
HSC Research and Development 2026 Doctoral Fellowship Awards

Guidance Notes

Closing date for applications: **Friday 10 October 2025 at 2PM**

The application form should be saved as a .pdf file and submitted by e-mail to Eimear.Cowan@hscni.net. All the signatories who have e-signed the application declaration page (section 15b) must be cc'd into the submission email.

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Health & Social Care Research & Development Division of the Public Health Agency (HSC R&D Division) offers Doctoral Fellowships to support research training in Northern Ireland. The scheme forms part of a commitment to increase research and development capacity and build an evaluative evidence-based culture in Northern Ireland.
- 1.2 Doctoral Fellowships are intended to enable individuals working in the areas of health and social care to undertake research training as a means of developing a research career, and to follow a training programme leading to a PhD.
- 1.3 Doctoral Fellowships represent a significant investment for HSC R&D Division and for the individual fellow. It is essential that applicants intend to pursue a long-term career in HSC R&D and must be prepared to demonstrate their commitment to research.
- 1.4 All inquiries and correspondence relating to the HSC R&D Doctoral Fellowship Scheme should be addressed to:

Strand Administrator: Eimear Cowan
Eimear.Cowan@hscni.net

Senior R&D Programme Manager: Dr Sorcha Finnegan
Sorcha.finnegan@hscni.net

HSC R&D Division
Public Health Agency
Linum Chambers
2 Bedford Street
BELFAST, BT2 7ES
Tel: (028) 9536 3490
<http://www.research.hscni.net/>

2 Eligibility

- 2.1 The Doctoral Fellowship scheme is intended for individuals employed;
- in or by Health and Social Care Northern Ireland (HSCNI);
 - in community, voluntary, or not-for-profit organisations in Northern Ireland involved in health or social care provision
 - as an independent contractor (e.g. GP) in Northern Ireland involved in health or social care provision; or
 - by a recognised HSCNI training agency (e.g. the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency).
- 2.2 Applicants must be able to demonstrate evidence of an employment contract with one of the bodies described above.
- 2.3 Applicants are required to identify an eligible Employing Organisation which will act as their employer for the duration of the Fellowship. This must be one of the bodies described above. This organisation must be able to provide the applicant with a contract of employment for the full duration of the award. For most applicants their Employing Organisation will be their current employer.
- 2.4 The applicant must be accepted for a higher research degree by an academic institution in Northern Ireland before starting their research programme, as evidenced by the declarations in the application form.
- 2.5 Applicants must not start their formal research training programme before receipt of a HSC R&D Doctoral Fellowship. Retrospective applications will be considered invalid. Applications will not be considered for completion of existing research degree programmes.
- 2.6 Employees with multiple employment contracts may be eligible to apply to the scheme providing they have an employment contract with one of the bodies described above. However the fellowship will only cover an applicant's contracted employment time in the eligible organisation.

3 Remit

- 3.1 The remit for applications includes all areas of health and social care. Examples of previous projects can be found here: <https://research.hscni.net/hsc-fellowship-awards>
- 3.2 Research on animals is not eligible under this scheme.
- 3.3 Applications for taught or professional doctorates are not eligible under this scheme.

4 Scope

- 4.1 The Doctoral Fellowship award is three years whole-time equivalent (WTE) and applicants are able to hold the fellowship at between 50% and 100%.
- 4.2 The award must normally begin between April and December 2026. Fellowships cannot normally be deferred.
- 4.3 The maximum award available is **£275,000**. Applicants are advised that all costs should be justified and kept to a minimum. Part-time awards will be made on a pro-rata basis up to the maximum value. Applications which are in excess of this funding limit must explain how the shortfall in funding will be resolved.
- 4.4 The awards will support:
- the applicant's basic salary costs (plus employer's contribution to superannuation and national insurance, and normal increments and inflationary pay awards) for the number of sessions/hours devoted to the research training programme, but excluding time spent on professional duties. Promotional increases will not be supported during the tenure of the award. In the circumstances where an applicant is promoted in the period between submission of an application and interview date, the applicant must inform HSC R&D Division as soon as they are aware of the promotional increase.
 - University tuition fees
 - a contribution towards **research and training expenses up to a maximum of £27,000** (such as travelling expenses relevant to the

project, small items of essential equipment, consumables, training courses, and research conferences).

- Personal and Public Involvement (PPI) in any stage of the research project, up to a maximum of £1,500.

4.5 Support will **not** be considered for:

- Overheads for administering the research training programme.
- Facilities and services generally available within the HSC for the care of patients/clients.
- Facilities and services generally available within the university for the support of students and researchers.

5 Application Process

5.1 The closing date for receipt of applications by the HSC R&D Division is:

Friday 10 October 2025 at 2pm

5.2 Applications for Doctoral Fellowship awards can be only be made by the prospective recipient, and must be submitted on the appropriate application form.

Application forms are available from HSC R&D Division website:

<http://www.research.hscni.net/health-social-care-rd-doctoral-fellowship-award-scheme>

5.3 Applicants are asked to complete and submit an electronic copy of the application form with an e-signed declaration page.

- The application form must be saved as a PDF file. If including a Gantt chart for the project management plan (section 5c) please save this with the application form and submit as one document. Any additional information (e.g. letters of support) should be submitted as single separate PDF documents. We will review any additional documents and decide whether it is appropriate to share them with the panel. Please note a scanned PDF version will not be acceptable.
- Applicants should use the following filename format based on the applicant's name e.g. DocFellow.smith.john.2026.pdf

- Electronic signatures are required on the declaration page (section 15b)
 - The application form should be submitted by e-mail to Eimear.Cowan@hscni.net
- All the signatories (who have e-signed the declaration page) must be copied into the submission email.

6 Evaluation

6.1 All applications will be validated by HSC R&D Division. Any invalid applications will not go forward for further evaluation. Applicants will be notified in writing if an application is deemed invalid.

6.2 All valid applications will be evaluated by external referees and by an Evaluation Panel.

6.3 The Evaluation Panel will typically shortlist and evaluate applications based on a number of criteria including:

- the scientific merit of the proposed research project
- the quality of the training plan and the research environment
- the involvement of appropriate service users and the public as partners in the research process
- the applicant's potential as a researcher

Applicants can contact the HSC R&D office if they require further advice on how applications are evaluated.

6.4 It is anticipated that shortlisting will be conducted during the week beginning **19 January 2026**.

6.5 It is anticipated that shortlisted applicants will be invited to attend for interview during the week beginning **16 February 2026**. Invitations for interview will be issued immediately after the shortlisting meeting.

6.6 The number of awards made under the HSC R&D Division Doctoral Fellowship Scheme will depend on the quality of the applications and the funding available.

7 Notification

- 7.1 Each applicant will be notified of the outcome of their application by HSC R&D Division using the correspondence details specified on the application form.
- 7.2 All applicants may make a written request for feedback. Where relevant, this feedback will consist of comments from the Evaluation Panel and feedback from the external referees.
- 7.3 Unsuccessful applicants may reapply to HSC R&D Doctoral Fellowship Awards, however it is a requirement that they indicate this on their application form and outline the changes that they have made since their previous application.

8 Successful Applicants

- 8.1 Acceptance of an Award from HSC R&D Division will constitute acceptance of HSC R&D Division core Terms and Conditions and any additional Terms and Conditions¹.
- 8.2 Awardees will be employed by their chosen Employing Organisation for the duration of the Fellowship; therefore will undertake the Fellowship under the terms and conditions of their employment contract including financial arrangements.
- 8.3 Awards must be accepted by an appropriate designated Host Organisation (normally the host University) which will manage the award on behalf of HSC R&D Division. HSC R&D Division will make appropriate arrangements with the relevant organisation(s) for claiming the Award.
- 8.4 Applicants must inform HSC R&D Division immediately if funding for the project becomes available from another source.
- 8.5 The agreed period of the award should provide for full analysis of data and completion of a research thesis and any other training requirements, as

¹ For a copy of HSC R&D Division Terms and conditions please see: <http://www.research.hscni.net/terms-and-conditions-awards>

appropriate. Extensions of support for fellows will be given only in exceptional circumstances.

- 8.6 Successful applicants will be provided with feedback including comments from the Evaluation Panel and feedback from the external referees, which they are expected to consider prior to starting their research.
- 8.7 All Award Holders will be required to submit Progress Reports describing the progress of their project². Continuation of funding of the Award is subject to the receipt of prompt and satisfactory Progress Reports.
- 8.8 Award Holders will be required to inform HSC R&D Division of all the outputs and outcomes (research publications, future linked awards/grants, policy changes, intellectual property (IP) etc.) from Award funded research.
- 8.9 Where relevant, responsibilities required by Research Governance must be met. The responsibilities of the various Research Governance stakeholders, e.g. funder, sponsor(s), employing organisation(s), care organisation(s), Chief Investigator (CI) and researchers are set out in the UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research. All parties are expected to discharge their responsibilities in accordance with that Framework³.
- 8.10 Award Holders will be asked to provide a copy of their abstract and any revised versions of their abstract, which will be used by HSC R&D Division, in response to external requests for information. The content of the abstract should consider any potential disclosure of IP. HSC R&D may publish details of the abstract, names of investigators and project costs.
- 8.11 The support of the HSC R&D Division must be appropriately acknowledged in any published or public communication including all forms of media communication, including media appearances, press releases and conferences⁴.
- 8.12 On completion of a HSC R&D Division Doctoral Fellowship the fellow is expected to have successfully completed a robust research and training programme and be able to show evidence of:

² To review HSC R&D Division reporting requirements please see: <http://www.research.hscni.net/reporting-requirements-award-holders>

³ <https://research.hscni.net/new-framework-uk-health-and-social-care-research-launched>

⁴ For guidance on acknowledging support from HSC R&D Division please see: <http://www.research.hscni.net/acknowledging-hsc-rd-division>

- completion of the research proposed in the application
- award of a PhD (research doctorate, not a professional doctorate)
- completion of a substantial and wide-ranging research training element
- appropriate personal and public involvement
- publications arising from the research program
- increased research skills
- involvement in collaborative relationships
- impact of the research on the health and care of patients, the public and on health and care services

PART 2: Guidance for Completion of Application Forms

All applications can only be judged on the information contained within the application form. HSC R&D Division will regard incomplete or incorrectly completed application forms as invalid. Applicants must adhere to the given layout. In order to treat all applicants equally, the HSC R&D Division must enforce strictly the prescribed format requirements including font size and font type.

Unless otherwise stated, forms must be completed in typescript using Arial font size 11pt with single line spacing or greater. Arial Narrow font will not be accepted as an alternative to Arial.

Applications that use alternative formatting will be treated as invalid and automatically excluded. Applicants should adhere to any word limits.

Applicants are asked to note the following instructions:

Question 1: Applicant's Details

- Name and title
- Professional Background (medical and dental practitioners should also indicate their specialty)
- Professional Registration (if applicable)
- Current Job Title
- Indicate if you are a current or previous medical or dental Academic Clinical Fellow (ACF) or Clinical Lecturer (CL). *Please provide detail, e.g. year position held.*

Question 2: Fellowship Summary

- Full scientific title of the research project
- Proposed duration, indicate full-time/part-time and include proposed start and end dates
- Select the degree awarding body
- Name of lead supervisor
- Total cost of the award (*a breakdown of the total costs should be provided in question 13*)
- Tell us if you have previously applied for the scheme, and if so describe the changes that you have made since your previous application(s).

Question 3: *Employment details & applicant correspondence*

- Provide information about your employing organisation
- Provide information about the employing organisation for your fellowship *if it will be different from your current employer*
- The correspondence details are the only means by which HSC R&D Division can communicate with the applicant. It is the applicant's responsibility to provide a correspondence address, with up-to-date telephone and email details. This is particularly critical for the notification of interview procedures. Any changes in correspondence details must be communicated to HSC R&D Division at the earliest possible opportunity.

Question 4: *Research proposal summary:*

- Full scientific title of the proposed research
- Scientific abstract
- List of research methods used to complete the study (*e.g. clinical trial, cohort study, observational study, intervention study, epidemiological, questionnaire, interview, focus groups etc.*)
- List of five key words related to the research proposal
- Public or 'lay' title, designed to be understood by an interested non-scientist / non-specialist / member of the public.
- Lay abstract: a summary which provides a description of the proposal written in plain English and suitable for patients, service users and the public (*it would be useful to involve your PPI/lay partners in producing this summary*)

Question 5a: *Research proposal*

- Applicants must submit a structured description of the research project for which support is requested under the award. The word limit for this question is 5000 words. References are not included in this word limit and should be included at the end of the research proposal. *This is the only question that has a word limit; all other questions have a set text box which cannot be extended.*

Details that should be contained within the proposal may include:

- What is the problem being addressed?
- What are the aims and objectives of the project?
- Why is this research important in terms of improving the health and/or wellbeing of the public and/or to patients and health and care services?
- Background – a critical review of the background literature to demonstrate the evidence base from which the proposed project has been derived.

- Plan of investigation – propose the hypothesis or reasoning for the study, and the methods of research including a valid study design. Details of the analysis plan should be entered on question 5b.
- Applicants must clearly set out what work they will be doing as part of the proposal, what work will be done by others in support of the project and what work has been/is being done by others in the field.
- Ethical framework for the project
- References (Harvard or Vancouver format)

Question 5b: Analysis Plan

- Analysis plan – applicants should provide sufficient detail on all statistical aspects of the research proposal including statistical tests to be used, justification of sample size, recruitment processes etc. *Please note that detail is required on all proposed analysis, both quantitative and qualitative.*

Question 5c: Project Management Plan (PMP)

- Applicants must complete a PMP to provide an indication of milestones and timescales for the Award. This should include a list of specific actions and outcomes relevant to the project and it should indicate who is responsible for the delivery of each action. A number of examples are given.
- The template in the application form can be used or alternatively applicants can create a Gantt chart and submit it as part of the application as a PDF.
- You should bear in mind that the PMP is often used to monitor the progress of a study and highlight successes and challenges.

Question 5d: Contribution to planned research activities

- Applicants should describe their contribution to the research activities described in their research proposal. Please note that at PhD level it is expected that the candidate should undertake the majority of activities themselves.
- If applicants plan to enlist the help of others to undertake some of the research activities, for example – research nurse, statistician, data analyst, they should justify the need for their input, provide specific details of their role and explain the extent of their involvement.

Question 5e: Dissemination, Outputs and Anticipated Clinical Impact

- Applicants should describe what they intend to produce from the research, how the outputs will enter our health and care system or society, and how this will inform and engage patients, HSC/NHS and the wider population.
- Applicants should describe what the anticipated impact of the research will be and for whom within 5 years from the end of the study. They should consider things like; patient benefit; changes in HSC/NHS service (including efficiency savings); and commercial return (which could contribute to economic growth).

Question 6: Preliminary Work

- Please give details of any preliminary or previous work which is relevant to this proposal. If appropriate and relevant to this application, include detail on any interaction with other organisations such as the HSC Trust Research Offices, NI Clinical Research Network, NI Cancer Trials Network, NI Clinical Research Facility, NI Clinical Trials Unit, NI Methodology Hub, etc.⁵

Question 7: Personal and Public Involvement (PPI)

- HSC R&D Division believes that research grant applications and research projects are strengthened through the appropriate involvement of service users and the public and PPI is now a requirement in all funding applications. Applicants should use this section to describe how patients, carers or the public have been and will be involved in the planning, design and application of their project(s). Fellows are expected to make every effort to involve patients, carers and the public, where appropriate, at each stage of the research process. Applications which fail to address PPI appropriately may not be shortlisted. The chosen level/approach of involvement should be fully justified. Applicants should also demonstrate an awareness of the role played by PPI in research to inform their PPI plan through reference to relevant literature, and the (or how their research will incorporate) UK standards for Public Involvement <https://sites.google.com/nih.ac.uk/pi-standards/home>
- For further guidance on PPI involvement, applicants are referred to the HSC R&D Division website⁶ and are encouraged to contact Dr Janet

⁵ For further information on research infrastructure in NI please see <http://www.research.hscni.net/>

⁶ <http://www.research.hscni.net/personal-and-public-involvement-researchers>

Diffin, Senior R&D Programme Manager, HSC R&D Division (Email: janet.diffin@hscni.net).

Question 8: Statement of Motivation

- Applicants should use this section to summarise their motivation for the project and for undertaking a PhD. They should include any personal qualities they believe are needed to undertake a doctoral fellowship and describe how they already demonstrate these qualities or how they might develop them. Applicants should also use this section to demonstrate their commitment to an on-going career in health and social care research and describe how completion of a PhD will increase research capacity in their area of work. They may wish to make reference to the relevance, benefit and impact of the proposed research to the wider HSC/DoH NI.

Question 9: Applicant's CV

- Applicants should complete a CV within the application form using the standardised format. This should include only the most relevant information to the application.

Question 10: Plan of supervision and training

- Applicants should outline details of the formal and informal training they will receive during the course of their Fellowship and provide details of their plan of supervision. This training plan should include both generic research training and training that is specifically relevant to the applicant's research project. The contribution of each supervisor and any additional collaborators should also be clearly described.

Question 11: Training environment & Institutional commitment

- Applicants should indicate how the training environment is suitable to support their project, including how the proposed project relates to existing research programmes and what support (human and infrastructure) is available to the applicant. Within this section, the applicant should describe clearly how they will access advice and support for statistics and data management for their project.
- This section should be used to detail the facilities and other institutional support that will be available to the applicant during their Fellowship. *This section should be completed by the authorised signatory of the University awarding the degree (who is also required to sign the declaration under section 15b).*

Question 12: Details of Supervisor(s)

- The proposed supervision arrangements must comply with the requirements of the relevant university. It is advisable that at least one supervisor should have supervised a minimum of one successful PhD or equivalent higher research degree. Please list up to six significant and relevant publications with full authors, title and journal or book reference (Harvard or Vancouver format). If there are more than two supervisors, this page must be duplicated.

Question 13a&b Finance

- A schedule of estimated expenditure is required showing the breakdown of funding for expenses required over the relevant years. Applicants proposing to undertake full-time study should complete Question 13a and applicants proposing part-time study should complete Question 13b.
- If the total funding required exceeds the **maximum award limit of £275,000** applicants must explain and provide evidence on how the shortfall in funding will be resolved.
- Research and training expenses should include travelling expenses relevant to the project, essential equipment or consumables and attendance at specific training courses. The HSC R&D Division Doctoral Fellowships **cannot provide research expense support in excess of the £27,000 limit**. Where an application indicates research expenses are in excess of the overall limit the applicant must explain and provide evidence on how any shortfall in funding will be resolved. It is usually expected that the costs for research expenses are spread across all years of the Fellowship, e.g. for 3 years full-time up to £9,000 could be awarded per annum. Travel and subsistence costs are intended for dissemination of the research findings and an opportunity to build partnerships within the relevant research community.
- Salary must be costed using the most up to date payscale and must include inflationary costs for each year.
- PPI costs can be identified to assist in recruiting and implementing PPI. A maximum of **£1,500** is allowed across the lifetime of the award.

Question 13c: Justification for support

- Justification of each item of anticipated expenditure is required as well as how any shortfall in funding will be resolved.

Question 14: Nominations for referees

- Applicants are requested to nominate two scientific referees who could be asked to assist the HSC R&D Division in the evaluation of the proposed research programme. They must be familiar with the field of research, work outside Northern Ireland, and should not be current or recent collaborators with the applicant or supervisor(s). HSC R&D Division will also request additional external peer review. Please inform HSC R&D if there are any persons you wish were not contacted to fulfil this role and justify.

Question 15a: Organisation Details

- Provide details of the organisations who will be involved in support this application.
- The Host Organisation should indicate the research sponsor for the Award.
- Refer to the Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care⁷ which identifies key stakeholders involved in health and social care research. These stakeholders are allocated responsibilities and prior to the commencement of any study they must agree formally to undertake these responsibilities.
- HSC R&D Division will act as funder for these awards but cannot act as sponsor. If successful, applicants will be requested to confirm their employing organisation for the duration of the research, the sponsoring organisation and any relevant care organisations (i.e. organisations which are responsible for service users participating in the research) which will be involved in the research.

Question 15b: Declarations

- *(i) Applicant's signature*
 - The applicant is required to e-sign the application.
- *(ii) Lead Supervisor's signature*
 - The Lead supervisor should be aware that they are e-signing on behalf of all the supervisors from all organisations and therefore should be aware of their level of support.
- *(iii) Host Organisation: University signatory – Academic*

⁷ <https://research.hscni.net/new-framework-uk-health-and-social-care-research-launched>

- This should be e-signed by the Head of School/Faculty **or** Research Centre Director **or** Head of Research Institute confirming that the University supports the application and the supervisory arrangements.
- *(iv) Host Organisation: University signatory - Finance*
 - This should be e-signed by an appropriate representative from the Host Organisation Research Office.
- *(v) Employing Organisation: Research Office*
 - This should be e-signed by the research office of the employing organisation for the duration of the award, confirming that they are aware of the proposed research and any implications for the organisation.
- *(vi) Employing Organisation: Finance*
 - This should be e-signed by the Research Finance Officer or Director of Finance of the employing organisation for the duration of the award.
- *(vii) Head of School, Training Programme (if applicable)*
 - This signatory is required from applicants who are currently on a Specialty Training Programme facilitated by the NI Medical and Dental Training Agency.

Universities cannot sign off an application in the role of employing organisation. In the case of Specialist Registrars, the NI Medical and Dental Training Agency will assign them a supernumerary posting in the relevant Trust. Senior House Officers who have not yet been awarded an NTN will be assigned to a relevant Trust in a locum capacity. The relevant Trust is deemed to be the Trust which acts as Care Organisation.

If the sponsoring organisation is a HSC Trust or University please note that it is essential to submit your finalised application to the relevant research office of the proposed sponsoring organisation a minimum of six weeks in advance of the closing date for this award (i.e. by 29 August 2025) to allow adequate time for the Trust or University to confirm sponsorship. Applicants are advised to make contact with the relevant Trust and University research offices as early as possible during the preparation of their application.

Failure to provide all the requisite e-signatures will result in the application being excluded automatically at the initial validation stage.

****All signatories must be cc'd into the final email of submission****

Question 15c: Declaration of Conflict

- Applicants must declare any potential conflicts of interest that they, their supervisors, or others associated with the application may have in undertaking this research, including any relevant, non-personal and commercial interest that could be perceived as a conflict of interest.