



Applying for a research degree at ISF

Guidance for applicants

**Institute for
Sustainable Futures**

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Contents

Purpose	3
Available degrees	3
Summary of the application process	3
Who makes the pre-approval decision?	4
Preparing your application	4
1. Your CV	4
2. Academic transcripts for your previous degree(s).	4
3. Response to assessment criteria	5
4. Research proposal	7

Purpose

This document describes the process that applicants must follow to apply for a research degree at the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) at University of Technology Sydney (UTS). All applicants 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.

Available degrees

ISF offers the following research degrees:

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

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

Summary of the application process

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

1. **Make contact:** Contact ISF to express interest in a research degree. The best way to do this is to send an email to the ISF Graduate Research Program address: isf-grp@uts.edu.au. Our staff will then provide further instructions on next steps. Alternatively, if you have a potential supervisor in mind (see the [list of supervisors](#)), you can contact them directly.
2. **Complete an EOI and confirm a supervisor:** Once you have made contact, we will ask you to complete a short Expression of Interest (EOI) form with more details about your research interests and proposed topic. At this stage, you can also advise us if you are seeking a scholarship. If you have not already identified a suitable supervisor, we will use the EOI to try and find a supervisor that is interested and available. Applications are not able to proceed until at least one ISF supervisor is willing to support the application.
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 four documents, as outlined below. Applications should be emailed to ISF-LearningLC@uts.edu.au and to your proposed supervisor. Closing dates for applications are published in advance on the ISF website: <https://www.uts.edu.au/isf/learning/graduate-research-program/how-apply>.
4. **Wait for confirmation:** Pre-approval applications are assessed and ranked by the ISF LDLC. This usually takes place about two weeks after the application deadline. We will inform you of the outcome of the pre-approval process shortly after the LDLC meeting. Please note that pre-approval is not a guarantee that you will be awarded a scholarship. We generally do not have sufficient scholarships available for all applicants that are seeking them.
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 award of scholarships. You will be contacted directly by the UTS Graduate Research School with the outcome of your application.

Who makes the pre-approval decision?

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

- Associate Director Learning and Development, ISF (Chair)
- Program Lead, Higher Degree Research, ISF
- ISF's other Responsible Academic Officers
- Program Lead Course Development
- An ISF Program Officer
- Two student representatives.

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

Preparing your application

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

1. Your CV
2. Academic transcripts for your previous degree(s).
3. A written response to our assessment criteria
4. A research proposal

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

1. Your 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 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 '1_CV_Your surname'.

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

You should provide a scanned copy of transcripts, testamurs and grading explanation for all tertiary degrees attempted, current or completed. Transcripts need to include both grade and unit for each course. Please include in 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 '2_Transcripts_Your surname'.

3. Response to assessment criteria

This document should be submitted as a single Word or PDF file.

The filename should be '3_Assessment Criteria_Your surname'.

ISF assesses and ranks applicants using several assessment criteria. Your application needs to include a written response to these criteria. The responses should be provided in a single document, using the headings and order shown below.

Application Summary

The first section of your application 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 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.
Topic summary	A 100-word summary of your proposed research topic, indicating its significance and potential impact.

Previous degrees

Please list all previous degrees you have been awarded and complete the requested information in the following table.

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)	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?

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>.

Student achievement

In our assessment, ISF recognises student achievement during previous degrees and other training. Please provide a brief statement (**maximum 500 words**) that describes notable achievements during your previous degrees or other training courses. You might wish to include:

- Any competitive prizes or award earned during previous degrees that recognised your merit or capability. For example: Dean's or Chancellor's Merit Awards; University Medal; competitive scholarships; success in design, writing, communication competitions etc.
- Professional development courses you have completed, particularly courses that are relevant to your proposed research topic
- Extra-curricular roles you have taken on during your time at high school or university, including volunteer roles, internships and tutoring or leadership roles that demonstrate your engagement and motivation. Again, roles that are relevant to your proposed research topic are of particular interest.
- Any other information that demonstrates how your previous study has prepared you to undertake a research degree, such as your performance in any research-related subjects.

Research outputs and achievements

Publishing research is a key skill that research students need to develop and ISF values demonstrated ability to develop research publications. We are interested in the quantity, quality and impact of publications and other forms of research communication that you have previously produced. This category is assessed 'relative to opportunity'; if you have only recently completed your first degree, expectations are less than if you have been working for several years in a research-related role.

We interpret research outputs broadly to include not only peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters, but also research reports, blog posts, contributions to industry publications, conference papers, research-based presentations, creative outputs, and other forms of research communication. All such outputs should be listed in your CV.

In this section, please write a summary (**maximum 500 words**) of your research outputs and achievements. Your response should address the following questions:

- How many years have you been actively engaged in research activities?
- What are your top three research outputs to date? For each of these outputs, provide a short explanation of why you consider each output to be one of your best and summarise any evidence you have for its quality and impact. For example, you might refer to: citation counts; the impact factor or standing of journals in which you have published; invitations to present at conferences; evidence of the standing of conferences you have presented at; number of views or downloads for online publications; size of audience and prestige of event for presentations; lead authorship; testimonials and positive feedback received; evidence of changes resulting from research outputs, such as policy or institutional changes or adoption of findings in practice. Where possible, please provide a link to each of these three outputs so that we can review them.
- Do you have any other evidence that speaks to the quality and impact of your other research outputs, beyond the three outputs discussed above? You might wish to refer to indicators of your overall research output here, such as total citations or h-index. We also welcome narrative responses that help us understand the context of your research outputs, e.g. if you have written a lot of research reports that are confidential and cannot be shared, please make us aware of that.

Professional and research experience

ISF has a mission to create change towards sustainable futures. As such, we place great value on achievement of real-world impacts through professional experience. We also value the development of research skills in professional roles. We assess professional and research experience relative to opportunity. An applicant who has been in industry for 15 years should be able to demonstrate significantly more impact than an applicant who has just graduated. Experience can be demonstrated through both paid and unpaid roles.

Your current and previous roles should be documented in your CV. To supplement this list, please provide a summary (**maximum 500 words**) of your professional and research experience responding to the following:

- Summarise your current and previous paid employment, volunteer, or community roles and 'life experience' and outline its relevance to your proposed research topic. How has your previous experience prepared you to undertake a research degree?
- Describe the impact you have achieved through your current or previous roles and provide evidence to support this where possible.
- Describe any opportunities to develop and apply research skills that you have taken in your current or previous roles.
- If you have experienced career interruptions that have affected your ability to develop professional and research experience, please explain those here.

4. Research proposal

This document should be submitted as a single Word or PDF file.

The filename should be '4_Proposal_Your surname'.

The final document you need to provide is a research proposal. This should be developed in consultation with your proposed supervisor. The research proposal is a crucial element of your application, as it allows us to judge the quality of your early research framing and design, as well as the match with ISF research interests. In assessing proposals, we consider the following:

- **Significance:** How significant is the proposed research for creating change towards sustainable futures? Does it address an important research gap and clearly articulate that gap? What is the potential for an original contribution to knowledge?
- **Research literacy:** How well does the proposal demonstrate familiarity with the conventions of research writing, including drawing on appropriate literature, appropriate citation, clear structure, articulation of research questions, and alignment between the research questions and research design? How well does the proposal demonstrate critical thinking?
- **Feasibility:** How well does the scope of the research fit with the opportunities and constraints of a graduate research degree?
- **Writing:** How well is the proposal written, at meta (structure), macro (section) and micro (paragraph) levels?

Please take care to avoid plagiarism. 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. Serious plagiarism will lead to rejection of your application.

We recommend being concise and keeping the length of your proposal to no more than 10 pages. A suggested structure is as follows.

Introduction and Significance (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 4 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.



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