

ESRC PhD CASE Studentships

What does an ESRC PhD CASE studentship involve?

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funds academic research across the social sciences and actively promotes the widest use of this research. As part of this process, they fund a number of PhD studentship schemes, one of which is known as the CASE award scheme. 'CASE' stands for Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering. Awards under this scheme are for three year PhD studentships (five years part time) with a link between an academic institution and a non-academic collaborating organisation from the public, private or voluntary sector. The rationale is that academic research has much to offer the non-academic sector, but collaboration does not always happen as much as it could. The aim is to make PhD research of 'applied relevance', including allowing the PhD student to 'experience' a period of time with the collaborator (about 16 weeks over the course of the 3 year award), helping to ensure that future social scientists are not only highly trained researchers but also have the skills to work in both academic and non-academic environments.

What are the benefits of collaboration for the non-academic funder?

The following 'benefits' from undertaking collaborative projects are largely drawn from the ESRC's website <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/>, and represent the views of organisations who have previously participated in the scheme:

- The opportunity to access key expertise that may not exist within the company or which may not be cost effective to develop in-house (this includes the students themselves, but also the academic supervisors).
- An opportunity to test the value of collaborative research for a relatively modest outlay (i.e. to get comparable research done under a professional research contract would cost considerably more).
- The ability to fund valuable but not necessarily the highest priority research, for which an economic case for doing the work in house would be difficult.
- Providing future researchers/potential employees with 'real life' experience of situations outside academia whereby academics have a better understanding of 'real life' and employees have improved research skills.
- Developing the skills and careers of staff.

Specifically, the collaborator will receive a number of 'outputs' as the studentship progresses. These include: a copy of the literature review conducted at the beginning of the studentship (with an up-to-date review of the relevant debates); short reports and briefing documents on various aspects of the research (such as surveys conducted and subsequent data analysis); seminar presentations; attendance at relevant meetings; short pieces for the collaborating organisation's website; and finally a copy of the completed PhD thesis.

The application process

ESRC CASE studentships are awarded on a competitive basis, so there is no guarantee that an application will be successful (about 1 in 3 are approved by the ESRC). However, our experience at the CCRI is that time spent on developing a suitable project with the collaborating partner can markedly increase the chances of success. The application process itself is fairly straightforward, involving the completion of a form that outlines the aims/objectives of the research proposal, together with its proposed methodology and timescale. The form also sets out the relevant expertise of the academic partner as well as the involvement of the collaborator; with the collaborating body having to complete less than one page on the form. This process is discussed in more detail under 'CASE Studentships at the CCRI', below.



The awards are made on an annual basis, with the submission date usually around the end of January or the beginning of February each year. This means that it is necessary to have at least a first draft of the proposal in place before Christmas. The next submission date is January 31st 2008.

What does it cost?

The ESRC pays an enhanced maintenance grant and fees for the student. The non-academic partner is required to make a minimum contribution of £2000 to the student and £2000 to their collaborating academic department in each of the three years of the studentship. i.e. there is an annual commitment of approximately £4000 p.a. for the non-academic partner.

CASE Studentships at the CCRI

The CCRI (formerly the CCRU of the University of Gloucestershire) has considerable experience of working with a range of collaborating organisations. Since 2002 they have had seven CASE studentships with a number of organisations, including: the Forestry Commission - examining 'Public benefits from private woodlands' and 'Planning for biodiversity in the wider countryside'; the Countryside Agency - 'Implementation of the Rural Development Regulation' and 'Involving young people in environmental community development'; ACES (Association of Chief Estate Surveyors and Property Managers in Local Government) - 'Examining the role of county farms'; and NABMA (National Association of British Market Authorities) - 'An examination of traditional food retail markets'.

In order to maximise the value of the research to all concerned, and to help ensure that the application has the best chance of success, considerable time is spent discussing ideas and requirements with the collaborating sponsor. This usually involves an initial meeting, followed by a number of draft proposals which are circulated for discussion; prior to formulating a final bid for a CASE studentship.

A preliminary agreement between the CCRI and the CASE sponsor on required credentials is made prior to the recruitment process, although the academic ability of students is never compromised. Candidates are short listed following University recruitment guidelines and typically five or six candidates are interviewed. Bearing in mind the added responsibilities of CASE students, the CCRI strongly prefers to appoint CASE students who already have a relevant Masters degree. There are normally two designated supervisors from the CCRI, who are senior researchers with an established track record in the subject area involved and who between them have at least two successful PhD completions. The non-academic partner may also be a formal supervisor, or more likely their role will be that of advisor. Either way, they will be briefed on University and academic protocols for successful PhD advice and supervision to make the link between the academic and external partner as seamless as possible.

During a student's first year, frequent (normally weekly) meetings are held between the first supervisor and the student, with the second academic supervisor and collaborating supervisor/advisor being included on a regular (typically monthly) basis. We also involve the non-academic partner in such activities as seminar presentations and the marking of assignments, to help them gain an insight into the CCRI's wider role in the study; something we have found can be an important element of the relationship. During the data collection phase the sponsoring organisation usually provides assistance and office space for the student and, at this time, progress meetings are held at this location which helps us appreciate the needs and protocols of the sponsoring organisation. Over the three years of the award, the student will spend in the region of 16 weeks with the collaborator.