AHRC Doctoral Landscape Award - Assessment criteria for 2026

The majority are of fundable quality and the competition is fierce. We have developed a set of criteria to help us to make difficult decisions in a transparent way.

In essence, the questions we ask are:

- Why this applicant?
- Why this research project?
- Why this supervisory team?

Marks are organised into broad bands A-D. Reviewers are asked to allocate precise marks within each band. Total marks available for award are 50.

Qualifications OR Relevant Professional Experience

Band	Mark	Qualifications description*	Relevant Professional Experience description
A	6	A first-class degree with evidence of high marks maintained across the programme or exit velocity as demonstrated by increasing marks in undergraduate transcripts *and* dissertation or equivalent awarded a first-class mark. **OR** a Masters level distinction with a dissertation mark of 70% first class/A grade or equivalent **OR** clear evidence of excellence in the dissertation/independent research element of an unclassified postgraduate research degree (e.g. MPhil), e.g. comment from external examiner or dissertation of publishable quality, set out in the candidate's application and corroborated by a reference letter provided with the application for a University place	A compelling case that relevant professional experience is **at least equal to** the completion of a Masters degree with distinction, including strong evidence of independent research thinking and excellent quality output

B	5	A first-class degree **OR** a Masters level distinction **OR** clear evidence of a high standard of achievement in the dissertation/independent research element of an unclassified postgraduate research degree (e.g. MPhil), e.g. dissertation of near-publishable quality, set out in the candidate's application and corroborated by a reference letter provided with the application for a University place	A strong case is made including evidence of independent research thinking and high-quality output
C	4	Masters with merit	A good case is made that relevant professional experience is **at least equal to** the completion of a Masters degree but is not compelling. For instance: evidence is available of research thinking but the level of independence is unclear; evidence is available for output, but the quality is not excellent.
D	1	Masters at pass (overall mark 50-59% or equivalent) **OR** Undergraduate degree at 2:1	A case is made that relevant professional experience is **at least equal to** the completion of a Masters degree but is not strong. This might include a lack of evidence of independent research thinking and poor-quality output, for example.
*** Where the qualification is non-standard or unclassified, your application for a University place and/or Supervisory Statement will provide further information for review purposes**			

Quality of Research Proposal, Knowledge Exchange, Public Engagement, and Impact (including Academic Impact)

Band	Mark	Description
A	14 13 12	An exceptional proposal in all of its components. Research questions are clear/cogent, and the proposal demonstrates a comprehensive awareness of the research context and the contribution that the project will make to the field. A clear gap in existing knowledge has been identified and a compelling case made for the significance of addressing this gap. The proposal is original and innovative, the methods are appropriate, and the project is feasible within the timescale 3.5-4 years. An entirely persuasive case has been made for the potential for knowledge exchange, public engagement and/or impact (including academic impact) with demonstrably feasible plans for delivery within the timescales. Any ethical/safety issues have been identified and appropriately addressed. The proposal is compelling.
B	11 10 9	A strong proposal with clear and cogent research questions and a sense of the contribution that the research will make, combined with appropriate methods. The research is likely to be feasible within the timescale of 3 ½ years. There is a good case for the potential for knowledge exchange, public engagement and/or impact (including academic impact) together with a realistic delivery plan. Any ethical/safety issues have been identified and appropriately addressed. A good case is made for the proposal.
C	8 7 6	A solid proposal with researchable questions, appropriately identified sources and an appropriate methodology. There is some awareness of its intellectual importance. The research may be feasible within the period of supervised study. There will be indications of awareness of the potential for knowledge exchange, public engagement and/ or impact activity (including academic impact) but the proposal may lack realistic plans for implementation. Any ethical/safety issues have been identified and appropriately addressed.
D	5 4 3	A proposal with serious shortcomings in one or more of its aspects.

Preparedness for research

Band	Mark	Description
A	10 9	Evidence that the applicant is **exceptionally well-prepared** for **their proposed research** and **for PhD level of study** through either: Previous highly relevant study (e.g.: the relevance of undergraduate and Masters' programme and dissertation topics; specific advanced methodological or skills training; proficiency in required language or technical skills; relevant employment-related or work-based learning experience etc.); **or** Previous highly relevant professional experience (e.g. significant employment in a highly relevant field with equivalence to Masters' study; specific methodological training and/or experience etc.); **and** The training requirements identified demonstrate convincingly that the candidate has an excellent sense of what is required to enable them to complete the project successfully and has identified training available, making excellent use of the SGSAH Hub.
B	8 7 6	Evidence that the applicant is **well-prepared** for **their proposed research** and **for PhD level of study** through either: Previous related study (e.g.: the relevance of a UG programme and Masters' dissertation topic; specific methodological or skills training); **or** Relevant professional experience (e.g. employment in a relevant field with equivalence to Masters' study; specific methodological training and/or experience); **and** The training requirements identified indicate that the candidate has a reasonable idea of what is required to enable them to complete

		the project successfully and has identified some training available, making good use of their membership of the SGSAH Hub.
C	5 4 3	Evidence that the applicant is prepared for **their proposed research** and **for PhD level of study** through either: Previous related study but somewhat limited in scope (e.g.: the relevance of an undergraduate or Masters dissertation; some competency in appropriate methodological or skills training and/or experience). **or** Some relevant professional experience but limited in scope or duration (e.g. employment in a relevant field with equivalence to Masters' study.) **and** The training requirements identified indicate that the candidate has partially considered the training required to enable them to complete the project successfully and has given some indication of familiarisation with the resources and opportunities provided by being a member of the SGSAH Hub.
D	2 1	No evidence that the applicant is prepared for their proposed research and for PhD level of study (e.g. there is no relevance of UG/Masters programmes to the proposed project) **or** No relevant professional experience **and** Little indication of familiarisation with the resources and opportunities provided by being a member of the SGSAH Hub.

Individual Training Plan (ITP) and Engagement with the Hub/University Training

Band	Mark	Description
A	10 9	Compelling evidence that the specific needs of the nominated applicant have been considered carefully, that the training needs identified are appropriate and relevant and that the student will be exceptionally well supported. It is highly likely that the project will be successfully completed within the funded period. There is clear evidence that the future career aspirations of the applicant have been considered that appropriate opportunities/resources have been identified, making excellent use of the resources available across the University of Edinburgh and the SGSAH Hub The overall plan is clear and realistic and offers an outstanding PhD Programme for the applicant.
B	8 7 6	There is strong evidence that the specific needs of the nominated applicant have been considered and that the training needs identified are appropriate and relevant. It is likely that the project will be successfully completed within the funded period. There is good evidence that the future career aspirations of the applicant have been considered, and that appropriate opportunities/ resources have been identified.
C	5 4 3	There is some sense that the specific needs of the nominated applicant have been considered though the development opportunities are limited.
D	2 1	The training plan is entirely generic. Insufficient attention has been paid to specific training and skills development needs and how these will be met.

Supervisory Expertise and Research Environment

Band	Mark	Description
A	10 9	Supervision arrangements represent an optimal fit with the nominated student and their proposed research. The supervisory team, in its totality, provides this student with the best possible support available, and is internationally excellent. The supervisory team is likely to offer complementary areas of expertise, at the level of knowledge/discipline, methodologies, and other appropriate skills (e.g. impact and KE experience), demonstrating the ability to develop the doctoral researchers' skills and professional competence. All members of the supervisory team are active researchers, demonstrating significant and ongoing expertise in the required field(s), as appropriate to their career stage. The research environment offered to the applicant is demonstrably excellent in all of its components. Resources available across the HEI are essential to the successful completion of the PhD and will add value to the overall doctoral experience – e.g. specialist libraries, collections, spaces or equipment – and the nominated applicant will be able to access the resources. The research fits well with the expertise and/or priorities and/or research clusters of the supervising HEI. There is demonstrable 'added value' for the student being co-supervised by this supervisory team and particular HEI and vice versa.
B	8 7 6	Supervision arrangements represent a strong fit with the proposed research. There is a strong research environment, with the supervisory team able to offer good support, and the environment providing access to necessary research resources. There is evidence of existing or emerging capacity in the proposed research area.
C	5 4	Supervision arrangements are adequate, with supervisors having some experience in the subject area but there are some questions about the fit between the full supervisory team and

	3	proposed research. There is adequate fit between the resource needs of the project and the research environment.
D	2 1	There are some strengths but there are also clear weaknesses in terms of supervisory fit and research environment. The supervisory team does not fulfil the supervisory training requirements in all of its components.