



SPHeRE 

Structured Population health, Policy
and Health-services Research Education

SPHeRE Information Package

For prospective Scholars, Supervisors, Principal Investigators and organisations with funding for a PhD Scholar

Version 7.0 February 2026

Summary

The SPHeRE PhD Programme provides a key infrastructure to support health research in Ireland through its unique and innovative PhD programme. This document provides information on the SPHeRE PhD Programme that people may find useful when completing funding applications or research plans that include possible PhD Scholar research in the broad area of population health, policy and health services research (PHPHSR). This document is aimed at those intending to enrol on the programme, Supervisors, Principal Investigators (PIs) applying to the SPHeRE Programme Call for Projects, PIs, Employers and other organisations with funding for four years for a PhD Scholar, or submitting a funding application that includes an option for recruiting a PhD Scholar.

Why SPHeRE?

- Access to the SPHeRE training programme is free.
- Structured PhD training as part of a cohort has personal and academic advantages over the traditional model of individual training with bespoke modules.
- Inclusion on SPHeRE opens up many training, supervision and networking opportunities.
- The Health Research Board strongly encourage applicants who want PhD funding in PHPHSR to include their Scholars on SPHeRE.

The SPHeRE PhD Programme provides a national training facility in PHPHSR. It is open to the best Scholars regardless of institution or funding source. Access to the PhD training is free of charge to the PI and Scholar, and is subject to successful application. PhD Scholars in PHPHSR with alternative funding who wish to join the programme can apply for a position on the PhD programme. PIs, charities, employers or other organisations with funding available can also apply to enrol a registered PhD Scholar, tied to their own projects, on to the SPHeRE Programme.

Recruitment

Call for Projects

Each year the SPHeRE Programme opens a call for projects in November/December. PIs are invited to submit a project for consideration in order to fund a Scholar for four years full time. The projects are peer-reviewed by academics in each of the SPHeRE Programme's partner HEIs. The highest scored projects are reviewed and the top scoring projects, which are aligned to the SPHeRE Programme research priorities, are chosen. Information on the successful projects will be added to the SPHeRE website and potential Scholars may apply to a maximum of three project(s) of their choosing.

The PI **and** Primary Supervisor (in many cases this may be the same person) must have a contract of employment covering the duration of the four year PhD. All applicants must have at least four years active post PhD research experience.

Please note that those who are currently a primary supervisor of a SPHeRE Funded Scholar are not eligible to apply as the primary supervisor but may form part of the supervisor team.

Applications from early and mid-career researchers (including researchers and academics) are also strongly encouraged, in addition to those with longer track records. For the purposes of this call early and mid-career researchers are those who:

- Possess a PhD
- Have at least four years active post PhD research experience
- Do not have more than 10 years post-PhD excluding maternity/paternity leave
- Have not have acted or are not acting as the primary supervisor for a PhD Scholar, but must have some previous supervisory experience other than as primary supervisor for a PhD Scholar

Applicants are advised to check the HEI regulations where they are based to ensure they meet the regulations to be a primary supervisor.

After an initial screening, selected potential Scholars will be interviewed by a panel consisting of members of the SPHeRE Leadership Team, and six successful Scholars will be allocated to six projects and awarded a HRB SPHeRE funded Scholarship.

Please note that those who become a primary supervisor for a SPHeRE funded Scholar may be asked to score projects in a future call for projects.

Scholar Applications

There are two recruitment streams - Scholar-led or PI/Employer/Other-led:

1. **Scholar-led:** Scholar-led recruitment begins in March each year, after the call for projects has closed.

The three Scholar led modes of application are:

- i) SPHeRE-HRB funded, (six per annum); whereby a Scholar applies for one (or a maximum of three) of the projects chosen from the Call for Projects (outlined above). Applications are submitted online through the [SPHeRE website](#), where applicants are asked to complete an online form and submit a one page cover letter and a two page CV. Applications open in March and close in April.
- ii) Alternatively funded applicants, identifying which of the available funding sources they are interested in/can demonstrate the skills for, or applicants may apply with their own funding already secured. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis. To complete the relevant application form please email Katherine Walsh, SPHeRE Programme Manager (katherinewalsh@rcsi.com).

- iii) Self-funded applicants, whereby costs associated with being a PhD Scholar are borne by the person themselves. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis. The relevant application form please email Katherine Walsh, SPHeRE Programme Manager (katherinewalsh@rcsi.com).
2. **PI/Employer/Other-led:** PI/Employer/Other-led applications for a PhD Scholar are accepted on a rolling basis. PIs, employers, and other organisations can recruit a PhD Scholar themselves and put them forward for consideration by the SPHeRE Programme up to August. **Funding for four years** (or the part-time equivalent) must be in place. The SPHeRE Programme can also advertise the recruitment for these Scholars on the SPHeRE website.
- Queries on PI/Employer/Other-led applications should be sent to Katherine Walsh, SPHeRE Programme Manager (katherinewalsh@rcsi.com).

Review

Scholar-led applications go through a three-step review process: an initial screening; a more comprehensive shortlisting; followed by a final round of interviews. Screening is conducted internally to exclude those who do not meet the minimum requirements. Shortlisting is conducted by a panel of academics from the different higher education institutions in Ireland. Shortlisted candidates for the HRB SPHeRE Funded Scholarships are then put forward for interview, with interviews normally held in May/June. The interview panel is comprised of members of the SPHeRE Leadership Team, and a representative from the HRB. Shortlisted candidates who are alternatively-funded or self-funded are typically interviewed in August.

PI, Employer, Other-led recruitment is managed separately to SPHeRE. Once a PI, Employer or other organisation has identified a suitable candidate and have secured **four years of funding** for them, they can put this candidate forward for a short interview with the SPHeRE Directors. This interview is conducted to ensure suitability.

PhD Journey

Scholars are in the first instance required to meet all requirements set out by the institution in which they are registered. PIs and other funders may have additional requirements of Scholars, e.g. modules or workshop training specific to their area of work.

It is important that PIs/Employers/Other organisations enrolling a Scholar on the SPHeRE Programme recognise that the workload in Year 1 of the SPHeRE Programme is significant and includes compulsory weekly teaching, module assignments, compulsory workshops, and a thesis presentation day that takes place at the end of the year.

The actual PhD research does not begin until summer of the first year. The logic for this is that the Scholars are much better equipped to do their PhD upon completion of the six modules and thesis presentations, and are more likely to deliver their PhD on time and at a higher quality. It is also good for the PhD Scholar's well-being as they establish themselves as part of a cohort, and receive support from both peers and each of the taught elements of the programme.

In addition to institutional and funding-associated requirements, the SPHeRE PhD Programme provides access to a comprehensive set of capacity building and training activities to Scholars. These activities are organised around expert-led, independent, and peer-led learning processes. These core approaches to teaching and learning underpin the different stages of the PhD journey. Appendix 1 provides a figurative overview of the journey and associated activities on a full-time basis: people completing on a part-time basis will have longer periods between stages, more details of which can be found on our website in the ["Routes to Completion of the SPHeRE PhD Programme"](#) document.

Scholars have access to six taught modules in their first year, which must be completed for progression to thesis proposal submission and Year 2 (see Appendix 2 for module descriptors). Once successfully completed, Scholars enter a new phase combining structured and independent learning.

Structured learning will be provided across the key stages of progression through delivery of workshops underpinned by three core goals:

1. Developing advanced research methods skills;
2. Building deeper understanding of the healthcare context; and
3. Developing a range of professional skills, including for career development (see Appendix 3 for an example of workshops that have been offered).

In addition to workshops, SPHeRE-HRB funded Scholars are required to undertake a 6 to 8-week national placement in their first year, and a 2-week international placement in either second or third year. Where possible, we recommend that alternatively funded Scholars also undertake placements given the academic and networking benefits that can accrue for Scholars and supervisors.

Independent learning takes place across all years and relates to core thesis work undertaken by Scholars, and completion of annual reports and dissemination milestones. The thesis proposal and subsequent annual reports are reviewed by an Academic Panel of experienced researchers, where this Panel stays with their assigned cohort through to completion. Satisfactory completion of annual reviews is required for progression. All Scholars are also required to submit a thesis-related journal article and a thesis-related policy brief. They aim

of these milestones is to have Scholars plan dissemination from an early stage in their PhD, and to learn to communicate to different audiences. Workshop training is provided to support these aims. Submission and examination of each thesis is subject to the procedures and regulations of the institution where Scholars are registered.

Finance

Table 1 provides a breakdown of costs for a fully funded PhD Scholar, and is intended as a guide for Principal Investigators (PIs), Employers and other organisations seeking to allocate funding for a PhD Scholar. Alternatively funded budgets remain separate from the SPHeRE Programme, are managed independently of the SPHeRE Programme, and are subject to the procedures of the grant holding institution and the requirements of PIs. Funding for consumables and training are at a ‘ceiling’ level, with individual Scholar expenditure in these categories managed and determined by PIs. There is no SPHeRE financial support available to alternatively funded Scholars. Appendix 4 sets out the minimum costs of undertaking a PhD that both alternative and self-funded Scholars should expect to cover through an alternative funding source or by themselves.

Table 1: Sample Funding Costs for a Full-Time Scholar

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Stipend	€25,000	€25,000	€25,000	€25,000
Fees	€6,300	€6,300	€6,300	€6,300
Equipment (Laptop and laptop lock)	€1,300	€0	€0	€0
Consumables (Books, travel to Year1 lectures, PPI, printing, data collection Years 2-4)	€2,500	€2,000	€500	€500
National Placement	€500	€0	€0	€0
International Placement	€0	€2,000	€0	€0
Travel/Dissemination (conferences and publishing)	€250	€1,500	€3,250	€1,750
Technical Training (external training in addition to the SPHeRE Programme)	€500	€0	€0	€0
FAIR Data Costs	€2000	€0	€0	€0

Travel to Year 1 lectures will be covered by the SPHeRE programme for the six SPHeRE-HRB funded Scholars for teaching that takes place outside the county in which the Scholar is registered (with the exception of Scholars based in Maynooth University attending teaching in Dublin) up to €60 per day, or €200 per overnight stay when teaching takes place on consecutive days.

There may be travel expenses incurred for alternatively funded Scholars travelling to Dublin to avail of the training provided by SPHeRE. This should be taken into account when applying for funding that will include putting a Scholar on the programme.

Appendix 1: PhD Journey¹



NOTES:

1. This diagram relates to the 4 year, full-time, SPHeRE PhD programme. Scholars undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis may choose a different route to completion and can undertake their core modules over a two year timeframe. The *Routes to Completion of the SPHeRE PhD Programme* document contains information on undertaking a SPHeRE Programme PhD on a part-time basis.

Appendix 2: SPHeRE Programme Structured PhD Training Modules

Six modules are taught in the SPHeRE Programme in Population health, Policy and Health Services Research. Modules are taught in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Trinity College Dublin and University College Cork through a combination of face-to-face and online learning methods. Each module is assessed through a written assignment and/or presentation.

MODULE 1: Population Health and Epidemiology

Module Lead: Dr Eithne Sexton (RCSI)

This introductory module provides scholars with a comprehensive introduction to population health and epidemiology, with a focus on conceptual, theoretical, and analytical foundations. By the end of the module scholars will be able to describe and explain key concepts, principles and methodological approaches in population health and epidemiology, and critically appraise how health is defined and measured. Scholars will gain an understanding of the complex ways in which health is determined, with a focus on the interplay between individual, social, environmental and structural determinants of health. The module will prepare scholars to understand and apply relevant theoretical and conceptual frameworks in PHPSR. The complexities and challenges involved in generating and interpreting evidence will also be explored, providing a foundation for a more in-depth study of research methodology in subsequent modules. Different cases and core topics are used to frame disciplinary perspectives, helping scholars to understand the multidisciplinary nature of the field and develop a critical PHPSR perspective.

MODULE 2: Study Design and Evidence Synthesis

Module Leads: Dr Barbara Clyne (RCSI) and Prof John Browne (UCC)

In this module scholars describe the major sources of research evidence (including the grey literature), conduct effective and efficient searches of the literature to the level required for a Cochrane review and critically appraise, summarise and synthesise the literature on a specific topic. They define a health service problem, identify a related research question or questions, discuss and select from appropriate study designs and methods and write a detailed research protocol (for a systematic review or randomised controlled trial) addressing key planning issues including sampling, data access, data collection, data management and research ethics considerations. The experiential approach to learning enables scholars to develop the skills necessary for presenting a successful PhD proposal.

MODULE 3: Quantitative Research and Applied Data Analysis

Module Lead: Dr Fiona Boland (RCSI)

This module introduces scholars to core concepts in research design, data types, and statistical analysis within the context of health and biomedical sciences. Through a combination of lectures, group-based exercises, and hands-on practical sessions, scholars will explore the principles of quantitative research, descriptive and inferential statistics, and regression modelling. Emphasis is placed on understanding epidemiological measures, hypothesis testing, and interpreting statistical outputs to support evidence-based decision-making. The module fosters critical thinking and collaborative learning through case-based discussions and applied data analysis

MODULE 4: Qualitative and Mixed-methods Research

Module Lead: Dr Aisling Walsh (RCSI)

This module provides a foundation in qualitative and mixed methods research, with a focus on applications in population health and health services research. Through a combination of lectures, group-based exercises, and hands-on practical sessions, scholars will explore the principles and practices of the primary qualitative research designs, and appropriate uses. The module also introduces key methods of data collection, alongside common approaches to qualitative data analysis. An introduction to qualitative synthesis will also be provided. Scholars will design and implement a qualitative research project. In addition, students will be introduced to the typologies of mixed methods research, learning how qualitative and quantitative approaches can be integrated to address complex research questions.

Emphasis will be placed on understanding methodological rigour, ethical considerations, and the process of designing and justifying a qualitative and mixed methods research project. By the end of the module, students will be equipped with foundational knowledge and skills to critically engage with qualitative and mixed methods research in their own doctoral work.

MODULE 5: Health Systems and Policy

Module Leads: Prof Sara Burke (TCD) and Dr Carlos Bruen (TCD)

On completion of this module scholars are able to describe and discuss the structure and operation of health systems globally with specific reference to the Irish health system. They become familiar with the conceptual frameworks from the health systems and policy analysis literature and understand their application in an Irish and global context. As the approach of this module is interactive and discursive, scholars discuss and compare the performance of health systems in different countries. They discuss and appraise the main policy debates relating to human resources motivation, migration and workforce planning as well as focusing on the development and (non) implementation of universal healthcare. As a third feature of this module scholars are introduced to the approaches, structures and practice of healthcare management in an applied and real-world context.

MODULE 6: HEALTH ECONOMICS

Module Lead: Dr Bridget Johnston (TCD)

In this module Scholars are exposed to the uses of economics and econometrics in the analysis and evaluation of health care. The module provides a basis for more advanced study for those likely to use economics in their PhD research. Key issues such as health financing, equity and resource allocation are discussed, as are the practical methods of economic evaluation.

Appendix 3: Sample Workshop Schedule

Core Workshops

Cohort Year	Title	Participants	Trainer	Access***
Yr1	The importance of academic feedback*	Yr 1 compulsory	SPHeRE Assistant Director for Academic Affairs (RCSI)	SPHeRE only
	Presentation skills*	Yr 1 compulsory		SPHeRE only
	Delivering Inclusive Population & Health Services Research*	Yr 1	Breandan Ward (New York University)	SPHeRE only
	Public and Patient Involvement in PHPHSR	Yr1 compulsory; Yr 2+optional	Dr Emmy Racine (UCC), Martha Killilea (University of Galway)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
Yr2	Making the transition to Year two	Yr 2 compulsory	SPHeRE Assistant Director for Academic Affairs (RCSI), with SPHeRE Scholars in Year 3/4)	SPHeRE only
	Code of good practice in research	Yr 2 compulsory	Prof John Browne (UCC)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
	Research Participant Recruitment	Yr 2 compulsory	Prof Colette Kelly (University of Galway), Dr Pauline Dunne (RCSI)	SPHeRE only
	Publishing in a peer review journal	Yr 2 compulsory	Dr Lucy Norris (TCD)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
	Writing Skills*	Yr 2 compulsory	Prof Olena Mazurenko (Indiana University)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
	NVivo Day 1 (Basic)	Yr 2 compulsory	Ben Meehan (QDA Training)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
	Yr2 Research troubleshooting*	Yr 2 compulsory	Prof Mary Clarke (RCSI) Dr Caitriona Cahir (RCSI)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
	What is your contribution?*	Yr 2 compulsory	Dr James Larkin (RCSI) Dr Rikke Siersbaek (TCD)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
Yr3	Yr3 Research troubleshooting*	Yr 3 compulsory	Prof Kathleen Bennett (RCSI), Dr Aisling Walsh (RCSI)	SPHeRE only
	Communicating your research for policy*	Yr 3 compulsory	Dr Carlos Bruen (TCD)	SPHeRE only
	Thesis Preparation	Year 3 compulsory	Dr Sarah Barry (RCSI) Dr Michelle Caffrey (RCSI; SPHeRE ADAA) Prof Olive Lennon (UCD) Dr Charlotte Myers (TCD; ADTL & SPHeRE Alumna)	SPHeRE only
Yr3&4	Becoming a research leader in PHPHSR	Yr 3+4 Compulsory	Prof Patricia Kearney (UCC)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
	Grant preparation and writing	Yr 3+4 Compulsory	Dr Nicholas Clarke (RCSI)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars

Advanced Workshops

Frequency	Title	Participants	Trainer	Access***
Annual	Stata troubleshooting clinic*	Optional Years 2-4	RCSI Data Science Centre (RCSI)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
Biennial	Mixed methods research training*	Optional Years 2-4	Dr Sarah Parker (TCD)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
Biennial	NVivo Day 2 (Advanced, attendance at NVivo Day 1 required)	Optional (years 2-4)	Ben Meehan (QDA)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
Biennial	Multi-level modelling	Optional (years 2-4)	George Leckie (University of Bristol)	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars
Biennial	Media Training	Optional (years 2-4)	Dr Claire O'Connell	Limited access for non-SPHeRE Scholars

Legend

* Indicates preparatory work required

*** Priority will be given in the first instance to SPHeRE Scholars, though where places are available they will be open to non-SPHeRE Scholars to attend.

Alumni and non-SPHeRE Scholars interested in attending SPHeRE workshops should contact sphere@rcsi.ie with enquiries.

Appendix 4: Minimum Costs for Alternative and Self-Funded Scholars

Year 1	Consumables	Year 1 Book List	€	400	
		Laptop and Software	€	1,300	
		Stata Software	€	240	
		Travel to Orientation Day & Peer Learning Day*	€	260	
		Travel to Year 1 Modules (from outside Dublin and Cork)	€	1,580	
		Travel to Year 1 Thesis Presentation Day (Dublin)	€	60	
		Travel to Year 1 Workshops	€	180	
	Training	National Placement Costs	(optional, but advised)	€	500
	Fair Data Costs			€	500
Year 2	Consumables	Travel to Year 2 Workshops	€	480	
		Data Collection Costs			
	Travel and Dissemination	Travel and Dissemination (conferences, publications)			
	Training	Training Costs including International Placement (optional, but advised) in Year 2 or 3	€	2,500	
Year 3	Consumables	Travel to Year 3 Workshops	€	180	
		Data Collection Costs			
	Travel and Dissemination	Travel and Dissemination (conferences, publications)			
	Training	Training Costs			
Year 4	Consumables	Travel to Year 4 Workshops	€	120	
		Data Collection Costs			
	Travel and Dissemination	Travel and Dissemination (conferences, publications)			
	Training	Training Costs			

*Expenses are capped at €60 per day or €200 per overnight stay

**Carrying out the national placement in the Scholar's home city to reduce additional travel costs

Please note that the costs outlined above are indicative costs for participation on the SPHeRE Programme and individual PhD Scholar costs will vary depending on factors such as the project, location of their home institution etc.