



# SUSTAIN AI CDT – Cohort Four Studentship Proposals Call (Starting October 2027)

## Shape a PhD project around a real-world challenge

We are inviting proposals for 4-year PhD studentships within the SUSTAIN AI Centre for Doctoral Training, starting in October 2027. These will be part of the fourth (of five) cohorts of students in the SUSTAIN AI CDT (<https://www.sustain-cdt.ai/>).

This is an opportunity for academics and industry partners to **co-develop a PhD project** that applies AI technologies to address real-world challenges in sustainable agriculture and food production, supported by UKRI funding.

Proposals must be led by an academic supervisor at a SUSTAIN partner university. However, industry partners with a project idea are encouraged to contact the SUSTAIN team, who can help identify suitable academic collaborators. Likewise, academics seeking industry engagement can contact the SUSTAIN team for support in finding relevant partners.

## What we're looking for

We're looking to support **collaborative, well-scoped projects** that bring together:

- A Primary Supervisor (lead academic)
- A Secondary Supervisor (**from a different SUSTAIN university and a different discipline**)
- At least one industry partner

Additional academic and industry supervisors can be included where helpful.

Projects are primarily funded by UKRI, alongside a financial contribution from the industry partner(s).



## Who can submit a proposal?

Proposals can be submitted by academic staff based at SUSTAIN partner universities (University of Lincoln, University of Aberdeen, Queen's University Belfast, University of Strathclyde). Proposals may also be submitted by industry partners working with a suitable academic partner.

**If you don't yet have a collaborator in place, the SUSTAIN team can help make connections.** Please contact us at [SUSTAIN@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:SUSTAIN@lincoln.ac.uk).

## What makes a strong proposal?

Proposals will be assessed against the following criteria:

- Clear focus – well-defined aims, objectives and research questions.
- Fit to SUSTAIN – strong alignment with the CDT's core themes in AI and sustainable agri-food.
- Interdisciplinary strength – an appropriate spread of expertise across the supervisory team.
- Methodological rigour – a robust, well-justified approach that is achievable within a PhD.
- Real-world relevance and impact – clear links to industry challenges.
- Ambition with realism – innovative ideas, with risks recognised and appropriate mitigation in place.
- Student experience – a project that will support the development of an independent researcher and lead to high-quality, publishable outputs.

Projects with confirmed industry engagement and financial contribution will be prioritised.



## Research focus

Projects should sit within SUSTAIN's core themes, combining AI approaches with challenges in agriculture, agri-tech, food manufacturing or related supply chains.

### Application areas:

- Measuring and analysing sustainability (e.g. emissions, resource use, supply chains).
- Reducing environmental impact (e.g. improving productivity, lowering emissions, increased biodiversity).
- Supporting better decision-making across the agri-food system.

### AI areas:

- Machine Learning
- Explainable AI
- Trustworthy and Ethical AI

## How to submit a proposal

Please complete the **SUSTAIN Project Proposal Form** and send it to: [SUSTAIN@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:SUSTAIN@lincoln.ac.uk).

Please include:

- Primary Supervisor CV
- Industry Letter of Support (including proposed financial contribution)

We run three recruitment rounds each academic year, with the Cohort 4 deadlines for project proposals in:

- Round 1: September 2026
- Round 2: January 2027
- Round 3: April 2027

Submitting earlier has clear advantages. Projects received in earlier rounds are advertised to students sooner, increasing visibility and the likelihood of recruitment.

As projects may be competing for a limited number of studentships within each institution – and allocations are made on a rolling basis – **early submission is strongly encouraged.**



## What happens after submission?

Proposals are reviewed by the SUSTAIN Admissions Committee and will be classed as either “successful”, “needs revision”, or “out of scope”.

You may revise and resubmit if needed; we recommend contacting the SUSTAIN management team in advance to discuss your proposal via [SUSTAIN@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:SUSTAIN@lincoln.ac.uk).

## How students are recruited

Approved projects are advertised via the SUSTAIN website and external platforms such as FindAPhD. Students apply directly to individual projects, and both supervisors and industry partners may be involved in the shortlisting and interview process.

Due to UKRI funding restrictions, only 30% of each cohort can be international students, and competition for international studentships is particularly intense.

Final studentship allocations are made using a structured matching approach that takes into account applicant preferences, supervisor rankings, and the overall balance of topics and within institutions across the CDT. As a result, not all projects will necessarily recruit a student in a given round or year, and may be offered an opportunity to rollover to a later round or year.

## Activity Week Commitment

The SUSTAIN CDT includes a structured programme of cohort training and development activities. By submitting a proposal, the supervisory team acknowledges that, as a condition of SUSTAIN funding, the appointed student will be expected to attend and participate in compulsory CDT activities, including four SUSTAIN Activity Weeks per year during the first three years of their studentship.

Supervisors should ensure that the proposed project and associated commitments support the student’s participation in these compulsory CDT activities.



## Questions or early discussions

If you'd like to discuss an idea before submitting, or need help finding collaborators, please do get in touch:

[SUSTAIN@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:SUSTAIN@lincoln.ac.uk)