

Perspective

Thank You for Listening: Reflections on Voice, Inclusion and Research Culture at NIHR

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Abstract

Joining the NIHR Academy Member Voices Group as an early career researcher was both an exciting and enriching experience. It provided a unique opportunity not only to contribute to strategic discussions within the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), but also to learn from colleagues with diverse experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives. This perspective reflects on that journey and the lessons it offered about research culture, leadership, collaboration, inclusion, and the importance of protected time for academic development. More importantly, it highlights how meaningful dialogue between early career researchers and research leaders can strengthen the wider research system. My experience reinforced the belief that listening, collaboration, and genuine engagement are fundamental to building an inclusive and sustainable research environment.

Discussion

When I first joined the NIHR Academy Member Voices Group as an early career researcher, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. I was thrilled to join the group and was looking forward to having the valuable discussions, insights, expertise, and perspectives towards NIHR's work. This was a unique opportunity to help shape initiatives and represent the voices of NIHR Academy members and Associates in meaningful ways. I found the whole journey and experience was enriching, something more genuinely collaborative, and that had shaped how I think about early career researcher advocacy within the widest NIHR system. The purpose of the group was to provide a forum for a two-way dialogue between the NIHR and NIHR Academy Members to ensure that Members are influencing the strategic direction of NIHR and that the NIHR is responding to real-time issues experienced by early career researchers. The group does not operate in isolation. Reporting to the NIHR Academy Strategy Group and linking with the NIHR Academy Forum and NIHR Centres Executive Board, it ensures that Member perspectives feed into the wider NIHR system. Those who have held the role speak warmly of its value, both for the networking it enables and for the importance of having an early career perspective heard where strategic decisions are made. My advisory was:

1. To shape the strategic direction and delivery of the NIHR
2. Raise issues experienced by early career researchers, which fall within NIHR's remit.

The group's purpose is straightforward: a two-way dialogue between Academy Members and NIHR leadership. For early career researchers navigating the uncertain terrain between training and independent academic careers, having a structured forum to raise real-time issues with those who shape NIHR strategy is not a small thing. The breadth of experience around the table is one of its greatest strengths. Representatives spanning different award types, professional backgrounds, and geographies ensure conversations reflect the genuine diversity of the early career researcher community. We were supported by the Executive team, senior leaders and were very well looked after. Several substantive themes have emerged from recent discussions.

Firstly, research culture and leadership matters. Research and academic development do not occur in isolation. It depends upon the culture, leadership, mentorship, infrastructure, protected time and supportive networks.

Second, collaboration matters, and answering key important research questions requires co-ordinated multicentre effort rather than isolated institutional work. Evidence of meaningful collaboration within funding applications, creating accountability measures of genuine partnerships are a key requirement. Annual Academy conferences are excellent platform to promote networking and shared learning. A dedicated session on connecting with infrastructure with real case studies of what good collaborative evidence could be a concrete next step.

Third, courage and curiosity matter. Whether through integrated academic training, collaborative research, or large multicentre trials, progress ultimately depends upon researchers who remain willing to ask difficult questions and challenge established assumptions, including about how NIHR itself operates. Equally, there is a growing recognition that NIHR selection committees must better reflect the methodological breadth of the research they evaluate. Community-based interventions, public health research, and work addressing the social determinants of health require different evaluative frameworks than traditional clinical trials. Ensuring that panels have the expertise to assess these approaches is central to fund research that serves all populations equally.

Fourth, inclusion matters, yet for all the structural progress, a more fundamental challenge remains. Not all voices are heard equally in research. Recent race-related tensions in Belfast and across the UK are a sharp reminder of why inclusive research matters and of the cost of getting it wrong. Research should not simply study communities;

it should work alongside them. By listening to lived experiences and amplifying seldom-heard voices, we can challenge inequalities, build genuine understanding, and contribute to more inclusive futures. Patient and Public Involvement must extend beyond established organisations to reach the right people in community settings, those whose experiences are most relevant and whose voices are least often sought. This demands that we orient our work around four commitments: to listen, to collaborate, to sustain dialogue, and to pursue change that is measurable and accountable. As researchers, policymakers, practitioners and community leaders, we must keep asking: who is absent from the conversation, and what are we doing to change that? How can research contribute more effectively to addressing racial inequalities and strengthening community cohesion in the UK?

Some of the most meaningful moments in research are not publication launches or conference presentations, but hearing participants say: *"Thank you for listening."* Perhaps that is where meaningful change begins, and it is a standard against which the Member Voices Group, and the wider NIHR system it feeds into, should continue to measure itself. Finally, time and funding matters. Not simply chronological time within training, research programmes or large trials, but protected cognitive time, time to think deeply, analyse critically and develop ideas carefully. Funding allows this process to happen smoothly. Getting these ingredients right will clearly stand us in the most envious position in the world.

Conclusion

Looking back, my time with the NIHR Academy Member Voices Group has changed the way I think about research and the role of early career researchers within it. I joined expecting to contribute my perspective, but I leave with a much deeper appreciation of the importance of listening, collaboration, and shared leadership in shaping the future of health research. It has shown me that meaningful change is rarely driven by one voice alone; it grows through open dialogue, mutual respect, and a willingness to learn from different experiences. The conversations within the group repeatedly returned to themes of research culture, collaboration, inclusion, protected time, and funding. Although these may appear to be separate issues, they are closely connected and together shape the environment in which researchers develop and thrive. Investing in early career researchers therefore means more than supporting individual projects; it means creating a research culture where diverse voices are valued, thoughtful ideas are given time to grow, and meaningful partnerships are encouraged.

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I hope the NIHR Academy Member Voices Group continues to provide a space where early career researchers can contribute with confidence, challenge constructively, and help shape the future direction of the NIHR. If there is one lesson I will take from this experience, it is that meaningful research begins not only with good questions, but with a genuine willingness to listen.

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