

# South and East Network of Social Sciences (SENSS) Doctoral Training Partnership

## Student-Led Studentship Competition Policy

### Summary

- The SENSS student-led studentship competition will be formally **launched on Friday 10 November 2023**.
- Applicants must apply for a place to study at their chosen SENSS university **before** applying for a SENSS studentship. SENSS universities can determine their own deadline for applicants to apply for a place to study at their chosen university, which must fall within the following date range: Wednesday 3 to Friday 9 February 2024.
- However, the **deadline for applicants to submit their SENSS applications for funding** via the HEapply on-line application platform is **12:00pm (GMT) on Friday 9 February 2024**.
- The **deadline for SENSS universities to submit their nominated institutional candidates to SENSS** via HEapply is **12:00pm (GMT) on Friday 8 March 2024**.
- By this date, the following actions must have been completed:
  - **Applicants** must have completed their online application form, which includes their supervisory team's supporting statement. Applicants will not be able to submit their forms until they have completed all the relevant sections.
  - **Supervisors** must have provided guidance to applicants for completing the research proposal section of the application and must have completed the supervisor's statement section of the online application form.
  - **SENSS universities** must have interviewed and sifted their applicants.

## SENSS Student-led Studentship Competition Process and Timeline

All studentships will be allocated on merit. While SENSS will ring-fence a certain number of scholarships for its new Pockets of Excellence and for students from under-represented backgrounds (notably BAME students), these, like all studentships, will be awarded based on their merit from what we expect to be a highly competitive pool.

Both home and international applicants are welcome to apply and, if successful, will receive a fully-funded studentship. (Eligibility rules are available [here](#).) However, UKRI requires that only a maximum of 30% of all studentship awards can be made to international applicants (up to 50% for Economics at the discretion of the SENSS Management Board). For SENSS, this amounts to ~10-11 studentships for international applicants per year.

Applicants must first apply to the university at which they wish to study. At this stage, they also need to indicate if they would like to be considered for SENSS ESRC funding. Each SENSS university remains responsible for reviewing applications, interviewing applicants, making PhD place offers and allocating supervisors. SENSS universities must follow best practice in equal opportunities, ensuring that all potential applicants have fair access to funding. Applicants put forward for SENSS funding must have been interviewed at their 'home' university, and their two supervisors must be identified before the application can be considered for an award.

The following process has been adopted by the SENSS Management Board for the 2023-24 studentship competition:

### Overall competition process

- There will be a three-stage selection process: 1. Institutional, 2. Thematic Area, and 3. Management Board.
- SENSS will ring-fence the following studentships:
  - Three studentships for the best Advanced Quantitative Methods (AQM) applications (for guidance on what constitutes an AQM application, click [here](#)), regardless of structure of studies;
  - Three studentships for the best applications focussed on Data Skills (for guidance on what constitutes an eligible application, click [here](#)), regardless of the structure of studies; and,
  - One studentship for the best candidate studying in each of the identified Pockets of Excellence institutions (University of Lincoln, Middlesex University London, and Cranfield University), regardless of the Thematic Area they apply to.
- We also aim to award several studentships to candidates from a BAME background (noting the structural challenges these candidates face within society and within the education sector) and/or to those coming straight from undergraduate studies.

The remaining studentships will be open to all applicants, across all Thematic Areas.

# 1. Institutional process

## Summary

ACTIVITY	DEADLINE
Soft launch of SENSS studentship competition	Early November 2023
Studentship competition is publicly advertised and opened for applications	Friday 10 November 2023
HEapply opens for applications	Friday 10 November 2023
<b>INSTITUTIONAL PHASE OF THE COMPETITION</b>	
<b>PhD place application deadline</b> – partner institutions to clearly communicate this <b>and</b> the SENSS application deadline, to their applicants	Between Wednesday 3 and Friday 9 February 2024
<b>Deadline for applicants to submit their online SENSS applications</b>	12.00pm (GMT) on Friday 9 February 2024
Institutional-level sifting, interviews, and selection processes	After 12:00pm (GMT) on Friday 9 February to 12:00pm (GMT) on Friday 8 March 2024
Deadline for institutional nominations (up to two per unit of assessment in each thematic area), and up to two additional WP/E&D nominations)	12:00pm (GMT) on Friday 8 March 2024
Partner institutions to let unsuccessful candidates know that they will not be progressing in the competition	Institutionally determined, but not later than 15 March 2024

## Detailed notes

- Each partner institution's basic allocation is to nominate **up to two candidates per unit of assessment** in each Thematic Area.
- Beyond that basic allocation, each partner is encouraged to put forward **up to two additional candidates per UoA per Thematic Area** provided that they are Home candidates meeting these criteria:
  - The third must meet at least one of the agreed Widening Participation criteria (see separate EDI document); and,
  - Any fourth nomination must be a BAME candidate.

NB: These additional nominations will then be considered in the usual way along with all other applications. Applicants' personal data will continue to be kept confidential by the Core Team throughout the remainder of the competition and no decision-makers beyond the institutional review phase will have access to any equal opportunities data.

- During this stage, partner institutions will also identify which applications qualify for either the ring-fenced AQM and Data Skills awards (noting that these will primarily fall within the Advanced Methods for Social and Economic Research Theme).
- There is no restriction or prescription in terms of the proportion or number of international applicants that a partner institution can progress per Thematic Area.
- Operational Leads must confirm institutional-level nominations on HEIapply. Before confirming their nominations, each partner institution must have undertaken the following checks:
  - i) To confirm their candidates' residential eligibility; and,
  - ii) To ensure that the proposed supervisory team meets the SENSS eligibility criteria.

## 2. Thematic Area process

### Summary

<b>THEMATIC AREA PHASE OF THE COMPETITION</b>	
Core Team makes applications available on HEIapply to Thematic Area Institutional Leads	By 16:00 GMT on Friday 15 March 2024
Thematic Area Institutional Leads undertake their evaluations on HEIapply	Friday 15 March to 9:00 GMT Wednesday 27 March 2024
Thematic Area Institutional Leads submit their evaluations on HEIapply	By 9:00 GMT Wednesday 27 March 2024
Core Team provides an aggregated score sheet of evaluations to Thematic Groups	By 16:00 GMT on Thursday 28 March 2024
Thematic selection meetings held virtually, preceded by 30-minute briefings for Thematic Area Chairs (one at 9.30am, and the second at 1.30pm). Members of the Core Team will be in attendance, to answer process questions	Monday 8 and Tuesday 9 April 2024
Thematic Area Chairs to provide their final ranked lists and report	12.00pm GMT on Wednesday 10 April 2024
Core Team to let candidates know whether they will be progressing further in the competition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates progressing via HEIapply</li> <li>• Unsuccessful candidates (including 1-2 lines of feedback on their applications from their Thematic Area review)</li> </ul>	By Thursday 11 April 2024 By Friday 26 April 2024

## Detailed notes

- Thematic Area Leads are required to grade all applications to their panel, including those from applicants to their home universities, except where they themselves are part of an applicant's supervisory team. As part of this grading process, Leads are required to provide written feedback on all applications. Reviewing and grading applications will be done via HEIapply.
- The maximum permitted number of Thematic nominations to the final ranked lists will vary according to the number of institutions within each Thematic Area. However, given the very competitive fields expected, we would caution Thematic Panels against expecting that a large proportion of those nominated will win funding.
- The Thematic Panel Chair will chair the Thematic Panel selection meeting.
- Should a Thematic Area Institutional Lead come from the same institution as the candidate under consideration at the meeting, the Lead will be permitted to speak to the application. If a member of the Thematic Area is a member of a candidate's supervisory team, they will be asked to recuse themselves from the discussion of that application.
- A member of the Core Team will attend each Thematic Area meeting to provide immediate advice on process, and to ensure that the competition rules are followed.
- An Institutional Operational Lead will attend the Thematic Area selection meeting, to provide administrative support.
- Applications will be assessed according to the criteria outlined at the end of this document. Final ranked lists with scores agreed by the Thematic Panel and brief feedback for unsuccessful candidates must be submitted to the Core Team, along with a report on the conduct of the meeting. That report should refer to the Management Board any cases on which there is a divergence of opinion which could not be resolved at Thematic Panel level. The Core Team will progress candidates on the HEIapply system using the information provided.
- Thematic Area groups must also:
  - Consider the applicant's past training and professional experience in relation to the project for which funding is sought and recommend additional training should the training identified by the applicant and supervisor be viewed as insufficient. Linked to this, recommend the structure of award to be made, should the applicant be successful (e.g. +3.5 or +4.5);
  - Confirm that the proposed supervisory teams are appropriate and suggest any further opportunities for additional or co-supervision across SENSS universities which would strengthen the PhD project;
  - Confirm that proposed arrangements for fieldwork (e.g. length and costs, and whether UK or overseas fieldwork) are appropriate and suggest any modifications;
  - If possible, identify whether the research proposal is inter- or multidisciplinary, and/or is a cross-UKRI proposal (to be awarded a SENSS ESRC studentship award, at least 50% of the proposal must fall within the Social Sciences);
  - Identify whether an application qualifies as an AQM award within that Thematic Area (acknowledging that the bar for 'advanced' is liable to be higher in the more methodologically oriented Thematic Areas); and/or,
  - Identify whether an application qualifies as a data skills award within that Thematic Area.
  - If the Thematic Area Group has a recommendation for an organisation which may be able to provide a suitable placement for an applicant, this should also be noted in the meeting notes.

- As per the table below, the total number of nominations put forward by each Thematic Group will vary according to the number of institutions participating in that Thematic Area.

No. of institutions in Thematic Area	Thematic Areas	Total nominations permitted
8	Sustainability and Climate Emergency	16
	Justice, Institutions and Social Change	
	Resolving Uncertainty and Addressing Crises	
7	Health, Wellbeing and Social Care	12
	Digital Social Sciences	
5	Advanced Methods for Social and Economic Research	12

### 3. Management Board process

#### Summary

MANAGEMENT BOARD PHASE OF THE COMPETITION	
Core Team produces ranked lists of nominations from each Thematic Area, along with a summary of any important points arising from the Thematic Area reports. Core Team normalises the ranked lists, provides a report on the outcome of the normalisation process, and recommends whether the normalised or non-normalised lists should be adopted	By 16:00 (GMT) Wednesday 10 April 2024
Management Board selection meeting	Wednesday 17 April 2024
Successful candidates will be sent informal offers by the Core Team through HEIapply	By Friday 19 April 2024
Formal offer letters sent to candidates via HEIapply by the Core Team within two weeks	By Friday 3 May 2024

#### Detailed notes

- The scores for all applications will be normalised. The normalisation process factors in not only the average but also the spread of marks and how these vary across Thematic Areas. These statistics will be calculated using scores of all candidates, and not only those progressed to the MB phase of the competition. The Board will utilise the normalised lists to make awards unless the non-normalised lists show such little variation as not to warrant using the normalised list.
- The Board will make the final decision regarding:
  - How many awards to make each year;

- Which candidates will be awarded the AQM, data skills, EDI, and Pockets of Excellence awards; and,
- Which international candidates will be awarded studentships.

## SENSS Selection Criteria

The criteria below will be used to assess applications across all Thematic Areas.

Panel members are asked to provide a score (a whole number between 0 and 10) for each of the following four criteria. A weighted average of these scores will give the proposal's overall score on the same 0-10 scale, with the weights corresponding to the percentages in the table below. (For example, a score of 6 for quality of proposal will be multiplied by 0.4.)

Panel members should take into account the fact that applicants will vary in the extent of prior study and, in particular, those needing and applying for a longer studentship have had less training and fewer opportunities to think about and to research their proposed research project than someone applying for a +3 studentship – especially someone whose proposal builds on Masters-level research.

Criterion	Definition
Quality and feasibility of proposal (40%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research question clearly outlined and answerable</li> <li>• Project located within existing literature and research</li> <li>• Research has potential to generate significant new knowledge</li> <li>• Research methods clearly described and appropriate for the task</li> <li>• Timetable plausible and project completable within the time available</li> <li>• Necessary evidence/data either available or collectible</li> </ul>
Interdisciplinary and impact potential of proposal (10%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fit of project within relevant SENSS theme</li> <li>• Some attention given to the potential impact/use of the research beyond academia</li> </ul>
Preparedness and potential of applicant (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to communicate purpose and method, including in personal statement</li> <li>• Basic grounding in substantively relevant discipline</li> <li>• Enthusiasm of supervisor's supporting statement</li> <li>• Evidence of achievement, progression and/or potential in studies to date</li> </ul>
Quality of local research environment, including supervisory expertise (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supervisory team offers expertise in both substance and methods of proposal</li> <li>• Supervisory team offers combination of experience and training in supervision</li> <li>• Researcher will be connected to wider peer network, within and/or beyond host department, school or university</li> </ul>