Ask SeNSS – Open Event
Preparing for PhD studies
November 2021
Outline

• Why do a PhD?
• What is SeNSS?
• Finding a supervisor
• Writing a proposal
Why do a PhD?
Common assumptions

• Students who obtain PhDs want to become professors.
• Only the best doctoral students become professors.
• The career paths of PhDs are linear (i.e. PhD to assistant > associate > full professor).

(Nerad et al, 2009)
Purposes of the students

• Instrumental purposes (e.g. career of the researcher)
• Intellectual purposes (e.g. personal interest, satisfaction, contributing to discipline)
• Altruistic purposes (e.g. solving problems, enabling change, benefiting others)

(Mowbray & Halse, 2010)
Doctoral destinations after 3 years (Vitae, 2013)

Figure 3  Occupational clusters for doctoral graduate respondents in UK employment by disciplinary group

https://www.vitae.ac.uk/impact-and-evaluation/what-do-researchers-do
Doctoral variations

- PhD by published work
- ‘New route/new variant’ PhDs – partly taught
- Professional doctorates, e.g. EdD, DBA, DClinPsy, EngD, Dprof, DPharm
- Online/distance/blended PhDs
- ‘Practice as research’
- Industry collaboration
- Higher doctorates
- Honorary doctorates
- Degree-mill (‘unaccredited’) doctorates
Making sense of SeNSS: the South East Network for Social Sciences
What is SeNSS?
• SeNSS an ESRC Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP)

• The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is one of seven research councils funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

• The ESRC funds 14 Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) across the UK and Northern Ireland.

• Using this funding, DTPs award and manage studentships and Post-Doctoral Fellowships
ESRC SeNSS Funding

• The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) currently provides funding for around 500 new postgraduate students each year through a network of 14 Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)

• South-East Network for Social Sciences (SeNSS) ESRC DTP is a partnership between East Anglia, Essex, Reading Surrey, Sussex, Kent, Goldsmiths, Royal Holloway, City and Roehampton

• Over 40 ESRC SeNSS studentships awarded in 2020
What does SeNSS offer?

• Innovative and challenging world-class doctoral training in a dynamic, inter-disciplinary research environment
• Subject-specific, generic, and advanced training in elite training facilities, tailored to your individual needs
• Significant online training including exclusive access to Sage Campus
• Access to all 10 institutions in the DTP
• An existing network of over 200 external organisations, offering collaboration and work placement opportunities (eg. Sage, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology)
• Opportunities for overseas visits and fieldwork, attending and presenting at annual conferences and events, and academic publishing
• Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
Who’s who?
SeNSS core team

- The SeNSS core team and office is based at the University of Essex, the co-ordinating institution
- Director: Professor Ismene Gizelis
- Deputy Director: Professor Fragkiskos Filippaios (University of East Anglia)
- Manager: Dr Felicity Szesnat
- Training Manager: Abi Shirley
- Co-ordinator: Paul Newman
SeNSS universities and Pathways

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SeNSS: governance structure
3 Steps to making an application

1. Apply for PhD place at your “home” institution

2. Create a HEIApply Account

3. Develop your proposal with your Supervisor and submit your online application.
Some important information

• You do not need to have a Masters degree to apply for a +3 PhD. If you have equivalent professional experience or an undergraduate degree plus relevant professional experience, you may be eligible for an award. Please discuss this with your proposed supervisor before starting your application.

• All studentships are offered on a full-or part-time basis, and on a three-year or four-year basis.

• All studentships are fully-funded, regardless of your residential eligibility status. That is, your tuition fees will be paid for the duration of your funded studentship, and you will receive a stipend for the same period.

• There are four stages to making a SeNSS application:
  a) check your eligibility
  b) if eligible, apply to your chosen university for a postgraduate place;
  c) discuss your application with your supervisor and, if they are supportive, then;
  d) apply for a SeNSS studentship.

• Check with your chosen university you are applying to for the deadline for applying for a postgraduate place. We strongly advise you to apply several weeks before this to allow sufficient time to complete the four stages above. Once you have applied to your university, you must apply for SeNSS funding.

• The deadline for submitting your SeNSS application is 12.00 GMT on Tuesday 25 January 2022.

• You are only permitted to submit ONE application for a student-led studentship beginning in 2022. However, there is no limit on the number of collaboratives studentship applications you can make, provided you are eligible for each of these.
Choice of Studentship

- The ESRC argues that students should have completed almost all their core methods and research design training, and some generic training, before they embark on their final 3 years of studying for their PhD. As a result, SeNSS is required to ensure that all the Masters, 2+2 and +4 PhDs it offers includes this training.

- As noted, SeNSS offers various routes to a PhD over 3 to 4 years. The most common are the +3 PhD only route, and the 1+3 masters plus PhD route, but 2+2 and +4 awards are also available on some Pathways. A student without any postgraduate core research methods and research design training will need to apply for a 4-year route, most often a 1+3. If the 1+3 route is chosen, the student must take an approved Masters at a SeNSS institution.

- The list of approved Masters is available here. There are some approved 4-year (either 2+2 or +4) PhD programmes which may be an alternative for these students. The key training is delivered in year 1 of such PhDs and is equivalent to the training in an approved Masters. This route does not lead to a Masters award, and does not require the student to submit a Masters dissertation. The list of approved 4-year PhDs at SeNSS is available here.

- In other cases, the student will have completed (or still be studying) a Masters when they apply for a SeNSS studentship. If the student studied at a SeNSS institution, then please consult the list of SeNSS approved courses to see if the student’s Masters is on this list. If it is, then the student is eligible for a +3 PhD. If not, then SeNSS will need to assess the student’s Masters to see if it is compliant. If it is, the student can take a +3 PhD. If not, the gaps in the student’s past training will need to be identified, and a decision taken as to whether they should be offered an extra 3 or 6 months’ funding to fill those gaps.

- Difficult cases can arise when the student has done (or is doing) a Masters at a university outside SeNSS, including overseas. In these cases, the key thing is to ask the SeNSS core team as early as possible for advice about the appropriate route for a particular student, by emailing the SeNSS Training Manager (trainingmanager@senss-dtp.ac.uk).
Finding a supervisor
Finding a supervisor

• You do not know the institution but you know your topic:
  • [https://scholar.google.com/](https://scholar.google.com/)

• You know both the institution and your topic:
  • [https://www.sussex.ac.uk/research/directory](https://www.sussex.ac.uk/research/directory)
  • [https://www.kent.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/research-phds/find-a-supervisor.html](https://www.kent.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/research-phds/find-a-supervisor.html)
Communicating with a supervisor

• When you contact your potential supervisor it is important to:
  • Address them properly in the e-mail
  • Tell them something interesting about yourself
  • Explain your research interests and how you feel your research proposal matches their expertise
  • Proofread your email before sending it to a potential supervisor
  • Not make any extravagant claims, if you say you have read their publications, make sure you have
  • Prepare for face-to-face interviews, think of the questions they may ask you and prepare some answers
Writing a strong proposal
Completing the SeNSS Application

• Discuss your research proposal with your supervisor
• Incorporate feedback from your interview in your application
• Read the SeNSS application guidance notes in HEIApply so you know what to expect.
• Application has 2 stages: application form and supervisor statement. These must be completed in sequence: the application form task must be complete before you can request the supervisor statement.
• Supervisor is auto-emailed to request their statement
• Most importantly – focus on developing a strong research proposal
Research Proposal

- Research Proposal Title – maximum 80 characters

- Research Proposal Abstract – maximum 3,800 characters

- Research Proposal – maximum 10,000 characters

- Personal Statement – usually a maximum of 500 words
What are the essential ingredients?

- **The Issue**: What problem does your research address?
- **Research Design**: How will the research achieve its objective?
- **Benefit**: What will the research contribute?
Your Research Proposal

• Key to your application – should be discussed with your proposed supervisor(s)

• Assessors look for high quality and strong potential for doctoral study (evidence of intellectual purpose and originality, reasons for, and approach towards, undertaking your proposed study, awareness of the research context)

• Description of research project and reasons for undertaking it should include:
  • key areas/issues of the project, and why you wish to pursue this research;
  • the research problems or questions you intend to address;
  • the research context in which those problems or questions are located;
  • the particular contribution to knowledge and understanding in this area that you hope to make, explaining why the work is important; noting relevance to non-academic beneficiaries, as appropriate;
  • the methods and critical approaches that you plan to use, and the sources, if appropriate;
  • how the project will develop over the period of the award (e.g. key stages, timetable);
  • how the doctoral research relates to your eventual career aims
Your Research Proposal (cont’d)

• The following create a negative impression in otherwise strong proposals:
  • typos
  • lack of clarity
  • extreme jargon
  • brief proposal with long references section
Assessment Criteria

• The following three categories of criteria will be used to assess applications across all pathways and degree formats

• Evidence of the quality and feasibility of the proposal (40%)

• Evidence that you are well-prepared for your proposed research and future career (40%)

• Evidence of the suitability of the proposed supervision and training (20%)
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<thead>
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<th>Score</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Outstanding: meets all standards at the highest level for all criteria</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.0-5.9</td>
<td>Excellent: demonstrates excellent standards for all criteria</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.0-4.9</td>
<td>Very good: meets high standards for all criteria or has excellent /outstanding standards for most but not all criteria</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.0-3.9</td>
<td>Good: has merit and meets satisfactory standards for most criteria and could potentially be readily improved</td>
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<td>2.0-2.9</td>
<td>Fair: potentially of some merit but overall is of inconsistent quality and requires significant additional measures to improve to an acceptable standard</td>
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<td>1.0-1.9</td>
<td>Poor: does not meet adequate standards for several criteria</td>
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<td>0-0.9</td>
<td>Non-scoring: seriously scientifically flawed, serious technical impediments, or insufficiently clearly written to be able to assess</td>
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Evidence of the quality and feasibility of the proposal

• This will be based on your outline of your proposed research project, your reasons for pursuing it, and its wider significance.

• It will also be based on the information supplied by your proposed primary supervisor.

• SeNSS assessors will be looking for evidence of:
  • your ability to design and conduct a strong research project
  • a coherent and well thought-out research plan
  • a strong awareness of the place of your research within the current field, and potential impact
In simple terms

• Innovate – Make sure your idea stands out (Remember reviewers will have to read at least 30 applications and you need to make sure that yours stands out)

• Support – Ensure that you have adequately covered the literature (key and up to date references are included)

• Do not under or over promise – This comes together with the feasibility question.

• Ensure that you have appropriate methodology and a contingency plan (what if you planned on interviews and did not manage to access key participants?)
## Quality of Research Proposal

- The research proposal should be of an outstanding quality, with clearly articulated aims, objectives and focus.

- The research methodology should be appropriate and very well-defined, and should demonstrate that ethical considerations have been taken into account.

- The proposal should clearly show what impact the research will have, such as building research capacity, helping to transform business practices, helping to explore and develop the skills necessary in today’s economy etc.

- The project must be feasible within the given time and resource limitations.
Evidence that you are well-prepared for your proposed research and future career

• This will be based on your description of how your previous experience (academic and/or professional) has prepared you for postgraduate study and research

• your supervisors’ evaluation of your suitability for such research based on:
  • your performance at undergraduate and postgraduate level (if relevant);
  • your relevant professional experience (if relevant); and
  • a description of how the programme will contribute to your long-term career aims.
In simple terms

• It does not just matter if you have a strong proposal but...

• YOU are also the most appropriate person to take it forward. You have the right:
  • Skills
  • Motives
  • Drive
Evidence of the suitability of the proposed supervision and training

• This will be based on your proposed supervisors’ research areas, knowledge and expertise in relation to your proposed project

• The individual roles of the proposed supervisory team

• Your identified training needs and suggested ways of meeting those training needs
In simple terms

• You do not only need an excellent proposal and a clear demonstration that you are the best person for the research but...

• Also that you will be supported by a team that has expertise and experience and can identify training needs for you
Personal Statement

• Your reasons for applying, and why you deserve a studentship:
  • Please discuss your academic interests, and why you wish to study with SeNSS, your chosen university, and your chosen department.
  • Please discuss those aspects of studying with SeNSS you find most appealing, such as taking certain modules or placement opportunities.
  • Please demonstrate your preparedness for the demands of postgraduate life by discussing your passion for your topic, as well as your existing knowledge and experience.
Your proposal should follow the structure outlined below

- Description of your research proposal
- Research background and questions
- Research methods
- Proposed timeline
- Proposed impact
More Information

• http://blogs.kent.ac.uk/kent-business-matters/2017/11/28/how-to-apply-for-phd-funding/

• https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/kent-business-matters/2016/12/02/how-to-apply-for-a-phd-in-the-uk/
Any questions