PhD

Accounting Stream

Doctor of Philosophy in Business Administration

HALIFAX ~ CANADA

EQUIS ACCREDITED AACSB ACCREDITED PRME BSIS IMPACT

sobey.smu.ca/phd

Sobey School of Business
Saint Mary's University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in Business Administration

View PhD Business Admissions

Welcome message for the Accounting Stream

Lead with Purpose: Shaping the Future of Accounting Research

Welcome to the PhD in Business Administration - Accounting Stream at the Sobey School of Business, where you are empowered to lead with purpose through groundbreaking research and meaningful impact. This brochure introduces you to our program: a dynamic and collaborative faculty, conducting innovative research in areas like auditing and assurance, ESG, corporate disclosure, taxation, AI and analytics, and accounting practices at cooperatives, credit unions and municipalities; an impressive group of current PhD students making waves in top conferences and producing influential work; and rigorous, hands-on foundational courses designed to sharpen your theoretical insight and research skills from day one. What truly defines our group is a culture of mentorship, collegiality, and high expectations—where faculty are deeply invested in your success and students are empowered to lead bold, original research. As echoed by our students, the Accounting group at Sobey stands out for its commitment to innovation, personal growth, and methodological diversity, making it an ideal place to launch a rewarding academic career. If you are ready to grow and lead with purpose within the accounting academic community and the world of accounting, you are in the right place.

AACSB & EQUIS accredited

A mark of quality, and a distinction achieved by only 1% of business schools worldwide.

PRME champions

Sobey School is one of a select group of schools designated as PRME Champions under the Principles for Responsible Management Education initiative of the UN

PhD ACCOUNTING STREAM
Faculty Welcome

Vasiliki Athanasakou, PhD, ACCA

View Web Profile

View Welcome Message

"The Accounting Language: Moving from the game of numbers to the power of words and the depths of the human mind. My work sits at the crossroads of accounting, governance, policymaking, and capital markets. I seek answers to fundamental questions: How do firms communicate their strategy and vision? How do these disclosure and accounting practices shape investor decisions, market behavior, and even the implementation of corporate strategy itself? My recent work expands into understanding how disclosure advisory services, strategy and sustainability reporting influence value creation. Ultimately, my goal is to advance corporate reporting as a dynamic language that can articulate strategy, foster trust, and unlock long-term value for organizations, markets, and society. For doctoral students, my research offers not just analytical tools, but a mission: to push the boundaries of how we think about corporate communication and the power of the accounting language in shaping the future of our ecosystem."

"Ever heard the claim that the number of people who drowned in pools is closely correlated with the number of films Nicolas Cage appeared in? While that statistic is amusing, it's a reminder that correlation doesn't necessarily imply causation. My research focuses on identifying and testing causal relationships rather than relying on correlations alone. Most of my work lies at the intersection of government, economics and accounting. More recently, I've incorporated large language models (LLMs) into my research, using them to analyze text and images in to generate novel datasets that are otherwise difficult—or impossible—to collect. I teach Advanced Empirical Methods in the PhD program, where we explore the vital distinction between correlation and causation, and students learn how to pinpoint settings and natural experiments that allow researchers to credibly make causal claims."

Matthew Boland, PhD

View Web Profile

View Welcome Message

Amna Chalwati, PhD

"Exposing the Green Façade: Understanding the Real Impact of Corporate Sustainability Claims: My research explores how firms communicate their sustainability efforts—and how these disclosures often mask underlying inconsistencies between talk and action. I focus on greenwashing (misleading claims about environmental responsibility) and greenhushing (strategic silence to avoid scrutiny), examining their effects on investors, regulators, and corporate stakeholders. I'm especially interested in how new sustainability standards and ESG regulations shape corporate behavior and financial reporting transparency. This work is ideal for PhD students curious about the intersection of sustainability, corporate governance, and financial markets—particularly those wanting to apply empirical methods, including textual analysis and big data, to real-world accountability problems."

View Web Profile

"My scholarly activities span a broad range of areas including, governance, sustainability, ESG, CSR, EDIAB, board of directors, top-management-team, audit and assurance, enterprise risk management and internal control, professional judgment and critical thinking, strategic decision making, emerging trends in IT and applied machine learning, financial accounting, and corporate finance and banking."

View Web Profile

Mohamed Drira, PhD, CPA

My research explores firms' opportunistic behavior and the influence of macro-level institutions on micro-level corporate decisions. My work examines how firms strategically respond to external forces such as government incentives, political connections, and institutional constraints, particularly in the areas of taxation, financial reporting, and ESG performance. A central theme in my research is the interplay between policy design and firm strategy, shedding light on how organizations navigate complex regulatory and economic environments. By linking macroeconomic context with firm-level behavior, my work advances understanding of corporate accountability, sustainable finance, and the effectiveness of government interventions.

View Web Profile

View Web Profile

I am interested in the broad areas of tax and managerial accounting. Using archival methods, I draw on theories from accounting, finance, and economics to examine how tax policies influence firms' decision-making processes. Specifically, my studies explore how tax policies affect managerial decisions such as structuring executive compensation contracts, investment choices, and debt policies. Additionally, I am interested in examining whether tax-motivated income shifting affects financial reporting quality, financial disclosures, and investor perceptions of firms engaged in tax-motivated income shifting. My research has contributed to developing a large dataset of marginal tax rates for Canadian public firms, forthcoming in *Accounting Perspectives*.

My research focuses on judgment and decision-making processes and outcomes by external auditors, CFOs, internal auditors and management, thus bearing both scholarly and applied or policy implications. Together with my co-authors, I have received multiple research grants from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and from the Canadian Academic Accounting Association. I am currently serving as an Associate Editor of International Journal of Auditing. I am also a member of Canadian Auditing and Assurance Standards Board.

I mentor PhD students interested in behavioural and qualitative research in auditing and accounting for sustainability.

Natalia Kochetova, PhD, FCPA

View Web Profile

Ming Liu, PhD

View Web Profile

Decoding the Hidden Signals in Corporate Disclosure: How do a CEO's words reveal their true mindset? My research explores how managerial psychological traits—hidden in corporate disclosures—shape business decisions and influence stakeholders' perceptions. Using cutting-edge natural language processing, I analyze corporate disclosures to predict managerial psychological traits and interactions, then examine how these predicted traits and interactions influence corporate decisions. I also investigate how factors like disclosure readability and competitive language impact corporate innovation and financial markets. If you're curious about the intersection of AI, accounting, and psychology, let's uncover the hidden forces driving corporate strategy together!

Daphne Rixon, PhD, FCPA

View Web Profile

"We have opportunities for academic and PhD candidates to conduct research on a broad array of topics related to co-operatives and credit unions. My current research work is centered on advancing co-operative accounting, education, and sustainability. Key projects include developing a performance dashboard for co-operatives aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and contributing to the creation of international accounting standards tailored to co-operatives (iSORP) in collaboration with UK-based practitioners and scholars. My international collaboration with FUNDEPOS Alma Máter University in Costa Rica supports joint research, training, and events with a focus on the SDGs. Additionally, I am engaged in Indigenous-focused projects, particularly in healthcare and business planning, in partnership with Dr. Heidi Weigand."

"My current research includes projects on the theoretical foundations of political corporate social responsibility and asymmetry in stakeholders' responses to genuine and dubious corporate social responsibility initiatives."

View Web Profile

Xiafei Song, PhD, CPA

PHD ACCOUNTING STREAM
Our rising stars!

Zac Koning
PhD Candidate, CPA

My research interests broadly lie in behavioral accounting research involving auditors. I am keenly interested in professional skepticism and assurance over non-financial information.

Research outputs since beginning PhD program:

- Who Wants to Be a Millionaire: Exploring Auditor Comfort Over Qualitative Financial Statement Disclosures | Substantially complete, pending supplemental data collection.
  Co-authored with Dr. Natalia Kochetova.

  Preliminary results presented at EARNET (September 2023), SMU Speaker Series (November 2023), Waterloo Speaker Series (March 2024), AAA ABO (October 2024) and AAA Midyear Audit Meeting (January 2025)
- Auditor Management of Costly Skepticism | Thesis; work in progress.
  Presented at QARS (November 2024), awarded 2024 CAAA Doctoral Student grant.
- Fraud Responsibility Amongst Municipal Actors | Pre-data collection.
  Co-authored with Dr. Natalia Kochetova & Jane Fraser.

Survey questions and answers:

a. What key factors influenced your decisions to pursue a PhD in Accounting at Sobey School of Business?

· Paradigmatic and methodological diversity amongst faculty
· Close knit, collegial, and spirited environment
· Openness to support PhD students with little to no research experience

b. What makes the Accounting group of Sobey School of Business 'special' in developing and supporting doctoral students?

Ability to represent SMU (more broadly Atlantic Canada) on fairly large, international stages. The behavioral accounting research world is small, although it is heavily clustered in certain US schools. It is an honour to present my work and represent our small corner of the world at these venues.

c. What was your most rewarding experience from the PhD program so far, in terms of it supporting your research interests and career aspirations?

I would reference the above; my view is that the opportunities SMU provides funding supervision, development, etc., are well above what a third party might expect from a smaller school in Atlantic Canada.

d. What guidance would you offer to prospective students considering this PhD program?
Enjoy the process, be curious and don't be afraid to fail. There is an inaccurate (and dangerous) perception that research progresses in a stepwise linear fashion towards completion. My best ideas came when I wasn't thinking about research; my greatest progress was made during times when advancing seemed impossible, and my greatest satisfaction garnered when the world looked bleak the day before. Your road is yours alone – sometimes it's best not to get too "fussed" about where you are relative to peers.

Jane Fraser
PhD Candidate, CPA

My research interests lie in auditing, with a specific focus on fraud responsibility and governance in the public-sector and not-for-profit spaces. I am also interested in auditor-client interactions within these sectors. I am also interested in case writing and experiential learning in Accounting education.

Research outputs since beginning PhD program:

- Fraser, J., and Konings, Z., Stephane Levac: Foraging on a Dream. Ivey Business School Publishing.
- Fraser, J. and Oxner, M. Wabanaki Maple: Building for Growth. Ivey Business School Publishing. *Shortlisted for European Foundation of Management Development (EFMD) 2025 Case Writing Competition
- Fraser, J. and Maltby, N. GRID: Disrupting the Real Estate Industry with Blockchain. Ivey Business School Publishing. *Shortlisted for European Foundation of Management Development (EFMD) 2025 Case Writing Competition

Survey questions and answers:

a. What key factors influenced your decisions to pursue a PhD in Accounting at Sobey School of Business?

I was drawn to the program's strong in-person learning environment and the ability to connect closely with classmates and faculty. The professors in the program have extensive experience and are engaged in meaningful, interesting and high-impact research. The program has also offered me financial support - I have been fortunate to receive a graduate studies fellowship and was a recipient of the Bernard Kline Memorial Scholarship this year.

b. What was your most rewarding experience from the PhD program so far, in terms of it supporting your research interests and career aspirations?

A rewarding experience in the PhD program would be my attendance and participation in various conferences. I was encouraged by my professors to present at the Craft of Accounting Workshop as part of the doctoral consortium at the Canadian Academic Accounting Association conference at the end of my first year. It was an opportunity that pushed me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to make connections and gain valuable feedback on an interesting project that has since moved forward. I also had the opportunity of attending and presenting at the Atlantic Schools of Business Conferences in my first and second year. Attending the AAA Auditing Midyear Doctoral Consortium was also a highlight—it was inspiring to engage with scholars and peers from across the globe!

c. What makes the Accounting group of Sobey School of Business 'special' in developing and supporting doctoral students?

The Accounting group is incredibly supportive and intentional in creating engaging opportunities through seminars, workshops etc. The faculty genuinely cares about the well-being and success of the doctoral students.

d. What guidance would you offer to prospective students considering this PhD program?

I would encourage prospective students to take the time to explore what the SMU program has to offer. Don't hesitate to reach out to current students or faculty—people here are approachable and happy to help. Also, Halifax is a vibrant and welcoming city, which adds to the overall experience. Most importantly, be open to stepping outside your comfort zone - you'll grow so much in the process.

Bryce Cross
PhD Candidate, CPA

Hi, I'm Bryce! My research focuses on debt contracts in the syndicated loan market. Public firms issue a substantial amount of debt, and it's often unclear why debt contracts have the terms that they do. I work to understand why these important contracts are constructed the way they are, how lenders and borrowers negotiate key terms, and what economic forces drive changes in contractual provisions over time. By analyzing large datasets and leveraging empirical methods, my research sheds light on how legal covenants, creditor control rights, and financial reporting shape debt agreements. Ultimately, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how these contracts impact firm behavior, investor protection, and the broader credit market.

Research outputs since beginning PhD program:

- Taylor, S., Cross, B., Nissen, A., McGregor, J., and Richards, N. (2025). From the classroom to journal publication: A guide to publishing accounting instructional pedagogical resources. Issues in Accounting Education, 40(3), 49–79.
- Cross, B., and Taylor, S. (2025). Healthy Meals 4 Kids: A four-part instructional case. Accounting Perspectives.
- Boland, M., Cross, B., and Cumming, D. (2025). Are firms ideologically fickle? Working paper.
- Cross, B., and Boland, M. (2025). When takeovers loom: Takeover risk and the reshaping of private debt contracts. Working paper.

Survey questions and answers:

a. What key factors influenced your decisions to pursue a PhD in Accounting at Sobey School of Business?

I chose the Sobey School for its faculty's extensive expertise across both domain knowledge and research methodologies. Their commitment to staying at the forefront of emerging trends ensures that students are well-equipped with the latest tools and insights needed to tackle today's research challenges.

b. What was your most rewarding experience from the PhD program so far, in terms of it supporting your research interests and career aspirations?

One of the most rewarding experiences in my PhD program has been the opportunity to present my research at top conferences. Engaging with leading scholars, receiving valuable feedback, and discussing my work with experts in the field has been incredibly enriching.

c. What makes the Accounting group of Sobey School of Business special in developing and supporting doctoral students?

The Accounting group at the Sobey School of Business stands out for its strong sense of collegiality and mentorship. Faculty members are genuinely invested in the success of doctoral students, providing both rigorous academic guidance and a supportive environment for research development.

d. What guidance would you offer to prospective students considering this PhD program?

For prospective students considering this PhD program, I'd emphasize the importance of developing strong technology skills early on. A solid foundation in tools like Python or R can significantly enhance your ability to work with large datasets, automate analyses, and conduct more sophisticated empirical research. While technical skills are not always a formal requirement, they can set you apart and make your research more efficient and impactful.

FOUNDATION COURSES

These courses equip students with a deep theoretical grounding in key functional areas of accounting research, while building the skills necessary to develop innovative, well-motivated, and rigorously framed research questions—essential tools for a successful academic career.

SPHD 7750 - Doctoral Seminar in Accounting Research and Theory I

Students are provided with an overview of academic research in auditing and accounting information systems. Topics include, external and internal audit, internal control and enterprise risk management, corporate governance, accounting analytics and artificial intelligence, and IT- and cyber-governance.

SPHD 7751 Doctoral Seminar in Accounting Research and Theory II

Students study the theory and empirics of financial accounting research, Topics include principal themes in capital markets research, including, various specific topics, such as corporate governance, corporate sustainability, earnings management, voluntary disclosure, and taxation.

This course offers doctoral students a dynamic opportunity to explore core financial accounting theories alongside cutting-edge research across major financial accounting themes. Students are not passive learners but active contributors. Building on the theoretical frameworks and research discussed in class, students craft and present bi-weekly research proposals on topics of their choice. This hands-on approach allows them to receive immediate, constructive feedback from both the instructor and their peers, fostering a collaborative and intellectually stimulating environment.