reach opportunities for development. The other datasets offer detailed statistics on aggregate welfare benefits and individual wellbeing overtime, respectively.

Methodologically, the data implies hierarchical structures and spatial autocorrelation. The analyses will use multilevel models with spatially structured effects, reducing potential bias in parameters and increasing robustness.

Professor Sharon Wright	**UoA:** Social Work and Social Policy **Challenge Pathway:** Social Inequalities	**University of Glasgow**

Disabled People's Lived Experiences of Benefit Reform and the Costs of Disability

This PhD will re-analyse 118 in-depth interviews with 52 disabled people (each interviewed up to three times) from the 'Welfare Conditionality' (Welcond) qualitative longitudinal dataset. The aim is to establish original knowledge about how the design and delivery of social security impacts disabled people's lived experiences of the costs of disability in Scotland and England. The candidate will learn, apply and develop advanced secondary analysis techniques for rare 'Big Qual' (Brower et al, 2019) data, including NVivo framework matrix analysis. Cuts and reforms to disability benefits are fundamental to welfare transformation (Patrick, 2017). Whilst much of the debate has focused on work-related benefits (Wright & Dwyer, 2022), less is known about changes to support for the additional costs of living with a disability. At UK level, Personal Independence Payment (PIP) (formerly Disability Living Allowance) was established to support disabled people regardless of their employment status. The application process for PIP became controversial because of a punitive approach to assessments carried out by private agencies (Porter et al, 2021). Reanalysis of Welcond data will reveal new insights about how PIP was experienced by claimants in England and Scotland (2014-18). In 2018, the Scottish Government created a devolved social security system with the explicit aim of establishing 'fairness, dignity and respect' in financial support for disabled people (Pearson et al, 2024). The Scottish Adult Disability Payment (ADP) was introduced in 2022 to replace PIP for disabled people in Scotland. Although ADP has a new benefit assessment process, payments remain set at an equivalent rate to the system operating in England. Additional fieldwork with a total of approx. 10-15 ADP claimants/stakeholders in Scotland will supplement the secondary analysis. This combination of advanced secondary analysis and primary data will offer methodological advances in the field and deliver potential policy impact.

Professor Peter Craig	**UoA:** Social Work and Social Policy **Challenge Pathway:** Social Inequalities	**University of Glasgow**

Evaluating the impact of minimum unit pricing on alcohol consumption and harm using record linked datasets

A key public health issue in Scotland is the rising number of alcohol related hospitalisations and deaths. Alcohol consumption and its associated harms are strongly socially patterned, making it essential to accurately estimate changes

in alcohol consumption and related harms across subgroups to effectively evaluate interventions, such as the 50p minimum unit price (MUP) for alcohol introduced in Scotland in 2018. Achieving reliable estimates of alcohol consumption and harm, and of how they vary across the population, requires robust statistical methods that minimise nonresponse bias to ensure representativeness and address underreporting bias caused by measurement errors. However, high nonresponse rates in health surveys, coupled with measurement errors from respondents, interviewers, and data processors, hinder the ability to obtain accurate estimates using existing standard approaches. Our research to date has identified differences in alcohol related hospitalisations and all-cause mortality between participants in the Scottish Health Survey (linked to morbidity and mortality data) and the general population, particularly across the high-risk group of heavy drinkers. To address this, we developed novel multiple imputation methodologies that adjust for survey non-representativeness by creating synthetic observations for non-respondents based on record-linked alcohol related hospitalisations and deaths. Yet, alcohol consumption remained under-estimated compared to sales data, likely due to residual non-response and measurement errors in survey data. Addressing this methodological gap, this project will apply Bayesian approaches to adjust for both non-representativeness and measurement errors in alcohol consumption measures within Scottish Health Survey, linked to alcohol related hospitalisations and deaths. This approach will also allow for uncertainty in the estimates leading to further reduction in bias. Bayesian methods will then be used to evaluate the impact of Scotland's 50p MUP policy on alcohol consumption across sociodemographic groups (age, sex and deprivation).

Interdisciplinary

Dr Sara Sereno	**UoA:** Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience **Challenge Pathway:** Communication, AI and New Technologies	**University of Glasgow**

Adaptive Reading Technologies

Reading technologies are continually evolving with new tools available to enhance the reading experience as well as make it more inclusive. This research project aims to design and develop reading technologies which transform the reading experience via specific, research-based modifications and innovations to text presentation.

This interdisciplinary project will assess different computer-based paradigms to enhance reading by optimising visual processing. By integrating psycholinguistics and computer science, we will design and implement two innovative paradigms: parafoveal magnification (PM) and guided reading (GR). PM compensates for reduced parafoveal visual acuity and GR exploits our eye movements used for following moving objects to enhance reading speed. The project also proposes to implement one of these technologies into a user-controlled app.

The methods involve eye-tracking systems and sophisticated software for precise text presentation that changes in real time depending on the position of the reader's eyes. The research plans to recruit participants from the University of Glasgow (UofG) community. Ethical considerations align with established research protocols within Psychology and Computer Science domains.

Dr Alistair Geddes	**UoA:** Geography and Environmental Studies **Challenge Pathway:** Environment, Migration and Demographic Change	**University of Dundee**

Leveraging gridded population data to advance risk assessment for geohazards.

Glacier recession in in high-mountain environments worldwide causes the formation of glacial meltwater lakes that are liable to unpredictable failure, termed glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs). Assessing downstream GLOF risk is urgent and must be informed by interdisciplinary work integrating physical hazard and population exposure.

This project aims to enhance GLOF population exposure assessments leveraging spatially detailed population datasets. Produced by different research groups, these datasets generally entail disaggregating conventional census headcounts to small grid squares (≤1km2). Re-aggregating grid-based counts within GLOF zones can improve exposure estimates.

However, each gridded dataset is also subject to uncertainty associated with inputs and modelling methods. Thus, relying on single-source results from any one dataset is unwise, although is current standard practice. For this project, one key stage focusses on producing improved GLOF exposure estimates adopting a range of gridded inputs: an ensemble-type approach. This approach can furnish a better picture of estimate uncertainty for subsequent risk management decisions.

A second key stage focusses on analysing and making recommendations on scope for longer-term usage of the datasets in GLOF risk assessment. It will appraise the wider data ecosystem in which the datasets are to be inserted. This is important if dataset usage is to move from research into operational settings. It is especially important for LMIC countries posed with GLOF risk. Generally, such countries possess less experience and expertise for transitioning to more data-driven approaches.

Geographically the project is focussed on the Peruvian Andes, where major GLOF hotspots exist. It is organised around the two stages aforementioned. Stage 1 data-focussed results establish a basis for engagement and knowledge exchange with GLOF risk management policy stakeholders in Stage 2. Peru-based climate and anticipatory action specialists in the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre will facilitate stakeholder access and provide in-country support.

Professor Vicky Johnson	**UoA:** Area Studies **Challenge Pathway:** Communication, AI and New Technologies	**University of the Highlands & Islands**

Contributing cross cultural meaning to sentiment analysis: a case study of qualitative data sets on youth and uncertainty from Ethiopia and Nepal

Previous ESRC-FCDO funded research in Ethiopia and Nepal showed that concepts such as uncertainty, insecurity, resilience, and marginalisation are not easily translatable across cultural contexts (Johnson et al., 2022). Research was conducted with 500 youth living in fragile and conflict affected environments leading to the publication of datasets on youth and uncertainty.

This studentship will use these datasets to develop a new interdisciplinary methodology for the culturally sensitive application of natural language processing, drawing on approaches from human geography, data science, and cultural studies.

The lexicons applied in natural language processing are informed by the cultural contexts of their development – predominantly English language, privileged, white, male, Global North cultures – that can carry forth unconscious biases in their applications. If natural language processing techniques can be consistently applied to datasets from diverse cultural contexts, they could substantially enhance research capacity in the Global South. This studentship will contribute new understanding on how sentiment analysis and other natural language processing techniques can be meaningfully applied to datasets constructed in fragile social contexts in the Global South.

This studentship provides a unique opportunity to work with national researchers in Ethiopia and Nepal to contribute new, culturally relevant principles and processes for the application of natural language processing. The student will be supported to develop an interdisciplinary methodology that engages with advanced data science methods and participatory and decolonising approaches, backed by a supervisory team with specific expertise in participatory and collaborative methods, natural language processing, and decolonising research. Training across disciplines will be integrated throughout the studentship to foster transformative applications of these approaches and ensure ethical and culturally sensitive collaborations with national researchers. Timely completion is supported by well-established and trusted partnerships in Ethiopia and Nepal, revisiting existing partnerships and risk assessments, and a readymade published ESRC dataset linked to youth profiles.