



EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS
IRELAND



Cochrane
Ireland

ESI Study within a Review (SWAR) Award Scheme

Guidance Notes

Closing Date: 30 September 2026

Background

[Evidence Synthesis Ireland](#) (ESI) is an all-Ireland initiative funded by the Health Research Board (HRB) and the HSC R&D Division of the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland. Our mission is to make evidence syntheses more usable in every sense of the word – better designed, conducted, and reported, more accessible for decision-makers, and more applicable within healthcare policy and clinical practice decision-making across the island of Ireland and beyond.

Alongside the rise in the number of evidence syntheses, there has been growth in the evidence base to inform decisions on how we plan, conduct, and share the findings of systematic reviews. However, significant uncertainties still exist across many aspects of the review process.

Developments in systematic review approaches require high-quality evidence to guide decisions on how they are conducted. For instance, living systematic reviews, which aim to shorten the time between the publication of primary research findings and their synthesis, need more robust evidence to inform those decisions.

Such uncertainties can be resolved by doing a ‘**Study Within A Review**’ or **SWAR**.

What is a SWAR?

Watch this [video](#)

A SWAR is a research study that can provide evidence to inform decisions about how we plan, do, and share the findings of future reviews. It addresses methodological uncertainty and is usually included within

a systematic review or other evidence synthesis to assess the effectiveness of different methods of delivering or organising a specific review process. Guided by the methodological uncertainty they aim to address, a research team can choose from various study approaches, including randomised and non-randomised comparisons, mixed-methods, or qualitative study types to design a SWAR that investigates the implications and impacts of such methodological choices.

The SWAR Programme and [Store](#) was established by the All-Ireland Hub for Trials Methodology Research in collaboration with the Medical Research Council's Network of Hubs in the UK and the Global Health Network. That programme offers a library of SWAR methodology studies and a repository for individuals to log their studies and deposit their findings.

How is a SWAR done?

Some SWARs can be conducted within a single systematic review, while others may answer questions that require integration across multiple systematic reviews. SWARs can be carried out in several reviews simultaneously or gradually over time, building the evidence sequentially. Multiple SWARs could be completed on the same topic, enabling future cumulative meta-analyses of individual SWARs.

Alternatively, SWARs may explore qualitative factors, such as the usefulness of the final review product or the quality of interpretation in systematic review processes, including screening, data extraction, critical appraisal, synthesis, and the sharing of findings. This could be seen as a Study "Without" A Review. Since much of the data needed to answer SWAR research questions is either produced during a review or can be gathered with minimal effort, SWARs present a potentially cost-effective way to enhance review procedures.

Scope of the call

Aligned with the mission of the [Evidence Synthesis Infrastructure Collaborative](#) (ESIC) to advance evidence synthesis through technology, we are especially interested in SWARs that help maximise the impact of the people and resources within the evidence synthesis community. This includes work that critically assesses where artificial intelligence (AI) can reduce workload, enhance efficiency, or improve quality, ensuring that innovation is based on solid methodological evidence rather than assumptions.

This call welcomes applications for SWARs that encourage the safe and responsible integration of AI into evidence synthesis procedures. Funded SWARs could explore independent research questions centred on how AI tools and technologies can be methodologically integrated, whether in how we plan, do, or share the

results of systematic reviews and other evidence synthesis outputs, in ways that are transparent, reproducible, and trustworthy.

We also welcome applications that address [Priority III](#) questions and other related impactful projects.

SWAR topics that were previously awarded in the ESI SWAR Award Scheme:

- Exploring the use of stakeholder consultation exercises within scoping reviews: a qualitative interview study ([SWAR 23](#))
- Exploring the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Systematic Review Abstract Screening: A Comparative Study of AI-aided and Manual Reviewing Methods. ([SWAR 25](#))
- Investigation into the sensitivity and completeness of search strategies built using a text-mining word frequency tool (PubReMiner) compared to current best practice search strategy building: a study within a review (SWAR). ([SWAR 26](#))
- Is automated data extraction using Elicit superior to human led data extraction? A comparative study using a systematic qualitative review. ([SWAR 37](#))
- Training and Experience in Study Selection (TESS): A pilot randomised trial within a systematic review. ([SWAR 38](#))
- Evaluating the usability of unified tools for critical appraisal within rapid reviews of intervention effects. ([SWAR 41](#))
- The experiences of novice team members in evidence synthesis: Barriers, facilitators and opportunities for the future. ([SWAR 44](#))
- Exploring discrepancies between protocols and published scoping reviews: what differs and why? ([SWAR 46](#))
- Meeting the need for a critical appraisal tool for realist reviews/synthesis
- How can we best communicate the findings of systematic reviews to the public?
- Artificial Intelligence in screening within rapid reviews: quantifying the impact on main findings, certainty of evidence and resources required. ([SWAR 49](#))

What is the Award?

Four awards are available, each worth up to €6000 of direct project costs, excluding 25% overheads. Overheads are calculated as 25% of direct project costs. The award duration is up to 12 months from the award date, with strict timelines and reporting requirements. The proposed project's expected duration

should be between 3 and 12 months, and the start date is expected to be within 3 months of receipt of the award notification.

Who should apply

Evidence synthesis teams interested in methodological research are encouraged to apply. Approval for the SWAR application must be secured in writing from the Principal Investigator or Lead Reviewer of the host systematic review(s), if relevant.

- Lead applicants must be currently resident in the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland and working in an eligible institution*.
- Collaboration is possible with researchers located anywhere in the world
- Applications from early-career researchers are encouraged. The research team must demonstrate sufficient breadth and depth of expertise to successfully complete the SWAR. Such applicants should provide evidence of mentoring arrangements to offer support.
- We can only accept one applicant per team – i.e., an applicant can be listed as lead or co-lead on only one application.

*HRB Host Institutions: <https://www.hrb.ie/funding/funding-schemes/before-you-apply/all-grant-policies/approval-of-host-institutions/>

** Early career researcher - someone who is currently a PhD student or within their first five years of academic or other research-related employment after completing postgraduate research training.

Application Process

1. **ESI SWAR Award application form** - Complete the application form and **sign** it
2. **Curriculum Vitae – 3-page** maximum CV in **PDF** of Lead Applicant
3. Please submit the Application Form and CV as a single PDF attachment to esi@universityofgalway.ie by 5 pm on 30 September, 2026. Include "ESI SWAR AWARD" in the email subject line.

Peer Review Process

Applications will undergo peer review. The process is independent, with conflict of interest rules applied strictly. Peer review is expected to take approximately 3 weeks after the call deadline. All applicants will be notified once peer review is completed.

Assessment Criteria

Reviewers will evaluate the applicant's application form and CV and score the submission based on the following criteria and weightings:

- Track record of the lead applicant (20 points) — Does the lead applicant demonstrate relevant experience in evidence synthesis or related methodological research?
- Early career researcher status and mentoring arrangement (5 points) — Does the applicant meet the early career researcher definition (currently a PhD student or within five years of completing postgraduate research training), and is there a satisfactory mentoring arrangement?
- Collaboration (10 points) — Does the application demonstrate authentic, substantive, and sustainable collaboration with a researcher or research team?
- Rationale and potential impact of the SWAR (30 points) — Is there a clear and compelling case for why this SWAR is needed?
- Methodological approach of the SWAR (30 points) — Is the proposed research design appropriate, feasible, and well-specified?
- Dissemination and Knowledge Exchange Plan (5 points) — Does the applicant have a credible and specific plan to share findings with audiences who can act on them?

Budget

Allowable costs include:

Salary (salary, applicable pension and social insurance costs)

Applicants from Ireland should consult the IUA website for the most current recommended salary scales for academic researchers. (<http://www.iua.ie/research-innovation/researcher-salary-scales/>).

ESI does not fund the salaries or benefits of academic staff within research institutions who are already receiving them. ESI also does not cover salaries or buy-out time for collaborators.

Running costs

Include all costs necessary to carry out the activities (e.g., software, design costs, etc.). Funding for small items of equipment can be included in this section. Standalone computers will not be funded. All costs must be inclusive of value added tax (or similar), where applicable.

Dissemination and knowledge exchange costs

This covers costs related to the Dissemination and Knowledge Exchange Plan, such as article processing charges, seminar or conference attendance (including details of name and location where possible), and any other methods of communicating outcomes or engaging with stakeholders.

Overhead contribution

In accordance with the HRB Policy on Overhead Usage, ESI will contribute to the indirect costs of the research by making an overhead payment of 25% of the total modified direct costs.

Technical guidance

Members of ESI's Executive Management Committee or Core Team are ineligible to apply or become collaborators on a SWAR Award. However, once awarded, recipients will be able to receive technical guidance on the SWAR methods from the ESI team.

Key Dates

Call open: September 2026
Call closed: 30 September 2026
Peer review sent by: 12 October 2026
Peer review completed by: 12 November 2026
Award notification by: 17 November 2026
Start date for SWARs: by February 2027
End date for SWARs: by February 2028

References

Devane D, Burke NN, Treweek S, et al. Study within a review (SWAR). *J Evid Based Med.* 2022; 1- 5. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jebm.12505>

(2012), Education section – Studies within a review (SWAR). *Journal of Evidence-Based Medicine*, 5: 188-189. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-5391.2012.01193.x>