

## PARSUK Grant 2026

### Announcement of Selected Projects

We are pleased to announce the outcome of the 2026 PARSUK Grant call. This year, we received two applications, and the Selection Committee has approved both projects for the 2026 cycle. Students are now invited to apply to the projects listed below.

- **Project 01 – Developing Immersive Virtual Exposures for Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder (DIVE-OCD)**

Dr Mariana Pinto da Costa | Senior Lecturer | King’s College London

- **Project 02 – Biobridge Training**

Dr Sarah Arnold | Research Leader – Applied Entomology | NIAB

Full details of each project are set out in the following pages.

We warmly encourage eligible students to review the project descriptions and submit their application, taking into account the grant guidelines.

London, 14 May 2026



Dr Catarina M. Liberato

**President of the Executive Board**

PARSUK

## Project 01 – Developing Immersive Virtual Exposures for Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder (DIVE-OCD)

**Principal Investigator:** Dr Mariana Pinto da Costa | Senior Lecturer | King’s College London

**Knowledge Area:** Mental Health

**Period:** 01 June 2026 – 31 March 2027 (flexible dates)

Obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) is a common and often disabling mental health condition characterised by intrusive thoughts, distress, and repetitive behaviours. Exposure and response prevention (ERP) is one of the most effective psychological treatments for OCD. However, many people find it difficult to engage fully with exposure exercises, which may reduce adherence and limit treatment benefit.

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) offer important opportunities to enhance exposure-based interventions by making them more engaging, personalised, and scalable. The DIVE-OCD project (Developing Immersive Virtual Exposures for Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder) is a randomised controlled proof-of-concept feasibility trial led by King’s College London in collaboration with the Champalimaud Foundation, Portugal. The study evaluates the feasibility, acceptability, and safety of AI-generated exposure content delivered either through immersive VR, screen-based exposure, or neutral VR environments.

Building on the DIVE-OCD feasibility trial, this project will focus on understanding participants’ experiences of technology-assisted exposure and identifying barriers and facilitators to implementation in clinical practice. Particular attention will be given to usability, acceptability, tolerability, and practical considerations relevant to routine mental health services.

The selected applicant will work with researchers at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King’s College London, and collaborate with the wider DIVE-OCD team. The project will involve contribute to the analysis of trial data, participant feedback, and qualitative material generated during the feasibility trial. Findings will contribute to informing the design of future larger-scale trials and implementation strategies for digitally supported OCD interventions.

This work will provide the applicant with experience in digital mental health research, clinical trials methodology, and interdisciplinary international collaboration across the UK and Portugal.

## Project 02 – Biobridge Training

**Principal Investigator:** Dr Sarah Arnold | Research Leader – Applied Entomology | NIAB

**Knowledge Area:** Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences

**Period:** 01 July 2026 – 31 December 2026

'Biobridge training' is a collaborative project that seeks to train and guide a master student that is finishing the thesis based on agroecological principles and to establish new relations with Portuguese partners (Viseu Institute Polytechnic and University of Porto). This project will train the internship student and co-develop protocols for her future PhD project ('Food Spray – a new approach to control *Drosophila suzukii*'). The PhD project aims to assess Food Spray potential as a mean of biological control against *Drosophila suzukii* Matsumura, one of the main pests of soft fruit. The objectives are: (i) to identify and characterize natural enemies associated with the pest and alternative food sources; (ii) to develop and evaluate food attractants capable of promoting the action of natural enemies; and (iii) to validate, in the field, the effectiveness of the attractants in controlling the pest. Tasks will include statistically robust replicated bioassay design and implementation, insect identification, and field and laboratory assays. Food Spray is a new method aimed at controlling pests that is an alternative to chemical insecticides. The PhD will focus on high value and nutritionally important soft-skinned fruits (e.g. blueberries, raspberries, and others), that are particularly vulnerable to *D. suzukii* damage, in mediterranean climate.

Tasks and timeline: (T1) literature review on *D. suzukii* natural enemies (Nes) and Food Spray attractant for NE, resulting in a scientific article (Deliverable 1) (01/07/2026-31/12/2026); (T2) training on monitoring and identification of NE and *D. suzukii* and practical training in laboratory and field assays (minimum one week) (October/2026); (T3) write a research protocol for the implementation and application of the Food Spray method, in different crops, contexts and countries, particularly in Europe (October-November 2026); (T4) draft of a scientific article (D2).