



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

Starting Your Journey Towards a PhD 2026/27

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



Economic
and Social
Research Council



Scottish Funding Council
Promoting further and higher education

Today we'll cover

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



Housekeeping

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



Scottish Graduate School of Social Science

Approx. £25m investment from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) with additional funding from Scottish Funding Council, 16 partner universities across Scotland

~400 current PhD students across Scotland, we award ~54 studentships and four postdoctoral fellowships per year

Scotland-wide provider of studentships, training & collaborative opportunities for social science PhD students (ESRC- and non-ESRC-funded)

Important advocate for Social Sciences in Scotland with close relationships with Scottish Government and ESRC

Student Induction 2025



Summer School 2026





Before we start – demystifying the acronyms and phrasiology!

- **SGSSS:** Scottish Graduate School of Social Sciences
- **DTP:** Doctoral Training Partnership
- **PGR:** Postgraduate Research (PhD)
- **ESRC:** Economic and Social Research Council
- **UKRI:** UK Research and Innovation
- **Challenge-Led Pathway** – 6 broad research areas around which we organise student
- **UoA:** subject area or discipline

Types of Social Science PhD student



A Flavour of the different types of Social Science PGR student

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



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

- A PhD in the social sciences is a programme of independent and original research usually addressing an area of societal or economic concern. It serves as an apprenticeship for a career in research-related fields. It usually takes 3 years and produces a thesis of around 70-100,000 words.
- It tends to be undertaken with the supervision of two or three academics who have some expertise of your subject area.
- It entails formal and informal development of advanced methods and disciplinary specific skills and of a range of generic skills that will enable you to shape future career choices in and beyond academia.
- It requires hard work, critical and creative thinking, communication skills and RESILIENCE in meeting challenges. It's (mostly) rewarding and when you get to the end, it will be one of your greatest achievements.
- It teaches skills that are valuable in other sectors not just academia

Main funding sources in Social Sciences

ESRC/SGSSS Funding



- ESRC are the largest UK funding organisation for research and postgraduate training in the economic and social sciences. They are part of UKRI
- Funding is distributed through Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)
- Approx. 54 opportunities available each year at Scottish Universities via SGSSS
- Scholarship covers your fees and provides a monthly stipend (approx £21,805 pa for 2026/27)
- Additional funding for training, conference attendance and fieldwork (£940 pa) with a supplementary fund for projects with overseas fieldwork (~£2000)
- Access to extra funding to undertake overseas institutional visits
- Funding for placements with non-academic or academic organisations built in to your PhD
- Support for any additional funds that a person studying for a doctorate might need as a result of a disability, mental health problem or specific learning difficulty.



Other ways students fund PhDs

- **Fully-Funded:**

Internal funding from a University (check university websites – usually match ESRC rates, but not always). Reduced opportunities in recent years

- **Partially-funded:**

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

- **Self-funded:**

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



How could I become an SGSSS funded student?

Two different routes

- Apply for a specific PhD project funded through our **Supervisor-led Competitions**. These will be available from March 2027.
- Apply through our **Student-led Open Competition** with a research proposal written by you (with the support of a supervisor). Deadline of 24th November 2026 (5pm) (but you will need to start planning now and check that your selected university does not have its own internal deadlines).



Residential Eligibility for an SGSSS studentship

- International students can apply to all of our studentship opportunities, including the Student-led Open Competition.
- We can award up to 30% of our studentships to international students.
- Successful **international** students receive the same award as **home** students (fees, stipend etc.)
- **IMPORTANT – 5 Universities do not waive the difference between home and international fees (see next slide)**

The rules on residential eligibility come from UKRI. To establish if you are a home or international student, please see our eligibility webpage for guidance (<https://www.sgsss.ac.uk/studentships/eligibility/>).

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

SGSSS funding cannot be used to pay for UKVI visa fees or the National Health Insurance surcharge which international students would be required to pay if they are successful.

Universities who are **not** waiving the difference between home and international fees

- The following universities **will** charge you (the PhD student) the difference between the level of home and international fees:
 - University of Dundee, University of Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian University, Heriot-Watt University, University of Stirling
- You will be liable to pay additional fee costs (no funding for this from the ESRC who fund SGSSS)
- The additional costs will vary by University but are likely to be **significant**
- ~£15,000-£20,000 per-year (contact the [SGSSS admin lead](#) for more information)
- **You cannot cover the difference between home and international fees with your stipend**
- For visa purposes, you will have to demonstrate that you can pay the difference in international and home fees

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



Supervisor-led Competitions

Studentships

Steers Projects

3 awards in each of the following steers

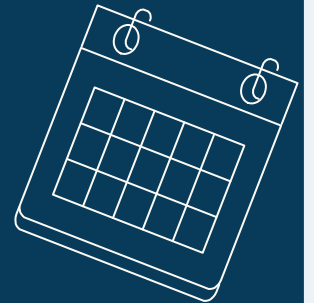
- Advanced Quantitative Methods
- Data Set
- Interdisciplinary

Collaborative Projects

Approx. 15 awards

Dates for your diary

- **23 February 2027** : Projects advertised on SGSSS website
- **23 March 2027**: Applications and references are due





Applying to the SGSSS Student-led Open Competition

Student-led Competition

Studentships

Please note institutions may set their own internal deadlines



ESRC Open Competition

Approx. 25 Awards

- ✓ Students apply to one challenge-led pathway
- ✓ **Choice of pathway does not affect scoring**
- ✓ Can only apply to one university
- ✓ You need to apply to SGSSS and to the relevant university

Dates for your diary

- **9 September 2026:** Competition opens
- **6 November 2026:** Applicant Drop-In Session (visit our website for details)
- **24 November 2026:** Deadline for applications (proposal, transcripts, CV, equal opportunities data, eligibility checker and both references)
- **Stage 1: 27th November to 17 February 2027:** Universities review and shortlist applications.
- **Stage 2 decision** – 8th April 2027: Cross-institutional, interdisciplinary review within Challenge Pathways
- **Stage 3** – final panel announces decisions on 6th May 2026

Challenge-Led Pathways



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

These challenges were developed so that they represent the kinds of social science research that our students do and to reflect the themes of the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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

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



How do we review your application

Stage 1 – within Universities (different models based on size)

Stage 2 – cross-institution/discipline within Challenge Pathways. 3 reviews for each application and comments

Challenge Pathway panel *6 – SGSSS representatives and Deans*2

Stage 3: - Global panel. SGSSS representatives and 2*Deans.

Scoring: Research Proposal (10), supervision and PGR development (10), Candidate Capabilities (10)

Look at our website to see how the scoring works!

Strong competition but the success rate increases across stages

Student led competition - what do you need to do



- You need to work out where you want to do your PhD and with whom? This might be a question of geography, research specialism or particular academics that you'd like to work with (but remember that supervision is a team effort).
- You can apply to only one university and you need to check that your chosen university has eligibility in your [disciplinary area of interest](#)
- **ASAP.** Contact your supervisor with your idea and ask if they are willing/able to support your application
- **ASAP.** Notify the University SGSSS 'admin lead' see [here](#)
- Register with **SGSSS Apply** (our online platform).
- **ASAP.** Contact referees as early as you can and check that they are happy to write a reference - let them know what they will need to do and when they need to do it (250 words).
- Write your studentship proposal including your research idea
- Make sure that you carefully read all the guidance for this year:
<https://www.sgsss.ac.uk/studentships/open-competition/>

Student led competition – what do you need to do



Manage your supervisor!

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

Once you submit through ***SGSSS Apply*** then you will need to wait to see if you are selected by your university (HEI Review Stage) and be ready to upload the Supervisor Statement and the Disciplinary Statement that will be provided by your supervisor/institution by or before **17 February 2027**.

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



Our thoughts on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)



Valuing diversity in PhD applications

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

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

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

Diverse researchers make for better quality research!



Key tips for securing funding

- Our review will include evaluations by academics outside your discipline area
- So, there is a need to communicate clearly the logic, value and broader impact of the research to researchers in other disciplines
- Consider the wider social/economic/academic contribution of the thesis. Can you link these to ESRC strategic ambitions? Look at PhDs funded by ESRC
- The ESRC requires PhD research to be completed in 3 years (no writing-up year) - Our evaluation of applications will consider the feasibility of PhD projects carefully - consider elements like data access/preparation, overseas elements. Ask your supervisor for advice on this.
- Use the 'risks' section of the application form to explain contingency planning in the event of delays in order to maintain ambition in the proposal



Key tips for securing funding

- Pay close attention to the scoring criteria (reviewers are trained to use this)
- A student-led application **must** be your own work. BUT it is expected that your supervisor will support students to develop ideas and their proposal
- There is strong competition..... We do welcome re-submissions and we do provide feedback
- Make use of the resources and guidance on our website
- 6 November 2026, 12-1.00 p.m. (Friday) - come along to our Q&A session



The Inside Story – what a current PGR student has to say, Natanya Mark

Further Information

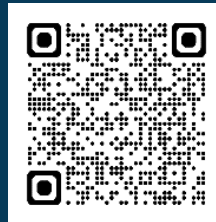
- Email us: team@sgsss.ac.uk

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