

PhD Studentship: Vice-Chancellor's PhD Studentship (Fully Funded)
Location: Buckinghamshire New University, High Wycombe, UK
Mode of Study: Full-time, in-person
Duration: 3 years

Project Title: *Developing Professional Competencies for Safeguarding Victims of the Impact of “the Knock” and Its Aftermath on Non-Offending Partners of Sex Offenders.*

Project summary: This project is seeking to investigate and understand experience and safeguarding needs of Non-Offending Partners (NOPs) impacted by “the Knock” — the police intervention associated with Child Sexual Abuse Material investigations. Research evidence shows that NOPs experience acute trauma, stigma, deterioration of family functioning, and practical vulnerability, yet they remain an unrecognised victim group in statutory safeguarding frameworks. Professionals in policing, social work, children’s services, and health settings report uncertainty, inconsistency, and lack of competency guidance in responding to NOPs, despite their central role immediately after the intervention and during risk assessment processes. This PhD will generate an evidence-based Professional Competency Framework for safeguarding agencies, informed by trauma-informed, intersectional, and victim-centred approaches. Using qualitative inquiry, co-production, and multi-agency collaboration, the research will map current practice, identify competency gaps, and develop implementable tools for frontline practitioners. Outcomes will improve multi-agency responses, reduce harm to families, and strengthen UK safeguarding policy. The project is aimed at improving outcomes for families after “the knock. The research objectives include:

1. Review literature and data from UK and international sources on indirect victimisation post-knock; identify current H&SCP competencies, gaps, and promising practices to inform draft domains and outcomes.
2. Collate NOP/young people/women narratives and practitioner perspectives to map out what may be good practice in, consultations, documentation, risk assessment, safety planning, and referral.
3. Co-design a framework with H&SCPs, police and partners (e.g., Lucy Faithfull/Stop It Now!), a Competency Framework with assessment tools.
4. Pilot and evaluate the framework with H&SCPs to assess feasibility, acceptability, and impact
5. Publish an Implementation Guide with adoption checklists and quality metrics aligned to NHS and Social Services.

Supervisory Team

Dr George Clerk, Senior Lecturer in Criminology. George.Clerk@bnu.ac.uk

Dr Keelin Howard, Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences. Keelin.Howard@bnu.ac.uk

Funding and eligibility: This project is open to UK and international applicants for full-time study only, and covers:

- Tuition fees for up to three years.
- A bursary of £15000pa for up to three years.

The successful candidate must enrol as a full-time PhD student at Buckinghamshire New University. The candidate is required to attend campus regularly, normally at least three days per week for 45 weeks per year. Any absence from campus during this period must be formally agreed by the Graduate School and will normally only be permitted for research-related activities such as data collection, fieldwork, conferences, or approved training. Continued enrolment and funding are subject to satisfactory academic progress, including successful completion of progression reviews and participation in the University's research training and development programme. This is an in-person studentship and cannot be undertaken remotely. Any employment undertaken during the studentship must be declared and approved in line with university regulations.

Person specification: The successful applicant will have:

- A **First Class or Upper Second-Class (2:1) Honours degree** in Criminology, Sociology, Social Work, Psychology or other relevant social science field. OR A **Master's degree** (or near completion) in Criminology, Sociology, Social Work, Psychology or other relevant social science field.
- Foundational knowledge of mixed-methods research design, including the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches.
- Familiarity with the context of "the Knock", digital sex-offence investigations, **trauma-informed practice** and multi-agency safeguarding processes.
- A commitment to academic integrity, research ethics, and research excellence, and to contributing to the BNU research community and to publications.

How to apply:

Applicants must follow the standard PhD application process through Buckinghamshire New University, as outlined on the Graduate School website. In addition to the normal application requirements, applicants must also complete and submit the Vice Chancellor's PhD Studentship application form alongside their PhD application.

Only complete applications, including both the standard PhD application and the VC Studentship form, will be considered. To apply for a research degree, please email the following documents to ResearchUnit@bnu.ac.uk:

a completed [Application Form](#)

a Research Statement ([Download Research statement template](#))

scanned copies of your degree qualifications - as in point 4 of the guidance notes in the application form. (Other supporting documentation may be submitted if available)

a scanned copy of your passport

evidence of any previous publications or research outputs, where relevant

Applications are considered two times during each academic year. The current application deadlines and associated start dates are as follows:

Application deadline	Start date
20 April 2026	1 September 2026

The Research Degrees Admissions Panel reviews all applications and decides whether to invite candidates for interview. The Panel aims to provide an outcome within 8 to 12 weeks of receiving a complete application. Successful applicants will receive confirmation of their start date as well as details of their induction programme.