

Dear **NETGAIN** community,

We are pleased to announce the call for proposals for our third and *final* **NETGAIN** cohort. We are looking to support approximately 20 multidisciplinary PhD projects across our four partner institutions – St Andrews, Aberdeen, Durham, Glasgow. Studentships include Home tuition fees, UKRI-level stipend, and a generous research and training support grant.

The deadline for project proposals is Monday 9th November at noon, 12 pm UTC and we aim to inform applicants of outcome the week beginning Monday 30th November.

Submit your proposal using the **NETGAIN** form: [LINK](#)

*“The **NETGAIN** vision is of a collaborative doctoral training programme integrating diverse disciplinary and sectoral perspectives to directly address critical training needs and knowledge gaps associated with net gain and the design and implementation of nature markets. Central to this is an emphasis on multidisciplinary co-creation.*

***NETGAIN** will support new environmental solutions, disseminate those directly into practice via industry partnerships, and hence contribute to securing productive, healthy and resilient environments and societies. We will deliver this ambitious vision with training that empowers the next generation of researchers with the breadth of skills necessary to navigate disciplinary and sectoral boundaries, integrating diverse evidence and methods to generate nuanced scientific insights and deliver pragmatic policy outcomes.”*

– **NETGAIN proposal**

Proposals and eligibility

The proposal has four components: supervisory team details; a project summary; a **NETGAIN** relevance statement; and a co-creation statement.

- The **supervisory team** should include a minimum of three and a maximum of five supervisors. There should be academic staff from at least two of the four academic partner institutions. One academic supervisor should have demonstrated “ecology and environmental” expertise and the other should have demonstrated expertise in any other **NETGAIN**-relevant discipline. The supervisory team must include at least one named supervisor from an external (non-higher education) partner organisation. You are not eligible to be a *primary* supervisor of a Cohort 3 project if you are a *primary* supervisor of a Cohort 2 project. We have no limit on the number of supervisory teams you can be a part of, but please consider your working load.
- The **project summary** should describe the project in an accessible way and include explicitly defined objectives and scope (400 words).
- The **relevance statement** should describe how the project contributes to any aspect of **NETGAIN**'s vision of developing the science and practice of nature markets (300 words).
- Finally, you should provide a statement describing the **interdisciplinary and co-creation** aspects of the project, including the contribution of each supervisor (300 words).

To assist with proposal development, we have added 2 appendices to this document. **Appendix I** is a list of Frequently Asked Questions generated from the call for Cohort 1 proposals. **Appendix II** provides examples of **NETGAIN**-relevant challenges that came out of a series of partner engagement workshops during the proposal development process. We also maintain a ‘partner database’ of **NETGAIN**-relevant academics from our four institutions and of the growing network of non-academic organisations interested in **NETGAIN**. If you would like to be added to this list, or are interested in connecting with potential collaborators, feel free to contact us (netgain@st-andrews.ac.uk).

You may also find the following resources useful as you prepare your proposals:

- The **NETGAIN** website includes summaries of current projects: [LINK](#)
- A series of ‘project pitches’ from the **NETGAIN** project incubator in June: [LINK](#)
- The full successful **NETGAIN** DFA proposal: [LINK](#)
- A .docx template of the **NETGAIN** proposal form: [LINK](#)

Recruitment process

Successful projects will be advertised by **NETGAIN** on FindAPhD. Candidates will apply to projects using a standardised online application form which will be managed by the **NETGAIN** team. Applications will be distributed to primary supervisors within a week of the closing date and recruitment will be supervisor-led. It is expected that the primary supervisor reviews the applications and leads the interview panel, and at least three members of the supervisory team participate in the interviews. Interviews will follow best-practice recruitment processes at the partner institute of the primary supervisor. **NETGAIN** will provide additional programme-specific recruitment guidance when applications are released.

NETGAIN is committed to attracting and supporting diversity and we will recruit students for advertised projects considering the representation shortfalls across protected characteristics (age, gender and sex, disability, personal circumstances, race) but also education and socioeconomic backgrounds. We have a dedicated ‘widening participation pathway’ that will prioritise under-represented groups to proactively address the lack of opportunity experienced by these groups (details are available on the [NETGAIN website](#)).

We look forward to receiving your project proposals and encourage you to reach out to any of the core team if you have any questions.

The **NETGAIN team**

Dr Chris Sutherland (University of St Andrews, Director)
Bethan Anetts (University of St Andrews, Programme Manager)
Dr Lydia Cole (University of St Andrews)
Dr Roslyn Henry (University of Aberdeen, Lead)
Prof Xavier Lambin (University of Aberdeen)
Dr Flurina Wartmann (University of Aberdeen)
Dr Katherine Simpson (University of Glasgow, Lead)
Prof Jason Matthiopoulos (University of Glasgow)
Prof Stephen Willis (Durham University, Lead)
Prof Philip Stephens (Durham University)

Appendix I – Frequently asked questions about NETGAIN projects

General Information

Q: What is NETGAIN?

A: NETGAIN is a collaborative doctoral training initiative among four institutions—Durham, Glasgow, St. Andrews, and Aberdeen, and a growing network of external partners. Its goal is to foster interdisciplinary research and partnerships with external organizations to address pressing challenges around the development of nature markets and the delivery of Net Gain.

Q: Is a project focused on farming practices and biodiversity suitable?

A: Projects examining how agricultural practices affect biodiversity fall within scope, especially when the outcomes can inform biodiversity metrics and nature markets. You should make this connection clear in your proposal, but it shouldn't be forced.

Q: How do I get invited to the annual conference?

A: If you've received communications from the NETGAIN team, you'll receive an invitation. The next conference is planned for early June 2027.

Formal Agreements and Partnerships

Q: Do formal agreements with external partners need to be signed before submitting a proposal?

A: No, formal agreements are not required during the proposal phase. These will be handled post-award and after PhD students are recruited. Our institutions are well-versed in developing these agreements both between institutions and with external partners.

Q: Are formal agreements necessary for financial contributions from external partners?

A: Yes, formal agreements are typically required if financial contributions are involved, but this depends on the universities' specific policies. Again, our institutions are experienced with these doctoral training programmes and with developing agreements both between institutions and with external partners.

Q: Are external partners required to be supervisors?

A: No, external partners do not need to be formal supervisors (in the academic sense). However, they must have an active role, such as providing training or being a point of contact, and demonstrate engagement throughout the project.

Proposal Submission and Review

Q: How can industry/external partners connect with academics with relevant expertise?

A: NETGAIN maintains a database of 200+ academics with listed expertise. If you're an external partner with a project idea, you can share a summary to netgain@st-andrews.ac.uk and the team

will help match you with relevant academics. Likewise, academics can use the database to find interested industry partners. The annual conference is a key networking event.

Q: Who reviews project proposals?

A: Proposals are reviewed by the NETGAIN core academic team. Any team members based at the institution where projects would be based do not review those proposals. Similarly, any team member involved in a proposal will not review that proposal.

Q: What are the proposal titles in the guidance document appendix?

These are idea pitches gathered during NETGAIN's engagement process. Some were developed into project proposals, others remain ideas. Contact netgain@st-andrews.ac.uk to find out who proposed a particular idea and whether it can be developed further.

Q: How competitive is the application process?

We received 20 project proposals in the first call and 10 were funded. We aim to fund up to 20 projects this cycle.

Supervisory Requirements

Q: Can supervisors come from outside the four core institutions?

A: Yes, as long as the minimum eligibility requirements are satisfied (see below), there are two supervisor positions that can be filled by anyone.

Q: What is the required composition of the supervisory team?

A: The minimum team must include:

1. A primary supervisor from one of the four core institutions.
2. Another academic from a second core institution.
3. A representative from an external non-academic partner organisation.
4. Two additional members from any academic or non-academic organisation.
5. At least one academic supervisor with ecology/environmental expertise.
6. At least one academic supervisor with expertise from a different NETGAIN-relevant discipline (e.g., economics, law, philosophy, anthropology, computational sciences).

Note that, in addition, you will need to satisfy supervisory team requirements at the primary/home institution.

Q: Does the external partner supervisor count toward the supervisor limit?

A: Yes, the named individual from the external partner counts as one of the 3 to 5 supervisors.

Q: What if supervisors are interdisciplinary?

A: The goal is to ensure the student's supervisory team covers all required disciplinary areas, so supervisors should clearly state their primary expertise (ecology/environmental or other NETGAIN-relevant discipline) and identify how they will support different aspects of the student's learning.

Q: Can external partners or co-supervisors be based in other countries?

A: Yes, supervisors (including those from policy, practice, or industry) can be based internationally if all other eligibility criteria for the supervisory team are met.

Q: Can a named supervisor be a postdoc?

NETGAIN supports early career researchers gaining supervisory experience, but there may be institutional constraints on recognition and workload allocation. In theory, a postdoc can be part of the supervisory team so long as their contract extends for the duration of the PhD studentship, and if not, they should not be the *primary* supervisors. The full supervisory team must be able to support the student from start to finish. The rest of the supervisory team should include more senior academics.

Training and Skills Development**Q: What training is provided to students?**

A: All students receive foundational training on interdisciplinary approaches in Net Gain and nature markets and bespoke training tailored to their specific project needs.

Studentships**Q: What is the definition of a CASE studentship versus a Collaborative studentship?**

A: A CASE studentship is a collaborative PhD project involving a non-academic partner organisation that meets a set of UKRI-defined criteria. These criteria are:

- The non-academic partner must host the student for 3–18 months, either continuously or in separate periods.
- The partner must provide co-supervision and is encouraged to contribute financially to student-related costs, materials, and facilities.

At least 25% of our projects must fulfil the CASE criteria, although our ambition is to far exceed this level.

Collaborative Studentships are projects without the hosting requirements or the encouragement of a financial contribution. By design, 100% of our projects will be classified as collaborative studentships.

Any non-academic organizations, including international entities, are eligible partners. UKRI-funded organizations (excluding Innovate UK) cannot be CASE partners, with exceptions for NERC studentships involving public sector research establishments (PSREs).

Q. Do you support International students?

A. We can allocate a limited number of studentships to International candidates. The UKRI have set a cap of 30% of one cohort, so this would be 6 out of the 20 studentships. After interview, if the supervisory team identify their top applicant as an International candidate, they will need to provide a short justification statement. This, along with the candidate's application, will be used to shortlist if there are more International candidates than studentships available. Further information will be provided should this come to pass. Please note that the tuition fee difference

cannot be met from the training grant, so an internal fee waiver or additional funding will need to be secured if the candidate cannot fund the difference.

Contact and Support

Q: How can I get help or more information?

A: For assistance, contact your institutional leads or email the NETGAIN team directly (netgain@st-andrews.ac.uk).

Appendix II - Challenge-led project themes/ideas that came from the NETGAIN partner engagement workshops held in the summer of 2024

1. **Climate-Responsive Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Models:** Develop methods for integrating climate change impacts into BNG. This could include climate-sensitive models for predicting the resilience of habitats and species targeted by net-gain initiatives, focusing on potential gains and risks under future climate scenarios.
2. **Social and Economic Incentives for BNG in Agriculture:** Create a framework for scaling BNG practices in agricultural settings, considering socio-economic levers like financial incentives to encourage farmers to adopt biodiversity-positive practices that are economically viable.
3. **Data Pipelines for BNG Assessment and Monitoring:** Build a "big data" pipeline that integrates sensor data and AI to monitor and evaluate BNG effectiveness. This could involve automation in data collection and processing for remote biodiversity assessments.
4. **Cross-Disciplinary Metrics for Biodiversity, Carbon, and Social Impact:** Develop integrated metrics that encompass biodiversity, carbon net gain, and social benefits. This could support more holistic evaluations of BNG initiatives across varied ecological, economic, and social indicators.
5. **Net Gain in Offshore Environments:** Investigate how to implement measurable net gain in marine ecosystems without slowing down project consenting processes. Research could address climate-biodiversity trade-offs specific to industries like offshore wind energy.
6. **Evaluating Net Gain in Decommissioning:** Explore how BNG can be sustained or adjusted as infrastructure projects reach decommissioning. This project could assess the long-term impacts of decommissioning on previously established net-gain objectives.
7. **Policy Frameworks for Net Gain in Non-Policy-Enforced Regions:** Design a model BNG policy framework tailored for countries or regions without existing net-gain legislation. This could serve as a foundation for localized BNG practices in diverse ecological contexts.
8. **Standardized Metrics for Marine BNG:** Research transferable metrics from terrestrial to marine environments for assessing biodiversity net gain. This project would address gaps in data and methodology for tracking BNG in ocean and coastal ecosystems.
9. **Socio-Ecological Impacts of Passive vs. Active Restoration:** Compare the socio-ecological outcomes of passive (pressure reduction) vs. active (seagrass planting, oyster bed restoration) restoration. This research could identify where passive recovery might be more beneficial or cost-effective.
10. **Evaluating the Effectiveness of Artificial Reefs in BNG:** Conduct a systematic review on the biodiversity benefits of artificial reefs, addressing concerns around greenwashing and whether these structures genuinely enhance biodiversity.
11. **Biodiversity Credits and Environmental Economics:** Design a system of biodiversity credits, considering social justice and sustainability. This project would explore how to develop biodiversity credits that are equitable and effective in incentivizing private investments in BNG.

12. **Spatial Equity in Net Gain Implementation:** Investigate ways to ensure spatially equitable distribution of BNG efforts across regions, particularly balancing urban and rural needs, and minimizing ecological and social disparities.
13. **Technology for Low-Cost, Scalable Monitoring:** Develop innovative, low-cost technologies for monitoring BNG outcomes, possibly involving remote sensing, machine learning, or drone technology to scale monitoring of habitat and species recovery.
14. **Social Acceptance of BNG Initiatives:** Study public acceptability of BNG projects, particularly in contentious areas like wind farms and fisheries. This could include stakeholder engagement and analysis of perceived vs. actual benefits of BNG.
15. **Nature-Inspired Infrastructure in BNG:** Research the potential for nature-inclusive designs (e.g., eco-mattresses) in infrastructure projects, particularly examining policy constraints and opportunities for implementation within UK legislative frameworks.
16. **Improving Biodiversity Metrics for Ecological Restoration:** Develop more scientifically rigorous biodiversity metrics to evaluate restoration projects. This could focus on creating and validating metrics that align with evidence-based biodiversity values across different ecosystems, including grasslands, temperate rainforests, and marine habitats.
17. **Exploring Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) in Urban Planning:** Investigate the impact of BNG on urban environments, particularly how BNG practices can offset green space loss in cities. This project could explore trade-offs and synergies between urban development and maintaining biodiversity.
18. **Long-Term Outcomes of BNG Initiatives on Community Livelihoods:** Research the socio-economic impacts of BNG on local communities, particularly those reliant on land and marine resources. This could include case studies on how BNG initiatives affect livelihoods in farming, fishing, and other rural occupations.
19. **Creating Biodiversity 'Footprint' Calculators:** Develop tools or calculators to quantify the biodiversity footprint of projects, akin to carbon footprint calculators. This tool could help stakeholders understand and manage their biodiversity impacts throughout project life cycles.
20. **Predictive Modelling for Restoration Tipping Points:** Create models to identify positive tipping points in biodiversity restoration, particularly in metapopulation dynamics. This project would focus on when restoration activities become self-sustaining and resilient, with applications in ecosystem restoration and species reintroduction programs.
21. **Evaluating Passive Recovery in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs):** Study the role of passive recovery (i.e., removal of damaging activities) in MPAs, especially for habitats like cold-water coral reefs. This could explore how MPAs contribute to net gain and identify where active restoration may be unnecessary or even counterproductive.
22. **Socio-Economic Drivers of BNG Data Sharing:** Analyse the factors influencing data-sharing practices among developers and stakeholders in BNG projects. The project could explore how economic incentives, policy mandates, and public pressure affect data accessibility and transparency.

23. **Using AI for Habitat Suitability Mapping:** Leverage AI and machine learning to create predictive habitat suitability maps, identifying prime locations for BNG initiatives. This could help in finding areas for restoration projects, especially those resilient to climate change.
24. **Nature-Based Solutions for Flood Mitigation and BNG:** Investigate how BNG efforts can align with flood risk mitigation projects, assessing co-benefits and potential synergies. This project could explore the dual function of restored wetlands or riparian buffers for both biodiversity and flood protection.
25. **Developing Adaptive Net Gain Targets:** Evaluate the current BNG target (e.g., the UK's 10%) and propose adaptive, habitat-specific targets that reflect long-term ecological and climate resilience. This could involve setting different targets for high-priority or climate-sensitive ecosystems.
26. **Biodiversity Credits in Private Finance:** Explore the integration of biodiversity credits in private finance, focusing on how financial mechanisms can encourage investment in biodiversity projects. This project would analyze successful case studies and propose frameworks for widespread adoption.
27. **The Role of Ecosystem Functions in BNG Metrics:** Investigate the role of ecosystem functions (e.g., carbon sequestration, water filtration) in BNG metrics, aiming to establish metrics that quantify both biodiversity and ecosystem functionality.
28. **Framework for Nature-Inclusive Coastal Infrastructure:** Create a policy and design framework for coastal infrastructure that supports BNG, such as integrating nature-inspired features like oyster beds or seagrass meadows into development projects. This project would focus on reconciling infrastructure with marine ecosystem resilience.
29. **Optimizing Biodiversity Offsetting through Ecosystem 'Exchange Rates':** Develop a system of "exchange rates" for biodiversity offsetting, where habitat losses are equitably compensated with appropriate gains. This project would research species and habitat equivalencies to support effective offsetting policies.
30. **Mapping Potential BNG Partnerships with Government Agencies:** Investigate potential partnerships with government agencies to support BNG, especially in countries without established BNG policies. This project would assess how government collaborations can create standardized frameworks for BNG implementation.
31. **Assessing the Effectiveness of Ecological Restoration in Marine Habitats:** Compare the success rates of restoration in different marine habitats, such as seagrass vs. oyster beds, to identify best practices and knowledge gaps. This project could provide insights into restoration limitations and scalability for various marine ecosystems.
32. **Integrating Biodiversity and Climate Goals in BNG:** Develop methods to balance BNG with climate adaptation goals, particularly examining how restoration projects can simultaneously support biodiversity and climate resilience. This could include case studies on nature-based solutions that address both objectives.
33. **Evaluating Biodiversity Footprint in Infrastructure Projects:** Measure and assess biodiversity impacts of major infrastructure projects, such as roads and wind farms, to improve planning processes that align with BNG goals. This project could include tools for real-time biodiversity impact monitoring during construction.

34. **Implementing Just Transition Principles in BNG:** Explore how BNG can support a "just transition" for local communities, especially those affected by development projects. This project would evaluate how BNG initiatives can equitably benefit communities and align with social justice principles.
35. **Public Acceptability and Awareness of BNG:** Conduct social science research on public perceptions and awareness of BNG, especially in rural vs. urban contexts. This project could assess what factors influence public support and identify effective communication strategies for BNG initiatives.
36. **Cross-Continental Biodiversity Metric Harmonization:** Work toward harmonizing biodiversity metrics across regions and countries to create a globally relevant system for measuring BNG. This project would evaluate existing metrics, seeking to integrate diverse ecological and social contexts into a universal framework.
37. **Innovative Incentives for Nature-Positive Practices in Farming:** Create and test economic incentives tailored for farmers to adopt nature-positive practices, such as biodiversity credits or ecosystem service payments. This could include pilot projects demonstrating financial viability for biodiversity-friendly farming.
38. **Developing a Digital Biodiversity Database for Policy and Research:** Establish a centralized digital repository for biodiversity data, accessible to researchers, policymakers, and developers. This project could streamline data access, supporting evidence-based decisions in BNG projects.
39. **Assessing Biodiversity Gains in Landscapes with Multiple Initiatives:** Study the cumulative effects of multiple environmental initiatives, like nutrient neutrality and carbon offsets, on biodiversity. This research would explore the interactions and conflicts between different environmental programs.
40. **Modelling Social and Economic Benefits of BNG in Rural Communities:** Use socio-economic models to evaluate how BNG initiatives impact rural communities in terms of employment, income, and land use. This project could quantify the broader socio-economic benefits of BNG beyond ecological gains.
41. **Evaluating the Resilience of Restoration Efforts to Climate Change:** Assess how climate-sensitive certain BNG habitats are, focusing on ecosystems at high risk from climate variability (e.g., vanilla grasslands). This project would evaluate the long-term viability of restored habitats under changing climate conditions.
42. **Exploring Biodiversity Market Innovations:** Investigate innovative market mechanisms, such as biodiversity certification and biodiversity banks, that can help finance and scale BNG initiatives. This could include analysis of how these markets could make biodiversity conservation financially sustainable.