

Council for Allied Health Professions Research position statement: Developing research skills within AHP pre-registration education

Introduction

This position statement from the Council for Allied Health Professions Research (CAHPR) recognises the strong and increasing need and value for the activities of all the allied health professions (AHPs) to be evidence-based and informed. It makes recommendations for how this can be achieved through the pre-registration education that prepares students for entry to their chosen profession.

While the professions have significantly increased their research activities over the last decade, current challenges increase the importance of developing their research capacity and capability further. A key, underpinning component is developing research awareness, understanding and skills through AHP pre-registration education.

This statement outlines the imperatives and benefits of developing the research content of pre-registration education, building on and sharing existing good practice. It asserts key messages and requested actions, and outlines CAHPR's role in providing support and leadership.

Imperatives

AHP pre-registration students need to gain the knowledge, skills and confidence, such that on qualification they are able to do the following:

- Be research- and evidence-aware in their practice
- Review and critique existing evidence
- Apply appropriate research evidence in their practice
- Engage in routine data collection relevant audit and service evaluation activities to inform clinical practice and research questions
- Participate in methodologically robust research, based on well-informed research questions
- Pursue postgraduate research programmes and career options in research.

In turn, newly-qualified AHPs need to be supported in building their research and evaluation capability and capacity alongside consolidating their clinical knowledge and skills. This is essential for their individual professional development and growing the collective capacity and capability of the AHP workforce to develop, deliver and evaluate services.

In short, AHP services need to be underpinned by relevant, robust research and evidence to demonstrate their value and impact. This sits in a context of increasing scrutiny of services' quality, productivity, affordability and of how unnecessary variation in the quality of patient experience and outcomes can be reduced.

AHP students and new graduates therefore need to be prepared for embedding research within their practice, development and careers. This includes being enabled

to take up research-related opportunities that contribute both to their individual professional development and the development of the allied health professions.

Benefits

Increased AHP research capacity and capability should have the following benefits:

- Enhance patient outcomes, experience and satisfaction
- Strengthen the case for the value and impact of AHPs' contribution to meeting changing population health and patient care needs
- Enhance career development opportunities for AHPs (including those that enable individuals to combine clinical and research activity)
- Raise the professions' profile and standing at national, European and international levels (Council of Deans of Health, 2014).

Key messages

CAHPR's key messages arising from the above points are as follows:

- **AHP pre-registration education programme teams are encouraged to review whether their current curricula are enabling students to become “research aware”** - for their future practice and to access clinical academic careers and other research development opportunities - and to look at practical ways to develop their curricula to strengthen students' learning activity and outcomes in relation to research knowledge, skills and confidence.
- **AHP professional bodies are urged to revisit their expectations of pre-registration programmes** (expressed through accreditation criteria, etc.) to ensure that these are appropriate for the research awareness, understanding and skills required for entry-level practice, and to keep expectations under regular review, in line with changing professional, workforce and service needs.
- **The HCPC is encouraged to review its standards for pre-registration education programmes and entrants to its register** to ensure its requirements for approval and registration relating to research awareness, understanding and skills are appropriate and sufficiently clear.
- **A collective, more strategic approach is needed to develop AHP research capacity**; this needs to include developing AHP students' research knowledge and skills, including such that they are confident as graduates to take up early-career research opportunities, as well as to access and use relevant published research to inform their practice – otherwise, the AHPs risk missing out on funding and professional development opportunities and their evidence bases taking much longer to develop and mature (a risk to demonstrating the professions' value and impact).
- **AHP managers should ensure that their staff are appropriately supported in using and developing their research understanding and skills** - in ways that both support professional and career development and optimise capacity to evaluate services, demonstrate value and impact and research-related activity to enhance service delivery and patient care.
- **CAHPR has a key role to play in supporting the development of strengthened AHP research capacity and capability**, as outlined below.

Context

Since the development of the first evidence-based practice model (Sackett and Rosenberg 1995; Sackett et al.1996; Greenhalgh 2014), AHPs have demonstrated their commitment to developing the evidence base that underpins their professional activity. This has been in spite of limited access to research funding. With developments in NHS clinical academic careers, the AHPs have gained more credibility in terms of their research skills, while other funding bodies have opened their doors to good-quality grant applications from members of the professions.

Developments in schemes have included the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Integrated Clinical Academic Career grants in England. These offer funding for AHPs to develop their research skills and activities at a range of levels. The other UK nations also support a range of clinical academic/research funding opportunities and fellowships accessible to the AHPs.

The Health Research Authority (HRA) UK policy framework for health and social care research (Department of Health, 2015) is due to replace the current research governance frameworks published by each UK health department. This should create greater clarity in governance procedures. A key aspect is that it should assert the expectation that students are not normally the chief investigator at any level of study. This shift promotes a helpful expectation that relevant, appropriately experienced research supervisors/academic staff will develop and lead research projects, within and to which students can contribute on an individual or group basis.

Developments in AHP student research activity

AHP pre-registration education (at Bachelor's degree and taught postgraduate levels) over some time has included research skills as a key component of curricula. This is in recognition of the need for a solid evidence base and the need for all allied health professionals to be cognisant of research approaches and methods to practise. Programmes cover research methodology and statistics, and the application of students' research knowledge and skills through a research-based assignment.

However, developments in research ethics processes (within both HEIs and the NHS), and resource issues, have created practical difficulties in gaining the requisite approval for students' project proposals in timely ways (especially for those based in clinical settings). This has led some programme teams to modify curricular components to exclude empirical research projects. Instead, some student assignments have become focused on systematic reviews, protocol development, and the collection of small datasets and analysis using different types of research methods.

As a result, not all AHP students gain experience in gathering, analysing and interpreting data on a reasonable scale, or writing up research activity. In turn, this can affect the readiness and confidence of some newly-qualified AHP practitioners to embark on Master's level research, or to prepare for doctoral level education. In addition, variable exposure to research activity within pre-registration education may

mean that practitioners do not have the awareness or interest to consider research as a career pathway, either as an alternative or as an adjunct to clinical practice.

CAHPR is therefore concerned that a lack of preparation at pre-registration education level can disadvantage AHPs in accessing post-registration research opportunities. While limiting professional development, this also risks the development of the professions' evidence base to support and inform their practice.

Recognising recent developments in ethical approval processes and the new HRA framework, obstacles to AHP students engaging in empirical research activity should reduce considerably.

CAHPR's contribution

CAHPR's purpose is to do the following:

- Strengthen AHP research capacity and capability
- Raise the profile of AHP research
- Increase opportunities for research collaborations and partnerships
- Provide one voice for AHPs on research matters
- Provide and share examples of good practice.

More specifically, CAHPR does the following:

- Its **23 regional hubs and 124 hub leaders and facilitators** are focused on building research capacity and capability; CAHPR hub activities include running research-focused workshops, lectures and research-focused conferences, offering one-to-one advice, and support for the development of stronger AHP research cultures at a local level
- The **CAHPR professoriate has over 100 members based in HEIs across the UK**; professoriate members contribute to CAHPR strategic developments, as well as acting as role models for early-career researchers and providing inspirational lectures for pre-registration students
- **The CAHPR strategy committee, with representation from all the AHPs, as well as consultants and managers**, provides collective governance and strategic direction to CAHPR activity, priorities and plans
- **CAHPR officers** develop and co-ordinate resources to support AHPs' research-related activity; available on request, these resources can be used to engage pre-registration students, as well as registered AHPs with the research process
- **CAHPR resources** provide a wide range of support on developing research awareness, engagement and skills; the 'Top Ten Tips' series can be particularly useful to AHP students.

More information about CAHPR can be found via the following link:

www.csp.org.uk/cahpr

Requested actions

CAHPR seeks the following actions:

- **AHP professional bodies** to consider this position statement and to revisit how they set and implement expectations of pre-registration education and its development of research awareness, understanding and skills.
- **AHP education teams** to review the need to update their approach to embedding research skills development within their pre-registration programmes and to share good practice within and across disciplines to ensure that entry-level practitioners are equipped with the awareness, understanding and skills to engage in research-related activity in their day-to-day practice and to take up professional development opportunities, including research careers.
- **AHP academics and practitioners** to engage in regular discussions, including on ways to promote and achieve patient and public involvement; this should lead to identifying appropriate research questions and securing prior ethics and governance approval for research projects to which AHP students can then contribute; this should also enhance collaboration between clinicians, managers, academic staff and students (within and across professions and disciplines).
- **All members of the professions** to consider how they can individually and collectively contribute to a positive research culture in their workplace
- **All AHPs** to consider how they can actively draw upon and contribute to the support that CAHPR provides.

References

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