



SPOTLIGHT ON RESEARCH

A FUTURE IN CLINICAL RESEARCH?

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I have always been interested in research and wherever I have worked have been involved in audit, quality improvement and projects that seek to improve patient care and/or outcomes for patients. After completing an MSc in 2019 in Clinical Biomechanics and then taking a different pathway in my career in 2021 by joining the team at Accelerate CIC, I put the thought of any further study on the back burner while I become immersed in the nursing world and working with a completely different client group within the world of chronic oedema.

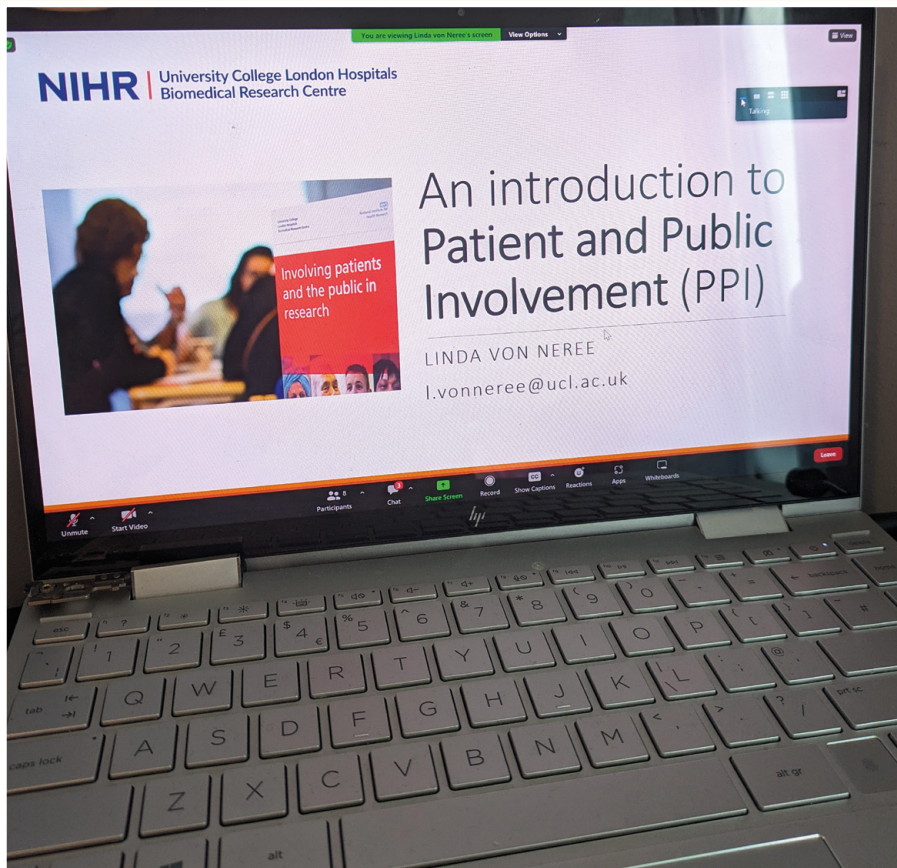
In August 2022, an email popped up into my inbox from a university lecturer I was in touch with, asking if I would be interested in applying for a pre-doctoral integrated clinical academic (ICA) programme at King's College London. The programme was geared towards those who want to develop careers that combine research and research leadership with practice and professional development through the NHS England and National Institute for Health and Research (NIHR). The main aim of the programme is to prepare a competitive PhD application with a view to applying for an NIHR Doctoral Clinical and Practitioner Academic Fellowship. A fellowship is an award given to a person to support their research and clinical professional training while undertaking a research project.

The deadline for the application process was September 2022. At the time I was eager to apply but given the tight deadline, I felt it best to apply the following year. This would give me time to think about my research ideas and about the logistics of being on such a programme. Also to ponder, could I have a future as a clinical researcher?

Eligibility:

When I decided I wanted to pursue this, I used the following year to prepare my application and it was just as well, as there were challenges and a lot of information to collate along the way. The first challenge was around eligibility. Accelerate is a social enterprise company and we are commissioned to see National Health Service (NHS) patients, but we are not the typical NHS provider. One of the eligibility criteria is that you must work for an organisation that treats NHS patients.

When I first enquired about my eligibility, I was advised I would not be eligible as the concept of 'social enterprise' and where the organisation sat within the NHS healthcare landscape was not understood. I tried again and explained my position and the organisation in more detail and again was advised 'not eligible'. I then asked that my query be escalated to a more senior person for review. To my relief, I got a very favourable response, with a thumbs up and great interest in my potential research field. So, before you apply for these programmes,



ensure that you meet all the eligibility criteria and if you are met with a response that you don't feel is appropriate, ensure that your queries are taken to the right person to review, don't give up!

Application process and preparation:

Once I was sure I met all the criteria I started researching on the internet and YouTube to find any webinars that could shed light on the application process and interview. I found a great YouTube video which featured two prior applicants who were successful in their interviews and at the time were on ICA programmes. There was also a wealth of information on the NHSE/NIHR website. I found watching webinars more palatable as some of the NHSE/NIHR documents can be exceptionally long and at times difficult to understand and digest on first pass. However, it is important to read the NHSE/

NIHR documents to understand the requirements of the programme for which you are applying.

The YouTube videos I watched provided useful information on accessing the Research Support Service (RSS), Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) groups, The James Lind Alliance and becoming familiar with the Vitae Researcher Development framework. I also found the courage to contact the people online in the webinars who left contact details to see if they would have a chat. If you do not ask you do not get, right?

I had meetings and informal chats with academics in the RSS, this is an outstanding free service. I spoke to academic tutors about how to have impact and stand out on the application form and how to prepare for the interview. Through the RSS I was put in touch with a group of PPIE experts and was invited to PPIE workshops before my interview.

I did a self-assessment using the Vitae framework, this helped me to summarise my strengths and areas for development on the application form but also articulate these in the interview. I looked on the James Lind Alliance to ensure that my research field was aligned to the top 10 health and research priorities. Speaking to people who had gone through the interview and their journeys was also helpful in gaining an insight into the programme and the potential challenges.

It can be daunting contacting strangers. But all the people I contacted, and these ranged from Professors, PhD students and post-Doc's, all found time for a 20-minute chat. I was surprised and humbled at how kind and helpful people were in giving their time, advice and sharing their mistakes, successes, and top tips regarding being on a PhD pathway, preparing a competitive application and for an interview. Prior to applying, I was invited to an online seminar which gave more information on the programme, submission deadline dates and timelines for the course and was able to engage with some of the course leaders and people who were applying. This was extremely helpful.

Another important part of applying is having sign off, from your organisation for the programme, as your manager must write a supporting statement as part of the application. Depending on your situation, this may take some time, negotiation, and consideration regarding work cover for the time you need off for the programme. I recommend having these conversations early.

I also had to find a clinical mentor that would be willing to support me during the programme. This is quite an informal role and is not

like that of an academic supervisor/mentor it is more of a 'pastoral' role with support. Finding the right people willing to take this on was a challenge, however it is important to get this right. Fortunately, I have the support from two mentors which I appreciate as their advice and pastoral support prior to starting and during the programme to date has been invaluable.

All this preparation was in conjunction with developing my research ideas and plan for the programme over the year if I was successful. As you can see, for a rounded, competitive application it is not just about you as a candidate and your ideas, it is also demonstrating that you have the right support, knowledge about the programme, how your research will have impact and the challenges that may occur, not only academically but personally, with undertaking these types of programmes.

The application form was straightforward given that I had done the preparation and prepared a research CV, it was sent off and within two weeks I had been shortlisted for an interview.

The interview:

I did two mock interviews to prepare, one with a colleague and another with a person from the RSS. They gave me honest feedback on how I could improve the content, impact, and the critical areas to highlight during my interview. I highly recommend mock interviews. Do as many as you can and as early as possible.

My interview date fell during the week of the BLS 2023 conference, and the time of my interview was sandwiched in between two workshops I was helping to deliver at the conference. I considered

changing the day and time, but on reflection being at the conference was a positive. I utilised the 'buzz' and atmosphere of being at the conference to my advantage to get into the zone. I practiced my interview 'pitch' on all the people I spoke to on the morning prior to the interview. So, thank you to everyone I met that morning, talking to me may have been slightly intense, but you unknowingly helped me with my interview!

The interview itself was with two nurses and I felt nervous, but as I had prepared, practiced, and honed my pitch in the morning, it was not long before I was talking comfortably with the interviewers. The interview was 30 minutes long, and the questions were what you would expect for example, tell me why you have applied, what have you done to date, what impact will your research have within healthcare and where do you see yourself in the future. The interview closed and I had to rush back to the conference deliver a workshop. This also was a gift because I did not have time to dwell on the interview and was occupied for the rest of the day with the conference.

Having the distraction and benefits of being at a conference is not going to be possible for everyone. If you do secure an interview, consider having some conversations and practicing your 'pitch' prior to the interview to get into the zone and then have something to do after the interview, this may be helpful in reducing the stress on interview day.

Where I am now:

As you can imagine, as I am writing this, I am one of ten people who were successful in securing a place on the programme. The process from submitting the application,

the interview and starting the programme was about six months. The programme itself is unlike anything I have done before, and I have just finished doing a scoping review protocol and am learning more about PPIE. This is the start of my journey, and I am sure there will be many challenges, milestones, fears, successes and learning on this road ahead during my clinical academic career.

Get out of your comfort zone:

If you have always been interested in research or have an idea that you feel is novel and will help enhance care and are interested in a clinical academic career, then I would encourage you to apply for this course or others like it. The take home messages are to start your preparation early and talk to as many people as you can about your trepidations and fears and ask plenty of honest questions. Build your research CV and use the incredible free resources out there to learn more about research, what it involves and where you are on the research continuum. Likewise, be resilient and confident in your abilities, you may meet barriers or feel you are not the right person to apply, but don't let these challenges phase you. Applying will put you outside of your comfort zone, but that is the place where, quite often, good things happen.

Links:

HEE-NIHR Integrated Clinical and Practitioner Academic Programme | NIHR

Research Support Service | NIHR

The James Lind Alliance | James Lind Alliance (nih.ac.uk)

Researcher professional development (vitae.ac.uk)