Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS)

2026/27 Student-Led Open Competition

Guidance



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All applications must be submitted via the SGSSS online application platform, SGSSS Apply.
For the full Student-led Open Competition timeline, please click here.

1. Introduction

PhD competition overview, student & supervisor eligibility, funding details, things to know before applying



1.1 Competition overview

This document provides the guidance required to submit a Student-led Open Competition application and should be read in full, prior to submitting an application.
The PhD studentship awards made through the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science Doctoral Training Partnership (SGSSS) Student-led Open Competition are co-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and partner universities (institutions) and are governed by the ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide.

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 SGSSS PhD studentships in all UoAs. A comprehensive list of eligible institutions and UoAs can be found on the SGSSS website here. The two institutions who are not eligible to apply for funding (Queen Margaret University and Robert Gordon University) are eligible for training programmes offered by SGSSS.

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 PhD studentship awards made will be subject to that outcome.

Where a university has high quality social science supervision capacity in a UoA, they will have a designated PGR lead (see here, scroll toward the bottom). Before applying to the Student-led Open Competition we ask that you contact the relevant PGR lead, as well as your potential PhD supervisor(s). You should discuss your research proposal with them and inform them that you wish to apply for an ESRC studentship via SGSSS. **Please note, you must have engaged with your proposed PhD supervisor(s) before applying to the Student-led Open Competition. Confirmation of this is required at application stage and your supervisor will also need to complete parts of the application themselves.**

You may apply for an ESRC PhD studentship through only **one** of the 14 eligible SGSSS institutions.

1.2 Student eligibility criteria & funding arrangements

As per guidance published by UKRI, a minimum of 70% of all PhD 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 will always remain the primary assessment criterion during the competition. Unfortunately, some highly ranked international students may not be able to receive an award, due to the 30% UKRI cap.

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 you do not meet the criteria above, you will be classed as an international student.
To establish if you would be classed as a home student, please see pages 4 and 5 of the UKRI eligibility guidance here.

Before applying, international students should read the Funding Arrangements section below closely. In particular, it is important to note that not all institutions waive the difference between home and international student tuition fees which will likely be charged to the student.

Funding Arrangements

Home Students

For home students, SGSSS funding operates within the standard ESRC studentship package:

- Tuition fees;
- Maintenance stipend;
- Research Training Support Grant (RTSG); and
- Overseas fieldwork support (where applicable to the student's project).

Estimates for 1+3.5 award (this is a max award length a student may receive) (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

Please Note: each SGSSS studentship will be co-funded by the student's home institution (SGSSS DTP institutions) for a minimum of one-third (33.0%). This co-funding agreement is already in place and no action is required by students to facilitate this. The total number of years above is the maximum a student can receive (1+3.5, on a full-time basis), SGSSS will work with the student and supervisor once they are found successful to determine this so the length will vary per student.

* 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.

International Students

SGSSS studentship awards include funding which covers home fees.
Please be aware that if you are categorised as liable for international fee status, the following universities will likely charge you (the student) the difference between the home and

international fee level:

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

That means if you accept a studentship at one of these universities, you 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). If necessary, please contact the university in advance to discuss this. Contact the Administrative Lead at that institution, their contact details can be found here.

If you are considering applying for your studentship through one of these listed universities and think you may be liable for international fee status, please be aware of this potential additional cost and the implications for the financial requirements aspect of any visa application.

Additionally, regardless of where the project is based, 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. The UKRI/ESRC funding that SGSSS receives does not include provision for these elements.

Academic Eligibility

In most cases, students will have undertaken an undergraduate course at a recognised UK higher education institution or equivalent international qualification or similar professional experience and/or qualifications. Professional experience and/or qualifications that align to academic qualifications will be assessed using the UK National Information Centre data base.

For more on this, see pg. 8 of the ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide.

1.3 Supervisory team & first supervisor eligibility criteria

You must have support from a PhD supervisory team to be eligible for this competition.

Students must be the lead authors of submitted PhD proposals, with guidance provided by the proposed supervisory team. Proposals should not be submitted that have been led or written by a supervisor, including those previously submitted through a SGSSS supervisor-led competition. If a student submits a proposal that has connections to a funded project held by the supervisor, there must be clear evidence of a distinct intellectual contribution in the studentship that is not within the research promised in the funded project. The intellectual contribution of any studentship should originate from the student, with the supervisor supporting its development.

First supervisors must be located at one of our 14 partnered institutions eligible to receive ESRC

funding, and be aligned to one of the accredited REF Units of Assessment (UoA) in that institution. As part of your initial application, you must provide us with your first supervisor's details. This will trigger a notification to them prompting them to answer questions about their eligibility

Within the application, SGSSS require the first supervisor to complete a short set of questions to help us to confirm their eligibility and to indicate that they are content to be listed as a first supervisor. We encourage you to link your first supervisor to this webpage for more on the questions they will be asked to complete as part of your application.

If it emerges that your first supervisor is not eligible and you would like to add a new first supervisor on the application portal and/or if you want to check if they have completed their parts of the application process, use this visual guide. For any questions, contact us at team@sgsss.ac.uk

It is the responsibility of the applicant to assure their first supervisor submits their answers to these questions. Supervisors are encouraged to email us at team@sgsss.ac.uk if they have any questions.

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. 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 for your Higher Education Institution; and
- Be a research active Social Scientist with output (papers and/or research funding) that is aligned to your unit of assessment.
- Confirm one member of the supervisory team has supervised two PhD students to completion
- Confirm there are two supervisors based at the host HEI (especially important where there is a cross-institutional team)

Supervision across institutions

Second supervisors may work within any of the SGSSS 16 partner HEIs. Supervisory teams working across different universities within the SGSSS network can be accommodated. You can find full information about the SGSSS partner universities online here.

If you are proposing a jointly supervised project between two institutions, all supervisors (see pgs. 19-20) should jointly write the Supervisor Statement of Support. They should refer to the explicit benefits of the proposed cross-institutional arrangement. If you are interested in proposing such an arrangement, please discuss this with the relevant PGR Lead as soon as possible.

SGSSS require that there are two supervisors based at the University in which the PhD sits. So, where there is supervision across institutions we require a supervisor team of at least 3.

1.4 Quick Start

In week one of starting your application, you should:

- Register to SGSSS Apply and begin your application
- Contact your chosen first supervisor
- Enter your recommenders' details into SGSSS Apply
- Review the guidance in detail, and raise any questions with Team SGSSS via email at team@sgsss.ac.uk
- Start developing your studentship idea (if you have not already!)

1.5 Things to know before applying

Seeking admission into the institution of your choice and applying to the studentship funding

Although you **can** apply for an ESRC-funded studentship **before** securing an offer for a PhD programme from the institution of your choice, you must have secured an unconditional offer by the time the studentship will start in October 2027 (some institutions start their academic year in September). Please note, SGSSS play no role in institutional admissions processes and each institution will have varying approaches, including when you need to secure your institutional offer. **In some cases, you will have to have secured a conditional offer prior to applying for an ESRC award, whereas in other institutions you can secure an offer once you have been awarded a funded studentship. It is your responsibility to find out what the process is within your selected institution.**

To check how this applies to the institution of your choice, email the HEI Administrative Lead before starting your application, full list of Administrative Leads can be found, here.

Length of Award

The length of award that you receive depends on whether you need foundational or Masters level training before you start the PhD proper. You can indicate on the application form the type of training that you expect to receive, but each applicant is assessed by SGSSS to determine the most appropriate length of award based on previous study and experience. You may be asked to undertake a week-long foundational methods course, a Masters programme or elements of a Masters programme covering identified core methods gaps (social science methods gaps in quantitative, qualitative and research design skills). Once you start the PhD then you will receive up to 3.5 years (or part time equivalent) of funding. This include time for a three month (or part time equivalent) placement (see here for further information on placements) and three months (or part time equivalent) of training during your PhD, to cover additional skills prioritised by the ESRC (including training to make the most out of your placement).

For more on lengths of award, visit here.

First Year Student Eligibility

If an existing first-year student (or part-time equivalent) is self-funding their PhD, or they are in receipt of financial support lower than that of an ESRC award[1], they can apply for ESRC funding.

[1] See page 10 and 11 of the ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide for details on financial support not in excess of an ESRC award, and/or if you have undertaken one year (or less) of a PhD.

If successful, SGSSS will conduct an audit of the applicant's training requirements to determine how much further time and funding the student requires. If a first-year student is awarded a studentship, the SGSSS funding will **not include reimbursement costs** from the first year.

Part-Time Awards

Part-time awards are permitted and the funding and award lengths are pro-rated accordingly, in accordance with the ESRC funding guidance.

When completing the application, applicants will be asked to indicate if they wish to complete the studentship on a full or part-time basis. Part-time students must spend **no less** than 50% of their working time (defined by the ESRC as 37.5 hours per week, i.e. 18.75 hours, with 18.75 hours available for non-PhD activity) on their PhD research. To read more about this, review the ESRC funding guidance, linked above.

For any further questions, email team@sgsss.ac.uk before submitting your application.

Where to reside during the duration of your studies

As per the ESRC Postgraduate Funding Guide, (see page 5), 'all activity undertaken as part of the ESRC award must be carried out within the UK, except as part of overseas fieldwork which is an integral part of the study, conferences, or training. All students **must reside within a reasonable travel time of the Research Organisation** at which they are registered and we would expect there to be direct contact between the student and supervisor.'
For this reason, **we do not offer our PhD studentships on a remote/distance learning basis.**

Submission Expectations

In line with ESRC guidance, students applying to SGSSS studentships in the 2026/2027 cycle will be required to submit their thesis **within their funded period**. There is no 'writing up' or "thesis pending" period available.

Masters Programmes

Students who are required to undertake a 1+3.5 award will undertake a Masters year before starting the PhD). In almost all cases this MSc will be at the University in which the PhD sits. There are a small number of institutions that do not offer an ESRC approved Masters programme. In such cases we require completion of a ton SGSSS Masters Arrangement Form. Students should work with their supervisor and SGSSS Dean to facilitate the completion of the Masters Arrangement Form which will also need input from the SGSS dean at the institution in which the Masters will be completed.

1.6 Challenge-led pathways, Stuart Hall Foundation Fellowships, and Collaborative Projects

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 challenge-led 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-led pathway (or as a supervisor help my student to choose)?

We recognise that many applications will align with more than one challenge-led pathway. In discussion with your supervisor you should decide which pathway fits best with your main ideas. You will not be disadvantaged by your choice of challenge-led pathway in the selection process. There is no quota system in place for each challenge-led pathway so you don't 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 don't need to be concerned that your application will be judged a poor fit. In addition, you will be able to switch pathways if you feel that you have made the wrong choice in year 1 of your studentship and can also attend events held by other pathways if these are of particular interest and there is space.

What happens if I cannot choose any challenge-led pathway?

Because the challenge-led pathways were developed partly through a bottom-up process, looking at the research of our existing students, we are confident that the vast majority of likely proposals will fit at least one challenge-led pathway. If, however, after reflection and discussion with your supervisor, you are unable to find a pathway description that fits your proposed work then you can signal this to us – you will not be penalised for this in the review process – the marking framework does not assess challenge fit. In your at-award Development Needs Analysis you will be able to discuss with us which pathway might offer the most fruitful learning

conversations for you and your study.

Stuart Hall Foundation Fellowships (optional)

Scotland's two national graduate schools (SGSSS and SGSAH[2]) are delighted to be working with the Stuart Hall Foundation to offer up to 3 Stuart Hall Fellowships starting in October 2027.

Both SGSAH and SGSSS are committed to the public function of education and to addressing the barriers which exist to accessing higher education. The Fellowships, inspired by the life and work of Professor Stuart Hall and his research legacy in the areas of race, ethnicity, cultural and structural inequalities, will be used to provide opportunities for students from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Applications for these Fellowships are sought from UK candidates from non-traditional or disadvantaged backgrounds who are under-represented at graduate level in the Arts and Humanities and the Social Sciences in Scotland, and with a preference for those whose planned research aligns broadly with one of Stuart Hall's many areas of interest: cultural studies, race, ethnicity and inequalities. Applicants can apply through SGSAH and SGSSS's DTP Open Studentship Competitions, with selected successful candidates invited to apply for a Stuart Hall Foundation Fellowship.

Each Graduate School will award up to three Stuart Hall Foundation Fellowships, which will be attached to funded PhD studentships. The Fellowship can be held within disciplines across the social sciences, arts and humanities at selected Scottish HEIs which form part of the relevant Graduate School.

Recipients of these Fellowships will benefit from access to the Stuart Hall Foundation Scholars and Fellows network programme, which includes regular events and opportunities to develop their career and research profile. If you would like to be considered for the above opportunity, please answer "Yes" to the question, "If successful, do you wish to be considered for a Stuart Hall Foundation Fellowship?", which forms part of the online SGSSS Student-led Open Competition application form (via SGSSS Apply).

Collaborative Partner Proposals (optional)

The ESRC welcomes studentships with collaborative partners (although involving a collaborative partner is not a requirement of an application to the Student-led Open Competition). 'Collaborative' is defined broadly and covers studentships that are supported by private sector companies, public sector bodies or third sector organisations, i.e., non-academic partners. Collaborative PhD studentship are usually co-funded by the non-academic partner , (please see the SGSSS Funding Arrangements document for details). We ask that you liaise with your prospective supervisor(s) to help with discussions between you and your potential collaborative partner, if applicable.

Should a collaborative partner want to make a financial contribution towards your proposed studentship, you will need to upload a *Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement*[3] as part of

[2] Scottish Graduate School for Arts & Humanities: https://www.sgsah.ac.uk/

[3] This will act a s a precursor to the SGSSS Collaborative Agreement, used primarily within our supervisor-led Open Collaborative Competition, and will be required if successful.

your online application. 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 your supervision/development and your project.
- The agreed co-funding arrangement.
- Any agreed additional funding, e.g., this may include details of how the travel, subsistence and accommodation costs associated with your visits to the non-academic organisation will be covered.
- Any arrangements for special materials and facilities which will be made available to you.
- Any appropriate arrangements relating to Intellectual Property Rights.

The details of any previous involvement in social science research by the collaborative partner. This should include any collaboration that has previously taken place, e.g., any former studentships they have co-funded.

Private Sector

Depending on the size of the private sector organisation, this will determine the expected co-funding of the studentships costs as per the below:

- Less than 10 employees would equal a 10% contribution towards studentship costs.
- More than 10 employees but less than 50 would equal a 25% contribution towards studentship costs.
- More than 50 employees but less than 250 would equal a 33% contribution towards studentship costs.
- More than 250 employees would equal a 50% contribution towards studentship costs.

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 33% for all studentship costs.

Charity/Third Sector

If the collaborative partner is charity or falls within the third sector, then we expect co-funding to be at the rate of 10% for all studentship costs.

- If applicable, 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 a formal Collaborative Agreement (this is required if successful in this competition).
- 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 your supervision/development and

your project.
- The agreed co-funding arrangement.
- Any agreed additional funding, i.e., this may include details of how the travel, subsistence and accommodation costs associated with your visits to the non-academic organisation will be covered.
- Any arrangements for special materials and facilities which will be made available to you.
- Any appropriate arrangements relating to Intellectual Property Rights (IPR).
- The details of any previous involvement in social science research by the collaborative partner. This should include any collaboration that has previously taken place, e.g., any former studentships they have co-funded.
- If this proposal will include a collaborative partner, please upload a *Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement.*

If you would like to discuss and/or enquire more into collaborative studentships, how this would work and/or the application requirements, please contact SGSSS at team@sgsss.ac.uk.

2. Application process and timeline

Application stages, timeline, application questions, references)



2.1 Competition Marking Framework, Review Stages, and Timeline

There are three rigorous review stages during the Student-led Open Competition. You will be informed of on outcomes after each relevant review stage. For the full Student-led Open Competition timeline, please click here.

Studentship Marking Framework

At SGSSS, we believe in the benefits that come from having a diverse community.
We believe that strong social science research relies on academic rigour combined with a diverse community of PhD researchers who bring a range of backgrounds and experiences to guide and shape the research agenda. We're committed to opening up doctoral study to the widest possible range of applicants, and to minimising any barriers to taking part, right across the PhD experience.

One practical way we do this is when we allocate studentship. We use a Whole Person Approach marking framework. This means we look beyond academic achievements alone and consider other skills and experience that bring potential to flourish during a PhD. It's designed to welcome a wider range of people with the potential to excel in PhD research, including those who've been previously underrepresented in doctoral study.
The Whole Person Approach is grounded in SGSSS research within the doctoral community here in Scotland.

To view the SGSSS Studentship Marking Framework, please visit Stage 1 Marking Framework here, and Stages 2 and 3 here.

Application Stage (9 September to 24 November 2026)

This stage is when applicants develop and submit their application. Additionally, **applicants are responsible in assuring their recommenders have submitted their references** (two required, see section 2.3 for more on references). Applicants are **also responsible in checking their primary supervisors submit their supervisor questionnaire** (see section 1.3 for more): SGSSS will not coordinate or chase recommenders or supervisors.

9 September 2026 12 pm (midday) BST	Official Competition launch date (applicants can start submitting applications)
24 November 2026 5 p.m. GMT	Official Competition deadline (applicants must submit all application components and references by this deadline)

HEI Review (Stage 1) (27 November 2026 to 17 February 2027)

This stage is when universities shortlist Stage 1 applications to identify the successful students who will proceed to Stage 2. The number of applications which an institution can shortlist depends on the size of its social science community. The shortlisted applicants must not breach the international cap.

Institutions will notify students of outcomes **on a rolling basis in this period (27 November 2026 - 17 February 2027 dates)**.

If you are successful at Stage 1, you will be need to upload a Supervisor Support and Disciplinary Statement templates for consideration at Stage 2. Your supervisor will write the Supervisory Support Statement and your University will coordinate provision of the Disciplinary Support Statement.

Note: HEIs have until 17 February to submit their nominations into our application portal (however, most would have done this well before this date). This is the same deadline for candidates submitting their additional supportive documents. Each university will be in communication with their successful candidates ahead of the deadline to coordinate so it can be completed ahead of the 17th February 2027. For more on this part of the process, see page 19 below.

27 November 2026 – 17 February 2027, 5 p.m. GMT	Stage 1 Review takes place. During this period, and as part of the next stage, if you are nominated, HEIs will request you to submit your **Supervisor Support Template** and **Disciplinary Statement** within Apply.

Challenge-Led Pathway Review (Stage 2) (19 February to 8 April 2027)

In this stage evaluations of shortlisted applications occur within each of the six challenge-led pathways (around ~180 applications in total). Every application is reviewed by three reviewers from across SGSSS Universities and across disciplines. These reviews are discussed in each of the six challenge-led pathway panels who then nominate 30% of applications to go forward to Stage 3 – of these, only 30% can be international. Applications which do not align with a challenge will still be assessed within challenge-led pathways (the assessment framework ensures that these will not be disadvantaged and the Deputy Director for Studentships will oversee additional moderation of reviewer scores and comments for these applications to confirm that a no-detriment approach is followed).

9 April 2027, 5 p.m. GMT	Stage 2 outcomes are released to candidates

Global Review (Stage 3) (9 April to 6 May 2027)

This stage is when a final review panel consisting of three Deans and members of the SGSSS Directorate meet to make the final award decisions considering applications submitted across all six challenge-led pathways.

Outcome Announcement & Development Needs Analysis (DNA) Meetings (from 6 May 2027)

After the Global Panel meets, the Deputy Directors for Training and Studentships will meet to evaluate the award lengths for successful applicants. These decisions will be released via email to successful candidates on 6 May 2027. Preliminary awards will be released via SGSSS Apply where you as a candidate can log in to review and submit your decision (you have 1 week from receipt to complete this). After accepting the award, applicants will be tasked with completing their pre-DNA questionnaire. To read more about this DNA process, visit this document.

6 May 2027, 5 p.m. GMT	Stage 3 outcome is released to candidates

2.2 Overview of the Application Components

Below is an overview of the deadlines, steps, and information you will be required to submit/complete as part the Student-Led Open Competition.

Application Components

Applicants will access the application components by going to SGSSS Apply and clicking "Register" in the top right-hand corner of the screen, completing the details as prompted. **Please note, the application process on SGSSS Apply can be saved and as such does not need to be completed in a single sitting.**

Once registered you will be asked to "please update your eligibility profile". Please select either "Prospective ESRC-Funded PhD Student (SGSSS)"[4] or "Current Non ESRC-Funded PhD Student (non SGSSS)"[5], depending on your personal circumstances.

After you have created your *SGSSS* Apply account and the competition has launched, you will be able to start your application. As part of this process, you will need to have the following details:

- Information regarding nationality, residency and visas;
- Institution and pathway(s) to which you are applying;
- Your potential supervisor(s) name, email address and institution.

You will also be required to complete your application online in portal and/or upload the following as part of your online application submission. Please note, where uploads are required the documents must be in **pdf format only** (Word documents will **not** be accepted).

- Online application form (which includes, Equal Opportunities Monitoring Form, applicant information, supervisory team details, first supervisor eligibility, studentship and project details, and references – see here);
- CV;
- All relevant Undergraduate and Masters level degree transcripts[6] (and translations, if not originally in English. SGSSS does not require you to use a specific translation service, we just ask that it is translated to British English if it is possible) – provisional transcripts are sufficient if you are yet to complete your degree;
- Contact details for two recommenders, both provided as part of your Stage 1 application. Please note, an invitation to complete and upload a reference will be automatically sent to your referee, please see section 2.3 below for more on references.
- Details of any overseas fieldwork you propose to undertake during your research (advised within the online application form);
- Details of any difficult language training you propose to undertake during your research (advised within the application form);
- A Masters Arrangement Form, if applicable; and

[4] You are not currently undertaking a PhD and are looking to apply for ESRC funding via SGSSS.

[5] You are currently undertaking a PhD (self-funded and/or in receipt of funding less than the funding offered by ESRC) and are looking to apply for ESRC funding via SGSSS. Please note, you must be at the start of your second year (pro-rated for part-time students) at the latest when your ESRC funding would start, i.e., you would be going into your second year in October 2027.

[6] Undergraduate transcripts and Master's transcripts (if applicable), combined as one pdf document.

- A Collaborative Partner Letter of Agreement, if applicable.

For more on the questions asked in each component, download the template here.

Application Anonymisation

We strive to ensure applications are anonymised for reviewers. To help with this it would be helpful if all documents are redacted to hide your name and other identifiable information. We ask that you attempt to redact your documents yourself in the first instance and the application process contains instructions on how to hide such information in PDF files. However, if you require further help with this process, please contact SGSSS via team@sgsss.ac.uk at least two weeks in advance of the application deadline, quoting your application ID.

For more on anonymisation, use this quick guide.

Equal Opportunities Monitoring Form

SGSSS commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

SGSSS believes in the benefits that come from diverse student, supervisor and staff populations. We are committed to facilitating inclusion and removing any barriers to participation during applications and throughout the PhD experience. We actively work against any forms of discrimination in relation to the Equality Act 2010 protected characteristics, alongside characteristics that are not covered by the Act.

Purpose of this form and how we use this data

Through the following form we collect a range of data that are used in an aggregated and anonymised format to monitor trends, identify potential areas for improvement and report statistics related to EDI to our funders. We ask that you complete the form as fully as possible, but you may of course skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.
This data is not used for application review: it will be held confidentially and separately from any applications you submit to us. Your individual information will not be passed on to academic departments, universities or to anyone else such as a supervisor. Data will only be kept until our Training Grant expires.

Support for individual disability related adjustments

The data supplied is very helpful to SGSSS for informing actions that may encourage people with disabilities to apply and participate in PhD study. As the information supplied is only used in an aggregated anonymised way however, it cannot be used by us to inform individual circumstances. SGSSS encourage students to consider disclosing disabilities, or other circumstances that may require support, to their supervisors and aligned university services, e.g. Disability Support Services. This will then enable appropriate and confidential discussion of what additional support measures may help you.

Helpful information about Disabled Students' Allowance, is also available through our Handbook. For SGSSS events, we will request information on an event-by-event basis specific to the type of activity, so you can highlight any adjustments or requirements necessary to ensure your ability to participate.

Completing this Equal Opportunities Monitoring form helps us and others to better

understand issues of selection, participation and under-representation in postgraduate research. We are grateful for your time in completing it. For any questions, please email us at team@sgsss.ac.uk

Additional Information to upload if you are shortlisted at Stage 1

After the application deadline, applications will be sent to HEIs, Higher Education Institutions. Once the HEI has reached their decision, the HEI Administrative Lead from the institution listed in your application will submit the Stage 1 results into our portal (both successful and unsuccessful), which will automatically trigger an outcome email to you with next steps. This step varies in each institution, some may be in communication with you via email.

Your deadline to submit the templates is 17 February **via SGSSS Apply.** For any questions, email us at team@sgsss.ac.uk. We understand that this period is quite uneasy for candidates, but we kindly ask for your patience as these decisions will be released on a rolling basis. Please note, some HEI Administrative Leads may be in contact with you separately, in advance or post the outcome being released. This will vary per institution.

Applicants will not be able to make any further application updates, with the exception of updates to the supervisory team (when needed). If you are in this situation, please cc team@sgsss.ac.uk in any communications to the HEI Administrative Lead of the corresponding institution you are applying to.

Additional Document #1 – Supervisor Statement of Support

The supervisory teams of all at Stage 1 of the Open Competition are required to submit a Supervisor Statement of Support Template. This statement is a key component of the application and of the assessment process. We suggest that supervisors refer to the Marking Framework when writing their statement. In particular, we are looking for clarification on how the proposed supervisory team will provide the student with an outstanding PhD experience that engages with appropriate advanced development opportunities. In addition, we are keen to find out about supervisors' own development needs so that SGSSS can develop its approach to supporting supervisors.

Once they have completed the Supervisor Statement of Support Template, they must return it to their prospective student who will upload as per the deadlines their host institution will indicate; late submissions will not be accepted. **As applications are anonymised for reviewers, you must not mention your student by name.**

Supervisory teams will be asked to answer the following questions:

- Proposed supervisory arrangements including second supervisor(s) and their relevance to the project, as well as contingency supervisory arrangements. Where the supervisory team is cross-institutional, the added benefits to the student and their proposed research should be detailed. Please note, the statement should be co-written and signed by all supervisors.
- A consideration of the research environment at the host institution, with specific reference to the fit between the department and the proposed topic of research.
- A consideration of how the supervisory team and the broader research environment supports the development of an inclusive and diverse PhD community.

- Detail of the potential research training courses/programmes offered by the host institution that would benefit the applicant; consideration of broader advanced training that will likely be required including, but not limited to, that provided by SGSSS.
- A summary of the potential development needs of the supervisory team.
- An assessment of the potential impact of the proposed research and its significance to the academic discipline(s) concerned.
- Details of the supervisory team's experience of supervision. This should include the number of students supervised by each supervisor (including ongoing supervision) and their completion rates where applicable, i.e., we would like to know the proportion of students who have completed within four years (or equivalent for part-time students). In addition, we are interested to know of any specific research experience relevant to the student's proposed project, including any particular methodological experience or training.
- Confirmation that the proposal is the applicant's own work, although you will have provided advice on the content.
- A paragraph on the current and estimated progress of the applicant within their PhD, and confirmation that the supervisor agrees with the applicant's assessment of their PhD progress (this is a question within the online application form). This point is only applicable if the applicant is already undertaking a PhD in their first year or part-time equivalent.

To access the template, visit here.

Additional Document #2 – Disciplinary Support Statement

If your application is shortlisted at Stage 1, you will be asked to submit the disciplinary support statement which is to be completed by the PGR Lead at your institution. For more on the list of the PGR Leads per HEI, visit this link.

In no more than 250 words, provide a summary of how the proposed research will contribute to its underpinning discipline(s). You may wish to comment on theory, methods or other substantive contribution.

To access the template, visit here.

2.3 Recommendations

Each applicant is required to provide the details of two recommenders during the Stage 1 application process. To do this, applicants need to click into the "Student-led Open Competition Recommendations" section within the online application process via SGSSS Apply. **If recommendations are not provided by the deadline then an application will be removed from the competition.**

IMPORTANT: If any of your recommenders are no longer available to provide a recommendation & you would like to request a new recommendation and/or if you want to check if they have submitted this recommendation, use this visual guide. For any questions, contact us at team@sgsss.ac.uk

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What is the purpose of recommenders?

We ask for recommendations as this is an opportunity for an academic, or line manager from work, known to you to provide our reviewers with an overview of you as an individual, as well as how you perform academically (or within your workplace). In addition, a reference is a good way for reviewers to try to gauge if you are ready to undertake a PhD.

What is SGSSS asking within the recommendation template, which will be sent to my referees?

"Successfully undertaking a PhD requires not only academic ability but also resourcefulness, commitment and resilience. It involves a range of skills including the ability to communicate complex ideas (about why a research question is of societal and academic importance, why it can be addressed using particular methods and why your findings matter), planning and organisation (including within changing circumstances), working with others (inside and outside of universities) to increase the chances of your research making a difference.

Please provide an assessment of the applicant's preparedness to undertake and complete a PhD and to flourish as a result of PhD funding, bearing in mind their academic work and other life experiences. To encourage equivalence amongst applicants, we ask referees to submit between 175 to 250 words in this section. If you are an academic at a non-UK-based institution, please include within your assessment of performance in terms of its UK equivalence."

Who can provide my recommendation?

Where possible your references should include an academic familiar with your work (can be, but does not have to be, a member of your supervisory team). Both references can be from academics, but you may include a work reference, especially if you have been out of academia for more than 5 years.

What happens when I submit my recommenders' details as part of my application via SGSSS Apply?

Once you submit your two referees' details (full name and email address) online via SGSSS Apply, the system will automatically send them an email invite asking that they complete an online reference to support your application. They then need to follow the link detailed within the email to create an SGSSS Apply "recommender" account (this takes a few minutes), at which point they can then complete the online reference template. Once completed and submitted online by your referee, the reference will be 'attached' to your application automatically. You will receive an email confirming when this has been done. In addition, you will be able to see when your references have been returned via your application on SGSSS Apply. Please note, you will not be able to read your references, you will just be able to see when they have been completed.

When should I request my recommendations?

As you can request your references well before you submit your full application (please see question 7 below), **we encourage you to submit both of your referees' details as soon as possible to allow them as much time as possible to respond**. If you only request your references a week or so before the application deadline, this may not be enough time for your referees to respond, whereas if you do this a month before the deadline, you are giving yourself

a higher chance that your references will come in by the deadline and your application can progress to the next stage.

I am concerned one or both of my referees might not respond to my reference request; what should I do?

As an automatic reference request will be issued to your referees via *SGSSS Apply* as soon as you submit their details online, it is imperative that you have sought their permission before you send them a reference request. Not only is this polite, but it will also reduce instances where your application is incomplete and thus unable to progress through to the next stage of the competition.

If you have sought permission from your referees and you are still worried one or both may not complete the reference template on time or may forget, you can manage your reference requests yourself via your application within *SGSSS Apply*. The system will allow you to send reminders to your referees as well as change who your referees are (by withdrawing your reference request and deleting it, before submitting a new reference request). **We recommended you do not fully submit your application until both your references have been received, as once you fully submit your application you will no longer have the permissions to make changes to your reference requests** (please note, you must submit your application by 5pm, GMT, on 24 November 2026 regardless of which references have been received).

As the application system will allow you to prepare the rest of your application, i.e., you can save your application and return as many times as you like without fully submitting it, it is possible to manage your references and have your application ready for submission well before the application deadline.

What if my referee submits my reference late?

We will not provide referees any additional time to submit their reference. This deadline is final and should references still be outstanding, applications will automatically be marked as unsuccessful.

3. Appendices

Application Questions and examples of previously funded applications



3.1 Appendix 1: Project Proposal Application Questions

Below are questions you will be asked to answer online via *SGSSS Apply* within the "Student-led Open Competition Application Form" section of your application, relating to your project proposal. Should you prefer to download a Word version of the below to use to develop you research proposal/application responses, please click here. **PLEASE NOTE, YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO UPLOAD THIS APPLICATION FORM - ALL APPLICATIONS MUST BE MADE USING THE ONLINE APPLICATION SYSTEM**, i.e., the Word version can be used to develop your application offline and to share with your supervisors for feedback. You will be able to copy across from the Word version to the online application system (SGSSS Apply).

Lay Summary

Please provide a lay summary that explains your project and its significance to society/academic discipline to a non-academic audience. (250 words maximum.)

Preparedness to undertake and complete a PhD and to flourish as a result of PhD funding

Successfully undertaking a PhD requires not only academic ability but also resourcefulness, commitment and resilience. It involves a range of skills including the ability to communicate complex ideas (about why a research question is of societal and academic importance, why it can be addressed using particular methods and why your findings matter), planning and organisation (including within changing circumstances), working with others (inside and outside of universities) to increase the chances of your research making a difference. You may find it useful to refer to the Researcher Development Framework in thinking about this question.

Drawing on your own background (including your life experiences, journey to/through university, work experiences or volunteering) please provide a summary of why you are ready to undertake a PhD now and how you will flourish as a result of PhD funding. You might include, for example, personal challenges that you have overcome or achievements that you are proud of in your work, study or life experiences and how these map onto the skills required to flourish in a PhD programme. Challenges could include, but are not limited to, protected characteristics, socio-economic status and of being first-in-a-generation to university or care-experienced. (400 words maximum.)

Contributing to a positive and diverse PhD community

SGSSS aims to attract and support a positive and diverse PhD community where everyone can reach their full potential; Research and Development (R&D) is a supportive and fulfilling sector to work in; and is seen as a shared endeavour across society rather than only the concern of professional researchers. You may find it useful to refer to the UK Government's R&D People and Culture Strategy when thinking about this question.
Reflecting on your own background and/or proposed approach to PhD study and the opportunities which it will present, how will you support diversity and inclusion in the PhD community? The information collected here is used to inform our cohort development activities and not in the evaluation of applications. (250 words maximum.)

Research Proposal

The research proposal must be a detailed description of the intended research topic. It will form

the basis for assessing the application. The proposal should be written in a clear and concise manner and applicants should be aware that applications will be reviewed by interdisciplinary panels so please make sure that you fully explain disciplinary specific concepts or techniques. **Your research project must be feasible within the funded PhD. All ESRC funded students must submit their thesis by the end of the funded period). Feasibility will be considered carefully by reviewers.** The main body of the research proposal (excluding the bibliography) must not exceed 1,500 words.

Please also note that reviewers of this proposal will include those outwith your discipline.
The Research Proposal **MUST** include the following sections:

- Overview – a general introduction that succinctly sets out exactly what the project seeks to explore. This should also include the research question(s) to be addressed and the overall aim of the project.
- Context – situate the research within the relevant literature/s. This should include a brief summary of research already taken in the field, addressing key works and scholars. Specific attention should be paid to problems in the existing literature and ways in which your proposed research challenges/addresses these problems. You should also give an account of the theoretical issues relevant to your research, and whether you intend to test existing theories or develop new ones.
- Methodology – provide a detailed account of the methodology and/or methods that will be used. Specific attention should be paid, where relevant, to any innovative aspects of the proposed methodology.
- An indication of 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.
- You will be able to upload diagrams via SGSSS Apply, should you so wish.

Indicative Bibliography
References within the research proposal should be Harvard Style and the bibliography should reflect this. Please only include references referred to in the research proposal.

Risk Assessment
Please set out the aspects of your proposal that are at particular risk of non-implementation and indicate the approaches that you will take to manage such risks to ensure that your timely **within the funded period** submission is not compromised. (250 words maximum.)

Provisional Timeline
This section must only include an indicative timeline for your research. Any substantive discussion of your research in this box will not be considered by reviewers. Please note, your timetable should take account of the requirement that your PhD will be submitted at the end of your funded period.

Additional Costs for Difficult Language Training, an Overseas Institutional Visit and/or Overseas Fieldwork
Please indicate if your proposal is expected to benefit from the following:

- Difficult Language Training
- Overseas Institutional Visit

- Overseas Fieldwork

Domestic Fieldwork

If this proposal does not involve overseas fieldwork, can you confirm that the proposed fieldwork is likely to be undertaken within the notional RTSG allowance of £940 per annum. If not, please explain why and specify any likely additional costs. Please specify how additional costs will be met. (150 words maximum.)

Artificial Intelligence Statement

SGSSS emphasises the importance of academic integrity and personal intellect in developing all submissions. While AI tools may support the research and writing process, it is crucial that the studentship application is a reflection of the applicant's own intellectual endeavour and critical thinking. Misrepresenting AI-generated content as original work is strictly prohibited. Any use of AI must be transparently acknowledged, ensuring that the final submission remains a true and honest representation of the applicant's own intellectual contributions.

As part of your application, you will be asked to confirm if you used AI when creating the application. If you confirm 'yes' we will ask to elaborate on your answer.

3.2 Example Applications

Please see the three examples below for what makes a good Student-led Open Competition application. For each, we have included the full application form from successful from our recent competition.

PhD title: An Economic Approach to Machine Learning and Algorithm Bias
Key Information:
Institution: Heriot-Watt University
Pathway: Economics
Hub: Economies, Mind and Technologies

Click here to view the Application Form and Supervisor Statement of Support.

PhD title: Realising inclusive communicative practices in support services for refugees and other migrants: The role of translanguaging in a linguistically diverse third-sector organisation

Key Information:
Institution: University of Stirling
Pathway: Education
Hub: Society and Welfare

Click here to view the Application Form and Supervisor Statement of Support.

PhD title: Between the Life and Death of a River: Contested Knowledge in a Toxic Commons
Key Information:
Institution: University of Edinburgh
Pathway: Social Anthropology
Hub: People and Place
Click here to view the Application Form and Supervisor Statement of Support.