

Guidance on how to raise matters of concern about issues or decision-making pertaining to the SWDTP and its partner institutions

Introduction to and scope of this guidance

This document provides guidance on the ways to raise matters of concern in relation to decisions, or other issues that may affect you, as an SWDTP-funded student; or as an applicant for an SWDTP-funded studentship, including postdoctoral funding. In reading it, it is important to recognise that the SWDTP is neither an awarding authority for university degrees, modules, or assessments, nor is it the legal employer of any staff who may be conducting business on behalf of the SWDTP (including the SWDTP ‘hub’ staff, who are not employed by the SWDTP, but by the University of Bristol).

In most circumstances the correct place to raise a query, discuss or appeal a procedural decision, lodge a grievance, or to make a complaint is the higher education institution (university) to which you are registered or applying to. In such cases, you should consult your institution’s processes and procedures. It is not within the SWDTP’s remit to offer guidance to students/researchers who wish to explore or to instigate an institutional appeal or complaint, or to dispute any outcome that arises from it. Nor is it within our remit to dispute other decisions that are made by your institution; for example, in relation to progress on your PhD and whether it is considered satisfactory. Advice is usually available from relevant staff at your institution, including supporting student services, or the students union. Generally, the SWDTP is independent of institutional appeals and complaints processes. However, dependent on the nature of the case—for example, where the SWDTP either has an interest or is a relevant party—it could become involved.

Nevertheless, there are some circumstances in which the SWDTP can make decisions that have the potential to affect your status as an SWDTP-funded student/researcher. These may impact upon your opportunity to progress to completion of a doctorate or of postdoctoral study (for example, if we were to withdraw funding). This document sets out relevant SWDTP processes, including when and how concerns can be raised directly with the SWDTP, and how we anticipate they will be handled, subject to any institutional considerations that may apply.

Nothing in this document should be read as superseding or replacing any of the rules and regulations in place at your institution, your contract with your institution and with other relevant parties such as the SWDTP and ESRC/UKRI, the UKRI’s revised terms and conditions for training grants (<https://www.ukri.org/publications/policy-statement-review-of-the-training-grant-conditions/>), the ESRC’s own rules and regulations and terms of conditions of funding (<https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-postgraduate-funding-guide/>), or applicable legal and regulatory frameworks. In the case of doubt, those rules, regulation and terms and conditions should be referred to.

You are encouraged to raise more general matters of concern or areas of feedback through your SWDTP student representatives. Their contact details can be found at <https://www.swdtp.ac.uk/our-students/student-reps/>. You can also contact your Institutional Academic Lead: see <https://www.swdtp.ac.uk/institutional-academic-leads/>.

A query in respect to not being shortlisted for or awarded a postgraduate scholarship, or about the process of shortlisting

You cannot appeal academic judgment. Consequently, you cannot appeal how your application is judged and scored during the various stages of shortlisting and selection for a scholarship.

However, if you believe that there has been an irregularity in the shortlisting process that has had a material impact on whether or how you were shortlisted, scored and/or ranked then you should raise it with your Institutional Academic Lead (IAL) in the first instance to discuss. Their contact details can be found at <https://www.swdtp.ac.uk/institutional-academic-leads/>. Please contact your IAL as soon as possible. Delays will limit our ability to take corrective action.

If required, the IAL will raise the matter with the SWDTP Director, who will review the case with the IAL. Authority for any final decision rests with our Awards Ratification Committee (ARC).

In most circumstances (but see below), the final deadline to raise your concern is one week before the meeting of the SWDTP's Awards Ratification Committee (the final stage of our shortlisting process), the date of which can be found in Annex F at <https://www.swdtp.ac.uk/information-for-academic-colleagues/pathway-leads-and-supervisors/>.

If, however, your concern is about irregularities in the process overseeing the actions or decisions taken by the ARC, then please contact the Chair of the SWDTP Management Board (see <https://www.swdtp.ac.uk/about/swdtp-management-board/>). It is vital that you do this as soon as possible after the ARC has met and typically within two weeks. It may not be possible for us to respond to or act on information that is received beyond that date. Please remember that you can only query irregularities in the process of decision-making, not the decisions themselves.

Given the importance of time, should you be unable to contact your Institutional Academic Lead or the Chair of the Management Board (as required, please see above), or you receive no response, then contact the SWDTP Director directly by sending an e-mail to swdtp-enquiries@bristol.ac.uk. The deadlines stated still apply.

A query in respect to the process by which the SWDTP shortlists for and awards postdoctoral funding

If you believe that there has been an irregularity in the shortlisting process that has had a material impact on whether or how you were shortlisted, scored and/or awarded postdoctoral funding then you should raise it with your Institutional Academic Lead (IAL) in the first instance to discuss. Their contact details can be found at <https://www.swdtp.ac.uk/institutional-academic-leads/>. If required, your IAL will raise the matter with the SWDTP Deputy Director who will review the case with the IAL. Authority for any final decision rest with the SWDTP's Management Board. It is important that you contact the IAL quickly. Delays will limit our ability to take corrective action.

A request to review the length of funding awarded to a postgraduate scholarship and any training requirements attached to it

The length of funding and any training conditions attached to a funding offer are informed by your Developmental Needs Analysis (DNA) at the point of application, the nature of your research, and how both map to the ESRC's mandatory requirements for the content and delivery of postgraduate training (see <https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-postgraduate-training-and-development-guidelines/>). The decision is made by committee, under delegated authority from our ARC.

You may, after discussion with your supervisor, ask for the decision to be reviewed. The request to do so must come from your supervisor, who should send an email to swdtp-enquiries@bristol.ac.uk within 2 weeks of your offer letter being received, or before the deadline to accept the offer, whichever is sooner. **Any request to waive all or part of the training requirements must clearly establish you have prior learning and experience that meet the ESRC's expectations and satisfy the SWDTP Director or Deputy Director.** Please note that all students, without exception, must either have prior experience of or receive training in (1) digital methods and data skills, (2) qualitative methods and skills, (3) quantitative methods and skills, and (4) subject skills and knowledge. Please see the ESRC's postgraduate training and development guidelines for further information (<https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-postgraduate-training-and-development-guidelines/>).

Matters in regard to not passing, within the time frame set by the SWDTP, a Masters funded by the SWDTP that is required to progress to the PhD stage of study

If we have funded you to complete a Masters qualification prior to progressing on to the PhD stage, then that progression and the funding of the PhD is conditional on attaining (passing) the Masters upon which you have been enrolled, and to have done so by October 1 of the year the Masters funding ends and the PhD funding is due to start.

Typically, for full-time students, that October 1 deadline will be approximately 12 months after the Masters commenced. For part-time students, it will be around 24 months after the Masters has commenced. However, if an exam board does not meet until after that date (and so your final Masters result is not known by October 1), the funding for your PhD stage will be provisionally agreed, where there is confidence that you are on track to attain the Masters (to pass) at the next available exam board.

If you do not subsequently attain the Masters at that exam board, or decide not to continue with a PhD, then you will be liable for the repayment, if sought, of any scholarship funding that has been made beyond the Masters period (i.e. for any provisionally agreed PhD funding that has been made to you). The criteria to pass the Masters are those set, by your institution, for the programme on which you are enrolled. Please note, additional institutional requirements (including deadlines) may apply.

Your PhD funding is at risk if you have not attained (passed) the Masters within the timeframes specified above. Typically, your funding will be permanently withdrawn if you have not passed the Masters, or are not on track to do so, at the relevant exam board closest to the October 1 deadline. You can still complete the Masters, at your own cost, if your institution provides further opportunity for you to do so over a longer period than that set out above (e.g. by

allowing you to retake modules/units during an additional academic year). However, funding for the Masters and for the PhD will be withdrawn and not reinstated, regardless of any such opportunities.

In exceptional circumstances, the SWDTP Director can, with the agreement of your institution, allow the start date of your PhD to be deferred, and additional time be permitted to attain the Masters, without the permanent withdrawal of funding. Where this is considered, it is subject to the following conditions:

- there is confidence that the intended learning objectives and the criteria for passing the Masters will be met;
- the amount of work and time required to attain the Masters is relatively minor and can be completed reasonably quickly;
- there has been clear evidence of engagement with the Masters programme's teaching, learning and assessment by the student;
- all funding for the student from the SWDTP is suspended until the student progresses to the PhD stage;
- if the student does not progress to the PhD stage, the funding is permanently withdrawn with the student liable for any repayment, if sought, of funding that has been made beyond the Masters period;
- every effort is made to minimise the length of the suspension; and,
- the period of suspension is not judged to be overly detrimental to the student's prospect of completing the PhD.

The last of these conditions arises because the period of suspension counts towards the 12-months maximum that any ESRC-funded student is allowed to suspend over the entire period of their funding.

Please note that there is no automatic entitlement for this deferment and suspension. It is, as stated, at the discretion of the SWDTP Director and your institution, in exceptional circumstances.

Please note that the end date of the Masters and/or the start date of the PhD may be adjusted for medical, paternity, maternity, or other permitted leave. These may change the deadlines to attain (pass) the Masters. Please see the ESRC's Postgraduate Funding Guide for further information (<https://www.ukri.org/publications/esrc-postgraduate-funding-guide/>).

Please also note that your institution may set additional criteria for progression to a PhD. It is an institutional decision whether those criteria have been met. Any appeal regarding them should be directed to the institution.

Matters in regard to us withdrawing funding because of you not completing and passing the required skills training as set out in your PhD scholarship offer letter.

In accordance with the ESRC's training requirements, your SWDTP funding may require you to take, study, and pass specific modules/units, and the summative assessment associated with them. This will be stipulated as part of your studentship offer. Typically, these modules/units will be taught and assessed at the Masters level. The pass mark will be that of the corresponding Masters programme. For example, if you are required to take a module/unit in advanced quantitative methods which is also taught as part of a wider Masters programme with

a pass mark of 50% or above, then the pass mark you need to attain is 50%. This confirms that you have met the intended learning objectives of the module/unit and the ESRC's expectations in that area of training. If the training/module is not taught as part of a Masters programme, then other criteria may apply to pass.

We require you to have passed the modules/units, and your institution to have confirmed this to the SWDTP, within 24 months of the commencement of your PhD for full-time students, or within 48 months for part-time students, unless prior agreement has been secured with the SWDTP to spread the required training over a longer period. To help avoid non-completion within the time limit, we typically expect students to take the modules/units in the first year of their PhD. Students may retake assessments if permitted by their institution, provided the pass mark is achieved within the 12 months / 24 months limit. Allowance can also be made for medical and other suspensions.

If the modules/unit are not completed and passed within the designated period, then it is likely that funding for the scholarship will end. This is because the ESRC requires that where a student is not considered of the required standard to complete the PhD, funding should be withdrawn. You will be liable for the repayment of any funding that extends beyond the date that the funding is withdrawn.

If your funding is withdrawn, then you should explore your options and discuss your circumstances with relevant members of your institution. If appropriate, they may make representation to the SWDTP to have the decision reconsidered.

Matters pertaining to the consequences of you not engaging with our Developmental Needs Analysis (DNA)

DNA is a process of reflection, conversation, and skills development throughout the course of your PhD. Engagement with it is required by the ESRC and is monitored by the SWDTP through an online toolkit. This is in addition to any required skills training set out in your offer letter and discussed above.

Failure to engage actively with our DNA on an on-going basis can be treated as an issue of inadequate progress towards completing the requirements of an SWDTP-funded PhD and it may result in the withdrawal of your funding. Where such concerns arise, we will first seek to resolve the matter with your advisor and yourself, asking that our concerns be logged as part of annual progress monitoring or postgraduate review processes within your institution. If this is insufficient, found to be unsuccessful, and/or concerns about non-engagement with the DNA process remain, then we reserve the right to escalate the issue to Faculty or College level oversight via your Institutional Academic Lead. If this fails to resolve the situation, your funding may be withdrawn. You will be liable for the repayment of any funding that has already been made and extends beyond the date that the funding is withdrawn.

Any decision to withdraw funding is one of 'last resort', made because of persistent non-engagement and with consideration to any mitigating circumstances you may present. Should it occur, then you should explore your options and discuss your circumstances with relevant members of your institution. If appropriate, they may make representation to the SWDTP to have the decision reconsidered.

Matters of academic or other misconduct

Cases of academic or other misconduct will usually be handled by your institution. If this results in suspension or dismissal from your PhD or postdoctoral position, then your funding will be suspended or terminated too. It is possible that you will be required to repay some or all of the costs associated with your studentship, from the commencement of that studentship onwards (i.e. you may be required to repay the full amount of the studentship that has been paid).

Any appeal will be through your institution's processes. If successful and you are reinstated on to your programme of study, then we will aim to restart your funding if we are able to within the operating constraints and terms and conditions upon us. However, we cannot guarantee being able to do so, at which point any further appeal should be raised with your institution.

Although the SWDTP will not itself investigate matters of academic concern or other potential misconduct—except in checks for potential plagiarism or the use of AI generated content in submitted applications it receives from prospective students—it reserves the right to raise any concerns it may have with your institution, and to share with that institution any evidence the SWDTP may have in regard to them. This includes but is not limited to suspected plagiarism or contract cheating in your application form (including suspicion of someone else or a machine having written it), dishonest use of SWDTP funding, and other academic or professional misconduct such as the harassment of, ill-treatment toward, or prejudicial conduct against other students or staff working on behalf of the SWDTP.

Matters relating to disability support or reasonable adjustments to study as a result of medical or other circumstance.

It is the role of the SWDTP to advise, not to decide upon what your institution deems appropriate in terms student support, within the framework set out by UKRI's Terms and Conditions. Any appeals and complaints should therefore be directed to your institution. The SWDTP can, however, offer you advice on what *may* be possible within those terms and conditions, and can help you to make connections with appropriate people in your institution who may be able to help you further.

Concerns about another student or researcher (including 'whistleblowing')

Bullying, harassment, discrimination, and other forms of wrongdoing must not be tolerated, including unethical research practice or academic misconduct. Where these are experienced or witnessed, they should be reported using your institution's processes for reporting unacceptable behaviour. We recognise, however, that the SWDTP is a multi-institutional partnership and that the complaint may involve a student, postdoctoral researcher, or staff member at a different institution to your own. In such instances, you are invited to contact either the SWDTP Director or the SWDTP Manager. Their details are at <https://www.swdtp.ac.uk/meet-the-team/>. Neither will discuss what you raise with anyone else without your permission, unless there is a safeguarding or legal obligation to do so.

The UKRI's Whistleblowing policy can be viewed at <https://www.ukri.org/publications/ukri-whistleblowing-freedom-to-speak-up-policy/>.

Concerns about a member of your advisory team or another member of staff at your institution

The SWDTP neither appoints nor employs the members of your advisory team, or other staff that you may encounter whilst a PhD or postdoctoral student. As such, please follow the procedures in place at your institution to raise a complaint, concern or grievance about them. These may include talking informally, in the first instance, to a department, School or Faculty PGR Director, or equivalent, or to the students union.

Concerns arising during an internship/placement or an Overseas Institutional Visit.

Please contact your institutional advisors (PhD supervisors) and/or the SWDTP (swdtp-enquiries@bris.ac.uk) in the first instance to discuss. If the matter is urgent, please follow the procedures your home institution has for making contact in the event of an emergency.

Concerns about a member of the SWDTP staff

All students have the right to be treated fairly, respectfully and without prejudice by SWDTP staff. In the unlikely event that this is not the case, the matter should be raised with either the SWDTP Director or Deputy Director in the first instance or, exceptionally (and only if contacting the Director or Deputy Director is not viable), the Chair of our Management Board (see <https://www.swdtp.ac.uk/about/swdtp-management-board/>). They will seek to resolve your concern impartially and with sensitivity. However, it may become necessary, with your permission, to escalate the matter to a relevant line manager or member of HR for the staff member concerned, in order that the matter can be investigated fully and with fairness to all parties. There may also be a legal obligation to report the matter to relevant authorities. Formal complaints can be raised via <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/students/support/complaints/>.

A complaint to UKRI (/ESRC)

Generally, complaints regarding the SWDTP or its partner institutions should be directed to the partner institutions or to the SWDTP in the ways set out in this document. However, if you wish to make a complaint about the UKRI's (including the ESRC's) standard of service or activities, then their process for doing so is outlined at <https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/contact-us/make-a-complaint/>.

Please note that disagreements with SWDTP decisions do not fall within the scope of UKRI's complaints procedure.