

Cancer Research UK - Wellcome Trust Clinical PhD Programme in Cancer Research at the ICR

Fellowship allocation process: Frequently asked questions

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1 Introduction and background

These FAQs relate to the process of awarding ICR's Cancer Research UK-Wellcome Trust Clinical PhD fellowships.

This prestigious clinical PhD fellowship programme is jointly funded by CRUK and The Wellcome Trust. The programme is administered by the ICR and fellowships are awarded through competitive application. The fellowships aim to support the training of future clinical academic leaders in cancer research. Applicants from a range of specialties are invited to apply, including oncology, paediatrics, radiology, surgery, and anaesthesia. Throughout the application process, applicants should demonstrate ownership of their project and ambition to pursue a clinical academic career.

The most up-to-date information on the programme and broader information about the range of research and training opportunities available for clinicians at the ICR can be found on the ICR website at www.icr.ac.uk/clinicianopportunities.

2 Frequently asked questions

2.1 *What is the application and recruitment process for these fellowships?*

Applicants and supervisors make joint applications for fellowships based on a project developed together. In general, cohorts are recruited on an annual basis to start in October (see question 2.8). The process and timeline (based on a start date in October) is outlined briefly below. Note that the full list of deadlines is updated annually and published on the [ICR website](#).

- **July - September:** the ICR issues a call for expressions of interest from all ICR Faculty and Honorary Faculty (i.e. all ICR team leaders, a list of whom can be found on the ICR website) who wish to host a clinical fellow. Expressions of interest should detail the supervisory team, a brief outline of the project area, and whether applicants from any specific clinical specialties are particularly encouraged to apply. After the deadline, the ICR checks that the proposed supervisory team is eligible as per the [MPhil/PhD Codes of Practice](#).
- **September/October:** Supervisory teams and their project areas are advertised via the ICR website and the British Medical Journal in print and online. Supervisors who wish to advertise their project areas via additional routes should contact the Registry to discuss this (registry@icr.ac.uk). Applicants are asked to approach potential supervisors directly with their CV

and indicate that they would be interested in jointly developing a project and applying for the fellowship.

- **October-December:** Supervisors work with one candidate to develop a project and submit a full written application.
- **December:** Applications are reviewed and shortlisted applicants are invited to interview.
- **Late January/early February:**
 - Panel interviews held
 - The interview panel recommends the allocation of fellowships to the ICR's Executive Board for ratification.
 - Candidates informed of outcomes, usually within one week and no later than two weeks after interview

2.2 How many fellowships are available?

The CRUK-Wellcome Trust programme will fund six 3-year studentships per year (four from CRUK and two from The Wellcome Trust), for five years. The first cohort was recruited and enrolled in 2017, and the final cohort will be recruited in 2021.

2.3 Who is on the interview panel?

There are usually 6-8 panel members present at the interview. The panel is chaired by the programme director (Professor Kevin Harrington) or one of the co-directors (Professors Nandita de Souza and Johann de Bono). The panel will also include the Academic Dean and/or members of the Dean's team (e.g. Deputy Deans and/or senior tutors), and other clinical academics with relevant experience or responsibility for capacity building, such as BRC Theme Leads. The Registrar or a delegated member of Academic Services will also be present. An external clinical academic is also invited to join the panel. Any members of the panel with a conflict of interest, for example if they are a named member of the supervisory team, will declare this and will not be present for the relevant candidate interview. It is important to note that members of the panel will have diverse scientific backgrounds, and may be clinical or non-clinical. Candidates are encouraged to bear this in mind when preparing their presentation (see below).

2.4 What will happen at the interview?

The panel interview will last approximately 25 minutes. Candidates are asked to give a seven minute presentation without slides, followed by questions from the interview panel.

The candidates should use the presentation to briefly introduce themselves, and then spend the bulk of the time explaining the proposed project, and why they are a suitable candidate to undertake it. A whiteboard is available, but Powerpoint is not.

Candidates may bring material in with them, for example, a short handout or diagram.

The panel will spend the remaining time asking questions on the presentation and the submitted project. They will also ask about the candidate's career to date, research interest and experience, and their plans for developing their clinical academic career.

2.5 What is the panel assessing?

The panel is assessing a number of things in the interview, such as:

- Scientific merit of the proposed project & importance of the science.
- The candidate's understanding of the project, including details and limitations of the experimental approach, project risks, and impact on the field.
- The candidate's track record in their clinical career and research interest/potential e.g. academic training positions, publications, funding, prizes. NB if the candidate has participated in the ICR's MSc in Oncology, the results obtained to date are provided to the panel.
- The candidate's motivation and plans to develop as a clinical academic in the short and long-term e.g. awareness of training needs and plans to address them.

Through the application form and the interview, the panel will also assess:

- The strategic fit of the project in the context of the ICR/RM research strategy and RM-ICR Biomedical Research Centre (BRC) research themes.

2.6 How should candidates prepare for the interview?

Successful candidates are able to demonstrate intellectual drive and ownership of the project. They are expected to have a strong understanding of the project and be familiar with the relevant literature. Given the short time within which to gain this understanding and ownership, candidates are strongly advised to dedicate time to prepare for the interview. Some of the ways to prepare include:

- spending time prior to the interview in the laboratory where the project will be based and/or with the team in which the project is based
- conducting some initial experiments or analysing data
- learning the basic principles underlying the techniques they will use
- attending lab meetings or journal clubs
- discussing the project with the wider team
- having mock interviews with colleagues both familiar with the project area, and with others in other disciplines

Strong candidates are able to demonstrate to the panel how they have worked with the supervisor to ensure the project is robust and deliverable. Candidates are expected to be aware of limitations of the proposed project and the risks, and have plans in place to mitigate the risks. Candidates may be asked about specific experimental approaches, and should be prepared to describe details of their plans for the first few months of the fellowship. Whilst the supervisory team is primarily responsible for helping the candidate prepare to defend the project at the interview, candidates also benefit from discussing the project widely with other clinical and non-clinical academic colleagues. Demonstrating that the project has been strengthened through input and perspective from both clinical and non-clinical colleagues is encouraged.

This fellowship programme is aimed at clinicians who strive to become the future clinical academic leaders in cancer research. Strong candidates have thought about their career path after the PhD, are aware of the challenges of clinical academic careers and can articulate how they plan to continue as clinical academics in the medium and long term.

2.7 What support or training is available?

A key source of support for applicants and supervisors, particularly during the development of the project proposal, comes from scientific and clinical colleagues, collaborators and the Division Head. Candidates preparing for panel interview will be supported by project the supervisor(s), and also benefit greatly from discussion of the project with other senior colleagues e.g. through mock interviews.

There are a number of resources also available online to assist preparation. For example, the funders provide a lot of general advice for how on apply for fellowship funding. These include:

- <https://www.mrc.ac.uk/skills-careers/fellowships/clinical-fellowships/clinical-research-training-fellowship-crtf/>
- <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/funding-and-support/funding-for-training-and-career-development/>

The MRC skills table gives a good overview of the types of skills funders expect you to be gaining during research training: <https://www.mrc.ac.uk/skills-careers/skills-needed-to-win-support/>

The MRC has also developed a series of videos aimed at clinicians considering and applying for clinical research training fellowships. Video 4 may be particularly useful for applicants preparing for their panel interview.

- 1) Why do a clinical Research Training Fellowship?
- 2) Preparing your proposal for a clinical research training fellowship
- 3) The 3P's criteria of a Clinical Research Training Fellowship
- 4) Preparing for an interview for a Clinical Research Training Fellowship
- 5) Mock Interview for a CRTF

The RM-ICR BRC website also details helpful resources for clinicians preparing funding applications: <https://www.cancerbrc.org/brc-training-hub/support-nurse-ahp-researchers/application-writing-and-interview-skills>

The applicant's current university or NHS Trust will often offer support with writing fellowship applications, preparing for panel interviews and presentation skills.

Candidates based at The ICR or The Royal Marsden can contact hrtraining@icr.ac.uk for further information on support available.

2.8 How flexible is the start date for the PhD?

We understand the pressures on the NHS and the critical need to fill clinical rotas, which may affect when a trainee can take time Out of Programme (OOP) to participate in protected research time. During the panel interview the candidate will be asked what is the earliest and latest time they can start the PhD. Interviews are held in January or February in order to provide maximal time for successful applicants to inform the Deanery of their intention to become OOP. Whilst it is preferable for candidates to start at the same time as each other and with the intake of non-clinical PhD students (i.e. in October), there is some flexibility in terms of start time, for example if a candidate enrolled on an ACF wishes to complete their research time in a block before enrolling on the PhD. Candidates are advised to talk to their clinical training programme directors prior to application.

Further questions can be sent to registry@icr.ac.uk.