

Title: Building Research Capacity in Health and Care Practitioners: Qualitative Insights from an Internship Programme

Abstract

Introduction:

A research competent workforce is essential for embedding and sustaining evidence-based practice with health and care services. Despite strategic emphasis, many practitioners lack the confidence, skills, and opportunities to engage in research. This study explored the experiences of health and care practitioners from a range of clinical and non-clinical roles undertaking a project-based research internship. It aimed to identify key barriers and enablers to research engagement.

Methods:

A qualitative study was conducted with participants engaged in a 12-month research internship programme in the North West of England. Using Normalisation Process Theory (NPT) as a framework, an online semi-structured group interview was held with six interns post-programme. Data were analysed thematically and mapped to NPT domains: *Coherence*, *Cognitive participation*, *Collective action*, and *Reflexive monitoring*.

Results

Four themes were identified: *Discovering purpose from initial uncertainty*; *Negotiating commitment and researcher identity*; *Applying research practice within real-world contexts*; and *Establishing a sense of research legitimacy*. Sub-themes provide nuance around clarifying expectations, balancing responsibilities, support structures, adapting to organisational constraints, and the internship as a foundation for future practice.

Discussion

The internship programme successfully contributed to the development of confidence and

researcher identity among novice practitioners. Engagement was maintained through supervision, peer interaction, and pastoral input from coordinators, while workload pressures and differing expectations across stakeholders created challenges. Future delivery should continue to prioritise supportive supervision, peer connection, and pastoral input, while also attending to alignment of expectations, reliable provision of protected time, and training timing that aligns with project milestones.

Key words: Research capacity building, Research capacity development, Research Capacity strengthening, Continuing education, Continuing professional development, Health and care professionals.

Introduction

Research capacity-building (RCB) of health and social care staff is a strategic priority for organisations seeking to implement evidence-based interventions and care^{1,2} and improve outcomes for patients and service users.³ Research ready and research engaged staff can support health and care organisations in adapting to evolving healthcare landscapes, policy, and innovations,^{4,5} and strengthen the recruitment and retention of a highly skilled and competent workforce.^{6,7} Whilst healthcare policy and guidance globally emphasise the importance of involving health and care providers in generating, applying, and leading research,^{8,9} practitioners working within health and care may not possess the requisite capabilities to engage in research activities effectively.^{10,11}

Recent strategic guidance in the UK has sought to address the research capacity and capability gap for practitioners, in recognition that this key pillar of practice can be improved. The NHS England Multi-professional Practice-based Research Capabilities Framework,¹² with its eight domains, supports health and care practitioners to engage in and lead research. It aims to embed evidence-based practice at all levels of experience and normalise research within routine professional behaviour (see Figure 1). The gap between policy ambition and practitioner research readiness and preparedness is well-publicised in the international literature, with numerous studies suggesting a lack of practitioner confidence,¹³ expertise,¹⁴ and opportunity,¹⁵ to engage meaningfully in research activity.

The health and care sector has seen a range of different approaches to RCB for practitioners to meet expectations to provide care which is evidence-based and responsive to service user and organisational needs. These include internship (Khan et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020),^{16,17} fellowship,^{18,19} and more discrete continuing professional development programmes.²⁰ These

programmes are aimed at developing individual capabilities, whilst influencing a broader organisational shift in relevant workplace research culture.²¹

The RCB literature suggests that structured support and real-world application of learning can facilitate an increase in individual researchers' skills and confidence,^{22,23} but challenges remain in relation to organisational and structural support,²⁴ which inhibit meaningful research engagement and development of researcher identity. A gap exists in relation to what components hinder or support RCB programmes, in particular research internships. An understanding of participants' developing researcher identity can illuminate how participants in such programmes make sense of, engage with, enact, and reflect upon RCB efforts.

Against this backdrop of national ambition to embed research within routine healthcare practice, challenges remain. Research capacity-building initiatives, including internships, are part of wider continuing professional development efforts to extend skills, confidence, and researcher identity. Understanding how health and care practitioners make sense of and engage with these programmes, how they navigate competing demands, and integrate new practices into workplace settings is essential for translating policy goals into practice.

This study explores the experiences of participants in a project-based research internship designed for practitioners working in health and care-based services. Interns undertake workplace research projects supported by structured training, academic supervision, and programme coordinator input. It aims to identify the key barriers and enablers to research engagement from the perspective of interns.

Methods

101 *Design*

102 Qualitative programme evaluation using group interview method.

103

104 *Context and Setting*

105 This study was conducted in a cohort undertaking a 12-month research internship with the
 106 (BLINDED FOR REVIEW) in the North West of England. The internship programme is
 107 available to health and care professionals and support staff, as well as voluntary sector staff,
 108 employed within organisations affiliated to a regional applied research collaboration in the
 109 North West of England. It is designed for those interested in undertaking a workplace project
 110 and developing foundational research skills. Prospective interns are recruited following a
 111 successful interview, where a broad project idea is pitched, and no previous research experience
 112 is required. Salary back-fill is provided to supporting organisations to assist with one-day per
 113 week time release for research support activities and project commitment.

114

115 *Theoretical Framework*

116 This study was underpinned by Normalisation Process Theory (NPT),²⁵ a framework widely
 117 used in health services research to understand how new practices become embedded within
 118 complex organisational settings. Here, NPT was applied to examine how practitioners
 119 developed researcher identity and integrated research practices through undertaking workplace
 120 research projects as part of an RCB internship. The four domains of NPT: *Coherence* (sense-
 121 making), *Cognitive participation* (engagement and commitment), *Collective action*
 122 (enactment), and *Reflexive monitoring* (appraisal), enabled exploration of how the internship
 123 was understood, engaged with, acted upon, and appraised by participants. This approach
 124 explored barriers and facilitators to research practices becoming embedded within routine work
 125 and organisational structures

126

127 *Intervention*

128 The internship is project-based, with structured training and support provided responsively to
 129 support interns' workplace research projects. Projects are developed collaboratively between
 130 interns and assigned academic supervisors, refining interns' initial workplace-related ideas into
 131 feasible projects within the one-year timeframe. The internship programme includes seven
 132 face-to-face research training days involving a range of foundational research skills, broadly
 133 based on Holden et al's Research Capacity Culture Tool (RCC).²⁶ The RCC tool is a validated
 134 measure of perceived research capacity across organisational, team, and individual domains.
 135 The training is informed by the individual domain, which assesses self-perceived research
 136 capacity across a range of research activities. A showcase event where interns present a poster
 137 of their work concludes the face-to-face activities (See Table 1 for training schedule). In
 138 addition, interns are assigned an academic supervisor from one of five higher education
 139 institutes affiliated with (BLINDED FOR REVIEW). They can also attend optional one-hour
 140 drop-in sessions, held fortnightly via Microsoft Teams, for additional learning, project and
 141 pastoral support, facilitated by programme coordinators.

142

143 *Participant Recruitment*

144 All interns (n=9) from the 2024/2025 research internship cohort were invited via internal email
 145 to participate in an online group interview to gather feedback on their internship experience. A
 146 participant information sheet and consent form were attached to the email and participants were
 147 asked to contact the first author (programme lead) directly with expressed interest. The group
 148 interview formed part of an optional end of internship education session which included
 149 research write-up and wrap-up (recap on writing and publishing research reports). Six interns

were able to attend and consented to participate in the interview. One intern was unavailable on the scheduled date, and two interns did not respond to the invitation.

Data Collection

A semi-structured online group interview was conducted in March 2025 following the 12-month internship period. The interview was guided by NPT and explored understanding, application, and evaluation of the internship, and the conditions which shaped its success, or otherwise (Table 2). The group interview took place via Microsoft Teams and was facilitated by two researchers (INITIALS BLINDED FOR REVIEW) independent to internship training, supervision, and support activities, then audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview lasted approximately one-hour, and written consent was obtained prior to interview and reaffirmed at its commencement.

Data Analysis

The six-phase thematic analysis approach described by Braun & Clarke²⁷ was used (*Familiarisation with the data, Generating initial codes, Searching for themes, Reviewing themes, Defining and Naming themes, Producing the report*). As the interview guide was structured around NPT domains, the analysis was theory-informed while allowing themes to be inductively identified. This approach prioritised analytical depth and contextual richness over sample size. Initial coding was undertaken by INITIALS BLINDED FOR REVIEW and INITIALS BLINDED FOR REVIEW, who were independent of the internship delivery, followed by a third coding perspective from the programme lead (INITIALS BLINDED FOR REVIEW). Initial themes were then collectively identified, refined and finalised through consensus among all three researchers. Analysis was guided by and mapped to NPT domains *Coherence, Cognitive participation, Collective action, and Reflexive monitoring*. It aimed to

identify barriers and enablers experienced during the internship in applying research skills and successfully navigating projects to completion. To enhance trustworthiness, qualitative standards of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were followed,²⁸ supported by multiple coders, analytic memoing, note-taking, and regular team discussions throughout. Data were de-identified to protect participant anonymity.

Ethical Approval

The study received ethical approval from the (INSTITUTION BLINDED FOR REVIEW) Ethics Review Panel (BLINDED FOR REVIEW). All data were securely stored on a university hosted secure server in accordance with GDPR regulations and the Data Protection Act 2018.

Results

Six interns participated in the online group interview, including a senior peer facilitator (peer support worker in mental health), a project officer in Healthwatch (independent statutory body), two pharmacists (perinatal and critical care), an assistant psychologist (child and adolescent mental health), and a paramedic clinical lead. This represented two-thirds of the eligible cohort, providing diverse professional perspectives. Four core themes, each with two subthemes, were identified across each of the four NPT domains.

COHERENCE

This domain with its theme and sub-themes highlights how interns made sense of the internship and how their understanding evolved.

Theme: Discovering purpose from initial uncertainty

199 The theme captures how interns began with uncertainty that sometimes conflicted with other
 200 stakeholder expectations, but support and project progression provided clarity of what the
 201 internship involved.

202

203 *Sub-theme: Navigating different stakeholder expectations*

204 Some interns felt the expectations of what could be achieved from their internship across
 205 different stakeholders did not align. This lack of alignment sometimes caused difficulties, with
 206 interns describing the need to adjust to differing expectations:

207

208 *“I made some suggestions to my supervisor on how it could be simplified... but*
 209 *they were quite keen for it to go in a particular direction... They’re [workplace]*
 210 *quite keen to have certain outputs... what they see is you're gone for a day a week*
 211 *for a whole year, to them that's quite a lot of time.” (P3)*

212

213 Another commented:

214

215 *“I felt the tutor's [programme coordinators] expectations of us... was far more*
 216 *realistic than my supervisor's expectations... they [supervisor] were disappointed*
 217 *in me because they didn't get a journal article done” (P6)*

218

219 *Sub-theme: Developing clarity through engagement and support*

220 Once the training, drop-in and supervisory sessions had begun, interns' understanding of the
 221 program became clearer. In most cases, tailored stakeholder support allowed interns to work
 222 towards realistic, achievable outcomes:

223

“...what I really appreciated about this internship is that we had such specific support around lots of different aspects of research... but I think when I’ve covered it in sort of a general uni course, it didn’t go into as much detail as we’d been provided.” (P5)

Stakeholder support also gave interns practical clarity through ongoing opportunities to revisit questions and seek guidance:

“...aside from supervisors being very supportive, it was really helpful having the drop-in sessions because queries do pop up... sometimes you go away and think of some questions later. So there were lots of opportunities to ask further questions or get some clarity.” (P5)

Coherence related findings illustrate that while misaligned expectations across different intern, supervisor, workplace manager, and programme coordinator stakeholders created early uncertainty, structured support through training sessions, ongoing supervision, and accessible drop-in provision enabled interns to develop shared understanding of what was achievable. This progressive sense-making was critical to establishing a foundation for meaningful engagement with the programme.

COGNITIVE PARTICIPATION

This domain reflects how interns engaged with the internship and what factors influenced engagement.

Theme: Negotiating commitment and researcher identity

The theme reflects how interns managed competing work-study demands, and how support and encouragement increased their self-confidence in research and contributed to how they began to view themselves as researchers.

Sub-theme: Balancing competing priorities and responsibilities

Some interns were not given protected time to work on their project, despite having managerial support for the internship. This caused workload pressure that became difficult to navigate for some:

“My manager was supportive, but I felt I didn’t always get the time... I didn’t lose 20% of my workload... there was an expectation I’d do 100% of my work within four days and it just became insurmountable at times.” (P6)

One participant noted that even when time was set aside, some tasks created additional pressure:

“Yeah, my workplace was very good at allowing me to have my day each week... perhaps doing the ethics application that wasn't easy to pick up and drop once each week... So I did find that I did quite a lot in the evenings and there was some late nights.” (P3)

Sub-theme: Developing confidence through connection

The supervisor role was viewed positively by interns and often provided the reassurance and motivation needed to persist at difficult moments:

274 *"I was at a point where I was going to give up and... with [Supervisor name]'s support*
 275 *I didn't. The supervision that I've had has been amazing."* (P1)

276

277 Pastoral support from programme coordinators, in addition to supervision, was also described
 278 as critical in sustaining engagement when confidence was low:

279

280 *"I found the tutors [programme coordinators] really helpful and kept me engaged...*
 281 *there would be times you'd want to give up, but [programme coordinators] were very*
 282 *engaging and would meet with you and go through stuff with you... I can't praise*
 283 *[programme lead] enough... honestly, I would have given it up 10 times had it not been*
 284 *for [programme lead] making me believe I could do it."* (P6)

285

286 For others, feedback from supervisors was key to overcoming initial self-doubt:

287

288 *"...when it was coming to like writing my protocol, obviously I'd never done that*
 289 *before... just going through it and her saying, 'it's absolutely fine'... your confidence*
 290 *grows from there... you just doubt yourself at first..."* (P2)

291

292 Connections with peers and programme coordinators also fostered encouragement and a sense
 293 of belonging:

294

295 *"I think all the tutors [programme coordinators] were very engaging and quite*
 296 *supportive. I feel like the group of colleagues who were on the course with me at the*
 297 *same time were also very encouraging as well, which made it quite an enjoyable*
 298 *experience."* (P4)

299

300 For one intern, increasing confidence in their own research practice influenced a developing
 301 sense of being a researcher:

302

303 *“Yeah, my confidence grew as a researcher in terms of my identity, I did start seeing*
 304 *myself as a researcher... going out into the field... doing interviews... reading more*
 305 *research and using a Dictaphone and transcribing... all skills that I was learning,*
 306 *which led me to believe that I have got the ability to be a researcher.” (P1)*

307

308 Findings positioned within *Cognitive Participation* demonstrate that internship engagement
 309 was shaped by the interplay between structural challenges and relational support. Where
 310 protected time was absent or inconsistent, interns experienced increasing pressure in balancing
 311 competing priorities. However, supervisory encouragement, pastoral input from programme
 312 coordinators, and peer connection sustained commitment during difficult periods and increased
 313 confidence. For some interns, this support enabled an emerging sense of researcher identity
 314 and a shift in how they perceived themselves as research-capable professionals.

315

316 **COLLECTIVE ACTION**

317 This domain reflects how interns enacted the internship, determining the success, or otherwise,
 318 of its trajectory.

319

320 **Theme: Applying research practice within real-world contexts**

321 The theme highlights how interns applied the skills and knowledge gained to their own
 322 workplace, the difficulties of adapting to research requirements, and how they were able to use
 323 supports to traverse obstacles.

324

325 *Sub-theme: Adapting to structural conditions and constraints*

326 Interns described how they had to adjust projects and expectations in response to
 327 structural demands such as the timing of training, project stages, and fluctuating
 328 workloads, to maintain progress.:

329

330 *“I changed roles during the internship and I went from a role where it was easy*
 331 *to get the time, to a role that I didn’t get the time so hence why I’m now still*
 332 *trying to finish the project.” (P6)*

333

334 The workload of the internship itself was uneven across the year, requiring interns to adjust:

335

336 *“...there are periods of the internship which have been busier than others, so it’s been...*
 337 *learning how to be flexible within it.” (P5)*

338

339 *Sub-theme: Enabling progress through practical support and applied learning*

340 Drop-in sessions provided effective practical support for interns to help resolve queries,
 341 reinforce prior learning, and move their project forward, while applied learning opportunities
 342 enabled the transfer of skills:

343

344 *“In terms of the drop-in sessions, I dropped in a lot during the process of doing*
 345 *my ethics application because there were lots of just little queries... I needed to*
 346 *be able to check on those because I didn't necessarily understand what was being*
 347 *asked of me.” (P3)*

348

Finally, interns were able to show they could translate their research training into practical, workplace relevant tasks:

“I’ve done a service evaluation, and I’ve included data analysis, a discussion and conclusion and all that kind of thing in a format of an evaluation. I’ve been able to do that because of the internship.” (P1)

Collective Action findings highlight the realities of enacting research within health and care workplace settings. Interns had to adapt project scope and expectations in response to structural constraints including role changes, uneven workload distribution across the internship year, and misalignment between training timing and project stages. However, practical support mechanisms such as drop-in sessions and supervision enabled interns to navigate obstacles and translate learning into applied research practice. This demonstrated that targeted support could mitigate structural barriers and facilitate progression.

REFLEXIVE MONITORING

This domain reflects how interns appraised the internship, its successes, and considerations for future iterations.

Theme: Establishing a sense of research legitimacy

The theme illustrates how interns came to see themselves as contributors to research, drawing on affirming experiences that strengthened their confidence to pursue further research, and offering critical insights into the programme’s structure and design.

Sub-theme: Internship as a foundation for future research practice

374 The internship provided a catalyst for continued research engagement and gave interns the
 375 confidence to apply for future research opportunities to enhance their career and professional
 376 development:

377

378 *“So I've decided to carry on what I'm doing with my research work and I applied*
 379 *for another internship at [location] and I was offered another one at ARC but the*
 380 *people who are at [location] have more sort of expertise in this particular area.”*
 381 (P4)

382

383 Another noted:

384

385 *“it definitely has impacted my confidence to the point where I'm looking now to*
 386 *see what else I can do after I've finished... by doing this it's opened my eyes to*
 387 *other avenues of what I can do next to further what I've been doing.”* (P2)

388

389 *Sub-theme: Challenges which shape successful future delivery*

390 Interns identified ways the internship could be strengthened, highlighting the value of clearer
 391 expectation-setting at the outset, improved alignment of supervisory roles, and better timing of
 392 training in relation to project stages:

393

394 *“When you start your internship, it would have been useful to sit down with a tutor or*
 395 *supervisor to say, ‘realistically, you’ve got 12 months to do X’... rather than taking a*
 396 *month to realise what I was actually doing.”* (P4)

397

398 Another reflected on how supervisor expectations might be better managed:

399
 400 *“If you had a supervisor from outside of ARC... it would be handy to have a meeting*
 401 *with them and someone from ARC, because they might have different expectations of*
 402 *what’s manageable within a year.” (P3)*

403
 404 The timing of training sessions was also raised:

405
 406 *“...having the training days and then put it into practise a bit later on down the line. I*
 407 *don’t really know how we could change that... we’re all still at different stages in our*
 408 *projects. So from a timeline perspective, it’s probably hard to align that better.” (P2)*

409
 410 *Reflexive Monitoring* suggests that developing research confidence and legitimacy occurred
 411 despite challenges within the programme experience. Reflections highlighted structural and
 412 coordination challenges, including unclear expectations, supervisory challenges, and
 413 misalignment between training and project stages, alongside positive outcomes such as
 414 increased motivation for further research and changes in day-to-day practice. This suggests that
 415 while the programme supported research capability development, aspects of its design require
 416 refinement to better accommodate different intern trajectories and organisational contexts.

417 418 **Discussion**

419 This study explored the experiences of health and care practitioners undertaking a 12-month
 420 RCB internship programme. Normalisation Process Theory was used to examine
 421 implementation factors which contributed to the success, or otherwise, of the programme, and
 422 how research practices became embedded in projects and wider roles. Key findings highlight
 423 barriers such as misaligned expectations between stakeholders, existing workloads, and

inconsistent protected time, and enablers including supportive supervision, pastoral input from programme coordinators, informal peer support, and drop-in sessions. Despite implementation challenges, the programme was successful in developing researcher confidence and identity. These findings highlight barriers and enablers that shape research practice normalisation among novice researchers. These are considered in relation to the wider literature below.

Coherence in the internship did not appear to be established at the outset but was something that had to be actively built and maintained across stakeholders over time. Where expectations were misaligned, participants described greater early uncertainty and difficulty establishing momentum, whereas clearer shared understanding supported more confident engagement with research activity. Similar issues surrounding expectation-setting and early engagement have been noted in other internship contexts,^{29,30} but the present findings highlight how this clarity developed progressively through ongoing support rather than being established at the outset. The importance of ongoing programme-level support in sustaining realistic expectations and research progress has also been noted in previous studies.³¹

While individual motivation was important, cognitive participation and sustained engagement with the internship were also strongly supported by the relational and pastoral infrastructure surrounding participants. Similar roles for supervision and peer support in shaping confidence and researcher identity have been noted in previous studies,^{32,33} but our findings highlight the additional importance of ongoing pastoral input from programme coordinators in sustaining interns' engagement. During the early stages, this engagement often had to be negotiated alongside existing workplace responsibilities, and where protected time was absent or inconsistent, participants described experiencing significant pressure. The importance of

organisational support for embedding research activity has also been noted in the wider literature.³⁴

In this study, interns' projects were carried out alongside existing workloads, making the navigation of time and project pace an ongoing challenge. Practitioner-led research has similarly been shown to be sensitive to service pressures,³⁵ and these findings illustrate how service pressures can limit what can realistically be achieved with projects in practice. Progress was supported through supervision and additional practical help in applying learning. Similar roles for supervision and practical support in enabling research progress have been noted in previous studies.^{36,37} However, in this study, additional support through regular fortnightly online drop-in sessions further enhanced interns' ability to navigate ethics, data collection and analysis. This highlights the value of support embedded throughout the research process, which has also been noted in the wider literature as enabling practitioners to engage in research and maintain progress.³⁸

A key outcome of the internship was a shift in how participants positioned themselves in relation to research as part of their professional identity, with growing confidence and, in some cases, interest in further research activity. Early structured research experiences have similarly been associated with longer-term engagement in previous studies.^{39,40} In this study, the way participants came to position themselves in relation to research may have implications for workplace activity, including idea generation, service evaluation, and informal research leadership or mentoring. Interns also identified opportunities to strengthen programme delivery, such as addressing differing expectations between stakeholders, ensuring that supervisory input is consistently aligned with programme goals and limits, and recognising that training sessions did not always align with the stage of project work. The

importance of clear, aligned, and realistic programme design in shaping confidence and researcher identity has also been noted in the wider literature.⁴¹

From these findings, an early programme theory of RCB within this context can be suggested, in which capacity develops through the alignment of expectations, the navigation of existing workloads, and the development of professional identity within supported programme infrastructures. This theory could be considered and refined further in future studies with larger cohorts and across different service contexts.

Implementing and sustaining the programme required infrastructural support including instructors to provide training, pastoral and drop-in support; academic supervisors from partner institutions; salary back-fill to support protected time; access to research governance processes, secure data storage; analytical software and dissemination opportunities such as the showcase event. These are considerations for reproduction across different settings and reinforce the need for RCB initiatives to be embedded within wider organisational structures rather than delivered as isolated training activities.

Strengths and limitations

The study was theoretically grounded in NPT providing a robust framework for examining how interns made sense of, engaged with, enacted, and reflected upon research practices within their internship. Interview data was coded independently by multiple researchers, with consensus meetings ensuring rigour. The group interview generated rich qualitative insights into the interns' experiences from a sample representing two-thirds of the eligible cohort across diverse professional and service backgrounds. This provided a nuanced understanding of barriers and enablers to research engagement that can inform future programme iterations.

498

499 While the small sample drawn from a single region challenges transferability of findings, the
500 diversity of professional and service backgrounds enhanced the breadth of perspectives and
501 may support transferability to other health and care contexts. Further, the voluntary nature of
502 participation may have introduced potential response bias by interns more engaged with, and
503 favourable towards, the internship. Lastly, the group interview was conducted at the end of
504 the internship, allowing immediate reflection on participants' experiences but not capturing
505 long-term impacts on knowledge outcomes, career trajectories or research outputs.

506

507 *Recommendations for future iterations*

508 Greater emphasis should be placed upon what is expected of interns and should be discussed
509 with all stakeholders at the beginning of the internship to ensure expectation alignment is
510 maintained throughout. An exclusive orientation day may also help establish clarity and
511 alignment before the internship commences. The supervisor guide should reflect programme
512 goals and limitations, ensuring expectations are clear and supervisors are supported to provide
513 consistent input. In addition, programmes should consider involving wider organisational
514 stakeholders at the outset to support shared understanding of achievable outputs, manage
515 expectations, and strengthen the provision of protected research time. Future iterations require
516 early planning to secure resources including coordinator capacity, agreed back-fill, access to
517 data management and dissemination opportunities.

518

519 The internship training schedule should be revised to allow for closer alignment between
520 training days and project progress, with flexibility in delivery to tailor sessions to project stage
521 and opportunities to revisit core content when required. In addition, the importance of protected
522 time was highlighted, and future programmes should work with host organisations to formalise

and monitor these agreements. Interns also valued the addition of informal online drop-in sessions, which should continue as a regular feature, with some perhaps having a dedicated focus. Future programmes might benefit from including a longer-term follow-up to assess knowledge retention and ongoing research involvement, enhancing understanding of longer-term programme impact. Finally, pastoral support from course coordinators is critical in maintaining intern engagement. The associated time and input should therefore be considered in future programme planning and delivery

Conclusion

This study provides evidence of the value of a research internship for novice researchers in health and social care. The programme enabled participants to engage with research, grow in confidence, and begin to develop a researcher identity, while also showing how design features influence both opportunities and barriers to participation. The findings contribute to wider understanding of how structured RCB initiatives can support the normalisation of research practice in health and care settings and inform the refinement of future programmes. Alumni follow-up will be important for capturing longer term impact of the programme in relation project outputs, career trajectories, and continuing engagement with research.

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Lessons for Practice

- Setting realistic expectations with interns, their supervisors and employing organisations promotes clarity.
- Structured support through supervision, peer connection, and having flexible drop-in sessions builds confidence and supports a developing identity as a researcher.
- Programmes embedded in workplace practice support applied learning and strengthen the integration of research into routine roles, with alumni follow-up needed to capture longer-term impact.

Figure 1. Eight domains of the Research Capabilities Framework (NHS England, 2024)