

## PhD Project Advertisement

**Project title:** Evaluating suitability of graphitic carbon from methane cracking to improve soil nutrient retention for crop uptake

**Project No:** FBS2023-52-Sakrabani-cq

**Lead supervisor:** Ruben Sakrabani, Centre for Soil, Agrifood and Biosciences, School of Water, Energy & Environment, Cranfield University

**Email:** r.sakrabani@cranfield.ac.uk

**Co-supervisors:**

Deepak Kumaresan, Queen's University Belfast; Upul Wijayantha, Cranfield University

**Project description:**

Methane is a potent greenhouse (GHG) with a half-life shorter than CO<sub>2</sub> and can oxidise to form CO<sub>2</sub>. Minimising methane emission by converting it to hydrogen and carbon (C) will reduce CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. Methane cracking offers a solution to convert methane into hydrogen and graphitic C. With the increasing concerns on declining soil health, it is pertinent to explore options to maintain or where possible increase soil carbon and this project is timely and exciting. It embraces a circular economy approach to obtain graphitic carbon from methane and assess its suitability for soils application.

This PhD project focuses only on solid C and how suitable it will be for soil applications. The C itself may be inert but its surface chemistry can be modified to act as a carrier to adsorb and alter the lability of varying nitrogen (N) sources e.g. slurry, poultry litter and urea so that it can act as a slow-release fertiliser in combination with biostimulants. With increasing mineral fertiliser prices, an opportunity to rely on an alternative source such as graphitic C as a potential renewable option in conjunction with biostimulants needs further exploration.

This project will be led by Cranfield University in collaboration with Queen's University Belfast. It also offers a fantastic opportunity to engage an industrial partner such as Royal Haskoning DHV which provides supply of biostimulants. The student will be able to visit the production site in the Netherlands to have an exposure to an industrial scale operating condition. This project brings together a multi-disciplinary team comprising of soil scientists, engineers and microbiologists to tackle a challenge in a fully integrated manner.

In addition, there will also be opportunities to be trained in using specialist equipments and facilities to investigate fundamental interactions involving isotopic analysis and microbiology, to present the work in conferences and at scientific meetings both in the UK and abroad.

**Training opportunities:**

In this project there will be excellent opportunities for training on :

1. Experimental design: Theoretical and practical aspects of experimental design, microcosm and sampling
2. Laboratory analyses: Laboratory methods required for the project's analytical component, including geochemical and molecular ecology analysis for all types of samples
3. Stable-isotope probing, bioinformatics and "big data" analysis : next-generation sequence analysis with interpretation on the microbial eco-physiology in relation to environmental parameters. This also includes modelling approaches to incorporate bio-physical-chemical data to understand impact on soil health.
4. Transferable skills: Training in core scientific skills will be provided through the DTP courses and regular group meetings that includes scientific presentation, time and project management, team-working and communication.

There will also be opportunities to be trained on using AAS, ICP-MS for heavy metal analysis, Elementar for carbon, segmental flow analyser for nitrate and spectrophotometer for phosphorus analysis. The student will also attend MSc modules in soil science, plant genetics and food quality, if required.

**Student profile:**

Applicants should hold a minimum of a UK Honours Degree at 2:1 level or equivalent in subjects such as Soil Science, Environmental Science, Plant Science, Agronomy, Geography or Chemistry.

**Stipend (Salary):**

FoodBioSystems DTP students receive an annual tax free stipend (salary) that is paid in instalments throughout the year. For 2022/23 this will be £17,668 and this will increase slightly each year at rate set by UKRI.

This project has in-kind contribution from Royal Haskoning DHV to provide industrial exposure on the production of biostimulant and a sponsored site visit to the Netherlands.

**Equality Diversity and Inclusion:**

The FoodBioSystems DTP is committed to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), to building a doctoral researcher(DR) and staff body that reflects the diversity of society, and to encourage applications from under-represented and disadvantaged groups. Our actions to promote diversity and inclusion are detailed on the [FoodBioSystems DTP website](#).

In accordance with UKRI guidelines, our studentships are offered on a part time basis in addition to full time registration. The minimum registration is 50% FT and the studentship end date will be extended to reflect the part-time registration.

**For up to date information on funding eligibility, studentship rates and part time registration, please visit the [FoodBioSystems website](#).**