

ESRS Doctoral Summer School 2026

Shaping Change: Rural Futures in a Digital Age

6–10 July 2026 | Riga, Latvia

The ESRS Doctoral Summer School 2026 brings together doctoral researchers and leading scholars to explore how digitalisation is transforming rural societies, governance, communities, and everyday life. Through lectures, workshops, poster sessions, field visits, and collaborative discussions, participants will engage with contemporary debates on rural futures in an increasingly digital age.

Day 1 – Arrival, Keynote and Opening Reflections

The Summer School begins with participant registration and an official welcome to Riga. The opening keynote by **Koen Salemink** introduces key debates surrounding rural digitalisation, social and digital exclusion, and community transformation in rural areas. The keynote is followed by an opening panel discussion bringing together academics and practitioners.

The panel moves beyond purely technical discussions of digital infrastructure to explore broader questions concerning how digitalisation reshapes everyday life, governance, and social relations in rural areas. Particular attention will be given to two central themes: the relationship between top-down and bottom-up digitalisation processes, and the connections between digitalisation, rural depopulation, access to services, and rural sustainability.

The first day concludes with informal networking activities designed to foster new international collaborations and exchange among participants.

Day 2 – Digital Innovation and Doctoral Exchange

The second day focuses on digital innovation, agrifood systems, and socio-technical transformations in rural areas. Lectures by **Carlo Giua** and **Miķelis Grīviņš** introduce participants to contemporary debates on digital technologies, innovation ecosystems, and rural development.

Poster sessions and doctoral discussions form a central component of the Summer School. Participants will be divided into groups for mentoring discussions designed not only as presentation formats, but also as spaces for detailed academic feedback, methodological reflection, and conceptual discussion. Participants are encouraged to identify specific challenges related to their doctoral projects and to use the sessions as opportunities for networking and collaboration.

The afternoon workshops are organised into two parallel streams designed to balance conceptual reflection with hands-on methodological engagement.

The day concludes with *Community Stories*, an informal networking evening dedicated to sharing experiences, building connections, and reflecting on diverse rural futures.

Day 3 – Rural Communities, Nature and Digital Methods

The third day explores the intersections of digitalisation, community resilience, and nature-based practices. **Dr Leanne Townsend** will discuss how digital technologies shape rural community life, local economies, and environmental stewardship. Additional perspectives from the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU) will provide insights into Latvian rural development.

The workshop programme continues with two complementary streams:

Conceptual and Theoretical Workshop Stream

Koen Salemink and **Carlo Giua** coordinate the conceptual and theoretical workshop stream. The sessions focus on broader questions surrounding rural digitalisation, digital innovation ecosystems, and socio-technical transformation in rural areas. Particular attention is given to how localised digitalisation case studies can be conceptualised, compared, and generalised within wider theoretical discussions.

Methodological and Practice-Oriented Workshop Stream

Leanne Townsend and **Miķelis Grīviņš** coordinate the methodological and practice-oriented workshop stream. This stream focuses on digital research methods and forms of public engagement, including digital storytelling, netnography, digital ethnography, science communication, citizen science, and participatory research practices. The workshops explore how digital tools can be used both for conducting research and for communicating research to broader audiences.

Day 4 – Field Visit and Rural Latvia in Practice

The fourth day is dedicated to field-based learning organised in collaboration with the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU). Participants will engage directly with local stakeholders and explore examples of rural innovation, governance, and development in practice.

The field visit provides an opportunity to connect theoretical discussions with empirical realities and to reflect on the challenges and opportunities facing rural communities in Latvia and beyond.

Day 5 – Publication Strategies and Future Collaborations

The final day focuses on academic writing, publishing, and collaboration. Participants will attend sessions on publication strategies and academic writing, followed by an interactive writing workshop.

The Summer School is linked to publication opportunities, including a forthcoming special issue on artificial intelligence and rural futures. Participants will have the opportunity to meet the guest editors, discuss publication strategies, and explore thematic connections and possible collaborative publication ideas.

The Summer School concludes with a closing lunch, marking the end of an intensive week of learning, collaboration, and international exchange.