ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship Call
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Background

Why are postdoctoral fellowships (PDFs) only available through the Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)?

The Postdoctoral Fellowship call forms part of our strategy to provide additional support for early career researchers. They are available through the DTPs as they have been through a robust peer review exercise, ensuring that the fellows will be embedded within a high-quality environment for research and training, and be supported in their continuing career development.

Where should applications be submitted to?

Applications must be submitted directly to the DTP where you are planning to hold the fellowship. Please see the UKRI webpage and call specification for contact details: https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/esrc-postdoctoral-fellowships/

The UKRI webpage says that the closing date is 23 March 2027 but the DTP I want to apply to has a different deadline – why is that?

Each DTP will have their own procedures in place to assess proposals through expert review and make funding decisions on behalf of ESRC. This might include an Expression of Interest (EOI) stage where only those applicants shortlisted at the EOI stage will be eligible to submit a full proposal by 23 March 2027.

Where the DTP has an Expression of Interest (EOI) stage, potential applicants must apply by the deadline for the EOI and abide by the deadlines specified by the DTP to which they intend to apply.

Can I apply at more than one DTP?

No, applicants can only submit one application to a single DTP. As such, potential applicants should carefully consider which institution would offer the best fit for their area of research and career aspirations and limit their application to that one. Each DTP will share applicant names, and the institution at which the applicant undertook their PhD, with the rest of the DTPs. If applicants apply to multiple DTPs, all of their applications will be withdrawn from consideration.

How many fellowships are available at each DTP?

Each DTP has been allocated the equivalent of four 9-month fellowships but could choose to use that funding flexibly.

Eligibility

At which research organisations can I hold a postdoctoral fellowship?

Fellowships can only be held at research organisations which are part of a DTP and eligible to participate in this initiative. In addition, fellowships must be aligned to an accredited subject area. A list of eligible DTPs can be found here: https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/esrc-postdoctoral-fellowships/

Do I have to have completed my PhD at the DTP I intend to apply to?

No, but you must have completed your PhD in the UK at a UK research organisation.

I completed my PhD at an institution outside of the UK that has links to a UK RO. Am I eligible to apply?
No, you must have completed your PhD in the UK at a UK research organisation in order to be eligible.

Do I have to have been an ESRC-funded student?
No, you don't have to have been an ESRC-funded student in order to apply.

Can I apply if I have completed a professional doctorate?
Yes, you can apply if you have either a PhD or a professional doctorate.

The eligibility criteria say that I have to have submitted my PhD and passed the viva voce by the call closing date of 23 March 2027. What does this mean?
If you haven't yet been awarded your PhD, you must have at least submitted your thesis and passed your viva voce, or passed subject to minor corrections, by the call closing date (i.e. 23 March 2027). We would expect that any minor corrections would be addressed within a three-month period and that all applicants will have been awarded their PhD by the expected start date of the grant (usually 1 October).

Please note, the offer of an award will lapse if the PhD is not awarded by the proposed start date. Start dates cannot be deferred because an award has not been confirmed.

The outcome of my viva voce was that major corrections are required. Am I still eligible?
All candidates must have been awarded their PhD by the expected start date of the grant (1 October 2027). As such, if major corrections are required to your thesis then you will not be eligible for this year's call, unless you can show that your corrections have been submitted and approved by the call closing date.

I have a fixed-term contract ending before the fellowship start date. Am I eligible?
The call is not open to those who are established, permanent members of staff in an academic position with a research component. If you have been employed on a fixed-term contract you are eligible to apply, provided you do not have more than 12 months of active postdoctoral experience at full-time equivalent rate, measured from your viva pass date to the closing date for the competition.

Does 'active postdoctoral experience' just refer to periods within academia?
We regard 'active postdoctoral experience' as research experience. In the majority of cases this will relate to periods within academia, however some potential applicants may have been employed in research-related posts in non-academic organisations that would have to be taken into account when considering their eligibility. We do not regard teaching-only contracts with no research component as 'active postdoctoral experience'.

The specification states that career breaks will be disregarded from the 12 months postdoctoral experience – how are you defining 'career break'?
The 12 months active postdoctoral experience is at full-time equivalent rate. Career breaks include periods of maternity, sick leave, or unemployment, and will be disregarded from the 12-month period. Work breaks and disruptions to working patterns due to COVID-19 can also be included. All relevant information must be clearly presented on your CV.

Is the 12-month period of postdoctoral experience calculated from the closing date for the competition or the start date of the fellowship?
The 12-month period is calculated from the date of passing your viva voce to the closing date of the competition i.e. 23 March 2027.

Can I apply for a fellowship on a part-time basis?
You can only apply for a fellowship on a part-time basis if that reflects your usual working hours. These fellowships are intended as full working-time opportunities and cannot be held alongside any other employment except in the circumstances outlined below.

Can I hold other employment at the same time as my fellowship?
These fellowships are intended to be held on the basis of 100 per cent of the fellow's working time. We recognise that some students may have undertaken their PhD on a part-time basis alongside permanent employment and in those exceptional circumstances part-time fellowships can be considered alongside that part-time employment. All other fellows must spend 100 per cent of their working time (whether full-time or part-time) on the fellowship and cannot take any secondary paid employment during the course of the grant. Applicants who undertook their PhD part-time alongside a (or a series of) temporary and/or fixed-term contracts are expected to apply for a fellowship on the basis of 100 per cent of their working time.

Why can't I apply if I have a permanent post?
The call is intended to support early career researchers in their career development, which could include gaining a permanent position. As such, those who already have a permanent post are seen as already on a path to career development.

Funding

Who can advise me on costs?
You will need to speak to your research organisation's research office for advice on costing the proposal.

All proposals will be subject to ESRC's funding rules in place at the time the award is issued, as outlined in our ESRC research funding guide – UKRI.

How much can I apply for?
There's no maximum limit but fellowships can only include the following costs:

- salary costs of the fellow
- indirect costs
- estate costs
- up to a maximum of £7,500 for **all** other costs.

Eligible costs under the 'other costs' heading could include mentoring costs, travel and subsistence, conference attendance, networking, training, and impact and engagement events, for example, but the total amount requested must be within the £7,500 maximum.

Where your RO costs infrastructure technicians separately to estate costs, these will not be counted within the £7,500 limit on other costs and do not need to be justified. However, you should clarify in your Justification of Resources attachment where this is the case.

Can I include a Project Co-Lead or any other research staff on the proposal?
No, only the fellow can be included.

Will proposals be assessed for their value for money? Are there any guidelines to conform to 'value for money'?
We expect costs requested to be appropriate and fully justified for the fellowship activities. Costs should be reasonable, and reviewers will assess how appropriate these are based on the proposed programme of work.

Can I request a laptop as part of my application?
Any proposals requesting items that would ordinarily be found in a department, for example non-specialist computers, should include justification both for why they are required for the project and why they cannot be provided from the research organisation's own resources (including funding from indirect costs from grants).

Costs for laptops may be requested if they are not provided by the host organisation and can be clearly justified in terms of the programme of work being proposed. Costs that have not been clearly or adequately justified may be reduced or removed from the award.

Applicants should liaise with their host organisation to identify the most cost effective laptop essential for their fellowship.

Focus of the fellowship

The call says the fellowships must finish by 30 June 2028 except for specific circumstances, is there any flexibility on that?
No. Apart from periods of parental leave, sickness or part-time awards, all awards must finish by 30 June 2028.

The specification states that the objective of the scheme is to support me in consolidating my PhD. What do you mean by 'consolidating'?
Your planned programme of work needs to arise from your PhD and build upon it, in order to support your longer term career aspirations. The call specification has a list of suggested activities you could include, but these are examples only.

New research **cannot** be funded through these awards. If you are looking for a research-led opportunity, then you should consider applying to our Grow grant scheme or early career schemes offered by other funders.

Can I undertake my fellowship remotely?
No, it's a requirement that fellows reside within a reasonable travelling distance of their RO for the duration of the fellowship, except when on an overseas institutional visits. This will enable fellows to be fully embedded within the high quality research and training environment offered by the DTP.

Can I carry out new research as part of the fellowship?
No. These fellowships are specifically designed to build upon your PhD experience and develop your skills for a future career in research.

Our Grow grant scheme is more suitable for those seeking to undertake significant new research.

Do I need to undertake all of those activities listed on page 2 of the specification?
No, they are examples of the types of activities you could undertake. Applicants must articulate a realistic and achievable programme of activities; proposals considered to be unrealistic or overambitious are unlikely to be competitive. The activities included in your proposal should be specific to you and your career development.

Can I be paid for additional teaching time during the fellowship?
As part of their fellowship, award holders can undertake teaching and related duties, such as training and class preparation time, for up to 6 hours a week. However, this time must form part of their fellowship's programme of activities and cannot be paid for separately to their fellowship salary. As fellowships must be held on the basis of 100% of the fellow's working time, award holders should not take on other paid employment alongside their award.

The specification states that the fellowship should be based on PhD work. Does this make work based on current postdoctoral research ineligible?
The fellowship is expected to be related to the focus of the PhD. If the applicant's current postdoctoral research is related to the PhD focus, then this would be acceptable. If the applicant's current postdoctoral research is not related to the PhD, then it would not be suitable for this fellowship and you may want to consider applying to our Grow scheme instead or early career schemes offered by other funders. No new research is allowed in the ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Can we use funding to visit international academic organisations or other research organisations?
Yes – if the organisation would be suitable to collaborate with, will help broaden your networks, or provide training, access to data or resources not available at your host organisation. Extended visits to other organisations must be accompanied by a letter of support outlining the organisation's support of the visit in principle. You cannot undertake new research as part of any such visit.

Mentors

Why do I need a mentor?
As an early career researcher, your learning stands to be enhanced by the expertise and contacts of an academic mentor who can guide you in achieving the goals and activities of your fellowship, although it will be important for you to demonstrate how you are actively managing your own career development in your application. You are required to have one to two hours' contact time with your mentor every week, where they can advise on the progress of the fellowship.

Does my mentor need to be from the same RO and subject area as me?
Yes, the applicant must have a mentor based at the same research organisation as the fellow. The mentor should have experience and a strong interest in the applicant's field of research.

Can I have more than one mentor?
Yes, for example secondary mentors can be permitted if the focus of your fellowship is on the borderline between social sciences and another disciplinary area, or to draw on specific expertise beyond your institution. However your primary mentor must be based in your host organisation.

How can I identify a mentor?
Contact the DTP you wish to apply to, as they may have mechanisms in place to identify and match mentors to applicants.

Can the mentor be my PhD supervisor?
To encourage your development in this next career stage, we recommend that the mentor should not be your PhD supervisor. This is to broaden your network and be challenged by a wider group of academics than you might have been engaged with through the PhD. Your choice of mentor needs to be fully justified in the proposal.

If I choose to have two mentors, how do I present this in the proposal?
The need for more than one mentor must be fully articulated in the proposal. A CV will be required for both mentors. The mentor statement should be completed by the primary mentor but should cover input from the secondary mentor.

Can I include costs to cover the mentor's time?
Costs for the mentor's time can be included under the 'other costs' heading. Along with the other funds requested under this heading, there is a maximum limit of £7,500. Applicants should check with the DTP regarding mentor costs as some DTPs apply a fixed or capped amount.

Attachments

Can you explain the 'list of publications' attachment? The guidance suggests this should be a bibliography but as this is not a research proposal, where do you envisage applicants referring to literature?
There is still place for a bibliography in this type of proposal, and it is also relevant given it is a standard expectation for ESRC funding. In particular, the case for support may include references to literature. This attachment is simply a reference list, not a bibliographic essay. Speak to your research office if you are unsure.

Why am I being asked for details of a referee?
DTPs will contact those being recommended for funding to seek a statement from the nominated referee. The referee statement should not be provided by the mentor. The referee can be the PhD supervisor, but if the PhD supervisor is the proposed mentor then the referee statement should be provided by another academic.

The call does not clearly mention the pathways to impact, could you explain how I should cover this area?
Impacts of your research achieved so far and planned impact should be covered in the case for support. Impact should be at the heart of the proposal and woven through any planned activities as the focus of the fellowship is on consolidating the outputs of the PhD.

Do I need to include a data management plan with my application?
Whilst applicants cannot collect any new data as part of this fellowship, there may be exceptional circumstances where existing data is re-used or combined with other data to form a new dataset. In those instances, it is a requirement of the ESRC Research Data Policy to include a Data Management Plan with any application.

Assessment process

What happens to my proposal once I have submitted it?
Your proposal will be assessed by the DTP that you have applied to, by a procedure approved by ESRC. Successful applicants will then be required to submit their proposal to ESRC by 30 June 2027 at the very latest (applications can, and should be, submitted sooner if possible). Guidance for this will be provided nearer the time.

Why do I have to submit an application to ESRC if the DTP has offered me an award?
Whilst the DTP will determine who should be nominated to receive an award, in order to receive the funding applicants must submit an application to ESRC who will issue a grant to their host institution.

Does that mean that there's a further layer of assessment?
No. ESRC won't reassess the application but we will undertake a number of checks on the applications. These include whether the applicant is eligible, whether the proposed programme of work is sufficiently within our remit as well as checking that applications abide by the call guidance. This will include that all other costs don't exceed the £7,500 maximum, and have been clearly and adequately justified, as well as that attachments do not exceed page limits.

What happens if my costs exceed the £7,500 maximum or my attachments exceed the page limit?
If your application exceeds the page limits or otherwise does not abide by the call guidance, it will be rejected.