

Advice on applying for a NIHR Clinical Doctoral Research Fellowship

These Fellowships are awarded on the basis of quality. The NIHR is not funding as many proposals as it would like because they are not receiving enough good quality applications. If you are interested in applying, contact one of the Southampton AHPRN Hub facilitators as early as possible. Contact details are available on our Southampton Hub webpages, or email Margaret Bush (mb17g08@soton.ac.uk) for this information.

To enhance your chances of success the following tips may be helpful:

Guidance notes for application form

Read the Guidance notes very carefully. This document is invaluable to you, become familiar with the terminology used and the aims of the NIHR and the scheme. Don't just skip straight to "Completing the application form", the first 10 pages provide a lot of essential information.

Time

Do not underestimate the time it takes to write a really good application. Allow several weeks from start to finish and expect to go through many drafts on the way. The form may seem relatively straightforward to complete but it will nevertheless be very time consuming particularly if you are not experienced in applying for research funding or putting together a research proposal. Look at the closing dates and work backwards.

Consider:

- Getting signatures – check that people will be available well in advance; annual leave, conferences and clinics will all conspire to make that vital signature unobtainable. Make sure you get into the diary of vital signatories so that they are expecting you and email a copy ahead of time so that they have a realistic opportunity to read your application before signing it.
- Letting relevant individuals know in advance that you would welcome their help reviewing your draft application, people are more likely to help if they can schedule some time in their diary. Get as many people to review it as possible, they are all likely to spot something different. It is unlikely that there will be a therapist from your field on the panel reviewing your application so it must be understandable to other professionals.
- Allow plenty of time for postage or delivery of the hard copy.
- Murphy's law says that your internet provider will not function on deadline day. Email your application before the deadline.
- Make sure you have an up to date back up copy.

Assessment criteria

1. Evidence of research experience and output commensurate with career stage

If you have very little research experience, consider the NIHR MRes scheme before applying to do a PhD.

2. The quality of the proposed research, its suitability as a PhD project, and its potential to benefit patients and/or clinical practice within 5 years of its completion.

The quality of your proposed research is of paramount importance. The Research Design Service (RDS) is part of the infrastructure of the NIHR and it is there to help NHS researchers. Priority is given to researchers applying to NIHR funding schemes.

There are ten local RDS across the country. For more information;

http://www.nihr.ac.uk/infrastructure/Pages/research_design_service.aspx

South Central RDS is found here: <http://www.rds-sc.nihr.ac.uk/> . Make an appointment to see them at the earliest opportunity, and be aware that there may be a few weeks between you making first contact and you actually seeing someone to discuss your application. Do not delay in making contact; you will have time to collate your thoughts before the appointment with your advisor. When you do come to meet your advisor, it will be easier for them to help you if you have something written down to share with them rather than just having a “chat”.

Involve patients at all stages of your research. The NIHR website has a patient and public awareness section; <http://www.nihr.ac.uk/awareness/Pages/default.aspx> which states that “*All the NIHR Research Programmes actively engage patients and the public in all stages of research*”.

- Discuss your research proposal with your patients; find out if they think your research is a good idea and if they would be prepared to participate. Use their feedback to modify your proposal.
- There is a website that enables researchers to advertise for members of the public to help with research, you may find it helpful to post an advert there; <http://www.peopleinresearch.org/>
- Contact the patient support group relevant to your specialism and ask them if someone would be able to review your proposal.

3. The quality of the proposed research training and development programme

This will depend on the HEI that supervises your PhD, some HEI’s have a better reputation for research than others. The University of Southampton is one of the top UK universities for health research and the Faculty of Health Sciences has an excellent reputation for supporting postgraduate research. The NIHR website lists current award holders and their academic institution; <http://www.nihrtcc.nhs.uk/nihrfellow/Current%20and%20Completed%20Awards>

Find out what support your proposed HEI offers for PhD students, you could highlight support such as specific software training packages or help with ethics applications that would benefit your proposed research.

4. The extent to which the Fellowship period will support the development of the individual’s skills as a clinician.

“*Applicants must be able to demonstrate how they will develop their skills as a clinician over the period of the CAT C-DRF Fellowship*” This is quite a difficult call because on the face of it, three years out of your normal clinical work would tend to reduce your skills!

- Does your research proposal concentrate on a particular aspect of your clinical work? If so highlight this in your application.
- The research should impact on clinical practice within 5 years –highlight how that information will improve your work as a clinician.
- All the research skills; critical review, search strategies, familiarity with the evidence base etc. can be used to enhance your clinical ability
- Status within the MDT will be enhanced by the scholarship.
- Mention how the networking opportunities afforded by the scheme will enable you to learn from other AHP’s and increase the potential for multidisciplinary working.
- Identified any collaborators, talk about how that relationship will enhance your clinical skills – is there any chance of collaborating with someone abroad?
 - For example, there is a LinkedIn group for dietetics that is mainly US dietitians, it might be worth putting a general call for help out on that and see if anyone interesting responds.
 - The Dietitians also have other useful networks: Use PEN to identify Canadian dietitians with expertise in your field.

- Find out what is available in your profession and use the AHPRN local hub.

5. The suitability of the proposed academic and clinical institutional support, including academic and clinical supervision.

It is usual to have 2 or possibly three supervisors. It is important that you identify supervisors who will enhance your application and that you can work with. The role of an academic supervisor is to steer you through the university processes for doing a PhD, the supervisor should have had experience of getting a number of previous students through the PhD process and should have access to a network of contacts that will help you in your field of study. It is possible that a highly regarded academic supervisor with lots of contacts may enhance your application but have relatively little time in which to support you. It may be sensible to have a second academic supervisor who is more accessible and available to support you. The two academic supervisors do not necessarily have to work at the same institution but it would be sensible to ensure that communication links are good and that everyone is very clear about their role. You will also need a clinical supervisor to support you clinically. The clinical supervisor does not need to have experience of the academic process, or be from your profession, but should be a senior clinician.

6. Evidence of commitment to a career involving research and continued clinical practice.

The NIHR also has Fellowships for post docs: <http://www.nihrtcc.nhs.uk/nihrfellow/pdf> and <http://www.nihrtcc.nhs.uk/cat/cl>. It is worth looking at these links and using their terminology to say that you would like to work towards one of these in the future (one is pure post-doctoral research, one is a clinical lectureship – combining clinical and research activity).

7. The potential of the applicant and their planned career trajectory involving research and clinical practice.

The CRDF guidance notes talk about Clinical Lectureship and Senior Clinical Lectureship rather than Consultant posts, it might be advisable to use this terminology when talking about career plans. Get a manager, either AHP or medic to write (or sign something you have written!) a supporting paragraph about the need for specialist researchers in your area. Explore the possibility of a joint appointment between the NHS and an HEI or use an example to illustrate your proposed future career.

8. The appropriateness of resources claimed and whether the total funding requested represents good value for the use of public funds.

A detailed costing is required; the RDS and/or your local research office (in your trust or in the HEI who is proposing to host you) can help with this. Don't be tempted to leave things out to keep the cost down. If the cost of something is not included there won't be any money for it. However, make sure you can clearly justify all the cost you do include and try and make your calculations transparent rather than just including an over total sum. You want your judges to understand what estimations and assumptions you have made.

Good luck – and don't be afraid to ask for help.

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