General Application Feedback - STEM
GOIPG/2020 – Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship

I. Project
a) Clarity and coherence of the proposed research
• Proposals should be written by the students with some input and assistance from the proposed supervisor.
• Be realistic about the aims and objectives of the project, don't be overly ambitious.
• Favour a focused project description over a lengthy one - consider bullet points or short paragraphs, rather than long, continuous text: be concise and clear.
• Ensure details of experimental approaches are included, with an indication of outcomes.
• Include aims and objectives as well as hypotheses and predictions.
• Ensure that the proposal is accessible to reviewers less familiar with the field while maintaining sufficient detail for expert reviewers - make it very clear what the new advance/idea/innovation is, but write as if the reader does not have any knowledge about the proposed research.
• This is especially true for the lay summary: include details on what is to be done but be careful not to be too technical.
b) Quality of the proposed research design and methodologies
• Ensure that the research design, methodology, methods and tasks are described and justified with sufficient detail - and demonstrate that you understand them.
• Methodology should be clear - avoid bullet points as well as technical terms that those outside the field will not understand.
• Avoid listing techniques without giving thought to how a specific experimental approach addresses a question (or its limitations).
• If applicable, make use of structures and reaction schemes in the appendices to clarify the general concept and any specifics.
c) Feasibility of the proposed milestones, deliverables and contingency plans
• Make sure to link the milestones, deliverables and contingency plan to the methodological approaches of each aim rather than presenting them as a list.
• Spend time reflecting on the potential risks associated with the proposed research and what could be done to reduce these, and always include a clear contingency plan.
d) Consideration as to how the proposed research will advance state of the art and make a contribution to existing knowledge
• Take time to consider and understand the state of the art, and briefly outline what it is.
• Avoid general/generic statements - spend time considering how the proposed work will advance the field and contribute to new knowledge, be specific about it.
e) Plans for dissemination and knowledge exchange of the proposed research
• Recognise the importance of dissemination and communication as part of the project: dissemination plans need to go beyond listing academic outputs.

• Consider dissemination beyond publications in high ranking open access journals and conference - e.g. in non-academic media and aimed at non-academic audiences.
f) Consideration of the relevant ethical issues and sex/gender dimension
• In zoology: ethical issues only need to be discussed if working on vertebrates or cephalopods (specifically the octopus). Sex/gender issues should be included if it adds another dimension to the project: e.g. looking at differences between the sexes.

II. Applicants
a) Track record and research potential of the applicant
• Give consideration to a move to a different institution from where the BA and MA were completed.
• Clearly set out the dates of award of degree(s), including clear descriptions of subject, class and awarding institution, as well as your employment and research experience.
• Include all relevant experience - in case where an MA was not completed, research experience may make up for it.
• Be succinct in the description of the cursus - try not to repeat the same information.
• If applicable, consider including ranking in BA/MA promotion, especially for degrees obtained outside Ireland.
• In case of lab internships, indicate whether it was compulsory as part of BA/MA course, or voluntary.
• Consider setting out longer-term ambitions, describing how the award is a first step towards something bigger.
b) Personal statement
• Avoid generic and vague statements, be specific about your motivations/reasons behind the choice of subject or research environment.
• Contextualise the application - explain how the scholarship fits with what has been achieved to date and will make a difference.
• Where possible, highlight any non-academic activities/experience that demonstrate a genuine interest in the wider research area.
• Don't be afraid to express curiosity and fascination with research and the subject selected - don't focus too much on the technicalities of the project but rather on the reasons behind your interest in this particular area of research.
• Avoid phrases such as "ever since secondary school…", "I want to help people with …." , but instead reflect on why you want to pursue a career in research rather than other professions that could be equally rewarding.
• Be careful about appearing overly confident/hubristic.
c) Match between applicant's profile and the proposed research project
• Take time to reflect on the match between your profile and the research project, and make it as clear as possible, (e.g. training, previous research work).
d) References
• Supervisors and referees should be careful not to reveal the gender of the applicant using gendered pronouns or including reference lists with their name on it.
• Applicants should check the references and supervisor's sections to ensure that gender blinding is respected.

III. Training and career development
a) Clarity and quality of training and career development plan
• Consider wider skills sets beyond the practical aspects of lab work, including management and leadership skills.
• Don't be generic and vague, be specific and detailed in both the acquisition of scientific skills and soft/transferable skills.
• Familiarise yourself with career paths after a PhD and post-doc, and with the skills required in different professions, including outside academia.
• Justify placements and collaborations in terms of how they will affect the project, what you will get from them, and how they will impact on your future plans.
b) Capacity to acquire new knowledge and skills
• Discuss both the skills already acquired and the new skills/ training that will be gained or is needed, and link them.
• Do not only suggest that new skills will simply be built on those already acquired but demonstrate how the scholarship would transform the existing skills in those identified as being required to pursue the chosen career.
• Be realistic with regards to how many skills can be acquired during the time of the scholarship.
c) Potential for the development of skills relevant to employment outside the traditional academic sector
• Consider stating whether a career in academia or industry may be the preferred choice.
• Give more consideration to careers outside of academia, in the industry sector or teaching, for example.
d) Evidence of thought as to how the scholarship would impact on the applicant's career path
• Consider the contribution of the scholarship as prestigious and beneficial with regards to networking and access to resources and people.
• Consider not only the transferable skills that come with PhD study, but also training courses that would procure additional transferable skills – as well as how and why these skills would serve you in particular areas, both cognate to the subject and beyond it.
• Where the career path is envisioned within academia, consider how this can be achieved in addition to networking, conferences and publication, e.g. where your research project might take you in terms of demand for expertise, growth areas, global demand (or lack thereof).

IV. Environment
a) Suitability and ability of the proposed academic supervisor(s) to provide adequate supervision
• Applicant and supervisor should already be in close contact ahead of submitting the application.

• Supervisors are advised to comment on how applicants will be supported in the lab; this is particularly important in large groups where it is unlikely that the PI will provide day-to-day supervision to applicants.
• Supervisors should demonstrate an appropriate research interest/expertise in the proposed research, and that they can provide a supportive environment, whether through the department or the research group.
• Supervisors should consider including detailed information about their track record (e.g. number of years after PhD, link to profile to check publications, number of ongoing PhD students, publications of the last 3 students…)
• Consider mentioning the position of the research team in the international context, if applicable.
b) Quality of infrastructure, facilities and support to be provided by the higher education institution
• Avoid generalities. Give specifics of the infrastructure, track record, etc. that will support the student and the ability to carry out the proposed research.
• Avoid using only an institutional template and include a personal justification explaining why the facilities are appropriate for this applicant and this project.
• Consider highlighting the HEI's training programme, which is expected to be comprehensive.
• Ensure the HEI has a broad series of support structures for administrative, pastoral and academic support as well as evidence of a strong research culture in the fields of the proposal.
• Where applicable, mention the HEI's Athena Swan awards, as additional markers of the HEI's quality and investment in gender issues.
c) Match between the applicant, academic supervisor(s) and higher education institution
• Give insight into the interaction between scholar and supervisor that has led to developing/building the project.
• When choosing a supervisor and an HEI, the applicant should look at what the prospective supervisor(s)' PhD students have gone to achieve, and at how well the prospective HEI's facilities and infrastructures fit with the proposed research.
• Demonstrate the match between the applicant's background and the supervisor's expertise.