

Developing an application for the UK Pre-Doctoral Clinical and Practitioner Academic Fellowship

(PCAF): The collective experience of a community of physiotherapists.

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Abstract

For physiotherapists and other healthcare professionals, developing capability and expertise in research can be challenging. However, involvement in research is beneficial at organisational and individual levels, both for clinicians and patients. One way to embark on research is to apply for a personal fellowship such as the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Pre-Doctoral Clinical Academic Fellowship (PCAF).

While the NIHR has guidance on how to complete the application form, it can be difficult to implement this guidance and understand what a competitive application looks like.

As a group of physiotherapists and academic supervisors, who have applied for NIHR PCAFs, what follows is a supportive resource, to inform others who might be thinking of applying.

Contribution of paper

- This is the first paper to report a collective reflection on the experience of a community of physiotherapists and their academic supervisors of applying for NIHR PCAFs
- A description of the process is provided which will be beneficial to other physiotherapists aspiring to develop their application for an NIHR PCAF

Keywords: Research capability; Research fellowship; NIHR; Clinical academic career; Predoctoral Clinical Academic Fellowship (PCAF)

Introduction

For physiotherapists and other healthcare professionals, developing capability and expertise in research can be challenging. Lack of time, support and experience have been cited as barriers to engagement (1). Physiotherapists use research to guide their practice, but fewer than 0.1% of AHPs are employed in clinical academic roles (2). Research involvement has been shown to improve professional development, job satisfaction and improve staff recruitment and retention (1,2). Research training positively influences health care professionals' confidence in undertaking research (3).

In this paper, a group of physiotherapists and their academic supervisors share their experience of applying for, undertaking and supervising National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Predoctoral Clinical and Practitioner Academic Fellowships (PCAF). The group consisted of five current PCAF awardees, working in NHS Trusts in England, three of whom were not funded in their initial application, and five academic supervisors. The following reflection aims to open the gateway for other colleagues interested in this pathway.

Background to the PCAF

The PCAF is an individual award, offered annually by the NIHR, to support entry-level clinical-academic career development. The PCAF is open to registrants of all levels of clinical experience. Applications are competitive but despite this, in 2022, physiotherapists submitted the second highest proportion of applications (11/59, 19%) to the scheme (4). The PCAF offers salaried time to develop skills, knowledge, experience, and professional networking to enable the development of a competitive future application for the Doctoral Clinical Academic Fellowship (DCAF) (at the applicant's current rate of pay) and continue their development as a future clinical-academic leader

(5). Articulating a 5- or 10-year career plan aids in focusing the ambition of a potential clinical academic leader of the future.

As well as providing salary costs for the duration of the PCAF (pro-rata), the PCAF covers costs for training and development, attending conferences and supervision/mentorship (see Table 1).

Table 1: Associated funding (for Round 6, 2023 application) (5)

	Amount
Training and Development	£5000
Conference Fees and associated costs	£1000
Supervision/Mentorship and PPI	£1000

Time

The application is lengthy and time consuming. Allowing approximately 9-12 months for a full time clinician to complete the application is suggested for a competitive application. This duration is necessary to find a suitable supervisory team and mentor, and for an effective working relationship to be built. Some NHS Trusts have limited allied health professional (AHP) research activity, and subsequently limited knowledge of the PCAF award. Therefore, it is important to take the time to discuss the process with the relevant organisations, explaining the benefits both to the individual applicant and to the organisation to best enable the Head of Department to compile a strong supporting Host statement.

Time should be allocated to both develop and reflect on the application, the logistics of the proposed project, and the training and development plan. Regular meetings with the supervisory team are important to build effective working relationships and to make sure the supervisory

relationship is sustainable for the longer term. These regular meetings may be supplemented by regular email contact and review of the developing application.

Support required

Two academic supervisors and a mentor are required for the application. Potential applicants may not have a specific supervisor or mentor in mind at the outset and may see this as a barrier to applying. Suitable supervisors and mentors may be found through different routes including networking at conferences, clinical speciality groups, links from other colleagues or speaking to previous undergraduate lecturers. A clinical academic should be identified to act as a mentor for the applicant and the support they intend to provide should be detailed. It can be challenging to find a suitable mentor, but we found it helpful to think about colleagues we aspired to. Collaborators are intended to support the clinical development of the applicant within the context of their training and development plan. This may include a placement visit, exploring facilities and expertise the applicant may have access to.

Informal support is also beneficial during the PCAF application process. Informal support was found through networks that were established via supervisors. These networks developed into a community of practice consisting of members (the authors) who were at different stages of the PCAF; some applying, some completing it, and some had finished and were now in a supervisory role. These quarterly, online, 2-hour meetings became invaluable as they provided a forum to ask questions, share ideas and learn from each other's experience. For example, it allowed both current and previous applicants to discuss their training and development plans and which courses and/or conferences they had found beneficial.

Barriers and personal challenges

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101 Often applicants are full-time clinicians and must balance this with the application process and
102 discussions with their supervisory team. This experience will benefit the applicant when completing
103 the PCAF, as a crucial element is the balance between clinical and academic work. Some applicants
104 benefitted from a period of negotiated time from their employer to complete the application, which
105 eased the challenge of completing the application process alongside a current substantive post.
106 Some applicants reported they experienced the psychological phenomenon "*imposter syndrome*" (6)
107 often due to the prestigious nature of the fellowship and the discussions with previous applicants
108 who can often be perceived as ambitious and successful. This feeling of inadequacy and doubt can
109 be a difficult battle during the application and one that should be highlighted early on with the
110 supervisory team as support and encouragement for this feeling can be extremely helpful.

111

112 Resilience is key to success in these fellowship applications because it is usual to experience
113 rejection along the way, whether that be a supervisor saying no, a journal rejecting a paper, or a
114 rejected fellowship application.

115 Some of the authors were unsuccessful in the application process but there is the opportunity to
116 reapply. Subsequent applications have had favourable comments regarding using the intervening
117 year productively by immersing in research opportunities both locally and regionally.

118

119 Advice for future applicants

120

121 Be sure that this is the correct funding application for you. The NIHR offers a variety of funding
122 sources, and information on all sources is available online (7), for example, you could consider an
123 internship if you feel you have no prior experience. The PCAF as with all NIHR schemes is a highly
124 competitive fellowship, and it is advantageous to show some previous research work to demonstrate
125 your dedication to the clinical academic career pathway.

126

127 Look at the application guidance for the current funding call and the Chair's report from the year
128 before, which outlines some of the common weaknesses from previous applications. If possible, talk
129 to others who have been successful to get advice. Be concise and clear in your application.
130 Reviewers are from a range of professions and will likely not be familiar with specific physiotherapy
131 techniques or terms. Write in lay terms and avoid abbreviations and complex terminology for
132 example, using terms such as collar bone instead of clavicle. There is no interview, so your narrative
133 and personality need to come across in the application. Ensure you can specify how you will
134 continue to develop your clinical/professional skills during the fellowship.

135

136 Include justification of your research plan and methodology linking to published research and/or
137 health policy. Previous comments showed a strong focus on supervisors being experienced in
138 supporting PhD students to completion. Supervisors and mentors with previous experience of
139 applying for NIHR grants or supervising those with such grants were deemed favourable. Ensure that
140 the established links between the applicant and the supervisory team are articulated clearly and that
141 the proposed training plan supports the development of skills required for the proposed research
142 plan. Articulate how the previous research experience benefitted the applicant and what has been
143 learned from the experience, including what the applicant's role was in the studies and what
144 skills/knowledge were developed during the process.

145

146 Reflection

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148 Overall, the authors agreed that the PCAF application was a positive learning opportunity that gave
149 experience into what a clinical-academic career entails along with the development of networks for
150 future work. A process of self-reflection and learning gives the applicant a new sense of confidence
151 and belief in their capabilities. Refining a research question aids in the planning process and

development of a research proposal. It also adds to the appreciation of what goes on behind the scenes of research when critiquing papers and the challenges of trying to implement research findings into clinical practice.

Conclusion

Applying for a NIHR PCAF is a competitive process that provides tremendous opportunity. This article has reflected on the experience of applying for and supervising NIHR PCAFs including the importance of developing the right supervisory team, training plan, and path to future clinical-academic leader. It is hoped this reflective account is useful for others who are thinking of embarking on this pathway.

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