

## NERC Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs)

### Frequently Asked Questions

This document contains questions related to DTPs, grouped into 11 topics. Click on the topic below to go straight to that section. A glossary of terms can be found at the start of the document.

Some of the FAQs have been updated (January 2013) and these are highlighted in red.

Additional FAQs have been added (April 2013) in section 12, highlighted in purple.

1. [Background to the new NERC postgraduate training portfolio](#)
2. [DTP Competition format/ rules](#)
3. [DTP configuration](#)
4. [DTP internal organisation](#)
5. [Partnerships](#)
6. [CASE studentships](#)
7. [Students & Studentships](#)
8. [Training & Funding](#)
9. [Assessment criteria](#)
10. [Assessment process](#)
11. [Town meeting](#)
12. [Additional FAQs \(April 2013\)](#)

## Glossary

**Administrative Lead organisation:** The Administrative Lead organisation is the organisation that will receive the funding for the DTP from NERC, and will be the main point of contact between the two bodies. **The Administrative Lead organisation must be eligible for NERC funding.**

**Algorithm:** This is the current mathematical system for allocating NERC studentships. It is based on metrics such as research grant income. It is being replaced by the DTP competition.

**CASE partners:** CASE Partners provide specialist equipment or training to students. Any and all partners within a DTP may act as CASE partners provided they are not a Higher Education Institute (HEI).

**DTP Partners:** Any organisation involved in a DTP, which is not the Administrative Lead, is a DTP partner. There are no restrictions on which organisations can be DTP partners but their role should be indicated on the JeS form.

**Focused training:** This is postgraduate training that ensures NERC provides individuals with particular, specialist skills that are linked to its strategic priorities or to priority skills needs. Whilst the training topic may be chosen by the student/supervisor, it will reflect a specific training objective which NERC has identified.

**Responsive Studentships:** This is postgraduate training where the topic is chosen by the student/supervisor and which can be drawn from any part of NERC's remit.

**Training Advisory Group (TAG):** This is the expert group of community members with specialist knowledge and experience in postgraduate training. They have been advising NERC with the DTP competition and will form the core of the DTP assessment panel. Further details can be found at: <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/skills/postgrad/policy/tag/>

### **Acronyms:**

BIS	(Department for) Business Innovation and Skills
DTP	Doctoral Training Partnership
HEI	Higher Education Institute
RO	Research Organisation (HEI or other Research Institute)
TAG	Training Advisory Group

## **1. Background to the NERC Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) Competition.**

### **1.1 Why is NERC changing the way it supports Responsive studentships?**

NERC has developed its postgraduate training portfolio to:

- I. Better meet the NERC strategic goal of, "creating and supporting vibrant, integrated research communities";
- II. Recognise the benefits of an increase in multidisciplinary research training environment for enriching the student experience, and encourage knowledge-

sharing and interconnectivity, to the benefit of research in environmental science;

- III. Ensure that funding mechanisms are transparent;
- IV. Increase dialogue with providers and students;
- V. Have greater assurance of the quality of training being provided; and
- VI. Build critical mass both by concentrating resources and by encouraging strong partnerships in training.

### **1.2 What advice has NERC drawn on to develop the DTP competition?**

NERC has drawn advice from a Review Group that was set up specifically to look at postgraduate training issues. The development of the portfolio has also taken into account cross-council developments in postgraduate training, and the BIS Postgraduate Review (One Step Beyond: Making the most of postgraduate education, 2010). The report of the Review Group is available at:

<http://www.nerc.ac.uk/skills/postgrad/policy/skillsreview/>

NERC has also worked with the newly established Training Advisory Group (TAG). The role of the TAG is to: provide advice to the NERC Executive on the strategic direction of NERC training, advise on particular issues concerning NERC's training priorities, and drive an increase in the overall quality of training provided to PhD students. Further details can be found at: <http://www.nerc.ac.uk/skills/postgrad/policy/tag/>

## **2. DTP Competition format/ rules**

### **2.1 How many awards/ studentships does NERC expect to make available through the DTP competition?**

NERC will award a total of 240 new 'notional' (see q.2.2) studentship starts a year (i.e. the level currently supported).

NERC anticipates that between 10 and 20 DTPs will be awarded from this call, each normally with funding for between 12 and 24 new notional studentships per annum. The minimum studentship award is 12, but where the proposal justifies it, e.g. on the basis of the research concentration resulting from a strong partnership, applications for more than 24 students per annum are then permitted, and will be considered on their merits. DTP awards will provide funding for five years of new student intake, i.e. nine years of funding in total.

### **2.2 What does NERC mean by 'notional' numbers of studentships?**

The word notional in the DTP context refers to the minimum number of studentships that NERC expects to be supported. It is the number used to calculate the value of Doctoral Training Grants. There is not necessarily a 1:1 relationship between the number of notional studentships awarded and the number of students supported because of the flexibility in the funding awarded.

DTPs will have flexibility in how they use the funding (subject to the normal training grant terms and conditions), as long as the minimum numbers of students are

supported. All students should be funded at the minimum stipend level, and for at least three years.

It will, therefore, be possible for DTPs to use the funding to support more than the notional number of students each year. This could be achieved by having students undertake training over a variety of time frames (i.e. between 3 and 4 years as appropriate, depending on the discipline and the student's experience/knowledge) and by co-funding students through other sources.

### **2.3 Are you changing the overall number of studentships?**

No. The algorithm funded approximately 240 notional studentships per year and we expect DTPs to collectively support the same number per year.

### **2.4 Are you changing PhD submission or completion rate rules?**

No.

### **2.5 Are NERC using a method of demand management in the competition?**

No. Any kind of demand management is likely to influence the competition in some way and we want it to be open, fair and flexible. We want any partnerships to be real and beneficial, not forced and false, so we do not wish to restrict research organisations (see q.5.5 for eligibility).

### **2.6 Is there a limit to the number of bids an organisation/ department/ individual can be involved in or lead on?**

No. However, applicants should only submit a manageable number of proposals in terms of capacity, demonstrating an ability to provide what is outlined should all their proposals be funded.

### **2.7 Does there need to be a lead RO on an application?**

Yes. A single DTP proposal should be submitted by the DTP Administrative Lead organisation. The Administrative Lead organisation will receive the funding for the DTP from NERC, and will be the main point of contact between NERC and the DTP. This should not be interpreted as recognition of a dominant partner which will host the majority of studentships.

Administrative lead organisations must be eligible for NERC funding, i.e. applicants based in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), NERC Research & Collaborative Centres, and Independent Research Organisations (IROs) approved by NERC. Please refer to <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/funding/eligibilityforrcs/> for details: the competition is a responsive mode scheme.

### **2.8 If we don't get a DTP can we still get NERC studentships?**

Yes. There will be the opportunity to apply for Focused studentships and you may also benefit from project (tied) studentships on Large Grants or Research Programme grants. We are currently working on the details of how the Focused training competition(s) will run.

### **2.9 What will NERC do in five years - renew DTPs or run another competition?**

We anticipate running a new competition, to which existing DTP award holders could apply.

### **3. DTP configuration**

#### **3.1 Do we have to theme DTPs?**

No. Annex A of the Announcement of Opportunity contains further details.

#### **3.2 Do DTP members need be geographically close?**

No, but the chosen model, and the benefits it may bring to the students, should be explained and justified in the proposal with an explanation of how any risks will be mitigated. Annex A of the Announcement of Opportunity contains examples and suggestions for how DTPs can be organised, as well as some pros and cons of each model.

#### **3.3 Will NERC try to ensure a broad/even geographic spread of DTPs?**

No. DTPs will be allocated on the basis of excellence, wherever that may be.

#### **3.4 Can we have a narrowly-themed DTP?**

No. Each DTP must offer studentships in a range of science topics within NERC's remit. We expect DTPs collectively to cover the majority of NERC's remit.

#### **3.5 Does a DTP have to address a science question?**

No, but this is one potential way of structuring their DTP. As with the other options there are pros and cons with this approach and these should be addressed in the proposal with an explanation of how the risks will be reduced and the benefits maximised (See Annex A of the Announcement of Opportunity).

#### **3.6 Does a DTP have to cover all of NERC's remit?**

No, and indeed this would probably be impossible. DTPs must offer studentships in a range of science topics within NERC's remit and should not be narrowly themed. We expect DTPs collectively to cover the majority of NERC's remit.

#### **3.7 Can a DTP include training that overlaps with the remit of another council?**

Yes. Each DTP must offer training across a range of subject areas within NERC's remit, and may include training at the interface between environmental sciences and other disciplines, where many major research challenges exist. A proposal's main focus must be within NERC's remit.

#### **3.8 Should DTPs be multidisciplinary?**

In this competition we are considering the word multidisciplinary from the student's research training perspective. Training should be embedded in multidisciplinary research environments to enrich the student experience, and to prevent disciplinary 'silos' that may restrict the student. This does not mean individual PhD topics must be multidisciplinary. Annex E in the Announcement of Opportunity contains further details.

#### **3.10 How many partners should a DTP have?**

A DTP can be any size, from a single Research Organisation with partnerships across departmental boundaries, to several Research Organisations joined in partnership. Whatever the size and number of partnerships in a DTP, it is important that proposals include a justification for why those partnerships were chosen and how they provide the best training for students. All DTPs have to include an accredited Higher Education PhD award-making body.

### **3.11 What is the best structural model for a DTP?**

Annex A of the Announcement of Opportunity gives some examples of models, with some pros and cons of each. Applicants are encouraged to justify their chosen model in the proposal, and explain how they will manage any risks of using it.

### **3.12 Do DTPs have to be led by a University?**

No. Any eligible organisation (see q.2.7) may lead a DTP. However, all DTPs must include an accredited Higher Education PhD award-making body.

### **3.13 Will NERC favour proposals from single or multiple Research Organisations?**

NERC has no preferred delivery model. Evidence and justifications for the model used should be provided in the proposal. Annex A in the Announcement of Opportunity contains further details.

### **3.15 Do we have to link to other DTPs?**

No, although NERC hope in the future to establish a network between DTPs.

### **3.16 How international can a DTP be?**

DTP Partners may be international organisations, and a justification and explanation of the benefits international partners will bring to the students should appear in the proposal.

## **4. DTP Internal organisation**

### **4.1 Can RO's co-award a PhD within a DTP?**

Yes.

### **4.2 Do we need a new management plan for a DTP or can we use existing ones?**

Either. Strong proposals will provide evidence that the DTP will be well managed and organised.

### **4.3 How should we allocate studentships within a DTP?**

NERC expects there to be competitive mechanisms for awarding studentships within the DTP.

### **4.4 Can we organise a national student event?**

Yes, although there is no additional funding for this.

## **5. Partnerships**

### **5.1 What is NERC looking for in partnerships between or within ROs?**

We want partnerships which bring benefits and opportunities to students which may otherwise not be possible, and we want partnerships to be real and beneficial, not forced and false. We are also keen for NERC to have strong partnerships with DTPs, and for DTPs to have strong partnerships with NERC students.

### **5.2 Can partnerships include other Research Councils and their similar schemes and Centres?**

Yes. Proposals should demonstrate how any such partnerships would benefit the students and meet the assessment criteria.

### **5.3 Do partnerships have to be new?**

No, existing partnerships can be used to create a DTP. Information about partnerships should be included within the Case for Support.

### **5.4 Does each partner need to bring a unique contribution to the partnership?**

No. Proposals should include a justification of why each partner is important and the strengths they bring to the DTP.

### **5.5 Who can be a DTP Partner?**

Any organisation whose involvement will be beneficial to the DTP and its students. For example, DTP partners can provide equipment, facilities, understanding and opportunities. CASE Partners are a particular type of DTP Partner (see 6.3).

### **5.6 Will NERC intervene to create partnerships?**

No, partnerships are completely voluntary and we do not wish to force 'marriages of convenience'. However there will be an extended lunch at the Town meeting (London, 11<sup>th</sup> Dec 2012) for networking opportunities.

### **5.7 Does it matter if a partner has never received NERC funding?**

No, there is no minimum NERC funding requirements to be eligible to enter the competition.

### **5.8 Should partners have formal agreements such as Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs)?**

Individual DTPs should decide how they want to ensure understanding and cooperation between DTP partners.

### **5.10 Do we need letters of support?**

Yes. Each DTP partner (including the Administrative Lead Partner) will need to complete a '*DTP Partner: Letter of Support*' form. The form should be signed by the Vice Chancellor or equivalent (e.g. Director) for each organisation registering as a Partner on a DTP proposal. We do not require, and will not accept, any other form of DTP Partner letter or Letter of Support.

### **5.12 What is the role of the NERC Research Centres in this competition?**

NERC have not set out a specific role for the NERC Research Centres in this competition. Research Centres are an eligible Research Organisation and as such may act as the

Administrative Lead or as DTP Partner (including CASE Partners – see q.6.3 for further clarification).

### **5.13 Will bids involving the NERC Research Centres be favoured?**

No.

## **6. CASE Studentships**

### **6.1 Is there a CASE requirement in the DTP competition?**

Yes, we require all DTPs to ensure, over the five years of student starts, that 30% of their total studentships are CASE (collaborative) studentships. The 30% requirement is in line with the NERC algorithm studentships regulations.

### **6.2 Why do we need to have CASE studentships?**

By supporting CASE studentships NERC aims to promote partnerships between Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and other, non-academic, bodies. This enhances the training received by the student and will help them gain first-hand experience of work outside the academic environment.

### **6.3 Who can be CASE partners?**

CASE Partners are a type of DTP Partner which provide specialist equipment or training for students. Any and all partners within a DTP may act as CASE partners provided they are not a Higher Education Institute (HEI).

However, we do expect to see diversity and an appropriate balance in CASE partners so the majority of CASE studentships should not be with the same single organisation. The amount of students completing CASE studentships with each partner will be closely monitored through the annual reporting system.

NERC DTP funding cannot be used to meet the CASE partner financial contribution.

### **6.4 Can Higher Education Institute (HEI) spin-out companies be CASE partners?**

Yes, but only when the HEI owns less than 50% of the controlling interest of the company, and the spin-out provides a clear and distinctive non-academic setting for the student.

### **6.5 What are the requirements of the CASE partners?**

CASE partners must host individual students for between 3-18 months and provide specialist training appropriate for the PhD topics and the advancement of the individuals. CASE partners must provide supervisors for the projects and should work with the academic supervisors (and where possible the students) to plan the projects from the start. CASE partners must also supplement the student's maintenance grant by paying at least £1,000 a year for three years.

### **6.6 Do we need all CASE partners in place at the proposal stage?**

No. It would be unrealistic to expect all partners to be in place as needs change over five years and new opportunities arise. The quality of CASE partners is important; we would



expect to see CASE Partners identified in the application or, at least, a likely set of partners. We would also expect evidence of collaborative working.

## **7. Students & Studentships**

### **7.1 What is the flexibility in the DTP awards?**

The overall DTP award will be calculated on the basis of the notional (minimum) number of new students per year (expected to be between 12 and 24). The total funding awarded each year will be calculated on the basis of: the set student stipend, plus the set research training support grant, plus the set fee level, multiplied by the minimum number of students, multiplied by four. London Allowance will be awarded where appropriate.

DTPs will have flexibility in how they use the funding (subject to the normal training grant terms and conditions), as long as the minimum numbers of students are supported. All students should be funded at the minimum stipend level, and for at least three years.

It will, therefore, be possible for DTPs to use the funding to support more than the minimum number of students each year. This could be achieved by having students undertake training over a variety of time frames (i.e. between 3 and 4 years as appropriate, depending on the discipline and the student's experience/knowledge) and by co-funding students with other sources.

### **7.2 How many studentships can we apply for?**

NERC anticipates that between 10 and 20 DTPs will be awarded from this call, each normally with funding for between 12 and 24 new notional studentships per annum. The minimum studentship award is 12, but where the proposal justifies it, e.g. on the basis of the research concentration resulting from a strong partnership, applications for more than 24 students per annum are permitted, and will be considered on their merits. NERC will award a total of 240 new studentship starts per annum (i.e. the level currently supported). DTP awards will provide funding for five years of new student intake, i.e. nine years of funding in total.

### **7.3 Can studentships be split/part funded by other sources, thus increasing the overall number of studentships in a DTP?**

Yes, in line with existing terms and conditions of Research Council Training Grants see: <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/funding/grantstcs/>

### **7.4 Can students not funded by NERC be involved in training through a DTP?**

Yes, there are no restrictions on this. Indeed it may assist in building a cohort of students by offering networking opportunities, and increasing communication and working across different disciplines. Existing NERC students may also be involved in the DTP, where relevant.

## **8. Training & Funding**

### **8.1 Are there any mandatory training requirements?**

No, it is up to DTPs to decide what type and quantity of, training should be given, and when. DTPs should be able to vary the training they offer to suit the subject and individual. There should be on-going and clear processes in place to monitor and formally assess the student's progress.

### **8.2 Can we use existing training courses in DTPs?**

Yes. A DTP should decide whether an existing or new training course would offer the best opportunity for students, and explain this in the proposal.

### **8.3 Why are you funding each DTP for five years of student starts?**

NERC Council agreed the DTP competition should provide the ability to review responsive training allocations over the medium term, e.g. five years. This time-frame affords a number of benefits including secured funding for long enough to give DTPs an incentive to innovate, e.g. by developing new activities and ways of operating.

### **8.4 When will the awards start?**

The DTP awards will begin at the start of the academic year 14/15.

### **8.5 Can we apply for additional funds to cover Travel & Subsistence for students?**

No. Costs for T&S, including field work and equipment costs, must be covered from within the overall DTP budget; no extra funds are available.

### **8.6 Can we apply for specialist field trip expenses and resources, e.g. ship time, flights, polar field work etc?**

No. These must be financed from the overall DTP budget; no additional funds are available.

### **8.7 What is the NERC RTSG and how much is it?**

The Research Training Support Grant (RTSG) is a contribution towards costs incurred in training research students e.g. the provision of consumables, equipment, travel, etc. The RTSG is not intended to relieve a Research Organisation of any part of its normal expenditure. The Research Training Support Grant for DTPs is a fixed amount of £11,000 per notional studentship.

## **9. Assessment criteria**

### **9.1 Is this a metric- or narrative-based exercise?**

Both, as we want applicants to describe, explain and justify their ideas for DTPs. Metrics can be used as a way of providing evidence to help meet the assessment criteria.

### **9.2 Is there a pre-qualifying NERC grant income threshold?**

No.

### **9.3 Will we be judged on how many algorithm studentships we used to get?**

No. This competition is completely separate from the previous algorithmic method for allocating studentships.

**9.4 Will you assess how much support a DTP could contribute through co-funding, matched-funding etc?**

No.

**9.5 Do we need to include PhD topics in applications?**

No. We are not looking for individual PhD topics to be identified. However applicants should give an indication of the likely broad subject areas for studentships.

**10. Assessment process**

**10.1 What is the assessment process?**

Proposals will be assessed by an assessment panel consisting of Training Advisory Group (TAG) members, supplemented with additional members if necessary. Proposals will not be sent to additional referees nor will applicants be asked for interview. Further details can be found in the Announcement of Opportunity in Annex F.

**10.2 How will funding decisions be made, and by whom?**

Proposals will be sent to the Training Advisory Group (TAG) for assessment by panel meeting. The TAG may be supplemented with additional members. As with all standard NERC peer review panels, the group will provide funding recommendations to the NERC Executive which will then make the final decisions.

**10.3 Is NERC looking to ensure that collectively, DTPs cover the whole of NERC's remit?**

Yes. We envisage that collectively DTPs will cover a significant proportion of the NERC remit. If this is not the case, there are a number of options that could be used to ensure coverage of NERC remit. These will be looked at further once DTP proposals have been received.

**10.4 If we submit two or more proposals, will they be judged collectively or separately?**

Separately, as distinct proposals. However it should be clear within proposals that applicants have the capacity to deliver should all their proposals be successful.

**10.5 How will NERC allocate studentship numbers to DTPs?**

Applicants should state on the application form how many studentships they are applying for. This should normally be in the range of 12-24 (see q.7.2) and appropriate evidence should be provided in the application to support the request. However, NERC reserves the right to change this figure if necessary based on advice from the assessment panel.

**10.6 Do we have to complete a 'Pathways to Impact' document?**

No.

**11. Town meeting**

### **11.1 What is the aim of the town meeting? What are you hoping to achieve?**

The aim is to dispel any confusion over the DTP competition, to help inspire and enthuse innovative applications, and to give the community an opportunity to network and ask NERC questions.

### **11.2 Is attendance at the Town Meeting mandatory?**

No. It is simply an opportunity for the community to discuss DTPs with NERC and to get help with questions about proposals.

### **11.3 Is the town meeting open to all?**

Yes, although the venue does have a limited capacity of about 170 people. There is an open online registration system and places will be allocated on a first come first served basis.

### **11.4 Will there be facilitated networking at the town meeting?**

There will be opportunities for networking over lunch and break times etc., but there will be no specific NERC facilitation.

## **12. Additional FAQs (April 2013)**

### **12.1 What partner forms do we need to attach in support of our DTP?**

- a. **One DTP Partner Details form** – all partners involved in a proposed DTP (including the Administrative Lead Partner) should be listed on the DTP Partner Details form. Within this form there is space to include the role each DTP partner is expected to play. This form may be expanded although there is a maximum of six partners per side of A4. It should be completed on standard A4 sized paper, in single-spaced typescript of minimum font size 11 point, Arial font, with margins of at least 2cm.

The form should be portrait (not landscape) format.

- b. **A DTP Partner Support form for each partner involved in the proposed DTP.** The majority of partners should use the standard DTP Partner Support form. This should be signed by the VC or equivalent for each partner to show they are committed to the DTP.

The DTP Partner Support Form (Auxiliary) should be used when a VC or equivalent signature is not appropriate (e.g. for an industry partner where only a small section of the organisation will be involved in a DTP and so the Head of the relevant section rather than the CEO needs to sign the form).

No other letters of support will be accepted.

### **12.2 What is the role of the DTP Administrative Lead Partner?**

The DTP Administrative Lead Partner organisation will receive all of the DTP funding from NERC on behalf of the DTP. The DTP Administrative Lead Partner will also form the main point of contact between NERC and the DTP. We therefore need contact details for an individual

within the Lead organisation: the Lead Applicant. This individual should be from the Administrative Lead Partner and should be the expected administrative lead/head of the DTP.

The Administrative Lead Partner organisation should be listed on the DTP Partner Details form and provide a DTP Partner Support form.

**12.3 Can we use colour in our proposal and attachments?**

Yes. While the standard Research Council procedure is not to reproduce in colour we have decided to make an exception for the DTP competition.

**12.4 Can DTPs start recruiting students as soon as the funding decisions are announced?**

Yes.

**12.5 Will there be any funds available in year zero to help with recruitment and start-up costs?**

We expect the first DTP students to start in Oct 2014 and we will not be funding full studentships before then. However, a final decision on the profiling of the funding is yet to be made so at this stage we cannot confirm as to whether there will be any funds available in year zero.