Cambridge ESRC DTP Interdisciplinary Studentship 2020

Entrepreneurial infrastructure in the off-grid city: water and energy entrepreneurship in Ghana and South Africa

The University of Cambridge ESRC Doctoral Training Partnership [DTP] is pleased to offer an interdisciplinary studentship available for admission in October 2020.

The studentship will be a one-year masters (MPhil Geographical Research) followed by three-year doctoral programme and will be co-supervised by Dr Charlotte Lemanski (Department of Geography) and Prof Jaideep Prabhu (Judge Business School).

DTP students will acquire a unique set of skills that will equip them for high-profile careers as leading social scientists, in academia or in other government, industrial, commercial and third sector organisations, either in the UK or elsewhere.

Research Topic

In contemporary African cities, businesses and residents across all income groups access infrastructure through bricolage strategies that mix grid and off-grid services, particularly in accessing water and energy. This hybrid infrastructure is attributed to multiple factors including: patchy provision of networked services in post-colonial cities; poor quality and service-disruption connected to weak governance, climate change and natural resource limitations (e.g. drought, depletion of coal reserves); high tariffs; alongside sustainable ‘green’ technologies.

Recent scholarship within urban geography acknowledges the ‘myth’ of the centralised model of universal service-provision in the global South (e.g. Jaglin 2015, Coutard and Rutherford 2016), demonstrating heterogenous infrastructure consumption as a more accurate reflection of global South urban realities (e.g. Monstadt and Schramm 2017, Lawhon et al. 2018, Lemanski 2019). However, this emerging scholarship largely ignores the entrepreneurial activities of small- and large-scale commercial entities in providing off-grid forms of infrastructure that range from water sachets/canteens and small solar generators sold on the streets, to water tanks, boreholes, solar panels and diesel generators installed in (typically wealthy) residential and commercial zones.

However, there is increasing interest in these issues in business studies and development economics. For instance, academics in business question how such entrepreneurs provide quality services at highly affordable prices, despite the considerable odds they face (e.g. Prabhu 2017, Radjou et al. 2012). Meanwhile, development economists are increasingly interested in how urban entrepreneurs negotiate the boundaries between formal and informal economic activity in Africa and Asia (Banerjee and Duflo 2011, De Mel et al. 2008).

This postgraduate project will integrate insights from business studies on the economics of entrepreneurship with urban geography approaches to the socio-spatiality of hybrid infrastructure, in order to critically explore entrepreneurship in the off-grid city.

The studentship will address the following:

1. What are the motivations and practices of water and energy off-grid entrepreneurs in Accra (Ghana) and Johannesburg (South Africa); and how does this differ according to a) business scale (e.g. from...
street sellers to large commercial entities), and b) location within the city (e.g. residential/commercial, suburb/slum, central/periphery)?

2. How do entrepreneurs navigate the formal/informal economy, and interact with other stakeholders (consumers, other entrepreneurs, the state)?

3. What is the role of the state in regulating the activities of entrepreneurs who exist primarily due to the failures of the state in infrastructure provision? How does the state inhibit/discipline or promote/support different types of entrepreneurs?

4. How is entrepreneurship in the off-grid water and energy sector understood within global economic development narratives that position sustainable infrastructure as decentralised and small-scale?

5. How can entrepreneurship be re-theorised from an inter-disciplinary perspective?

The student will undertake fieldwork in Accra and Johannesburg; combining ethnographic observation with qualitative semi-structured interviews undertaken with a) off-grid water and energy entrepreneurs, and b) state officials responsible for regulating these industries, as well as policy analysis where relevant. While in the field, the student will be supported by colleagues at the University of Ghana and University of Witwatersrand.

Applicants will be expected to hold (or be about to graduate with) a high degree (1st or 2.1) in a relevant social science (e.g. geography, business studies, political science, anthropology, area studies, development studies, urban planning). Applicants are also expected to have a strong interest in urban development and/or business economics, experience of qualitative research methods, and a capacity for self-directed work in field locations. Prior experience working in urban Africa and/or conducting independent fieldwork is advantageous, but not essential.

The studentship will be based at the University of Cambridge DTP in the Department of Geography, and the student will register for the MPhil Geographical Research for the first year. The student will receive appropriate training within both geography and the Judge Business School, and will be co-supervised by Dr Charlotte Lemanski (Geography) and Prof Jaideep Prabhu (CJBS). The student will also participate in the cross-departmental ‘Global Energy Nexus in Urban Settlements’ (GENUS) research group: https://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/infrastructure/genus/.

A full ESRC DTP studentship will cover fees and provide £15,009 p.a. in living costs (current 2019 rates). DTP students also receive a personal allowance for additional training costs, and can apply for further funding to pursue fieldwork, academic exchange, and collaboration with non-academic partner organisations.

Cambridge ESRC DTP studentships are currently open to students who meet UK or EU residential criteria and the required academic conditions. Full studentships are open only to those meeting certain residency requirements. You can find out more here: https://esrc.ukri.org/skills-and-careers/doctoral-training/prospective-students/.

What to do next

You can find out more about the Cambridge ESRC DTP at: https://www.esrcdtp.group.cam.ac.uk/about/onoffer and read about some of the opportunities that will be available to you.

You can find out more about the Department of Geography at https://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/ and the Judge Business School at https://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/home/. Please address any questions about this studentship to Dr Charlotte Lemanski (ccl52@cam.ac.uk).

All Cambridge ESRC DTP applicants follow the University’s standard admission process. Applications for this studentship should be made to the Department of Geography. Please go to our Graduate Admissions Portal to start your application and ensure you indicate that you wish to be considered for funding in the Funding section of the online application form.
The closing date for applications will be **Tuesday 7 January 2020**

Interviews will be held in January/February 2020.