

Doctoral Fellowship Award 2025 Chair's report

Chairs:

Chair: Dr Emily Holmes, Reader in Health Economics, Bangor University

Deputy Chair: Professor Deb Fitzsimmons, Professor of Health Economics and Outcomes Research, Swansea University, and Co-Director, Health and Care Economics Cymru

Panel:

Nicola Evans - Reader, Cardiff University

Delyth James - Professor of Health Psychology in Pharmacy Practice, Cardiff Metropolitan University

Ben Hannigan - Professor of Mental Health Nursing, Cardiff University

Davina Allen - Professor of Service Delivery and Organisation, Cardiff University

Linda Cusworth - Social Care Research Fellow, Lancaster University

Harry Ahmed - Medic, Cardiff University

Liam Gray - Professor of Neurosurgery, Cardiff University

Tom Wilkinson - Professor of Barrier Immunity and Infectious Disease, Swansea University

Jim Fitzgibbon - Public Member

Introduction

Health and Care Research Wales' mission is to promote, support and provide collective oversight of health and social care research in Wales to ensure it is of the highest international scientific quality, is relevant to the needs and challenges of health and social care in Wales and makes a difference to policy and practice in ways that improve the lives of patients, people and communities in Wales.

The **Doctoral Fellowship Award** aims to support talented individuals to undertake research leading to the completion of a PhD and to support capacity building in health or social care research in Wales.

The Fellowship offers funding for directly incurred salary costs (no overheads or indirect costs allowable) for three years full-time funding, or four- or five-years part-time funding, PhD tuition fees, and the costs of an appropriate research project and training and development programme.

The number of applications received and awards made for the 2025 competition were:

Applied: 21

Eligible: 21

Awarded: 4

Doctoral Fellowship Awards

The scheme launched on 17 October 2024 and closed on 15 January 2025.

Observations and advice for prospective applicants

The Chair and Deputy Chair of the panel have made observations of the general strengths and weaknesses of the eligible applications and discussed areas that future applicants should consider to strengthen their application. These are summarised below.

Research ambition and professional role
Public involvement and budget for public involvement
Methodology and training
Confirmation of access to facilities and data
Research expertise and infrastructure in Wales

Research ambition and professional role

The panel were pleased to see high levels of motivation and ambition to pursue research projects in Wales, often alongside commitment to professional roles. Applicants who demonstrated their ambition for a research career, clearly outlining their trajectory, were commended. The panel would like to remind all applicants that statements of ambition should be accompanied by evidence of commitment

from their supporting organisation and a well justified research proposal that will support a pathway to independent research.

Public involvement (PI) and budget for public involvement

Embedding the PI element of proposed research continues to be a top priority for Health and Care Research Wales. Whilst we are seeing increased awareness of the importance of PI the panel were disappointed to observe limited budgets for PI in a number of applications. Applicants are reminded that Health and Care Research Wales takes PI very seriously and expects PI activities to be remunerated at recommended rates. It is crucial to demonstrate early PI in the development of a research proposal. PI is one of the assessment criteria used by the panel when reviewing all applications and PI members sit on the interview panels. We appreciate some areas of research are more familiar with PI than others, such as lab-based projects. Please see the [Health and Care Research Wales Faculty webpages](#) on PI for further guidance on how to involve the public in the proposed research and to [contact Health and Care Research Wales](#) for more information.

Methodology and training

The methodological approach needs to be very carefully considered and should be appropriate for the research being undertaken. It is vital that the research proposed is backed up by sound research methods that the applicant can independently justify. The panel would like to see applicants proposing innovative methodological approaches to their research, however, this must be appropriately specified and supported by training or mentoring from experts in the field. If an applicant doesn't have the required expertise in the research methods they are proposing in their application, the panel will expect to see specific training as part of the training and development programme and relevant support in the form of a suitable supervisor or mentor.

Confirmation of access to facilities and data, if successful

Applicants are reminded that the feasibility of conducting the proposed research is an important consideration in mitigating risk. Applicants should seek letters of support from all organisations cited in the research proposal detailing their commitment to support the research, if funded. The panel were disappointed by a lack of clarity between PhD projects and overlapping studies or trials. We encourage all applicants to distinguish between their PhD project and any preceding or concurrent research, this may be evidenced with formal and detailed signed letter of support from collaborators.

Research expertise and infrastructure in Wales

The context of the proposed research within existing research infrastructure in Wales should be considered. Applicants should have an awareness of existing research groups and infrastructure that aligns with their research and be able to envisage the positioning of their contribution, should the project be funded.

Useful Resources for Prospective Applicants

Scheme Guidance is [available on the Health and Care Research Wales website](#). This provides details of the eligibility and assessment criteria and should be read in full before starting an application.

Note that updated Scheme Guidance will be published with the launch of each call and applicants must ensure that they are referring to the most recent Scheme Guidance.

Current and previous Health and Care Research Wales award holders are listed on [the website](#) and may be a useful resource.

There are also a range of resources available on our website including upcoming and recorded health and social care [webinars](#).