

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

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

Pauline May

Senior Physiotherapist, Integrated Musculoskeletal, Pain and Rheumatology Service, East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust, St Peters Centre, Church St, Burnley, BB11 2DL

Kieran Mitham

First Contact Physiotherapist, Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust, St Ives, PE27 4LG

Natasha Maher

Upper Limb Physiotherapy Practitioner, Calderdale and Huddersfield Foundation Trust, Salterhebble, Halifax, HX3 0PW

Lisa Pitt

Upper Limb Physiotherapy Practitioner, Derby Shoulder Unit, University Hospitals of Derby & Burton NHS Foundation Trust, Uttoxeter Road, Derby, DE22 3NE

Gareth Whelan

Extended Scope Practitioner (Upper Limb), Musculoskeletal Service, York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Clifton Park Clinic, Clifton Park Avenue, York, YO30 5PB

Bruno Mazuquin

Research Fellow, Faculty of Health and Education, Department of Health Professions, Manchester Metropolitan University, Brooks building, 53 Bonsall street, Manchester, M15 6GX

Maria Moffatt

Senior Lecturer, Edge Hill University, St Helen's Road, Ormskirk, L39 4QP

James Selfe

Professor of Physiotherapy, Dept of Health Professions, Manchester Metropolitan University, Brooks building, 53 Bonsall street, Manchester, M15 6GX

Gillian Yeowell

Reader in Musculoskeletal Health and Wellbeing, Department of Health Professions, Manchester Metropolitan University, Brooks building, 53 Bonsall street, Manchester, M15 6GX

Chris Littlewood

Professor of Musculoskeletal Research, Faculty of Health, Social Care and Medicine, Edge Hill University, St Helens Road, Ormskirk, Lancashire, L39 4QP

1 Abstract

2

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

8

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

11

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

14

15 Contribution of paper

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

20

21 Keywords: Research capability; Research fellowship; NIHR; Clinical academic career; Predoctoral

22 Clinical Academic Fellowship (PCAF)

23

24

25

26

27 Introduction

28

29 For physiotherapists and other healthcare professionals, developing capability and expertise in
30 research can be challenging. Lack of time, support and experience have been cited as barriers to
31 engagement (1). Physiotherapists use research to guide their practice, but fewer than 0.1% of AHPs
32 are employed in clinical academic roles (2). Research involvement has been shown to improve
33 professional development, job satisfaction and improve staff recruitment and retention
34 (1,2). Research training positively influences health care professionals' confidence in undertaking
35 research (3).

36

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

43

44 Background to the PCAF

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

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

54

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

57

58 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

59

60 Time

61

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

70

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

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

76

77 Support required

78

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

89

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

98

99 Barriers and personal challenges

100

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

147

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

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

155

156 Conclusion

157

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

162

163 PM (NIHR302700), KM (NIHR302666), LP (NIHR301910), GW (NIHR301881) and CL (PDF-2018-11-
164 ST2-005) are funded by Health Education England (HEE) / NIHR. The views expressed in this
165 publication are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR, NHS or the UK
166 Department of Health and Social Care.

167

168 References

- 169 1. Nilsagård Y, Westerdahl E, Forsberg A. Engagement in performing clinical physiotherapy
170 research: Perspectives from leaders and physiotherapists. *Physiother Res Int* [Internet]. 2019
171 Apr 1 [cited 2023 Feb 2];24(2):e1767. Available from:
172 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pri.1767>
- 173 2. Cordrey T, King E, Pilkington E, Gore K, Gustafson O. Exploring research capacity and culture
174 of allied health professionals: a mixed methods evaluation. *BMC Health Serv Res* [Internet].
175 2022 Dec 1 [cited 2022 Jul 18];22(1):1–10. Available from:
176 <https://bmchealthservres.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12913-022-07480-x>
- 177 3. D’arrietta LM, Vangaveti VN, Crowe MJ, Malau-Aduli BS. Impact of Research Training on
178 Newly Graduated Health Professionals’ Motivation to Undertake Research. *J Multidiscip*
179 *Healthc* [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Feb 3];15:2223–40. Available from:
180 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36213177/>
- 181 4. Chairs Report for Round 5 (2022) of HEE/NIHR ICA Pre-doctoral Clinical and Practitioner
182 Academic Fellowship Scheme | NIHR [Internet]. [cited 2023 Mar 23]. Available from:
183 [https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/chairs-report-for-round-5-2022-of-heenih-ica-pre-](https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/chairs-report-for-round-5-2022-of-heenih-ica-pre-doctoral-clinical-and-practitioner-academic-fellowship-scheme/31624)
184 [doctoral-clinical-and-practitioner-academic-fellowship-scheme/31624](https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/chairs-report-for-round-5-2022-of-heenih-ica-pre-doctoral-clinical-and-practitioner-academic-fellowship-scheme/31624)
- 185 5. ICA Programme Pre-doctoral Clinical and Practitioner Academic Fellowship (PCAF) Applicant
186 Guidance Notes for Round 6 2023 | NIHR [Internet]. [cited 2023 Mar 28]. Available from:

187 [https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/ica-programme-pre-doctoral-clinical-and-practitioner-](https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/ica-programme-pre-doctoral-clinical-and-practitioner-academic-fellowship-pcaf-applicant-guidance-notes-for-round-6-2023/32419)
188 [academic-fellowship-pcaf-applicant-guidance-notes-for-round-6-2023/32419](https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/ica-programme-pre-doctoral-clinical-and-practitioner-academic-fellowship-pcaf-applicant-guidance-notes-for-round-6-2023/32419)
189 6. Freeman J, Peisah C. Imposter syndrome in doctors beyond training: a narrative review.
190 *Australas Psychiatry* [Internet]. 2022 Feb 1 [cited 2022 Jul 18];30(1):49–54. Available from:
191 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/10398562211036121>
192 7. Apply for funding | NIHR [Internet]. [cited 2023 Mar 23]. Available from:
193 <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/researchers/apply-for-funding/>
194
195