

Reflections on the NIHR Doctoral Training Camp 2026

By Faith Campbell, a Doctoral Fellow from the School of Dentistry, University of Dundee:

I was really pleased to attend the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Doctoral Training Camp 2026 with the support of the Incubator in Oral Health Research. I have recently submitted my PhD thesis, and I'm at the stage of thinking about my 'what's next?'. This was the perfect opportunity to begin to plan my transition from Doctoral Fellow to independent researcher and clinical academic.

During the day we heard from experienced academics within the NIHR network who shared their career paths and advice on creating a vision of our future research careers. I learnt about inclusivity in research, potential funding and fellowship pathways, building networks and developing a research question as part of a successful grant or fellowship application. I found the exercise of practicing my elevator pitch as challenging as when I began my fellowship three years ago, so this was a great way to consolidate my communication of my research.

This day was really inspiring and has been invaluable in supporting me in thinking about my journey to becoming a clinical academic in paediatric dentistry. I have begun to develop ideas on what the next stage of my research career might look like and how I can make that happen. This opportunity was particularly important for me because it provided me the chance to be involved in research training that would not have been accessible to me as a Scottish Trainee returning to full time clinical training post PhD. It gave me the time and support to consider how I can continue in research and where I can look for support to do this. Following this camp, I feel like I am better equipped to take such steps in clinical academia.

Thank you to the NIHR-supported Incubator in Oral Health Research for facilitating my attendance. I'm looking forward to working with the Incubator further to build research capacity in oral health in the UK!

By James Coughlan, Doctoral Clinical Research Fellow, University of Manchester

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Tight deadlines, working under pressure and last-minute work submissions are mainstays of a PhD student's experience, and everyone you speak to will have a story of emailing their supervisor last minute to approve a conference submission or a paper. But developing, writing and presenting a brand-new grant proposal with a group of strangers in two days?

That's exactly what we were asked to do in the NIHR Doctoral Training Camp. This was an intense three-day workshop run by the NIHR to help prepare current PhD students to be competitive when applying for grants and fellowships at the end of our PhD. Thanks to the NIHR Oral Health Research Incubator, this is something that Deepti John (PhD student, School of Dental Sciences, Newcastle University) and I were lucky enough to experience.

The first day featured many useful and inspiring talks from senior academics. We were introduced to the explicit remit of NIHR; as a branch of the government's Department for Health and Social Care, Professor Wendy Baird encouraged us to think about how our research can help improve health and contribute to economic growth, as well as the need for grants and fellowships to align with the government's scientific and health agenda, such as the three strategic shifts from hospital to community, sickness to prevention and analogue to digital.

Another theme running throughout the talks was how to develop and articulate your research impact across the translational pathway - as Mariam Knight put it, to think about your "so what". It is not enough to develop an interesting research proposal or pilot intervention, you need to be able to demonstrate how it will lead to delivery and impact in the NHS and wider society. This was exemplified powerfully by Dr Adwoa Parker, who described how, thanks to previous research on treatments for Lupus Nephritis, she was able to have treatment that prevented serious side-effects.

Speakers also highlighted the importance of engaging the public throughout the research process, incorporating inclusion as a pre-condition of funding, and thinking seriously about knowledge mobilisation ("it doesn't start or end with publication"). These aren't something to tack-on to a pre-existing project, but elements that need serious reflection and integration for the proposal to be successful.

As the talks came to an end, so too did our hopes of a relaxing few days away from our PhDs. "You're here to work" said programme Director Dr Steve Wootton with a kindly smile. And work we did. Split into 10 teams of seven people and guided by our amazing research mentor and public contributor (shout out Anne-Maree and Dan), we set about developing a fully costed grant application for £500k. We bounced ideas off our newly found colleagues, from apps to awareness campaigns, diabetes programmes to dental access, all the time trying to balance finding the best ideas with our dwindling time and empty application form. We grappled with the long-term impact of our projects, how to meaningfully engage and involve those with lived experience and how to make the finances add up.

With the strict submission deadline for the proposal at 5pm, several groups were seen running through the halls of the hotel to submit in time. The next morning, it was time to present our proposals to the funding panel, set-up exactly as it would be for a real funding interview. The sheer range of innovative projects, slick presentations and questionable project acronyms showed just why there is so much competition for research funding. Amazingly, our group managed to win the award for the best funding proposal, although sadly I don't think we will see the 500k anytime soon.

This was unlike any conference I've ever been to before. It was challenging, nerve wracking and at times stressful, but more than anything was a real privilege to work with and learn from both our amazing fellow PhD students from all parts of the country, and the senior academics and public contributors who supported and guided us. The interesting discussions, laughs and shared reflections on the PhD journey during the coffee breaks and dinners made an intense learning experience a truly enjoyable one, and I'd highly recommend the training camp to anyone who gets the opportunity to go.

A huge thanks goes to Zoe Marshman, Chris Vernazza, and the NIHR Oral Health Research Incubator for nominating Deepti and I to attend - hopefully our learning during these few days can contribute to future grant successes for the oral health field. Thanks also to the whole team

behind the Doctoral Training Camp. They put in a huge amount of work and time, including grading our applications into the small hours, to give us a realistic glimpse into the reality of grant applications, and to help develop the next generation of health and care academics.



Photo: James and Deepti attending the Doctoral Training Camp