

BALANCING BEST INTERESTS IN HEALTH CARE, ETHICS AND LAW (BABEL): FUNDED PhD PROJECTS



About the BABEL Programme

[BABEL](#) – Balancing Best Interests in Healthcare, Ethics and Law – is a five-year research programme funded by the Wellcome Trust, which began in 2018. The programme is a collaboration between the Centre for Ethics in Medicine (Population Health Sciences, Medical School) and the Centre for Health, Law, and Society (Law School) at the University of Bristol.

BABEL explores healthcare decisions that are made in the “best interests” of people who are unable to make decisions for themselves because they lack (what the law calls) mental capacity or competence. These include children – as poignantly illustrated in the recent, widely-publicised legal case of Charlie Gard – and adults, including those with learning disabilities, dementia or prolonged disorders of consciousness. BABEL asks how the “best interests” of such patients should be understood – which factors and values should be considered, who should be involved, and indeed whether “best interests” is even the best approach.

The project, which involves a combination of theoretical and empirical research, comprises four workstreams. Workstream 1 focuses on best interests in health care ethics and clinical practice. It examines, for example, the perceptions and practices of those involved in best interests decisions in clinical practice and the associated ethical dimensions of these decisions. Workstream 2 focuses on best interests in healthcare law. It looks in particular to various legal understandings of “best interests” and the views and practices of different legal actors. Workstream 3 focuses on developing methodology, impact and engagement. Workstream 4 then broadens the reach of BABEL, by including visiting fellows and PhD projects.

As part of workstream 4, we have **three BABEL PhD studentships available**, for commencement in autumn 2019. Depending on the project and supervisors, successful candidates will be registered in the Centre for Ethics in Medicine (Population Health Sciences, Medical School) or the Centre for Health, Law, and Society (Law School) at the University of Bristol. Applicants will develop and submit their own proposals for funding. Further guidance on the process and what we are looking for follows.

PhD Studentships

We have three funded BABEL PhDs available, which are expected to commence in September 2019. Successful applicants will be provided with:

- Funding to cover their PhD tuition fees of approx. £4,300 p.a. over three years
- An annual stipend, beginning at approx. £19,900 p.a.
- A travel/conference budget of approx. £1,500
- Access to a training budget (where applicable)
- Access to funding to undertake empirical research (where applicable)

Eligible Candidates

The most competitive candidates will be those with a first class honours degree (or international equivalent) and/or a master's degree with distinction in a subject relevant for the proposed research. However, the minimum requirements to note are:

- Candidates applying to Population Health Sciences will have an upper second-class honours degree (or international equivalent) or a master's degree in a subject relevant for the proposed research.
- Candidates applying to Law will hold an upper second-class honours degree in law (or equivalent) and normally a merit at master's level (or equivalent). Alternatively, a first-class honours degree in law (or equivalent) and evidence of ability to conduct independent and original research.
- Applicants may come from any pertinent discipline, although projects must include an ethical and/or legal dimension (see further below).
- If English is not your first language, please note that you will need to meet the English Language requirement of the School to which you are applying. This will be scrutinised at the second stage of application by the relevant Faculty admission team (see below).
- International students are welcome to apply but should note that the funding available covers PhD tuition fees on a home student basis; international students will therefore need to self-fund the difference in the tuition fees that are payable.
- Clinicians and other professionals are welcome to apply but should note that the stipend is set as per above.

Eligible Topics/Areas

Applicants should note the following:

- Projects must engage with "best interests"/welfare decision-making in relation to (human) health
- Projects must include an ethical and/or legal dimension
- Projects may include an empirical element, although this is not essential
- Projects are likely to be proposed on a full-time basis but may be proposed on a part-time basis

We invite proposals that focus on one or more of the following indicative topics/areas, although we would welcome proposals that focus on other topics/areas:

1. Advocacy
2. Pregnancy
3. Child-birth
4. Parents and parenting
5. Primary care and routine care

6. Public interest
7. Religious values
8. Social care
9. Mental health
10. Value theory/axiology
11. Sex and intimate relationships
12. Gender
13. Conflict and dispute resolution
14. End-of-life care
15. Research/research ethics

Application Process

There is a two-stage application process. Stage one is an application for BABEL funding. If successful, you will be issued with a letter stating our intention to provide you with funding if you are accepted onto the PhD programme of your intended school (either Law or Population Health Sciences). Stage two is an application to your intended School at the University of Bristol for a place on their PhD programme. Candidates must be successful at both stages in order to undertake the BABEL PhD.

Prior to Application

Candidates are welcome to make contact with the named members of the BABEL team (below) to check their eligibility to apply and/or the suitability of their proposed topic. Please note that we will **not** be providing feedback on draft applications prior to or during the first stage of the process.

Stage 1: Funding Application

Eligible candidates must submit:

1. A CV
2. A personal statement (see further below)
3. A detailed PhD proposal (see further below)
4. Two letters of reference

The personal statement should outline your motivation for, and interest in, postgraduate research in this area. Highlight details of any previous academic or professional experience related to your research area and any other information you feel is relevant. Please also explain why you are applying to the University of Bristol, why you think you are a suitable candidate for this programme, and how your planned project fits with your future career plans.

The PhD proposal should be approx. 4-6 pages long and must include the following nine elements:

1. Title
2. BABEL topic/area(s) to which the application relates (from the list above, where applicable)
3. Aim and research question(s)
4. Outline, background and importance
5. Approach (methodology and methods)
6. Anticipated timeline/milestones
7. Anticipated training needs
8. Anticipated enrolment basis (full-time or part-time)

9. Bibliography (references)

Please refer to our detailed guidance for writing proposals (**Appendix 1**, below).

Applications must be emailed to babel-project@bristol.ac.uk by **9am (GMT), 4 April 2019**. Shortlisted candidates will be invited to interview. Interviews are expected to be held on **21 May 2019**. We anticipate interviewing up to six candidates for the three available studentships.

Stage 2: PhD Application

Three candidates for the studentship funding will be identified in the first stage of the process. Each successful candidate will be provided with a letter stating the intention to fund their proposed project if they secure a PhD place at the University of Bristol. These candidates will also be directed towards potential supervisors for their proposed project and, at this stage, decisions will be made about the Centre/School in which the PhD will primarily be based (i.e. in the Centre for Ethics in Medicine/ Population Health Sciences or in the Centre for Health, Law, and Society/ Law). The successful candidates must then apply for a place on the PhD programme in the relevant School at the University of Bristol. Further guidance on that process will follow at that stage.

Unsuccessful Applicants

Candidates who are not selected for funding following stage 1 may still be eligible to apply for a PhD place, which would be funded by other means. Securing such other funding and a PhD place will be the applicant's responsibility. Such candidates are welcome to discuss these options further with the BABEL team following stage 1.

Inquiries

If you have any questions, in particular about your eligibility to apply and/or your proposed topic, please contact:

- Dr Sheelagh McGuinness sheelagh.mcguinness@bristol.ac.uk
- Professor Richard Huxtable r.huxtable@bristol.ac.uk
- Corinna Chandler (BABEL administrator) babel-project@bristol.ac.uk

Appendix 1:
Guidance for Writing Your BABEL PhD Research Proposal

1. Title

The title can either be in the form of a statement that describes what your research will do, or in the form of a question. It should be clear and concise.

2. BABEL topic/area(s) to which the application relates

Proposals must fall within the ambit of the BABEL programme. Please note that projects must:

- Engage with “best interests”/welfare decision-making in relation to (human) health and
- Include an ethical and/or legal dimension.

Your proposal should state clearly the topics/areas your project addresses. You may list more than one. We invite proposals that focus on one or more of the following indicative topics/areas, although we would welcome proposals that focus on other topics/areas:

1. Advocacy
2. Pregnancy
3. Child-birth
4. Parents and parenting
5. Primary care and routine care
6. Public interest
7. Religious values
8. Social care
9. Mental health
10. Value theory/axiology
11. Sex and intimate relationships
12. Gender
13. Conflict and dispute resolution
14. End-of-life care
15. Research/research ethics

3. Aim and research question(s)

Your proposal should have an overarching aim that makes it clear what you are trying to achieve. You may also include more specific objectives.

Example:

- Aim: *To elaborate an account of the best interests of children in paediatric intensive care, which is ethically defensible and empirically informed.*
- Objectives:
 - To determine empirically what is meant by “best interests” by the groups involved in their formulation.
 - To identify theoretical bioethical accounts of the best interests of children in paediatric intensive care.
 - To establish an account of the best interests of children in paediatric intensive care which is both coherent with practice and ethically defensible.

Your proposal should also have specific research questions that can be answered in order to meet your aim and objectives. Proposals should have a primary question and may also include further secondary questions. Answering the secondary question(s) helps you to answer the primary question.

Example:

- Primary research question: *Is there an account of best interests of young children that combines best ethical understanding with perceptions and practices in paediatric intensive care?*
- Secondary research questions:
 - What are the values and beliefs that underlie interpretations of the best interests of children in paediatric intensive care?
 - How should the best interests of children in paediatric intensive care be understood according to theoretical work in bioethics?
 - How can we combine these two views of children's best interests in a way that is both acceptable in practice and ethically defensible?

4. Outline, background and importance

Here you should explain what is known about your chosen topic, making reference to relevant literature, and explain what the gaps are in our knowledge/understanding. You should clearly show that we do not currently have an answer (or a good answer) or have several competing answers to the research question(s) you are proposing. You should then explain why answering that question is important and how your work will contribute to our understanding of the issues under examination, thus furthering academic debate.

In this section, your job is to persuade us that you have a good question and that the research is sufficiently important for you to be provided with funding to spend three years trying to answer it.

5. Approach (methodology and methods)

Research in bioethics and health law takes various forms and can use a range of different methods. It is important that you are able to demonstrate an entry level understanding of the methods you propose to use, provide an account of why the methods you have chosen can help you answer your research question, and show an appreciation of the challenges and feasibility of your proposed project. Please note that successful candidates will be provided with further feedback on their proposals, including on methodology and methods. However, in your application, it is important that you can demonstrate you have thought carefully about the methods you will use and that you have a plan for conducting your research.

Whatever discipline your proposal is based in, you will need to decide whether you will conduct theoretical/library-based research, or a combination of empirical and theoretical research. Here, we provide some guidance on each:

Theoretical Projects:

Projects may be entirely literature-led. Such projects will essentially involve thinking about the problem conceptually or doctrinally, reading and engaging critically with others' accounts and/or primary legal sources, and using argument to arrive at an answer to the research question(s). The exact process (and the sources you use)

will depend on your question and your home discipline but, broadly, you will be critically examining different positions and accounts, looking at what others have said about the issues, and developing your own account of the problem and its solution.

If you are taking this approach, you need to state that you will be undertaking theoretical/doctrinal research and briefly outline the main sources (e.g. legislation, judgements, arguments and thinkers) you expect to engage with. You do not need to actually start conducting analysis or making an argument, but the best proposals will: (a) make clear the order in which key material and arguments will be tackled and why; and (b) make clear any theoretical commitments and/or lenses through which your analysis will be conducted, making reference to approach(es) in the relevant discipline(s) e.g. philosophy, law, bioethics, sociology, theology.

Combined Empirical-Theoretical Projects:

In addition to theoretical engagement, projects may include an empirical dimension i.e. quantitative or qualitative inquiries, which are designed to help answer the research question(s). Such projects will involve thinking about the problem conceptually, but also undertaking some empirical research that is designed to inform or guide your conceptual thinking. This approach might be captured by the terms “empirical bioethics” and/or “socio-legal studies”.

If you anticipate taking such an approach, it is important that you do the following:

- State clearly what the purpose of your empirical research is. For example, are you interviewing people in order to get a better understanding of how to characterise an ethical/legal problem or question? Are you speaking to practitioners or other stakeholders to find out how acceptable or workable a proposed solution to a problem is? Are you gathering data about what people value or prefer in order to inform your critical judgement?
- State which empirical method(s) you will use (e.g. interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, observations) and why, and demonstrate an understanding of what the chosen method involves.
- State your proposed approach to analysis (e.g. thematic analysis).
- Where empirical data and theory are to be combined, applicants should attempt to situate their proposed study in the relevant methodological literature e.g. “empirical bioethics” or “socio-legal studies”.

When outlining your approach, you need to show that you have enough preliminary understanding of your proposed methods and methodology to undertake a doctoral study. It is important that the methods you propose are feasible and will enable you to answer your research questions and meet your aim.

6. Anticipated timeline/milestones

In this section you can demonstrate further understanding of your methods, and the feasibility of what you propose, by defining key milestones (key things that you need to achieve in your project), the order in which you need to do them, and how long you think it will take to do each. Examples of milestones include research ethics approvals, data collection, analysis, chapter drafting, and training. Milestones and timings will change as your project changes and progresses – and you will not necessarily be held to what you propose here. What we are looking for here is for you to demonstrate an understanding of what it is feasible to achieve in the time you

have available on the project. You might wish to provide a Gantt chart covering the years of the project. We illustrate below a Gantt chart, which plots milestones on the timeline. The illustration is for a single year, using two fictional (and incomplete) examples.

Example:

Theoretical Project:

Month/ Task	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Lit review												
Draft ch1												
Draft ch2												
Revise ch1												
Draft ch3												
Revise ch2												

Combined Empirical-Theoretical Project:

Month/ Task	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Lit review												
Develop protocol												
Ethics approval												
Recruitment												
Data collection begins												
Data analysis												

7. Anticipated training needs

A PhD project involves both research and learning. Applicants are likely to have some but not all of the skills and knowledge needed to undertake their projects. We can see from your CV what experience, training and qualifications you have. What we want here is an honest appraisal of what training – or further training – you feel you would need to undertake in order to carry out your project to the best of your ability.

Examples of possible training areas include law/legal methods, data collection, analysis, teaching, engagement, presenting, systematic literature reviews and writing for publication. You may want to take a look at what training opportunities are provided by the Centre for Health, Law and Society ([here](#)) and the Centre for Ethics in Medicine ([here](#)), as well as what training is available more broadly (e.g. the

Population Health Sciences short course programme ([here](#)) or skills training offered by the Bristol Doctoral College ([here](#)).

8. Anticipated enrolment basis (full-time or part-time)

Please indicate whether you wish to study on a full-time or part-time basis. Part-time applicants should indicate the anticipated basis of their enrolment (e.g. 50%).

9. Bibliography (references)

Please ensure you properly cite all sources you use in your proposal and include a list of references at the end.