

Guidance for applicants: 2022 competition

PhD Fellowships

Applicants should read this guidance in full before preparing an application and refer to the relevant sections at the time of completing the online application form.

1. About The Healthcare Improvement Studies (THIS) Institute

At THIS Institute we aim to create a world-leading scientific asset for the NHS by strengthening the evidence-base for improving the quality and safety of healthcare. Co-created by two exceptional organisations - the University of Cambridge and the Health Foundation – THIS Institute is founded on the guiding principle that efforts to improve care should be based on the highest quality evidence. We combine academic rigour with the real concerns of the people who use and work in the NHS. And we're highly collaborative, working closely with patients, healthcare staff, and other sectors, to provide a unique range of perspectives.

THIS Institute is made possible by the Health Foundation, an independent charity committed to bringing about better health and healthcare for people in the UK.

2. Background to PhD fellowship funding awards

Growing capacity and capability in healthcare improvement research is one of the THIS Institute's key goals. Building on the improvement science programmes previously run by the Health Foundation, we are committed to funding awards to

support PhD fellowships in improvement studies at UK universities. The Institute will fund three cohorts of PhD fellows over the period 2018-2027. Up to eight fellowships are available in each cohort.

Our PhD fellowships, which may be held at any UK university, offer talented researchers from diverse backgrounds and disciplines the opportunity to undertake high-quality studies that will advance the field, to join a supported community of improvement researchers, and to develop their research leadership skills.

We are seeking applications from universities who will recruit and select high-calibre, fresh-thinking students to undertake PhD student fellowships. Universities may appoint clinical and non-clinical candidates. THIS Institute would welcome steps by universities to attract the widest range of talent from diverse backgrounds. Each application should propose ONE project in the area of improvement research. There is no limit on the number of applications that can be made from any university, but we would not generally expect to make more than two awards to a single university.

We are asking universities to recruit individuals who can demonstrate that they can deliver the highest standards of research excellence and are highly motivated to apply their skills to studying improvement in healthcare quality and safety. Alongside disciplines already active in this area (such as, for example, health services research, epidemiology, and social science), we're also looking for fresh thinking and contributions from many fields within and beyond healthcare, including, for example, law, business studies, philosophy, engineering and many more. Applications will need to show how the proposed research will add to the evidence-base and will be of relevance to the UK health system.

Fellowship awards will include a salary/stipend, fees (where applicable) and research expenses. Though the fellowships are not Cambridge-based, fellows will convene regularly as part of the THIS Space community and will have access to a mentoring scheme.

Participation in THIS Space

THIS Institute fellows have a unique opportunity to be part of a vibrant and intellectually stimulating interdisciplinary and intergenerational community, centred on the study of improvement in healthcare. THIS Space will meet at least annually, and will function as a professional learning community, providing a 'home' for researchers from a wide range of disciplines. It is expected that all PhD fellows will be actively involved in these activities and make connections with other improvement researchers in the same cohort and beyond through buddying schemes, exchanges and development.

Mentoring

Fellows will benefit from mentorship tailored to their career stage. Mentors will be experienced in research and career development linked to the broad field of improvement studies. Individual mentors will be approved by the Institute and agree to the ethics and standards of the Institute scheme.

3. Overview of the application process

Any UK university may apply to the scheme. Applications are welcome from universities across all nations and regions of the UK, who meet the criteria below. Each application should propose a single project. Universities may submit as many applications as they wish, but in general not more than two awards will be made to any one university.

Funding is available for three years (PhD) or four years (Masters + PhD).

THIS Institute will not be involved in the direct selection of PhD fellows. Universities who are awarded funding will be responsible for recruitment.

The PhD fellowships are intended to be held full-time, but part-time applications may be considered by universities, for example, where applicants are undergoing clinical training or other circumstances apply. Those in clinical speciality training will be responsible for making their own arrangements with the relevant deanery or Local Education and Training Board, or equivalent, where appropriate.

We do not accept direct applications from individual students wishing to pursue a PhD. We cannot accept queries from individuals wishing to pursue PhD studies at Cambridge.

All applications must be submitted by the Lead Supervisor via our [Grant Tracker system](#). All applications should be supported by the finance office in the applying university.

The closing date for applications is **15 March 2022 12:00 GMT**. We do not accept late applications.

4. Assessment criteria

The Institute will run a competitive assessment process to fund UK universities to support PhD students to carry out research with direct relevance to the improvement of healthcare in the UK. Universities applying for PhD funding will need to demonstrate how their research and programmes of study will provide fertile ground for the development of PhD fellows.

PhDs supervisors must be clearly identified as part of the application. We expect the department/unit that will be hosting the student to be

clearly identified, but the supervisory team can be based across different departments and institutions, particularly if the project is multidisciplinary. Applications should provide evidence of relevant experience relating to all the assessment criteria detailed below:

- The host department/unit should be a centre of academic excellence with a strong record of research and career development for researchers.
- Extent to which the department/unit should be undertaking multidisciplinary research that will inform the development of theory, methods and areas of application relevant to improvement studies, broadly defined to include health services research, law, engineering, organisation / management / business studies, economics, social science and psychology, and other cognate areas (including, where relevance can be demonstrated, fields such as, but not limited to, the humanities, architecture, data science, and information studies).
- Quality of environment, including facilities, collaborative networks, and ability to work productively with the NHS and service partners.
- The department's ten most significant publications relevant to the study of healthcare, broadly conceived. Any contributions to these papers from PhD students should be identified.
- Approach to patient and public involvement in research.
- Suitable training programmes to support the skills and expertise needed to successfully complete the PhD research.
- Approach to equality, diversity and inclusion at the host department/unit, particularly in relation to the selection and support of doctoral students.

Applicant university departments should demonstrate a coherent development plan for improvement studies within their institution. This section of the application should clearly set out any plans for how the PhD awards will be leveraged to gain maximum benefit, for example, by broadening the scope or the depth of current areas of study or creating new multidisciplinary coalitions.

5. Proposed PhD projects

Universities must submit one application per project.

Research proposals need to demonstrate how the work will add to the evidence-base (broadly defined) for improving quality and safety in healthcare. Projects should show their relevance to the UK health system, and should ideally target areas that are either currently not supported or receive only limited support from existing funders. Projects that focus on neglected areas for improvement research are especially welcome, as are those that make use of existing data

infrastructures (for example, routine data, national clinical audits, etc.) and those that extend the range of disciplines (e.g. philosophy, engineering, law, economics, social science etc.) that can be used to study how to improve the organisation and delivery of healthcare. Projects that create novel interdisciplinary links will also be especially welcome. THIS Institute particularly (but not only) welcomes applications that seek to generate systematic knowledge about:

- What works and why in approaches and interventions aimed at improving quality and safety.
- Challenges related to standardisation, harmonisation, replication and scaling.
- Methods and theory in studying improvement.

We do not fund the following types of research projects:

- Global health.
- Projects targeting behaviour change or self-management in patients.
- Descriptive projects without an improvement strategy to be evaluated
- Projects describing variation in healthcare or the epidemiology of a specific disease without an improvement strategy to be evaluated.
- Animal research.
- Basic research in the biomedical sciences (including but not only wet lab work).
- Projects seeking to develop patient-reported outcome measures.
- Creation of cohorts.
- Development or testing of computer apps.
- Projects that seek to do a quality improvement project (e.g. applying the Model for Improvement with PDSA cycles, Lean etc.) unless embedded within a research study.
- Audits.
- Population/public health except where relevant to quality and safety in healthcare organisation and delivery.
- Projects that seek to develop devices, technology and/or pharmaceutical agents.
- Projects without potential for generalisation or transferability beyond a single clinical group/condition or locality.

Further information on what constitutes a good application and scope of existing projects, with examples from current awards, can be found in a blog on THIS Institute's [website](#) in February.

Applicants are strongly encouraged to contact THIS Institute to confirm whether their proposed research is within scope before starting their application. Please contact fellowships@thisinstitute.cam.ac.uk

Assessment will consider the extent to which the project proposals are:

- Specified appropriately to be completed through a PhD study.
- Relevant to improving quality and/or safety in the NHS.
- Synergistic with ongoing research programmes in the applying university.
- Demonstrate appropriate study design and research methods, taking into account different disciplinary norms.
- Articulate how the research project will approach reaching a diverse and representative participant or patient population. Applicants may find [this link](#) helpful.
- Describe the use of appropriate methods in which the supervisory team is expert.
- Describes an area in which the supervisory team has content expertise.
- Feasible within a doctoral programme where the student might need to gain approvals and undergo training.
- Likely to make a valuable contribution to the field of improvement research.
- Likely to enhance research skills and develop capacity.
- Likely to nurture future research leaders in the area of improvement research.

6. Recruitment of PhD students

Applications will need to include a recruitment plan for selecting PhD students and enabling them to commence their study by around September 2023.

Successful universities will be responsible for the recruitment and selection of high-calibre students to undertake the PhDs. Universities will be expected to work to their own organisational policies and procedures to ensure the students are equitably selected, with the process managed to the highest standards.

Universities will manage their research and development and administer course fees, stipends and other financial aspects of the award.

7. Budgeted costs and use of funding

The award ranges from £137,500 to £276,000 per doctoral fellowship, allowing for clinical salaries where appropriate and adjusting for the length of the fellowship (PhD or 1 + 3 model) (see Table 1). Universities may choose how they break down and allocate this sum. It is expected, at a minimum, that a university will use the funding to pay for:

- Relevant Masters / PhD fees (UK rates).
- A stipend or salary for the PhD student (UKRI offers [a minimum stipend of £15,609](#) outside London for 2021/22, but universities may wish to offer a higher rate, particularly where there is a need to attract high-calibre students with strong skills and experience, including those from clinical backgrounds).

- Research costs (e.g. conference attendance, items of small equipment, transcription costs, meeting costs, data access, and expenses for service-user participants).
- Help, advice and support for engagement with under-represented and/or minority groups
- Dissemination and publication costs, including at least one open-access publication.
- The cost of travel to Cambridge or London for an annual fellowship event.

Table 1 PhD award amounts

Type of PhD Fellow	Maximum award amount
Non-clinical PhD	£137,500
Clinical PhD	£221,000
Non-clinical Masters and PhD (1+3 model)	£165,000
Clinical Masters and PhD (1+3 model)	£276,000

We offer membership of THIS Space and access to a mentoring scheme at no cost to the PhD fellows.

Applicants are asked to provide a breakdown of all costs for supporting a PhD fellowship. The Institute will only fund the directly incurred costs for the PhD student and their research. We don't provide funds for estates; directly allocated or indirect costs.

This funding is not offered on a proportion of full economic costs (fEC) basis.

Funding is made available exclusively to support the PhD fellowship and is not intended to be used to support other costs (for example, costs or salaries for supervisors). Successful organisations will be issued with a formal funding agreement between the University of Cambridge and the recipient University. Funds will be available in up to four tranches; the exact timings for the release of funding will be discussed with each successful organisation.

8. Assessment and selection

All applications will be checked initially for eligibility and completeness. A preliminary assessment and scoring against the selection criteria will then take place by a selection panel, at the end of which high-scoring applications will be sent for external peer review.

Following peer reviews, the Institute selection panel will review the applications and determine which have successfully demonstrated how they meet the selection criteria. All applicants proceeding to peer review will be informed of the

outcome of their application following the selection panel meeting. All peer-reviewed applicants will receive brief written feedback.

9. Monitoring and reporting requirements

The Institute will require the following monitoring and reporting arrangements to be observed by the selected organisations.

- An annual progress report from the supervisor and student in each funded university, describing the research and training undertaken by the student, and reflecting on the student's professional development. Each report will include information on relevant publications and presentations.
- A final report from the supervisor and student at the end of the fellowship that includes a copy of the student's final doctoral thesis, together with an executive summary and any abstracts based on the doctoral research, submitted for publication or presentation. The executive summary should ideally include a description of external impact of the student's research, at least in terms of initial indicators of impact, for example on policy and practice.
- Only if applicable at the end of year one, a copy of the student's upgrade report from Masters to PhD.
- A quarterly report of expenditure against the fellowship budget with any variances noted and an explanation provided.

It is expected that on completion of the period of PhD funding, students will be able to demonstrate:

- Completion of the research proposed in the application.
- The award of a PhD (research doctorate, not a professional doctorate).
- Completion of substantial and wide-ranging training in improvement research theory, methods and application in practice.
- Preparation and submission of at least one open-access publication arising from the fellowship.
- Involvement in collaborative relationships with members of THIS Space, other PhD students and more widely, in the field of improvement research.

The institute's communications team will develop a set of core messages and acknowledgements for the PhD fellowship awards, and recipients are expected to use these when communicating externally about the PhD fellowship awards. Fellowship award recipients should include the institute's logo in all communication and media, for example presentations, publications, academic articles, websites or videos, both internally and externally.

10. Application, selection and recruitment timetable

- **Competition opens** – 24 January 2022, 09:00 GMT
- **Application deadline** – 15 March 2022, 12:00 GMT
- **First stage assessment completed** – 7 April 2022
- **Funding decision** – 24 June 2022