

The National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Undergraduate Internships

Interns: Nasima Begum (newly qualified Art Psychotherapist, University of Derby) and Darren Walker (final year Paramedic Science student, Teesside University).

Volunteer support: Thaina Matmati (Psychology graduate, University College London).

Academic team: Phil Hodgson (Clinical Specialist Physiotherapist), Jo Smith (Clinical Academic Dietitian) and Professor Emma L. Giles (Professor of Integrating Physical and Mental Health).

Introduction

Between July and September 2024, a team from Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust and Teesside University hosted two undergraduate internships for students undertaking pre-registration Allied Health Professional courses. The funding for the internships was secured through a competitive application to the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) ⁽¹⁾.

Led by Phil Hodgson, and supported by Jo Smith and Professor Emma L. Giles, the two internships were advertised, and interviews took place in June 2024. Two interns were appointed for the eight-week paid internships. Both interns were asked to undertake scoping reviews, one on peer research and co-production, and the other on equality and diversity in research. Both reviews focussed on mental health research, as this was the academic teams' area of interest.

The protocols were prepared by the academic team prior to the internships and registered on the Open Science Framework ^(2,3). Searches were run by the academic team. The remainder of the review process was undertaken by the interns, including a written report of the findings. The interns undertook formal training in systematic reviews, provided by John Hopkins University via Coursera ⁽⁴⁾. They were offered weekly supervision with the academic team, and an optional weekly peer supervision session.

The team were fortunate to have an additional volunteer, who was a non-AHP student but had seen the opportunity advertised and volunteered to support the interns to gain experience in research.

This article focuses on the experiences and reflections of the interns and volunteer.

Nasima's story

Reflecting on my experience as a research intern for a scoping review, I realise how formative this role was in shaping my understanding of the importance of mental health research. I was immersed in two projects: (1) Peer Research and Co-Production in Mental Health Research, and (2) Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Mental Health Research. The process of sifting through literature, selecting relevant studies, and critically evaluating their contributions opened my eyes to the depth and

breadth of knowledge in mental health research. Through this work, I began to appreciate how vital it is for research to be inclusive and collaborative, particularly when addressing mental health, where lived experience can offer invaluable insights.

This experience deepened my grasp of research methods, designs, and their practical application in healthcare settings. I found myself continually reflecting on the ways different methodologies could either illuminate or obscure crucial findings, and how each research decision holds the potential to impact real-world healthcare outcomes. This opportunity allowed me to engage directly with research in a meaningful way, building a stronger understanding of the details of the research process. It was a journey that refined my critical thinking and equipped me with skills that are fundamental to conducting impactful research. Therefore, I am thankful I had the opportunity to be a part of the research internship and encourage those early in their careers to take part in formal research too.

Darren's story

Recently, I completed an eight-week internship project, by way of a scoping review looking at Equality, Diversity, and inclusion, in the context of mental health research. The process included report synthesis, screening, quality assessment, and data abstraction.

I am pleased that I was given this opportunity, I can honestly say that it was challenging at times, and there were occasions when I felt a little out of my depth, but the support that I received from my peers was invaluable. There were regular meetings held throughout the internship, with peer supervision available on a regular basis, and my peers were always quick to respond, outside of these sessions, if there were any concerns or queries.

Having now completed this project, it has benefited me in so many ways; I have grown academically, personally, and professionally. The project has given me a valuable insight into the field of research, and undoubtedly it has armed me with the skills and knowledge to further develop my career, with the focus being on research in the future.

Thaina's story

Volunteering with the team on the two scoping reviews was a formative, enjoyable, and insightful experience. I now feel more prepared to take on future research opportunities and build on the skills I developed during the internship.

The staff did an excellent job of creating a well-structured internship that offered a balanced mix of learning, practice, and networking opportunities. The training offered us a solid theoretical understanding of systematic reviews and guidance on conducting quality scoping reviews. The research projects had clear, well-defined protocols that ensured a smooth and efficient process. The structure gave us clarity on what each step of the projects entailed and what our aims and objectives are for the projects. Additionally, the staff incorporated weekly supervision meetings throughout the internship, as well as separate peer supervision sessions. These

meetings provided an excellent space to check in, ask questions, brainstorm, and troubleshoot any issues that came up.

The highlight of the internship was the opportunity to collaborate and learn from a multidisciplinary staff and team of interns. The diversity of perspectives and skillsets was key to the success of the internship, as was the supportive and encouraging environment fostered by everyone involved. I am especially grateful to Phil, Jo, and Emma for their trust and guidance throughout this experience. I am also thankful to my fellow interns, Nasima and Darren, for being great team members and collaborators. I enjoyed the experience so much that I am now considering conducting a systematic review in my own studies—something I wouldn't have considered without this internship.

Additionally, I feel much more informed about the mental health research landscape in the UK, particularly regarding EDI, peer research, and co-production. I look forward to sharing what we have learned with others working in or interested in mental health research. I also hope to see similar initiatives grow and benefit more people from different disciplines.

Conclusion

The academic team found the internships to be an incredibly positive experience. Both interns and the volunteer worked incredibly hard, and produced high quality reviews that are planned for publication. Whilst the academics did not receive any funding for their supervisory time, the completed reviews will provide useful context for future research work. The team hopes to apply for funding to offer further internships in the near future.

References

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2. Hodgson, P., Smith, J., Giles, E. L., Begum, N., Matmati, B., & Walker, D. (2024, September 11). Peer Research and Co-production in Mental Health Research: a scoping review protocol. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/BPWDJ>
3. Hodgson, P., Smith, J., Giles, E. L., Walker, D., Matmati, B., & Begum, N. (2024, September 11). Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Mental Health Research: a scoping review protocol. <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/P3ZC2>
4. Coursera (2024) Introduction to Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. John Hopkins University. Available at: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/systematic-review?msocid=2800fa996d2e66f80856f56c6c166790>