



Applying for a research degree at ISF

Guidance for applicants

Institute for Sustainable Futures

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1. Introduction

1) Purpose

This document describes the process that prospective candidates must follow to apply for a research degree at the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). All prospective candidates must be pre-approved by the Learning and Development Leadership Committee (LDLC) at ISF before applying for their chosen degree through UTS. The process for obtaining pre-approval is outlined below.

2) Available degrees

ISF offers the following higher degrees by research:

- Master of Sustainable Futures (Research): Up to 2 years (full-time) or 4 years (part-time)
- Doctor of Philosophy (PhD): Up to 4 years (full-time) or 8 years (part-time).

Both degrees are open to domestic and international applicants. The PhD can be studied either locally within Australia or as a PhD by distance. The PhD by distance option is designed for international students who prefer not to relocate to Australia for their degree.

UTS living stipends are available only to domestic and international candidates based in Australia. International candidates, whether based in Australia or overseas, may be considered for tuition fee scholarships.

3) Summary of the application process

Prospective candidates should follow the process outlined below. Applications that do not follow this process will not be accepted.

1. **Submit an Expression of Interest (EOI):** If you are interested in undertaking a PhD or Masters by Research at the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF), your first step is to submit an EOI. The EOI form asks about your research interests, proposed topic, and whether you intend to apply for a UTS living allowance and/or tuition fee scholarship. We encourage you to review our [list of supervisors](#) to identify potential supervisors whose research interests align with your proposed topic. If you have a potential supervisor in mind, you may contact them directly and send them your EOI form and CV. Alternatively, you may email the ISF Higher Degree by Research Program (HDR Program) at HDR.ISF@uts.edu.au with any questions or to submit your EOI form and CV.
2. **Identify a potential supervisor:** Once you submit your EOI, we will share it with ISF supervisors whose research interests may align with your proposed project. If a supervisor is available and interested in discussing your proposed research, they will contact you directly. Please note that applications cannot proceed until at least one ISF supervisor is willing to support your application. While we do our best to identify potential supervisors, submitting an EOI does not guarantee that a suitable supervisor will be available.
3. **Apply for pre-approval:** Once you have confirmed an interested supervisor, you will work with them to prepare your pre-approval application. You will need to prepare and submit three documents, including response to the assessment criteria, your CV, and academic transcripts for your previous degree(s). Please follow the guidance for applicants in Applying for a research degree at ISF when preparing your documents. Applications should be emailed to HDR.ISF@uts.edu.au and copy your proposed supervisor(s) in the email. Closing dates for those seeking a UTS scholarship for living allowance are published in advance on the [ISF website](#).
4. **Wait for confirmation:** Pre-approval applications are approved by the LDLC. If you are seeking a UTS scholarship for a living allowance, the LDLC will also rank your application. Please note that pre-approval is not a guarantee that you will be awarded a scholarship.

5. **Apply to UTS:** Pre-approved applicants can then proceed to submit an enrolment application to UTS. Processing of applications by UTS can take several months and includes decisions on the award of scholarships. You will be contacted directly by the UTS Graduate Research School with the outcome of your application.

4) Who makes the pre-approval decision?

Pre-approval decisions are made by members of the ISF Learning and Development Leadership Committee (LDLC), which is a sub-committee of the [Institute Board](#).

Terms of reference for the LDLC can be provided on request.

5) Preparing your application

Your pre-approval application must include the following three documents:

1. Application summary and your response to our assessment criteria
2. Your curriculum vitae (CV)
3. Academic transcripts for your previous degree(s).

Further details on the requirements for each of these documents are provided below.

2. Application summary and your response to our assessment criteria

This document should be submitted as a single Word or PDF file.
The filename should be '1_Application summary and assessment criteria_Your surname'.

1) Application Summary

The first page should include a table with the following details completed.

Item	Your response
Applicant	Your full name
Proposed supervisor(s)	The names of your proposed supervisors. All UTS research students must have two or more UTS supervisors. Listing a single supervisor is acceptable for the pre-approval application.
Citizenship	In which countries do you hold citizenship? We need this information to confirm whether you are applying as a domestic or international applicant. Note that both Australian and New Zealand citizens are considered to be domestic applicants.
Degree you are applying for	Please indicate whether you are applying for a Masters by Research or PhD, and whether you propose to do the PhD locally or by distance.
Type of enrolment	Please indicate whether you intend to enrol full-time (minimum 35 hours per week dedicated to your research) or part-time (minimum 17.5 hours per week).
Tuition fee plan	Please indicate if you wish to be considered for a scholarship that covers tuition fees. If you are not seeking a tuition fee scholarship, please confirm that you have a plan in place to cover these fees.
Living expenses plan	Please indicate if you wish to be considered for a scholarship that provides a living allowance. If you are not seeking a scholarship, please confirm that you have a plan in place to cover your living expenses during your degree.

Response to assessment criteria

ISF assesses and ranks prospective candidates' applications using 5 criteria. Your application needs to include a written response to each of these 5 criteria. **Each criterion is to commence on a new page.**

2) Education and professional experience

Education and professional experience are the focus of criterion 1. This criterion is weighted at 30% of the overall assessment score of 100.

In our assessment of this criterion, ISF considers your recent education and professional experience, with particular emphasis on the quality and extent of your preparation for research within the past 10 years. This preparation may have come from previous education and/or from paid or unpaid professional experience. Please provide a brief statement (**maximum 250 words**) outlining your educational background and work experience, with particular attention to their relevance to your research topic.

Educational experience

Elements to consider include:

- Prior education and degrees awarded
- Other relevant education and training, qualifications and skills

The quality of the educational institution is taken into consideration. Examples of potential quality indicators may include, but are not limited to:

- Recognised international ranking lists for universities (e.g. QS, THE, ARWU) or disciplines within universities
- The best institution in the country on a recognised international ranking list

Professional experience

For professional experience, "research-intensive" means acting in a role or capacity that specifically undertook research. "Research-relevant" means acting in a role or capacity that requires and demonstrates these skills:

- Review, analyse, consolidate and synthesise knowledge to identify and provide solutions to complex problems with intellectual independence
- Demonstrate a broad understanding of a body of knowledge and theoretical concepts with advanced understanding in some areas
- Exercise critical thinking and judgement in developing new understanding
- Design and use research in a project
- Present a clear and coherent exposition of knowledge and ideas to a variety of audiences

Common examples include but are not limited to:

- Evidence of leadership in organisations or communities
- Consultancy work / acting in expert capacity
- Dissemination of knowledge
- Contributions to professional organisations / practice / service
- Relevant creative practice

If you already have a PhD, you are welcome to apply, but you will not be ranked for a scholarship in a round unless there are no other suitable prospective candidates.

In addition to the brief statement, you need to provide two additional lists:

Previous degrees

Please list all previous degrees (within the last 10 years specifically) you have been awarded, and complete the requested information in the following table. Your broader educational background can be documented in your CV.

Degree	Awarding institution (country)	Year awarded	Honours	Weighted Average Mark (%)	Research component
Full title of degree	Name of university or other institution (and show which country if outside Australia). What was the university's and / or subjects ranking, and in what ranking system.	Year of conferral	Indicate if this was an Honours degree or you were awarded Honours, and at what level	What was the Weighted Average Mark for the degree, expressed as a percentage? ¹	Did the degree include a research project? If so, what was its duration (in years and/or months)?

Previous work experience

Please list all of your relevant work experience (within the last 10 years specifically) and complete the requested information in the following table. Your broader work experience can be documented in your CV.

Role	Organisation (country)	Role, and period in role	Relevance to proposed research topic
Full title of role	Name of organisation (and show which country if outside Australia)	What was your role and how many years were you in that role e.g. 2024-2025.	Indicate the relevance of the professional experiences to the proposed research. Was it "research-intensive" or "research-relevant", provide a brief explanation.

3) Outputs and achievements

Outcomes and achievements are the focus of assessment criterion 2. This criterion is weighted at 30% of the overall assessment score of 100.

In our assessment of this criterion, ISF considers the quality and demonstrated potential of your previous research or research-relevant outputs within the past 10 years. Please provide a brief statement (**maximum 250 words**) of your research outputs and achievements within the past 10 years.

¹ If your transcript does not show the Weighted Average Mark, you may be able to estimate it using the formula provided here: <https://www.uts.edu.au/current-students/managing-your-course/classes-and-assessment/results/grading-schema-coursework-subjects/grade-point-average-and-weighted-average-mark>.

Research outputs are interpreted broadly and may include peer-reviewed publications and outputs (e.g., journal articles, book chapters, monographs, academic textbooks, conference papers), recognised non-traditional research outputs (NTRO), or other research-relevant professional or creative outputs.

Outputs, achievements, and authorship conventions should be stated as appropriate for the discipline and should be linked to quality indicators. Examples of quality indicators include, but are not limited to:

- Publication in journals ranked on a recognised international list appropriate to the discipline
- Contribution to a book published by a high-reputation press
- Creative output in an internationally or nationally prestigious venue
- Industry paper or report for a national or peak professional body

Awards, accolades, and acknowledgements of peer recognition may be taken into consideration where they are research-relevant. “Research-relevant” means either directly thematically related to the research the prospective candidate is proposing to undertake or demonstrating the skills necessary to undertake research.

In addition to the brief statement, you need to provide the following list:

Previous outputs and achievements

Please list up to 10 of your most relevant outputs and achievements (within the last 10 years specifically) and complete the requested information in the following table. All outputs and achievements can be listed in your CV.

Type of output or achievement*	Citation and link (if possible)	Year	Quality Indicator(s)	Explanation of research or research relevance output or achievement
E.g., Journal paper, book, Recognised Non-Traditional Research output, Industry paper/report, research relevant award	E.g. journal citation and DOI	Year of publication/ completion	e.g. journal ranking, book publisher, etc	e.g. shows independent research design, analysis, and publication capability that aligns with the proposed research

* ISF recognises that some government and industry papers and reports may not be publicly available. In these cases, we would ask to see a copy of the report for verification and would keep the document confidential.

4) Alignment with faculty research strategy

The alignment between your proposed research and [ISF Strategy 2025-2027](#)’s mission, vision, strategic priorities, and areas of work (research) is the key consideration in assessment criterion 3. This assessment criterion is weighted at 15% of the overall assessment score of 100.

Please provide a statement (**maximum 500 words**) of how your proposed research aligns with the [ISF Strategy 2025-2027](#)’s mission, vision, strategic priorities, and/or areas of work (research).

From time to time, the assessment of this criterion may be adjusted, for example, to prioritise prospective candidates whose research topics align with prioritised research topics identified within relevant ISF areas of work (research). These adjustments, approved by the LDLC, can be provided to you by your prospective supervisor(s) at the time of your enquiry.

5) Research proposal

The quality of the research proposal is an important indicator of your capacity to complete a higher degree by research at ISF. The research proposal is the focus of assessment criterion 4. This assessment criterion is weighted at 15% of the overall assessment score of 100.

The research proposal should be developed in consultation with your prospective supervisor. In assessing your proposals, we consider the following elements:

- Clear identification and articulation of the research topic, research question(s), and relevant fields of inquiry
- Evidence of originality and the potential significance or contribution of the research topic to knowledge, practice, or policy within the relevant field(s).
- Demonstration of engagement with relevant and contemporary scholarly literature, including an understanding of key debates, gaps, or areas of emerging interest.
- Identification and justification of appropriate methodological approaches and/or research design, demonstrating feasibility and alignment with the proposed research aims and objectives.
- Assessment of whether the scope and scale of the proposed research are achievable within the opportunities and constraints of a graduate research degree, including timeframes and available resources.
- Clarity, coherence, and accuracy of written/creative/professional expression, including the logical structuring of ideas and effective communication of complex concepts.

Please take care to avoid plagiarism and to declare the use of AI. You can find more advice on plagiarism and how to avoid it here: <https://avoidingplagiarism.uts.edu.au>. We assess all proposals using iThenticate software to identify possible plagiarism and AI use. Serious plagiarism and the undeclared use of AI will result in rejection of your application.

We recommend keeping your proposal concise and no more than 8 pages. A suggested structure is as follows.

Introduction and Significance (up to 1 page)

Introduce the need for your research, moving from a general description of the research challenge to the specific part of this challenge that you intend to address (your 'niche', or the research gap).

Make a case for the significance and importance of your intended research. Why does it matter? To whom? What use will it be? How will it contribute to sustainable futures?

What is your overarching research aim and/or objectives?

Literature and practice review (up to 2 pages)

Explain the background to the research problem through a review of relevant literature (and if appropriate a summary of experience from your professional practice) that demonstrates a sound knowledge of past and recent work in your domain of interest. Be sure to include peer-reviewed literature in your reading and analysis, as well as popular and/or industry material if that is relevant.

Summarise and critique the main findings reported by others and identify any gaps in literature or practice that you intend to address through your research.

Proposed Research Questions (up to 1 page)

Link your findings from the literature review with your own ideas. That is, specifically, what will you ask and answer in your research? Are there any hypotheses to be tested? Don't just list your research questions –

make an argument for there. How do those questions logically flow from the literature review you have presented?

What are the expected outcomes from answering these questions?

Preliminary Research Design (up to 2 pages)

Conceptual framework: What are your preliminary ideas about concepts and theories that might guide your study?

Methodology: What methodology fits well with your questions and your conceptual framework; e.g. do you plan to set up a mainly quantitative or qualitative study or something in between? Are you thinking of using case studies, surveys, interviews, models or some other method?

Data: What type of data will help you answer the questions? Where and how will you collect the data?

Analysis: What are your initial thoughts on how you will analyse and make sense of your data?

Budget (up to 1 page)

Think through the costs of your study and specify how you plan to cover them. Distinguish between your project costs (e.g. travel, fieldwork, software, etc) and your personal costs for undertaking postgraduate study (living allowance, tuition fees, etc). ISF provides students up to \$9,500 over the course of the degree to cover costs of doing the research and for professional development (up to \$4,750 for Masters). Additional funding will need to be sought by students and their supervisors for any costs beyond these amounts.

References (1 page)

List all references you have cited in your proposal and any other readings that have been influential for the development of your research proposal.

6) Adjustment factors

Assessment Criterion 4 focuses on adjustment factors and accounts for 10% of the overall assessment score out of 100.

You are asked to provide a statement (**maximum 500 words**) and any relevant supporting information to enable this assessment (e.g. personal statement, CV context, application declarations, and, where relevant, referee commentary), which can be provided as a supplement to your application. In your statement and support documentation, you should clearly outline the nature of any relevant factors, the extent to which these factors have influenced your trajectory or access to opportunities, and provide clear, evidence-based supporting detail. This criterion is intended to account for context rather than to reward achievement, and should not duplicate information already provided on outputs, experience, or proposal quality, which are the focus of other criteria.

In preparing your statement, you may wish to address any relevant circumstances, including:

- Carer responsibilities
- Long-term medical conditions
- Disability
- Living in a rural or remote area
- First Nations background
- Gender and/or sexuality
- Low socio-economic status
- Career interruptions
- UTS alumni status
- First-in-family background
- Constrained access to research opportunities

3. Your curriculum vitae (CV)

Please provide a detailed CV that includes your full contact details and outlines your professional experience, previous education, publications and other research outputs, other achievements, and referees. UTS provides a template for CVs that you can use, although the use of this template is not compulsory for the ISF application.

**This document should be submitted as a single Word or PDF file.
The filename should be '2_CV_Your surname'.**

4. Academic transcripts for your previous degree(s).

You should provide scanned copies of transcripts, testamurs, and grading explanations for all tertiary degrees attempted, current, or completed. Transcripts need to include both grade and unit for each course. Please include the original language (if applicable) and the English translation.

**Transcripts should ideally be combined into a single document and submitted as a single PDF file.
The filename should be '3_Transcripts_Your surname'.**

