



**Economic  
and Social  
Research Council**



## **Autistic Features as mechanisms of Selective Eating: A Transdiagnostic Approach to Identify Intervention Targets to Improve Health Outcomes from Childhood to Adulthood.**

### **ESRC DTP Collaborative Studentship**

#### **Aston University and Forward Thinking Birmingham**

The Midlands Graduate School is an accredited Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP). One of 15 such partnerships in the UK, the Midlands Graduate School is a collaboration between the Universities of Warwick, Birmingham, Nottingham, Aston Leicester, Loughborough, De Montfort and Nottingham Trent.

Aston University as part of Midlands Graduate School is now inviting applications for an ESRC Doctoral Studentship in association with our collaborative partner Forward Thinking Birmingham to commence in October 2025.

The project will examine factors associated with selective eating (SE). SE is common in childhood. Although it often declines beyond the early years, in more serious cases, the resulting dietary restrictions have longer-term implications, including being underweight and more frequent illnesses (Ekstein et al. 2010; Chao, 2018). When SE persists into adulthood, it can also lead to difficulty in psychosocial functioning (Thompson et al., 2015).

SE is particularly prevalent and persistent in autism spectrum disorder (ASD; Kruschner et al., 2015; Schreck & Williams, 2006), and is associated with core autistic features, including sensory sensitivity (Dovey et al., 2019; Macdonald et al., 2024), restricted and repetitive behaviours (Suarez et al., 2014), rigidity (Zickgraf et al., 2022), and differences in cognitive processing style (Becker et al., 2017). These features therefore represent putative transdiagnostic mechanisms underpinning the development and/or maintenance of SE. Understanding how SE develops and is maintained, is key to developing targeted, effective interventions.

The PhD student will adopt a dimensional approach to identify the transdiagnostic mechanisms underpinning the development/maintenance of SE. The PhD student will start with a systematic review of the existing literature, and then focus on designing and running studies, informed by a Patient and Public Involvement Panel. These will include detailed online questionnaire-based studies focusing on predictors of SE across the lifespan, but also, detailed laboratory-based investigation of predictors of SE, with autistic and non-autistic adults, using task-based measures. In these laboratory-based studies, food will be provided, so that SE can be objectively measured (i.e., a food-choice task), and subjective questionnaire-based measures (e.g., of sensory sensitivity) will be augmented with biological measures (e.g., fungiform papillae density count for taste sensitivity).

In addition to comprehensive research training and experience across a range of methodologies, the PhD student will also be embedded (20% of their time across the studentship) as an Honorary Assistant Clinical Psychologist in Forward Thinking Birmingham (FTB), a mental health provider for children and young people aged 0-25.

### **Application Process**

To be considered for this PhD, please complete the Collaborative Studentship application form [available online here](#). Please upload an anonymised CV and cover letter as part of the online application process. Shortlisted applicants will also be required to provide transcripts and two references.

**Application deadline: 17/02/2025**

### **Midlands Graduate School ESRC DTP**

Our ESRC studentships cover fees at the home rate, a maintenance stipend, and extensive support for research training, as well as research activity support grants. Support is available to both home and international applicants. For further details, visit: [www.mgsdtp.ac.uk/studentships/eligibility/](http://www.mgsdtp.ac.uk/studentships/eligibility/).

Informal enquiries about the research or the Aston University School of Psychology prior to application can be directed to Dr Sarah Carrington (s.carrington@aston.ac.uk)