Iapetus Studentship Competition 2026-2027

Applicant Guidance for Prospective Students

01st October 2026 – V2

About Iapetus

1. Iapetus is a Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) that supports the training and development of the next generation of environmental researchers. Through fully funded PhD studentships, students gain the opportunity to undertake world-leading research while benefiting from specialist training, cohort activities, professional development opportunities and access to a broad network of academic and external partners.

Eligibility

2. Applicants should carefully review both the project-specific requirements and the general eligibility conditions for UKRI-funded doctoral training before applying. Individual projects may require particular academic backgrounds, disciplines, technical expertise or research experience.

3. Applicants are normally expected to hold, or be on track to obtain prior to registration, a degree in a subject relevant to the proposed area of research. Applications will be assessed on a range of criteria including academic achievement, relevant skills and experience, research potential and suitability for the specific studentship project.

4. Both Home and International applicants are eligible to apply. However, the number of international studentships that can be supported is limited. International applicants must obtain sponsorship approval from the lead supervisor before submitting an Iapetus application. Applicants should therefore contact supervisors as early as possible to discuss their suitability for the project and any funding arrangements that may apply.

5. Home fees status is not only determined by nationality, it also includes residency. Please look to the UKCISA (UK Council for International Student Affairs) to help you determine whether you would be Home fees or International fees. If you are still unsure, please seek advice form the admissions department of the university that awards the project.

Funding and Financial Support

6. Iapetus studentships are funded through UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and provide a comprehensive package of support for successful applicants. This normally includes:

- Payment of tuition fees in accordance with UKRI funding arrangements.
- A tax-free annual stipend at the prevailing UKRI doctoral stipend rate.
- Access to training and skills development opportunities.
- Support for participation in Iapetus cohort activities and training events.
- Access to funding for approved research costs, fieldwork, conferences, placements and professional development opportunities, subject to local policies and funding availability.
- For international students, UKRI funding covers tuition fees only up to the Home fee rate. Any difference between the Home and International fee levels is determined by the host organisation. Applicants should discuss this with the supervisory team before applying.

Before You Apply

7. Applicants may apply for **one Iapetus project only** during each studentship competition. The choice of project is therefore an important decision and applicants are encouraged to identify the opportunity that best aligns with their academic background, experience, interests and long-term career goals.

8. Before applying, applicants should:

- Read the project description carefully.
- Review any stated academic requirements.
- Consider how their experience and interests align with the project.
- Contact the supervisor if they have questions about the research project or their suitability.
- Review the assessment criteria provided in this guidance document and use these to prepare their application responses.
- Because Iapetus studentships are highly competitive, applicants should ensure that their application clearly demonstrates how their skills, experience and ambitions align with the chosen project.

Preparing Your Application

9. Applications must be submitted using the Iapetus online application form. A Word template of the application form is provided to enable applicants to draft and refine their answers before completing the online submission. Completed Word templates will not be accepted in place of an online application.

10. In addition to the online application form, applicants must submit a current two-page CV and relevant academic transcripts by the published deadline. Applicants are encouraged to discuss their application with the supervisory team before submission.

11. When preparing responses, applicants should refer closely to the assessment criteria and support any claims with specific examples of achievements, skills, research experience or other relevant activities. Applications that provide clear evidence of suitability for the project are generally stronger than those relying on broad statements alone.

References

12. Applicants are required to nominate two referees as part of their application. Referees will be contacted automatically following submission of the online application form.

13. It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that referees are willing and able to provide references within the required timescales. Applicants should contact referees before submitting an application and ensure that they are aware of the relevant deadlines.

How Applications Are Assessed

14. The Iapetus Studentship Competition involves several stages of assessment. Applications are initially reviewed by the supervisory team associated with the selected project. Supervisors evaluate applications against the published assessment criteria and identify the strongest candidates.

15. Applications progressing beyond the project stage are considered through an internal competition within the relevant Host Organisation. At this stage, applicants are assessed alongside candidates nominated from other Iapetus projects within the same institution. As Host Organisations can nominate only a limited number of candidates, progression depends on performance both within the chosen project and relative to other applicants across the institution.

16. Applications nominated by Host Organisations are then considered by the Iapetus Studentships Committee. Shortlisted applicants are invited to interview, and final funding decisions are made following consideration of both the written application and interview performance.

Widening Participation

17. Iapetus is committed to increasing participation in doctoral research for groups that have historically been underrepresented in postgraduate study. Eligible Home applicants may be considered through the Iapetus Widening Participation Scheme.

18. The scheme is open to eligible Home-fees only applicants:

- Applicants from UK minoritised ethnic groups.
- Applicants who lived in a POLAR4 Quintile 1 area while attending secondary school.
- Applicants with a disability.

19. Information collected through the application form is used only to determine eligibility for the scheme and is not considered as part of the academic assessment of applicants. Iapetus aims to allocate up to 30% of interview places to eligible Widening Participation applicants who would not otherwise have progressed through the standard shortlisting process.

What Makes a Strong Application?

20. Successful applicants typically demonstrate:

- Strong academic achievement relative to their opportunities, or have relevant comparable experience – we welcome applications from those with non-traditional routes to PhD study.
- A thorough understanding of the proposed research project.
- Evidence of relevant knowledge, technical skills, training or experience.
- Clear and convincing motivation for pursuing the specific PhD project.
- Evidence of research potential and readiness for doctoral study.
- Enthusiasm for engaging with the wider Iapetus training programme and cohort activities.

21. Applicants should use examples wherever possible to illustrate their achievements and demonstrate how previous experiences have prepared them for doctoral research. Evidence of initiative, problem-solving ability, communication skills, teamwork and independent learning can strengthen an application when clearly described.

Competition and Feedback

22. Iapetus studentships are highly competitive, with applications typically far exceeding the number of studentships available. Many strong applicants are unsuccessful each year despite meeting the required standards because funding is limited and competition is intense.

23. Applicants should therefore not regard an unsuccessful outcome as evidence that they are unsuitable for doctoral research. Due to the volume of applications received, Iapetus is unable to provide individual feedback to applicants.

Further Information

24. Applicants are strongly encouraged to read this guidance document alongside the project description and application materials before submitting an application. Questions about individual projects should be directed to the relevant supervisory team. For general enquiries regarding the Iapetus Studentship Competition, please contact:

Iapetus Applications Team
iapetus.applications@durham.ac.uk

Appendix 1 – Timeline

Dates	Activity / Milestone
Friday 6th November 2026	Iapetus Studentship Competition Applications open
Wednesday 18th November 2026, 2pm	Online Q&A workshops for applicants.
Monday 7th December 2026, 4pm	Deadline for international applicants to apply for Iapetus sponsorship from supervisors
Monday 14th December 2026, 4pm	International applicants will be informed of if they have been sponsored
Tuesday 5th January 2027 12pm	Deadline for applicants to apply for a studentship by using the Iapetus application form, and by emailing their CV and transcripts to Iapetus.
Monday 18th January 2027 12pm	Deadline for reference providers to send references into Iapetus
Friday 29th January 2027 12pm	Applicants will be informed if they have been shortlisted into the Host Organisation's Internal Competition
Friday 12th February 2027 4pm	Applicants will be informed if they have been shortlisted into the final Iapetus Competition Invitation to Interviews sent out to all shortlisted candidates
Tuesday 23rd February 2027	Interviews of shortlisted candidates. (Applicants must be available)
Wednesday 24th February 2027	Interviews of shortlisted candidates. (Applicants must be available)
Thursday 25th February 2027	Iapetus Studentships and Scholarship Committee convenes.
Friday 26th February 2027	All nominated candidates notified by Iapetus of award decisions.
Wednesday 17th March 2027 12 noon	Deadline for selected candidates to accept or decline their award offer. (NERC Universal Acceptance Date).
Thursday 18th March 2027 onwards	Reserve offers made (where required).

Appendix 2 - Iapetus DTP Host Organizations

Partner Organization	Departments/Schools
British Antarctic Survey	All staff active within NERC's disciplinary remit.
British Geological Survey	All staff active within NERC's disciplinary remit.
UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology	All staff active within NERC's disciplinary remit.
Durham University	Departments: Archaeology; Anthropology; Bioscience; Earth Science; Geography.
Glasgow University	Engineering Geography & Earth Sciences Mathematics & Statistics Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre Institute of Biodiversity, Animal Health & Comparative Medicine
Heriot-Watt University	School of Energy, Geoscience, Infrastructure and Society
Newcastle University	All staff active within NERC's disciplinary remit
St Andrews University	Earth & Environmental Sciences Centre for Biological Diversity, and relevant parts of the Biomedical Sciences Research Complex Geography & Sustainable Development
Stirling University	Biological and Environmental Sciences

Appendix 3 – Iapetus Assessment Criteria

Marking Scheme for selection of applicants for Iapetus interview based upon documents received including application form, supervisor's supporting statement, CV, transcripts and references.

Each application is marked out of 4 by a minimum of 5 Panel Reviewers.

Scoring Descriptors:

1	**Not Competitive** - Considering the application as a whole, the applicant does not currently appear competitive for an Iapetus studentship.
2	**Good** - Considering the application as a whole, the applicant is a credible candidate who demonstrates suitability for the project, a good to very good record of achievement relative to opportunity, and evidence of motivation for the project and wider programme, but is less compelling than stronger applicants.
3	**Excellent** - Considering the application as a whole, the applicant is clearly competitive for an Iapetus studentship. They demonstrate strong suitability for the project, an excellent record of achievement relative to opportunity, and strong motivation for both the project and the wider Iapetus programme.
4	**Stellar** - Considering the application as a whole, the applicant is among the strongest in the pool. They demonstrate exceptional suitability for the project, exceptional achievement relative to opportunity, and strong motivation for both the project and the wider Iapetus programme.

Criteria

All eligible nominations for studentships will be assessed by the Iapetus Studentships Panel. Potential supervisors should be aware of issues of unconscious bias when filling out forms and be appropriately considerate of a candidate's background and career trajectory.

Note that suitability for the project does not require experience of all aspects of the project - especially in the case of interdisciplinary projects.

Note, also, that evidence of strong motivation for and engagement with both the project and the wider Iapetus programme is expected for applicants placed in the Stellar or Excellent categories.

Interviews and Overall Evaluation

All shortlisted nominees will give a short presentation then be interviewed by a panel using a set of common questions about their application and PhD. Nominees are requested to ensure that they will be available to interview online on the advertised dates. These interviews are weighted 50% in the overall evaluation of the studentships panel, with the other 50% coming from the evaluation of the initial application materials.