

# Supporting our future research leaders

## *Collective words of wisdom*

December 2023



The CRN West of England, through our [Research Scholars' Programme](#), has been supporting the development of five early career health and care professionals who aspire to be future research leaders. The group were guided through a series of leadership development activities as part of their second year, using the [Primary Colours Model of Leadership](#). This included a psychometric assessment and 360 degree feedback exercise, completed between June and December 2023.

As part of the 360 questionnaire, the Scholars' raters were asked the following question:

### **“What words of advice would you offer to the NIHR CRN West of England's Research Scholars?”**

We have compiled all responses in this one document, bringing together the collective wisdom of 83 colleagues across health and care. These colleagues include a mixture of different job roles, professions and levels of experience. They include line managers and supervisors, research delivery teams, academics, non-research health and care colleagues, collaborative partners, and direct reports, supervisees and trainees.

**The responses are grouped into seven key areas:**

1. Persevere and keep going!
2. Be selective! Consider your motivations and maintain balance
3. Set and share your strategic direction
4. Remember participants' needs and experiences
5. Build and sustain relationships
6. Keep communicating with your colleagues
7. Recognise, support and develop your team

**We also loved the following words of encouragement in particular:**

- “Keep going! You are brilliant, and have the potential to inspire those around you.”
- “You are a major asset to the team and have the personality and ability to pursue an academic career.”
- “Go for it!”

## 1. Persevere, adapt and keep going!

- Accept there will be disappointments in research and not to take them to heart. Also be prepared for significant barriers to progress but you mustn't let this put you off from your primary goal.
- Keep on going, you are doing well. Don't let setbacks affect you.
- The world of research is hugely friendly and full of people who have a huge world of knowledge and experience. It is intimidating starting out in research and you feel constantly that you don't know what you are doing.
- You are all highly successful individuals but you will experience setbacks. Learn from the setbacks with humility, clearly identify what happened and what could have been done differently.
- Research is an exciting and innovative environment to work in. It can be a very challenging and changing environment and you will develop the ability to adapt and evolve in your patient care.
- Keep up the honesty and authenticity! They're all inspiring and had their own challenges and hurdles to get over- a lot that can be learnt from them.
- Continue to persevere with becoming a senior research leader by applying for research grants as chief investigator so you have a track record of research funding.
- When something goes wrong learn from the mistakes, compassionately support those who made mistakes and that includes yourself. When things go well, celebrate that but still consider what could have been better, how the success could have been achieved and you have a healthy work life balance, for instance. As a leader and a person though you are more than the sum of your work achievements and when projects do not succeed or applications are unsuccessful, it is the project or application which is unsuccessful not you.
- Leadership is an individual journey complicated by numerous side roads, some which turn out to be dead-ends. Circumstances, as well as individual volition, often dictate the choices met at major crossroads. One trick is understanding and accepting the forces at play and using them to propel you. Maintain one eye on targeting the destination, and the other on enjoying the view.
- Be open to new technologies and changes that come into the medical world realising that your work will have to be flexible to change.
- Remember that success is not linear... keep going and know there will always be someone willing to offer encouragement, just ask!

## 2. Be selective! Consider your motivations and maintain balance

- Have an open mind about opportunities and learn to be selective about the opportunities you take.
- Your enthusiasm for your work is very infectious however because there are so many interesting studies it's tempting to spread yourself too thin meaning that if you are not careful you could become too stretched to focus on one thing at a time. Not always easy but try to ensure that this doesn't happen or at least be confident to delegate tasks where possible.
- Keep an eye on your work/life balance. This is especially important in a world that increasingly involves working from home and messaging via a variety of social media platforms. Your team members will feel less able to clock off, even if they are entitled to do so, if they see you constantly working, so practise what you preach! It also benefits everyone if you are less stressed because you've managed to have some down time periodically!
- Ensure you keep a good balance between clinical work, academic research and outside of work commitments.
- Be honest with yourself and others about your strengths and limitations.
- Prioritise workload and plan in advance to manage schedules effectively and efficiently.
- Do things you care about. I.e. isolate your research areas to those that you are genuinely interested in. This means it is more likely you will enjoy the process of doing research, rather than just seeking the achievements!
- Find one or more good mentors who you trust and can turn to for advice. Find a sense of direction - don't take every opportunity, choose the ones that make sense for you, what you are capable of and what interests you.
- One of the hardest things to do as a new leader is to be realistic - assessing what is feasible and being prepared to say no when it isn't. There is a tendency to want to impress superiors and prove yourself to them, but overpromising and then underdelivering is unlikely to achieve this. Listen to the people who will need to deliver on your promises and make it work in practice, especially if they have a fair amount of experience. If they have major concerns about certain aspects of your plans or proposals, try to understand these and address them as they are likely to be the result of previous bad experiences. They may have useful alternative suggestions to contribute or can at least provide you with evidence/justification for why something won't work the way it is being proposed.

### 3. Set and share your strategic direction

- Try and map out a clear pathway at the start of every project to include timelines/goals/involved stakeholders/key dates. This pathway should be regularly reviewed and updated, but would give all involved parties a shared goal.
- Leading a research team requires you to have a vision for the future, be able to share that vision in a way that excites those around you, be aware of the current landscape, and remember what you've seen before. Basically you have to have more eyes than a spider!
- Think about integration and relevance and the hook that will maintain this.
- Important to align own developmental needs with overarching strategic priorities to make sure that interests are synergised.
- Ensure you share your vision and broaden it to include the strengths of your team members.
- Develop a clear narrative.
- Look outwards.

### 4. Remember participants' needs and experiences

- Keep patients at the heart of conversations.
- Address embedding health inequalities.
- Don't make assumptions about what participants in the trials/studies are interested in or what they're capable of - talk to them. Increase diversity and spread the word of the research in communities.
- Try and keep participants informed and always feedback results to participants and delivery teams once the research is completed. They have taken the time to be involved and should know the outcome.
- Always inform how research can be brought from bench to bedside.
- Be aware of creating opportunities for others who may not have a voice or not be heard adequately.
- Research is the key to the future - the development of more clinical researchers can only be a good thing for the professions, the patients and their families - thank you for helping to drive this agenda.
- Do good PPI, always ask/engage the patient population/parents/care that will be affected by the research. Your primary outcome may differ from what they think is important. Your schedule of events may be too difficult for busy families, but they may have ideas that don't threaten the validity of the research.

## 5. Build and sustain relationships

- Enquire about research in a hospital when working there to see if increased networking can expand contacts and opportunities.
- Importance of maintaining good professional relationships with all involved in research including support departments. Ensure provision of sufficient time when having involvement in any research projects.
- Have collaborative and collegial conversations.
- People are your biggest asset. Invest in people and relationships, and it will pay off.
- Your colleagues can make the mountain you have to climb seem achievable and enjoyable.
- The little things matter. Some small advice or time given to a very new researcher can make a world of difference to their progress and career choice. I would not be on this pathway today if someone hadn't invested the time and support in me that they did and I am forever grateful. Your experience and support really can change peoples lives!
- Support, champion and develop enduring collaborations and partnerships in research that makes a difference to patients, communities and our population as a whole.
- Identify people with whom you can work alongside and whom you wish to emulate in research. This will inspire you and you will gain apprenticeship experience from the opportunity.

## 6. Keep communicating with your colleagues

- Communication is key- share ideas and use the knowledge and expertise of others- it shouldn't be threatening to your idea but more collaborative and helps others feel involved (as opposed to research being imposed).
- Keep up clear communication and meetings to check in with data collectors.
- Keep talking to your teams and work together to tackle problems and create solutions. Research teams hold a lot of expertise in what does or doesn't work when carrying out research, be sure to draw on this experience and knowledge.
- Communicate from the outset with the teams that are going to help to get the research off the ground, it's never too early to let teams know what might be coming their way. This helps to build in capacity and future planning .
- Talk to experienced research delivery teams about the feasibility of your idea and who they recommend you should talk to.
- Maintain open lines of communication, be able to see all points of view and develop good working relationships with those who will support them (not just those they need).

## 7. Recognise, support and develop your team

- Make time to develop and support others; this is not only rewarding but good for team building, succession planning and for the growth and sustainability of your vision as a leader
- Remember to recognise the contribution of the whole team and feedback positively, even when it you are really busy as it is so easy to overlook when you are very busy and pressured for time
- Develop others.
- Keep involving and developing others, especially students and junior colleagues - help them to climb the ladder, building succession and a pipeline of researchers for the future.
- Understand and appreciate the value the all of the staff and each one of the roles that make up the research teams
- Maximise the use of the range of skills available in the team, mutual respect and understanding are key, encourage everyone to support others in the team and share knowledge and expertise.
- Focus on what you can do to make a change, even if it is small, it will make a difference to an individual (which in turn will have a ripple effect on others).
- Always remember we are all working as part of a team, we are all in research together! Co-ordinators, nurses, lab techs, PIs etc. We cannot do this without each other!
- Each colleague has something to contribute; concentrating on furthering only your own career in the short term, will not achieve as much as working together to common goals. Therefore, sometimes it is preferable to allow personal goals to take second place to allow others to step forward.
- It is hugely important to value the input and contribution of other members to the research! Celebrate successes together!
- Respect the team that are working on research studies with you. We all have priorities and yours isn't the only one.
- You are an inspiration and really help give structure and support to the research team.
- Be objective and collaborative working with peers to approach the research idea and to make it work.
- The NIHR Clinical Academic Training Programme provides a brilliant foundation for a serious research career. Although it is designed to develop individuals, its real strength is its potential, through collaboration, to evolve and develop a group of clinical scientists who understand what is required to be effective. It is a shame that groups such as NCIN are not going to be around to further enhance these collaborations but it is important to continue to work together.