

Becoming research confident

Research placements in
pre-registration nursing,
midwifery and allied
health programmes in
the UK



June 2021

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1. Introduction

As the representative body of the UK university faculties engaged in education and research for nurses, midwives and allied health professionals, the Council is committed to increasing research capacity for our disciplines. This includes supporting opportunities for research at all training or career stages, promoting the fundamental role research plays in service improvement and highlighting research careers.

The Council's '[Becoming research confident](#)' publication outlined the current landscape of research in pre-registration curricula and showed different approaches taken to incorporating research in nursing, midwifery and allied health profession programmes. The report highlighted variability in exposure to research for pre-registration students.

This is a supplementary publication to 'Becoming research confident' to address the recommendation that further collaboration between universities and practice partners is needed to increase 'hands on' research. This publication explains how and why research placements should be delivered, sharing learning in this area.

Research placements help build research capacity and increase the total number of placement opportunities. We have included case studies to showcase research placements which have been successfully set up and we hope to build on this resource.

2. Why should healthcare students undertake a research placement?

Learning about research is not only relevant for those who want to work in clinical research or who may be interested in an academic career, but to every single healthcare professional. It is vital in understanding what good practice is - students need to recognise why they are doing things not just how to do them.

During the Council's Research month in February 2021, we ran a webinar on supporting students with research. The importance of providing students with practical 'hands on' research experience came across strongly, with student speakers emphasising that undertaking a research placement gave them a tangible link between research and service improvement. One student said that their placement "showed me first-hand why research is important and why we do it". Experiencing research in practice helps students make sense of research ideas, principles and methodologies that might seem alien when only talked about in a classroom.

The webinar also highlighted how research placements can open the eyes of students to different career pathways and expose them to other professions and roles. They provide a valuable opportunity for students to identify career opportunities such as clinical academic roles that they would not have considered previously.

3. What is a research placement?

Research placements can be set up for healthcare students in a similar way to any other practice learning experience. They can vary in terms of length of placement and placement setting, whether it is research taking place within a university, in clinical practice or at a research specific organisation. It can also cover different types of research from service improvement and audit to clinical trials.

A research placement should aim to give students an opportunity to gain experience, knowledge and skills in the design and conduct of audit or service improvement or research projects. It can also expose students to different roles within their professions and to work with people at different stages of research careers as well as other professions.

A research placement will not only develop students research skills but also key leadership and communications skills such as decision making, problem solving, critical analysis and delegation. As with other practice learning experiences, it should provide students with an opportunity to achieve their learning outcomes and to enhance their professional skills, understanding and employability.

4. Existing guidance on research placements

4.1. Regulatory guidance

There are regulatory requirements on both research competencies and practice learning experiences for nursing, midwifery and allied health professional registrants and programmes.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) states that [nursing and midwifery education](#) should 'support opportunities for research collaboration and evidence-based improvement in education and service provision'. It also says that students should have 'opportunities throughout their programme to work with and learn from a range of people in a variety of practice placements, preparing them to provide care to people with diverse needs.'

The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) proficiency standards state that allied health professionals should be able to draw on knowledge and research to inform practice and appropriate actions, understand the value of research and research methodologies, and assess and evaluate evidence. The HCPC [education and training standards](#) require programmes to 'support and develop evidence-based practice' with guidance explaining that 'development of evidence-based practice could be achieved through learner-centred and independent learning, teaching and assessment strategies, as well as learner-led research where appropriate.' Programme providers are encouraged to allow learners to develop analytical skills and research appreciation relevant to their profession.

4.2. Professional bodies guidance

Many of the health profession bodies have research strategies and guidance on research in pre-registration curricula. They also have frameworks or standards for pre-registration education and practice learning experiences.

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) has [guidance](#) on what makes a great placement and is very supportive of students taking up research placements as they can '[offer an invaluable learning environment](#)'. The CSP's [common placement assessment form](#) is designed to open up more placement areas outside the traditional clinical setting.

The Royal College of Occupational Therapy (RCOT) explicitly states in its Learning and Development Standards that education providers should develop partnerships with a range of settings including placements in practice-based research settings. The requirements of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) are reflected in the RCOT standards and therefore there is an expectation that pre-registration occupational therapy students engage in research placements which are within or in close contact with service provider organisations.

The Society and College of Radiographers' (SCoR) [research strategy](#) contains key aims including embedding research at all levels of radiography practice and education as well as expanding radiography research capacity. As part of these aims the SCoR includes recommendations such as training courses should provide exposure to ongoing research within academic and clinical environments and that initiatives should be explored which are aimed at engaging students in clinical research. The strategy suggests that research placements are one of the main ways to achieve these aims.

Key regulatory and professional body guidance or documents are listed in the resource section below.

5. Key considerations for universities

Set up

- *Map placement learning outcomes* – being clear on how the learning experience enables students to meet the learning outcomes and regulatory standards will clarify the relevance of the environment. Also remember to consult the Learning and Development Standards (or equivalent) of the associated professional body to ensure it meets their requirements.
- *Audit* – the learning environment should be audited like any other placement.
- *Placement checklist* – the placement experience should be the same as for any other placement so make the same considerations e.g. health and safety, quality of experience, assessment, support.
- *Collaboration* – input from practice partners will ensure obstacles are anticipated and the experience will be more valuable to all those involved if it is planned collaboratively. There may also be teething problems with new placements which can be more quickly resolved through good partnership working.
- *Preparation* – preparing students for the placement will ensure they get more out of it so try to provide them with information about what they will be doing. Also be clear with the practice partner about what stage of the programme the student is at and how much knowledge of research/the topic they have.

Delivery

- *Student support* – having a separate placement tutor (if possible) who understands the setting and the learning outcomes will ensure the student feels supported.
- *Effective communication* – have regular and effective communication with the practice partner and students to provide feedback or reflection.
- *Peer support* – multiple models of delivery can be explored. Having more than one student on a placement can be beneficial in providing peer support. In addition, having students of different professions will support interdisciplinary understanding and working.
- *Evaluation* – take note of student and staff feedback to develop and grow the placement experience.

Future proofing

- *Relationship building* – putting time and effort into supporting relationships will ensure the sustainability of the placement is more successful.
- *Promotion of placements* – have students talk to peers about their experience to encourage other students to take up research placements.
- *Follow up work* – try to provide students with follow up opportunities/projects following their placement to nurture and develop their research interest.

6. Case studies

Members have shared with us examples of research placements that they have implemented. The case studies outline how they set they were set up, which students were involved and how they have been received. This is a resource that we hope to build on to further share learning.

6.1. University of Leicester: BSc Physiotherapy Research Placements.

Course(s) offered research placements and point in the programme

Placements offered to BSc Physiotherapy students in both year 2 and 3.

Nature of the placement

The University of Leicester developed two different kinds of research placements for its BSc Physiotherapy students. The first of these was for a third-year student in Kidney research supported by two PhD students who were both Physiotherapists. The placement involved working alongside their supervisors as well as developing their own research project at University Hospitals of Leicester (UHL), acquiring numerous research skills throughout.

As a result of the success of the first research placement a second was developed for second- and third-year students. The placement involved mixed research and practice at UHL within the pulmonary rehabilitation service. The success of the placement allowed for students to present their research

including a poster submitted to the Physiotherapy UK conference for the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy in 2020.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, the University of Leicester scaled up the number of research placements for second- and third-year students. It developed an in-house research placement based at the university full time which supported students that were considered as clinically vulnerable as well as other students. They had access to ongoing projects within UHL and had the opportunity to develop a wide range of research skills.

Enablers

The most important enabler was the close working relationship between the Practice Education Lead and the Research Lead at UHL, who were both committed to involving students in research. Together, they ensured that students would meet their learning outcomes, and managed the necessary confidentiality and data sharing arrangements.

Staff/student reflections

The Research Lead at UHL reflected that it is important for students to have exposure to research at the start of their careers as research evidence underpins everything they do in physiotherapy and that this exposure can range from the straightforward such as critically appraising an article through to analysing a dataset within clinical speciality areas. The Practice Education Lead for the University of Leicester commented that one of the keys to success was to expand students' expectations of what placements should look like while another was allocating students with the ability and enthusiasm to thrive in a research placement.

Student feedback was very positive with a second-year student suggesting that while they were initially daunted by research, the placement had broadened their understanding. This included reinforcement of the role of research in developing treatments and disease management as well as the process of developing evidence-based practice. As a result of the placement, they were also keen to be involved in research throughout their career.

6.2. University of East Anglia: Dementia Care Research Placements for Occupational Therapy students

Course(s) offered research placements and point in the programme

Research placements were offered to BSc and MSc Occupational Therapy Students. BSc students were offered for placement 5 and MSc students at placements 2 or 3.

Nature of the placement

BSc and MSc Occupational Therapy Students were offered placements with a research team led by a Professor of Dementia Care Research who is also an Occupational Therapist. Placements last from 6-8

weeks during which students gained direct experience within and broader knowledge of the research environment. So far 2 BSc and 2 MSc students have undertaken the placements with their experiences including:

- Learning about and training on clinical assessments used in investigating the impact of neurodegenerative conditions on daily living and families
- Conducting assessments under the supervision of the research team
- Writing therapy plans based on research patient data and presenting them to the team and NHS colleagues
- Learning about research governance including research delivery, data collecting principles, and data management
- Organising events, including one for training with a clinical assessment developed by a research lead, and attending research meetings from local to international levels

As a result of the pandemic certain adaptations to the placement were necessitated. These were primarily the result of home visits being made impossible. Accordingly, data collection was done through telephone calls and workloads were adjusted to increase the number of case studies and provide more time for identifying research evidence in support of therapeutic plans.

Enablers

The possibility for this research placement was enabled by having research active members within the staff of the Occupational Therapy team at UEA.

Staff/student reflections

Since the first position in 2018 the placement has evolved considerably. This includes flexibility in the number of students taken on at a time, such as last year when two students were hosted concomitantly for increased peer support. Limiting the number of students has allowed increased individual attention and more available data collection opportunities.

The placement content has largely been shaped by student feedback including suggestions for more case studies and pre-placement reading. Feedback from one student suggests the placement has been successful in teaching them both how research is designed as well as why there is a need for research.

6.3. Glasgow Caledonian University: Research Placements at the Glasgow Clinical Research Facility at Queen Elizabeth University Hospital

Course(s) offered research placements and point in the programme

Placements were offered to students in BSc and MSc Pre-Registration programmes for adult, child, and mental health nursing students during part 2 of the programme.

Nature of the placement

The Glasgow Clinical Research Facility (CRF) at Queen Elizabeth University Hospital and Glasgow Royal Infirmary offers 6 or 8 week placements for part 2 nursing students from adult, child and mental health fields. It affords students the opportunity to:

- Gain an understanding of clinical research forming a part of patient care
- Gain an awareness of the need to promote a positive clinical research environment throughout the NHS
- Gain an appreciation of the importance of patient choice in research and observing the consent process
- Understand the importance of precise communication within clinical research
- Observe/carry out clinical procedures to ensure the safety of patients participating in clinical trials
- Understand the importance of maintaining accurate patient records within clinical research
- Gain an awareness of the legislation governing clinical trials

Enablers

Research placements at the CRF began in October 2016 and was made possible through collaborative working with the NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde Health Board to build placement capacity. This was initially for children's nursing students, but its success led to expansion to adult and mental health nursing students.

Staff/student reflections

One student has written a [blog post](#) about their experience commenting that they were initially concerned it would be no fun but left with a lifetime experience that they will never forget. This was for reasons including getting hands on lab experience, engaging with research participants, and learning skills that could be transferred into the ward setting.

Another student presented their experience at the Council's Research month webinar.

Advice to others setting up research placements

Embrace it! Nursing Research is one of the 4 pillars of nursing and an important role for a nurse. Pre-registration nurse education has a significant focus on evidence-based practice and professional values. Learning experiences in nursing research facilities allows nursing students to see how theory and practice inform each other first-hand. Those interested in setting up research placements should also contact their practice education team who can help you with the learning environment profile, student welcome pack, and setting up links with local universities engaged in nursing education.

6.4. Bournemouth University: Research Placements for students from multiple healthcare disciplines

Course(s) offered research placements and point in the programme

Placements offered to BSc Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy students in 2nd and 3rd years, BSc Midwifery students in 3rd year and BSc Nursing students in 3rd year.

Nature of the placement

Bournemouth University developed several types of research placements for BSc Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy students. The first was co-created by academics and clinicians and involved an occupational therapy student surveying and undertaking focus groups with occupational therapy and physiotherapy students. The student worked alongside the Therapy Lead, who had taken on an HEE fellowship to explore increasing placement capacity across Dorset. The student gained valuable research and communication skills and presented their findings to practice placement educators and HEIs in the region.

A second research placement has been provided for a physiotherapy student in the field of hand rehabilitation within an existing collaboration between orthopaedic surgeons, the trust's research design service, and academics. The student will work on beginning a systematic review and public and patient engagement activity while also spending time in clinics led by surgeons and therapists.

Alongside these research placements midwifery and nursing students have also had the chance for elective research placements. Midwifery students who have chosen these have undertaken research alongside an active midwife in a combined research and practice position, showing them the research process first-hand and debunking the idea of research as a boring desk job. Nursing students within research placements were placed with research nurses in variable placement lengths with largely positive evaluations towards research awareness, communication skills and experience of the research process.

Enablers

The university has an experienced placements team who are proactive, flexible, and willing to co-create new opportunities. Senior colleagues in the Trust are supportive of new ways of working and practice placement educators are happy to embrace new initiatives. The university has sought to reduce the burden of student assessments on placement educators by ensuring the bulk of assessments for students on dual placements are carried out in the university rather than in practice. The University's [clinical academic doctorate](#) offers placement support that can bridge the gap between research and practice and enable students to see future career pathways.

Staff/student reflections

The university is at the beginning of an exciting journey in which it will provide greater student opportunities to work with researchers on pre-existing projects and develop a wide range of research skills. Placement content will be shaped by student feedback with students already suggesting more pre-

placement reading and reflected that carrying out a project has enhanced their research and critical thinking skills.

The Covid-19 pandemic and number of HEIs in the region has meant a need for creative placement capacity growth. Increasing the number of students in research placements with colleagues in Trusts and the University it is hoped will increase engagement for undergraduates and lead to more graduates taking clinical research opportunities thereby providing an early start to clinical research career pathways.

6.5. Cardiff University: Occupational Therapy 3rd Year Student Research Placements

Course(s) offered research placements and point in the programme

Placements offered to BSc (Hons) Occupational Therapy 3rd Year Students.

Nature of the placement

An opportunity arose for 3rd year (level 6) students to undertake their final critical evaluation themed placement with the Occupational Therapy team based within local authority wellbeing services. A total of 2 students worked together to critically evaluate a recent service delivery change, implemented due to COVID-19. This involved the students planning and conducting a review of a recently introduced tele-health assessment provision with the various stakeholders involved. The students conducted a background literature review to support the planning and facilitation of interviews with service users and practitioners. The students interviewed service users and practitioners and following data analysis the students made recommendations, in consultation with their educator, that were fed back to the Occupational Therapy team and Directorate. The students were supervised by a senior Occupational Therapist with considerable practice education experience who facilitated their learning. This project was presented at the annual Occupational Therapy Showcase event and has been used by the service to shape future provision.

Enablers

This student opportunity was enabled by:

- Having established relationships with practice partners
- Engendering an environment where students want to engage in service development projects as part of their practice placement hours
- Providing practitioners with the support they require to be creative with respect to the type of placements they can provide
- Being careful to match the learning needs of the students to the type of placements that are on offer

Staff/student reflections

The staff are delighted that the recommendations were able to be presented to the local authority Directorate, which will allow them to be implemented in practice. The students gained confidence in their

ability to systematically evaluate service provision, a skill that they will require in practice and learning that has built on their academic modules during their third year. The students appreciated the opportunity to practice their presentation skills during the Occupational Therapy Showcase event and the educator now feels more confident in offering alternative placements in the future.

Tips/Advice to others setting up research placements

Liaising with practice partners to help them recognise alternative opportunities to meet the learning objectives of a placement. There is a need to facilitate a culture of creative thinking around placements by offering support to practice partners. It is important to ensure that the learning needs of the students are carefully matched to the demands of a non-traditional placement.

Cardiff University also offer research internships to their occupational therapy students. Read more about them in this [case study](#).

7. Key publications and resources

Regulatory guidance

Health and care Professions Council (2018) [Standards of education and training](#)

Health and care Professions Council (2018) [Standards of proficiency](#)

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2018) [Standards framework for nursing and midwifery education](#)

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2018) [Standards of proficiency for registered nurses](#)

Practice learning guidance

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy [Creating a great placement](#)

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy [Common placement assessment form](#)

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy [Supervision models](#)

Health Education England [Practice based learning resources](#)

NHS Education for Scotland (2019) [Practice learning handbook: for practice supervisors and assessors](#)

Royal College of Nursing [Subject guide: Practice Based Learning](#)

Research and research placements

Cardiff University [Research Internship case study](#)

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy [Placement profiles](#): non-patient facing

Council of Deans of Health webinar '[Supporting students with research](#)' (Research Strategy Conference 2021)

Council for Allied Health Professions Research [CAHPR top ten tips](#)

Health Education England Quick Guide on Practice Learning Opportunities for AHP students in Research

Royal College of Occupational Therapy [Students and apprentices: starting your research journey](#)

Royal College of Occupational Therapy [Research and Development strategy 2019 – 2024](#)

Society and College of Radiographers [Research Strategy 2016-2021](#)

Wonkhe (2021) [Research placements can help health professionals ground their practice in evidence](#)



For further information contact:

Council of Deans of Health

Woburn House
20 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HD
0207 419 5520

www.councilofdeans.org.uk

 @councilofdeans