



Role Description Theme Lead – Natural Systems November 2026

Role title: Theme Lead – Scotland Beyond Net Zero (SBNZ)

Roles available: We wish to appoint two leads per theme – there will be two co-leads for natural systems.

Deadline for application: Friday 4th December by email to sbnz@ed.ac.uk.

Suggested time commitment: Two volunteered days per month.

Basis of appointment: These are volunteer posts working across the SBNZ network of universities.

Theme Lead Purpose

The overall purpose of the Scotland Beyond Net Zero (SBNZ) Theme Lead – Natural Systems role is to design and implement a programme of work which is co-created with external partners, maximises the distinctive strength of 13 universities working together, and potentially can attract research funding and have significant impact.

We envisage there will be two theme leads per theme, meaning the leads will work closely with another academic to share the role.

There is significant scope to design the programme of work. The SBNZ Theme Leads will develop a strategic view on how to meet the goals of the role. This could include:

- **Research leadership:** Provide visible leadership on key SBNZ research priorities, shaping and articulating compelling research and innovation narratives around major environmental and climate challenges in the theme of natural systems.
- **Positioning for funding:** Build a collaboration which is well-positioned to apply for funding around a particular research challenge, including detailed mapping of specific expertise across members and engagement with previous and current SBNZ seed fund awardees.
- **Co-creation and collaboration:** Develop and strengthen strong external collaborations with industry and business groups, third sector organisations, communities, and funders, and potentially relevant international connections to ensure research is co-created.
- **Increasing policy engagement:** Develop and strengthen relationships with local, nation and UK governments to share research, and co-create research challenges.

Throughout, we would like to promote the interdisciplinary strengths of our members, and focus activities on multidimensional net zero and just transition challenges.

About the Natural Systems theme

The SBNZ Steering Group has conducted initial scoping work on the theme of natural systems which has identified some areas of strength and interest. We recognise that Scottish universities have substantial strengths in nature restoration, land use, water, forests and peatlands, as well as governance (e.g. biodiversity net gain) and community engagement in nature restoration. We particularly want to hear from academics who can combine the nature restoration and climate agendas, and promote interdisciplinary collaboration between natural and social sciences, as well as engagement with arts and humanities. Areas of focus include, but are not limited to:

- Using Scotland's existing network of living labs and place-based initiatives as the foundation for a systems-led programme focused on nature-positive futures.
- Working with members to co-create research challenges with policy makers on key challenges in land use and nature restoration.
- Place-based work with specific communities to build knowledge around long term social, natural and economic resilience and growth.

By connecting research, communities, policymakers and partners, SBNZ acts as a convenor that identifies the scales at which meaningful change can be delivered and replicated across Scotland. Working with the existing SBNZ network, including previous seed fund teams, the

Steering Group, other SBNZ Theme Leads, and the wider research landscape such as the Scottish Alliance for Food (SCAF), Marine Alliance for Science and Technology for Scotland (MASTS) and Scottish Alliance for Geoscience, Environment and Society (SAGES) is key. This role therefore represents an excellent opportunity to utilise and further develop your university and external networks across and beyond Scotland.

Person profile

We would like the Theme Leads to have the following skills and attributes:

- Recognised a leading researcher relevant to the theme of natural systems in relation to climate, sustainability and net zero in Scotland.
- Either already has a strong network, or potential or interest in establishing a network across Scotland. We are open to researchers at different stages in their career, though applicants must have a contract which extends beyond the 24-month appointment, and be appointed to at least a lectureship in an SBNZ member institution.
- Able to provide evidence of effective influencing and leadership skills.
- Well-developed leadership skills and an ability to shape and articulate a compelling vision for research, innovation and partnerships in relation to the relevant theme and climate research.
- Excellent communication and interpersonal skills with ability to build trust and credibility at all levels.
- Able to work collaboratively and creatively across different universities and partners, in a way which is collegiate, which respects differing levels of resource and approaches, and which is focussed on achieving Scotland's drive to net zero and a just transition.

Key contacts and relationships

These include but are not limited to:

- The SBNZ Governing Board (comprised of Vice Principals with responsibility for research and innovation from member institutions).
- The SBNZ Steering Group (comprised of academic or professional services staff which represent their university).
- The SBNZ Senior Research Partnership Manager.
- Other SBNZ Theme Leads (currently we have co-leads working in the themes of food and climate finance), plus the co-lead in your thematic area.
- SBNZ seed fund project teams in relevant areas.
- Relevant academics and professional services colleagues across the SBNZ network (crucially, not only within the appointee's own institution).
- Relevant external partners including government, business & industry, community organisations, research collaborations and funders.

- The Theme Leads will be invited to attend Governing Board and Steering Group meetings to share their work and co-ordinate with the wider SBNZ initiative, and can choose to attend as appropriate.

Support available

- The SBNZ Theme leads will have access to a small funding allocation to support activities such as workshops, travel and external engagement.
- Some activities can also be supported by the SBNZ Senior Partnership Manager where appropriate (e.g. help with convening events, co-ordinating external engagement and communications, and co-ordination with the other Theme Leads, seed fund projects and other stakeholders). As SBNZ has a very small core team (one member of staff plus one day per week of communications expert time), the Theme Leads will also be expected to marshal internal resources to deliver their plans.
- There is limited funding to support some research assistant time (likely a master's student) which can be discussed further when appropriate.

About Scotland Beyond Net Zero

The role of SBNZ is to amplify the research and innovation across our members, and create and encourage collaboration and co-creation of research between members and external partners such as government, industry and community groups.

Scotland Beyond Net Zero has 13 university members:

- University of Aberdeen
- University of Dundee
- University of Edinburgh
- Edinburgh Napier University
- University of Glasgow
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- Heriot-Watt University
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- Robert Gordon University
- University of St Andrews
- University of Stirling
- University of Strathclyde
- University of the West of Scotland

Academics from all listed institutions are eligible to apply for these posts.

SBNZ member universities commit to:

- Work together to share data, research and innovation to underpin the technologies, infrastructures and societal change required to meet and accelerate Scotland's climate and sustainability ambitions.
- Work in close partnership with external partners including the Scottish Government, the UK Government, local authorities, industry, the third sector and communities to identify challenges, priorities and solutions to achieve our goals.
- Highlight and catalyse greater collaboration across Scottish research organisations and industry to ensure Scottish R&D punches above its weight, positioning Scotland as world-leading in driving research in climate change and sustainability.

How to apply

- Please provide a CV and short statement (no more than two pages) which sets out your suitability and plan by the deadline stated above. In particular, we would be interested to hear about your plans for collaboration and co-creation, and how you would develop your theme.
- Applicants should clearly state which theme they are applying for (in this case, natural systems).
- Applicants should seek approval from their line manager to take on this role for two days per month for 24 months prior to applying, and confirm in their statement that this approval is in place. **Please consult your line manager at an early stage if you are hoping to apply in case this approval requires time to process in your institution.**
- If you have any questions, please contact the SBNZ Senior Research Partnership Manager, Dr Kate Symons, k.symons@ed.ac.uk.