

## PhD Scholarship: Legal needs, access to justice and intersecting inequalities

### ABOUT THE PROJECT

This PhD scholarship is part of the ARC DECRA Project *Advancing access to justice: identifying the causes of legal problems* and is offered in partnership with the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW (the Foundation). The PhD project aims to contribute theoretical and applied knowledge to better understand inequalities in people's experiences of legal problems and the opportunities for meaningful reforms that address intersectional disadvantages.

The law permeates everyday life, influencing and regulating personal relationships, health, education, employment, housing, and our interactions with governments. Legal problems affect most people at some point in their lives. However, the likelihood of experiencing such problems varies across population groups, with individuals living in socioeconomic disadvantage more likely to face legal problems, including multiple and more complex legal issues. Unresolved legal problems (or unmet legal needs) can escalate and compound disadvantage, inequality and poverty for those already experiencing hardship, resulting in social and economic costs for individuals and communities.

This is a unique PhD opportunity for an HDR candidate to develop impactful research across academic and industry settings. It will be part of an ARC DECRA project generating critical realist causal explanations of why and how legal problems arise for clients of Australia's tax-funded legal assistance sector ([www.legalneedsproject.org](http://www.legalneedsproject.org)). It will also contribute to the work of the Foundation, an independent statutory body whose research contributes to the development of a fair and equitable justice system that addresses the legal needs of the community. ([www.lawfoundation.net.au](http://www.lawfoundation.net.au)).

There is some flexibility as to the precise focus of the PhD thesis. The proposed project should align with the aims of these two partners, but can focus on a particular affected population, type of legal issue, experience of legal need, specific context, aspect of the legal assistance sector's work or other relevant topic.

The Candidate will be based at the [Institute for Culture & Society](#) (ICS), located at Western Sydney University's Parramatta South Campus. Institute members work in a broad range of fields, including cultural studies, sociology, media and communication studies, human geography, anthropology, history, museum studies, heritage studies, and urban studies. ICS offers a strong collaborative academic and social environment for HDR students, access to research training, interdisciplinary supervision and professional development opportunities.

The Candidate will also have an opportunity to work with the Foundation's multi-disciplinary team, which undertakes mixed methods research on inequalities in access to justice, legal assistance service provision and evidence-based justice system reform. In 2026 the Foundation is conducting a large-scale national legal needs survey, that will generate a rich new source of data. The PhD project therefore would suit a candidate looking to develop skills in quantitative analysis of social survey data.

**The PhD project will commence on 14 September 2026.** Primary supervision will be provided by [Dr. Catherine Hastings](#), ARC DECRA Research Fellow, with external co-supervision by [Dr Kate Davies](#), Research Director, Law and Justice Foundation of NSW. Additional co-supervision will be developed according to the needs of the candidate's project and/or disciplinary background.

### WHAT DOES THE SCHOLARSHIP PROVIDE?

- Domestic Candidates will receive a tax-free stipend of \$45,188 per annum to support living costs, supported by the Research Training Program (RTP) Fee Offset.
- Support for conference attendance, fieldwork and additional costs as approved by ICS.

### ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

We welcome applicants with a disciplinary background in sociology, law, human geography, psychology, public health, social work, cultural studies or other relevant fields.

The successful applicant should:

- Hold qualifications and experience equal to one of the following (i) an Australian First Class Bachelor (Honours) degree, (ii) coursework Masters with at least 25% research component, (iii) Research Masters degree, or (iv) equivalent overseas qualifications.
- Demonstrate strong academic performance in subjects relevant to the project.
- Have an authentic interest in access to justice and the Australian legal assistance sector, a solid understanding of intersectional disadvantage, and be motivated by a concern for social justice.
- Have or be willing to learn skills in descriptive interpretation of quantitative data or develop their knowledge of more complex statistical methods, ideally proposing a mixed-methods methodology as part of their proposal.
- Be enthusiastic and highly motivated to undertake further study at an advanced level.
- Have experience in human-centred service delivery or policy making in human services or legal assistance contexts (highly regarded but not essential).

The scholarship is limited to domestic students.

### HOW TO APPLY

1. Contact Dr Catherine Hastings ([c.hastings@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:c.hastings@westernsydney.edu.au)) to discuss your eligibility, the project requirements and your intention to apply.
2. Apply online via the [Online Portal](#).
  - a. Submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) via the Online Portal.
  - b. Once your EOI is approved, log back into the Online Portal and *submit your completed application by the application deadline*.
3. Refer to the knowledge article [How to apply for a research degree](#) for detailed instructions.
4. Your application must include:
  - a. a 2000 word (maximum) [Research Proposal](#) with an explicit statement of how your proposed research interests align with the ARC DECRA project aims and the work of the Foundation;
  - b. a CV with contact information for two referees;
  - c. a [certified copy](#) of your academic transcripts; and
  - d. a one-page document explaining how you satisfy the project's eligibility criteria.

**APPLICATIONS DEADLINE: 31 JULY 2026**