



AN EVALUATION OF HEALTH EDUCATION ENGLAND (HEE) RESEARCH INTERNSHIPS: COHORT 1

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1. Introduction

As a national organisation tasked with leading on workforce development, it is vital that recommendations and guidance emerging from Health Education England (HEE) are based on the best available evidence. As such it is imperative that staff understand the context and practice of conducting research and how to identify good quality evidence, as well as the relationship between research, practice and policy. In the 2015 staff survey, 60% of HEE staff reported that they were not provided with the tools or training necessary to help make evidence based decisions.

In response to this, HEE launched a Research Internship Programme for employees. The aim of this approach was to support HEE colleagues in non-clinical roles, to explore and develop skills in undertaking research, therefore increasing the capacity for research, evaluation and evidence-based decision making across HEE.

A national recruitment process took place in the Autumn of 2016, which consisted of an application form and an interview and presentation with a panel of HEE stakeholders. This resulted in the appointment of 12 interns who commenced the programme in early November 2016 to complete in March 2017.

As this was a new undertaking for HEE a formal evaluation was commissioned to understand;

- Participants individual experience of the internships; how taking part in the internships had impacted their capacity for undertaking research and making evidence based decisions
- Participants views on what worked well and what could have been improved both in terms of content and structure
- The outcomes and impact at individual and organisational level following completion of the programme

2. The Programme

The programme was designed to be a *“flexible, bespoke programme tailored to suit...specific needs and aspirations”* (HEE Programme Recruitment information 2015) and consisted of a number of components to support participants to understand more about the practicalities of undertaking research, to experience undertaking research within an organisational context, and to learn more about the context of research. Elements included;

- Identification of a local placement in a research-rich environment, relevant to the work of HEE and the opportunity to conduct a self-identified research project
- The opportunity to identify and work with a research supervisor relevant to the area of research carried out
- Self-identified formal learning opportunities to complement the workplace experience. For example, short courses, e-learning or accredited modules, attendance at conferences or seminars.
- Three whole cohort development days in December, February and April, with an expectation that work will be showcased at the final development day with a broader group of HEE stakeholders.

Participants were responsible for identifying their own research supervisor, placement and learning opportunities and would agree any time taken out of their workplace with their line manager.

Funding of £10k was made available to each participants organisation to help facilitate backfill of

salary, research project expenses, academic supervision, formal teaching, dissemination costs and travel and subsistence for attendance at the three development day meetings.

Participants also had the opportunity to undertake the Healthcare Leadership Model self-assessment as part of the Internships. It was suggested that there may be value in framing learning in terms of leadership development, and understanding how taking part in the programme may also impact broader leadership behaviours.

It should be noted that during the programme, the final development day was moved to take place in July 2017.

3. Method

As this was the first time the internship programme had taken place within HEE, it was important to design an evaluation approach which would explore and capture as many of the participants' experiences as possible. In discussion with the HEE lead for the internships, a range of methods and data were identified to facilitate this;

- A post-programme questionnaire distributed to all participants at the end of the programme in July 2017. This consisted of a range of self-rated items (likert scale, ranked responses, white space) exploring perceptions of skills, knowledge and confidence following participation in the programme, as well as exploration of areas for improvement and areas of strength. Questions also focused on which aspects of the internships participants had accessed as well as views on how their learning was being applied, and how the programme may have influenced leadership behaviours.
- Post programme semi-structured telephone interviews undertaken approximately 8 – 12 weeks post-programme. These were undertaken with a sample of 6 participants and focused in more detail on individual experiences as well as application of learning and next steps.
- Review of supporting documents; a desk top review of initial applications and items generated by participants throughout the programme to include; mid-way reports and presentation materials.

The evaluation process commenced in April 2017 and completed in November 2017

4. Results

Results for each aspect of the data are presented separately below. There was good participation across the data sets, with all 12 applications and mid-way reports reviewed, a 75% participation rate in the end of programme questionnaire, and 100% of planned interviews taking place.

4.1 Insights from Application Forms and Mid-Way Reports

All participants application forms and mid-way reports were reviewed for insights into why participants had chosen to undertake the internships, as well as the key learning points and challenges at the mid-way point of the programme.

Application forms gave an insight into backgrounds, motivations and aspirations of those applying for the internships. The 12 participants were from a variety of different roles and areas across HEE. Graphic 1 shows a summary of roles across the cohort. Participants roles varied from clinical to non-clinical, and management to administrative roles. Participants also represented different geographical areas of HEE, with one participant from Yorkshire and Humber, East Midlands, North West, North East and Cumbria and West Midlands patches. Three participants were from the Wessex geography and a further four were located in London; two from the South and East, one from the London Leadership Academy and one from the North West London patch.

Graphic 1: Summary of Intern Roles



Application form questions asked about four key areas; applicants reasons for applying, the benefits and learning to be gained, benefits to their area of work and the outputs to be achieved by participating in the internships. Points of interest from application forms include;

- Project areas were linked to strategic work areas and 'the day job' or challenges within specific settings in most cases (either locally or nationally).
- A number of applicants were utilising this opportunity to either progress existing academic work such as PhDs or MScs, or were exploring whether this was something they may wish to do in the future.
- In terms of how this linked to career aspirations, generally participants felt that this allowed them to further develop areas of expertise and knowledge, and helped to identify whether further academic study would be of interest, as well as providing a "stepping stone" to

further academic study.

- In terms of benefits to participants work, all were interested in having a sound evidence base through a research approach to underpin their work and ideas and felt that this was a key benefit of taking part. Participants referenced wanting to understand the impact of programmes and workstreams as well as informing the continued use of funding.
- Some participants project ideas were more exploratory, trying to create an evidence base for continuing challenges such as implementing the Five Year Forward View, recruitment, use of technology or informing work related to Sustainability and Transformation Partnerships (STPs).

- A number of the applicants wanted to use the internship opportunity to link work of different NHS and non-NHS bodies, to broaden opportunities to inform HEE work and networks, accessing specialised expertise and knowledge to develop programmes of activity.
- Personally, participants hoped to meet a broader range of HEE colleagues, to benefit from time and resource to explore areas of interest and in some cases, to “upskill” in terms of research methodologies and application of research. Some applicants referenced the length of time since undertaking research in higher education, and the benefits of further development through this process.
- Outputs expected from taking part in the internships ranged from evaluation and reports that could influence decision making, to toolkits and guidelines, and providing an evidence base for ongoing work.
- Additionally, participants saw this as an opportunity to contribute to data nationally and internationally by intentions to publish their work.

Applicants described the project areas they wished to undertake during the internships, as part of the application and interview process. A summary of project areas is described in Table 1;

Table 1: Internship Project Areas

Project Areas
Impact evaluation of School of Quality Improvement Fellowship Programmes
Evaluating a training programme for teaching assistants in occupational therapy
Retention of junior doctors between foundation and specialty training
Exploring cognition in strategic teams; agreeing whilst disagreeing
The impact of Medical Education Fellowships on future career pathways
In training but not trainees; an exploratory look at doctors in the Medical Training Initiative
Using peer assessment to aid educational supervisor selection
Can inclusive leadership save the NHS crisis?
Accessible Information – supporting patients with newly acquired accessible information needs
Scanning for future technologies in UK healthcare education today
How do NHS executive leaders experience personal resilience?
Initial impact of education funding changes

The mid-way reports were collected from all participants during February 2017. The reports asked participants to reflect on the goals and purpose of their project, the key milestones, challenges encountered, next steps and personal learning. The aim of this was to capture data during the participants journey and to have an opportunity for built-in personal reflection across the programme duration. General themes from the midway reports are shown in Table 2 below.

Common themes across the areas reported demonstrate positive regard for the support of the internships, and the personal impact in terms of influencing and evaluating information, as well as confidence. In addition, participants report valuing the flexibility of the programme and the opportunities to link to colleagues across HEE. A key area of difficulty and challenge was time and allotting time to the internships when also undertaking the ‘day job’. This is evidenced in both the additional comments and the participants reflection on whether they were on track with projects at this point. Approximately 50% of participants demonstrated a shift in the timeline of their projects by 2 to 3 months.

In addition to the areas of the report above, participants were invited to comment on the questions they felt could be asked of them, to understand more about their experience. Responses reflected a

range of areas, but in the main focused on retrospective views, “what do you know now that you wish you’d known at the start”? How HEE could further support them “what do you need from HEE after the programme?” And the ‘what next, so what?’ element, inviting responses about changes that were being made as a direct result of undertaking the internship. Participants also felt it was important to be canvassed about improvements for the internships.

These elements were taken into consideration when designing the online survey and semi-structured interviews.

As part of the desktop review process, a small number of presentation/photographic materials were available to the evaluator from the development days that were undertaken. Data within them was limited but echoed the data captured in applications and midway reports.

Table 2: Midway Report Summary

Report Area	Themes
Goals and Purpose	Evaluation of programmes and their impact Exploration of resources, support, or systems Exploration of perceived changes (NHS) both locally and nationally Progression of existing academic courses
Milestones achieved	Contact/networking/supervision/meeting stakeholders Attendance at formal modules and study days Process-driven (around the required research process)
Challenges	Lack of time to progress as planned Posts not being backfilled and this impacting on progression/ability to commit time Difficulty in convening stakeholders/key people Budgetary timing – difficult/impossible to use it all before new financial year The gulf between academic research and practice IT access and issues How to deliver tangible change in the timescale
Progression on track	Evenly split – 50% reporting yes, and 50% reporting no at this point
Next Steps	Initiation of different phases of research process – literature review and data collection starting to progress in most cases Some data analysis about to commence Most timescales were extended to May-June 2017
Personal Learning (commenting on areas of the Healthcare Leadership Model)	Evaluating information – several cited this as an area of improved skills and knowledge Influencing – by meeting with the ‘right’ people at the right level to affect change Personal impact – confidence and learning Usefulness of having time and space to think
Additional comments	Some comments reflected uncertainty about the benefits of the internship and what would be required at the end (these were not candidates who were progressing their existing academic work) Support about ethics would have been useful
	<div> Positives Very rewarding and well supported </div> <div> Negatives Struggled with time commitment Doing it in own time with no clear benefit </div>

Linked well to day job and made work more interesting Improved confidence Appreciated flexibility within the programme Positive opportunity to engage with wider teams Useful, insightful speakers Development days were very useful	Funding should be given as a bursary/award Internships should have been held back and launched as part of overall strategy
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4.2 Online Survey Results

The online survey was completed by 9 out of 12 participants.

Participants were asked a range of questions relating to the skills and knowledge acquired throughout the internship. Table 3 below, demonstrates participants views on how far the internships had supported them in developing specific skills or knowledge, in line with the original aims and objectives of the internship programme. Participants could rate on a likert scale where 1 represented not at all to 5, which represented very much so. The highest scoring items reflected that the internships had improved practical skills in designing research activity, with a mean of 4.33 and increased confidence in carrying out research activity which also had a mean of 4.33. 88.8% of participants rated both of these items as 4 or 5 on the likert scale. Other high scoring items with a mean of 4 are as below;

- Apply the practical skills of research and evaluation in your job role
- Improve your practical skills in carrying out research activity
- Increase your knowledge and understanding of undertaking research

One of the aims of the research internship was to respond to the 2015 staff survey finding that 60% of HEE staff felt that they were not provided with the tools and training necessary to help make evidence-based decisions. When asked whether the internships had provided participants with the tools and training to make evidence based decisions, 44.4% of participants answered 'Yes'. The remaining 55.6% responded 'to some extent'.

There was a variation in responses, as to how far the internships had helped participants to develop their leadership behaviours. With 22.2% reflecting "not at all" and only 11.1% reporting very much so. However, when asked specifically about the dimensions of the Healthcare Leadership Model, 55.6% reported Sharing the Vision, Evaluating Information and Developing Capability as the dimensions the internship had most impacted. A further 22.2% reflected that they were unsure in response to this question.

55.6% of participants reported that the whole cohort development days had helped them develop their communication skills, rating these as either 4 or 5 on the likert scale where 5 represented "very much so".

Participants ranked the research project (50%) and the ongoing work based research placement (42.9%) as the most useful elements of the programme. Qualitative comments reflected that participants benefited from the financial support, as well as the structure of the internships;

Table 3: Skills and Knowledge

	1NOT AT ALL	2	3	4	5VERY MUCH SO	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Increase your knowledge and understanding of undertaking research?	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	33.33% 3	33.33% 3	33.33% 3	9	4.00
Improve your practical skills in designing research activity?	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	11.11% 1	44.44% 4	44.44% 4	9	4.33
Improve your practical skills in carrying out research activity?	0.00% 0	11.11% 1	11.11% 1	44.44% 4	33.33% 3	9	4.00
Increase your confidence in carrying out research activity?	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	11.11% 1	44.44% 4	44.44% 4	9	4.33
Increase your knowledge and understanding of undertaking evaluation?	0.00% 0	22.22% 2	11.11% 1	55.56% 5	11.11% 1	9	3.56
Improve your practical skills in designing evaluation activity?	0.00% 0	11.11% 1	11.11% 1	66.67% 6	11.11% 1	9	3.78
Improve your practical skills in carrying out evaluation activity?	0.00% 0	22.22% 2	0.00% 0	66.67% 6	11.11% 1	9	3.67
Increase your confidence in carrying out evaluation activity?	0.00% 0	11.11% 1	11.11% 1	66.67% 6	11.11% 1	9	3.78
Apply the practical skills of research and/or evaluation in your job role?	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	22.22% 2	55.56% 5	22.22% 2	9	4.00
Understand the relationship between research, practice and policy?	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	44.44% 4	22.22% 2	33.33% 3	9	3.89

The formal learning opportunities have been invaluable to shaping my understanding which I will be applying to the future research and quality improvement plans. I also found the range of topics covered on the educational development days interesting and useful (Participant 8).

There was some indication that participants may have benefited from a formal research skills course, and possibly some additional topics during the whole cohort development days;

Having the flexible space for me personally to progress my research (both bespoke skills development and space to do the work for my PhD) benefited me the most. However, my observation for other people who have never undertaken a research skills programme, a formal research course focused on delivering a research piece would have been more useful (Participant 9)

77.8% of participants undertook self-identified learning opportunities alongside the programme. Qualitative data reflects that the majority of these were research methods modules, either via Corsera, or through other institutions. There was also reference to subject specific conferences in addition to this.

77.8% of participants rated their research supervisor as “extremely beneficial” to their learning during the internships. Comments reflected the support given, and the supervisor being an “integral” part of the internships;

Extremely helpful in providing support, focus, engaging in intelligent debate, steering my research activity, and challenging me (Participant 1)

When asked what had worked well during the internships, most of the answers reflected the whole cohort development days, and the opportunities to learn together and network with colleagues, with some indication this had helped to “keep things on track”.

In terms of how the internships could be improved, there were a variety of answers, but a common theme was time; either in terms of more time for the whole internships, or more time to undertake the research project, or a longer lead in time to apply and start the internships. Some comments reflected the usefulness of aligning the internship start dates with academic year so as to maximise opportunities to undertake university modules.

88.9% of participants responded that they would recommend the internship to a colleague, with the remaining 11.1% stating they were “unsure”. Qualitative comments were favourable, reflecting that this had been a “fantastic opportunity” and “really interesting (fun) to do” and “highly appropriate for HEE staff”. One comment reflected recommendation would be dependent on structure and time for the internship going forward.

When asked whether the internships had impacted career decisions in any way 44.4% of participants reported “yes”, with 55.6% reporting either “to some extent” or “unsure”. Qualitative data reflected that there had been more scope in the roles interns were doing, with benefits to HEE. As well as helping to support further job interviews or progression during a time of restructure at HEE. For example;

I have developed...skills in networking and linking with external agencies which has opened up opportunities for extending the scope of my work and the contribution I make to HEE. As a result of the work, I have been able to join-up people and networks that may have continued to silo work (Participant 1)

I have already moved to a new role having accepted voluntary redundancy. Doing the research internship helped me prepare for my interview and be aware of current developments due to my choice of research topic (Participant 3)

When asked about the most prominent learning point from the programme, participants reflected a range of answers, a central theme appeared to be about insight into research, either in terms of the resource and commitment required or the importance of doing it right, as well as finding creative ways to share outcomes of research;

Reflection is key to learning and raising self-awareness to my own thinking patterns. Insight is gained from talking to and researching a number of different avenues (Participant 2)

Focus, focus, focus. In hindsight I was being way too ambitious (which was mentioned to me during my interview) and if I did another research project it would be both better and less work (Participant 5)

Participants were asked about further application of their learning from the internships and how this would continue. Answers varied, but the theme of continuation of PhDs and aligning work to HEE priorities, as well as utilising learning to impact other workstream areas were referenced;

I am continuing to analyse my research data and will be writing a paper for publication. I have already begun to use some of the search skills for other pieces of work that I'm doing so that I can gather more evidence on what's been already and building on that (Participant 2)

Working on STP's aligning my PhD research to HEE critical work (Participant 3)

I have already begun using some of the skills I have developed with (specific staff group). I am also hoping to be involved in future projects if the opportunities are there (Participant 7)

Additional comments were invited, and participants responded positively about the internships, referencing the flexible learning opportunity it provided, and the supportive nature of the internships, as well as ideas for further development of the internship programme. Some comments reflected the need to consider time allocation, as well as the practicalities of the backfill funding which had been less easy to utilise in practice;

I enjoyed the opportunity but did sometimes find it difficult to spend time on the work for substantial parts of the programme due to workload. Having a pot of money sounded great but in reality, this was very difficult to spend due to time constraints and workload (Participant 2)

The structure of the internship allows you to access whatever opportunities you would most benefit from therefore making it a flexible bespoke learning experience, something I have thoroughly enjoyed. Thank you! (Participant 3)

Thank you for the opportunity and support. I hope that the internships will run again in the future so that others have the same wonderful opportunities. (Participant 4)

4.3 Interviews

Themes and salient points from interviews are presented below with relevant quotes to illustrate participant views. Whilst there were common themes across those interviewed, there were also variations and individual differences in experience. Some of this has also been captured within the narrative, to aid the range of insights captured.

4.3.1 Networks and Relationships: Enhancing learning and sharing outputs

A strong theme in the interview data was that of developing and extending networks and relationships, and how this impacted both learning and the sharing and spread of project outcomes.

All participants discussed the networks they had built within the cohort and how the internships had given them an opportunity to meet people from across HEE that they would never have met

otherwise. For some the internship had provided the opportunity to explore beyond the boundaries of their role which enhanced their professional networks;

...very quickly I realised that I was getting a lot out of the course, talking to people who had got managerial roles and I kind of learned a lot of things...I found that useful having that contact because I don't normally get that contact, so it's quite useful to understand how the processes work in HEE in line with my work...Participant 06, p1

Particularly, the diversity across the cohort was a welcome feature of the internships, aiding learning and exposure to other “branches” and areas of HEE. Participants referenced the insights this gave to them and their developing project work and how this had helped to enhance their learning about broader HEE and NHS issues.

During the last day when we got our certificates, everyone was talking about STPs and I was like ‘what is an STP?’ ...You know since they told me what the STP stood for I’ve come back and realised that’s like ‘the big thing’ and I’ve been working here for 7 years...it’s rare that you get people from varied organisations doing different things in the same group. Participant 1, p3

...there was somebody on there who works in scoping new technology and new innovations so that was a useful contact to make. I didn’t even know that this person existed without going on this internship, so for me the biggest value of the research internship is understanding more about how different branches of HEE communicate with each other, and getting in contact with people who I would never have got in contact with without that opportunity. Participant 6, p1

There was acknowledgment however, that this diversity across the cohort extended also to the levels of comfort and experience amongst the participants, in undertaking research and evaluation. Participants felt that this was an opportunity to learn from peers, and those more experienced in research were also able to pass on their learning and advice;

I had a bit more experience, and a few others in the group did, so we could pass that on to others and that helped them I think, so then we ended up helping each other. Participant 3, p2

Adding to this theme, was the reflection by some that the development days had aided the development of relationships across the cohort, providing opportunities for interns to “bond” and share learning. The cohort was described by some as a “community of practice” and participants valued this opportunity and space to explore ideas and learning with their intern colleagues;

I loved the community of practice around it, and I really did value that we had different people and different perspectives and different topics and approaching things in different ways because it made me think. And it was kind of good to get together and talk it through. Participant 3, p1

...it was nice to feel part of something which for me was because I’m quite on the periphery a lot and that was really nice to understand and feel part of the organisation a lot more. So that was brilliant Participant 5, p3

Networks and relationships had also grown and developed with broader stakeholders across the NHS and beyond as a result of undertaking the internships. Participants reflected the scope of stakeholders they had started to connect with due to undertaking their research project. For some this had been one of the most valuable aspects of the internships, allowing exploration beyond usual roles and boundaries. Participants reflected how these networks had helped in a number of ways, both personally and professionally. For example, in some cases the networks were helping with spread of project findings or sharing of information and in others, were helping to better shape the ongoing work by enhancing participants knowledge base or insights. Participants were also intentionally accessing these networks and forums to highlight their work to wider audiences, undertaking a connector-type role across organisational boundaries;

there were lots of side benefits that came from doing the project itself, which I hadn't anticipated and those were mainly around accessing other experts that are external to the NHS as well as internal...I've built relationships with people that I wouldn't otherwise even have reached out to, or even thought to...It made me go out of my comfort zone by making me talk to other people in different domains and sectors in order to gather the evidence that I was looking for, and as a result I got invited along to a much broader, wider network...which has given me a broader perspective that I don't think I would have necessarily found.

Participant 4 p3

when I started this, HEE started to take a strategic lead on the programme where they had been outside the programme before...I've been working with people from (Non-NHS organisation) and spreading awareness of HEE resources...the NHS is so desperate, and people didn't really know about it...I think the resources...are going to be useful to them going forward. Participant 1, p5

4.3.2 Practical Aspects: Content, Supervision and Time

Participants were generally very positive about their experience of the internship, and valued the flexibility offered by the programme, describing it as “hugely beneficial”. It was clear that participants had tailored the programme to suit their individual needs and interests, and that some had been driven to pursue the internships as it provided protected time and space to focus on particular projects or areas of work that may not have received the same attention otherwise;

For me the very fact that it was grounded in something that was wholly relevant to me was what made it attractive in the first place and what made it beneficial, so having a work based project was something that was entirely relevant and actually the out puts that were applicable and could be shared at the end...that was what the worth was for me and it meant that it gave me the space and time, and the inclination and the motivation to do it. Participant 4, p2

In practice, however, the issue of time allocated to undertake the internships and particularly the time needed for the research project had been more challenging to carry out in practice. For most participants, the timescales had been a challenge and across interviews some were still either continuing or completing their work in varying degrees. All of those interviewed referenced a need for the programme to be over a longer time period;

Essentially my learning is that 4 months for the project isn't appropriate...my outputs were to have crafted my research proposal...and also to get my ethics stuff done and if possible write some of my literature review...I achieved all those things, because I had the space to think and get to supervision...whereas other people were like, 'I've got to have this done by March' Participant 3, p2

Yes I think it would be great if it was longer...It's one of those things, because it's like a sort of drop in the ocean, it's difficult to influence one of the world's largest employers, in a short term way, but I think it would be really useful if it was longer. Participant 1, p8

...it needed to be over a 12 month period. It didn't start until November and obviously because of the end of the financial year, technically it had to end by March. But by the time you'd had your first development day and you know how long things can take to sort of get your project up and running. I think realistically you need 12 months...I know a number of interns are still continuing with (their project) so I think that's one thing that the timescale is a little bit unrealistic sort of in the 5 months...Participant 2, p2

It was acknowledged across those interviewed that the ability to utilise the time allocated had been impacted by a number of things, the most commonly mentioned were the logistics of stepping out of the 'day job', utilising backfill funding, and the impact of ongoing organisational change. For some, backfill funding and logistics had worked well, for example where a participant worked part time and could use the funding for extra time specifically to focus on the project of choice. For

others, where posts were full time, the logistics of recruitment had been challenging to fit with the timescales of the internship and time for release was more challenging;

...although my boss agreed to it in principle and was supportive, in theory he backfilled part of my role so that I could do a day a week, but by the time they actually got in post...it wasn't until February... so you know the whole thing, it just wasn't necessarily set up...there wasn't the time and space...I just couldn't drop and be backfilled for it basically. Participant 5, p1

I think what worked well...my circumstances have been different to other peoples. So if I was a full time employee going through the internship, then I probably wouldn't have used the funding to give myself some space and time because I probably wouldn't have been able to. So I'm lucky as I work part time so I could fund that fourth day to do it. So for me that was what worked really well, having that space and time. Participant 4, p9

A recurring theme across the interviews was the backdrop of organisational change that HEE was going through, and the impact this had on ability to engage. Commonly mentioned was the impact of the participants manager in enabling full participation with the programme during this ongoing change. A number of participants referenced the key role their manager had played in continuing to support the allocated time for the internships during challenging periods. However, this was not always the case and participants also referenced the need to focus on the 'day job' which sometimes impacted learning and project activity;

So I think realistically it needs to be advertised, if they're going to do it again, that you will be given time within your existing job almost to be able to do it...when I was going to do interviews and I needed to write up some of the work and I needed to protect some time...I know that other people haven't had that so it's been quite different for each person. I was quite lucky that my line manager was very supportive of it but I know that others haven't had that support and I think it would be quite difficult to do it, and to do it well when you're just trying to cram it into your full time job. Participant 2, p9

I think I went to two of the university taught programmes and it also allowed me to go to supervision, because it was formally acknowledged by my boss, I got to go to my supervision session...really thankful my boss took that stance with it...in the bigger context of HEE, it's not that great...I lost all my members of staff...Participant 3, p1

I think the sort of situation that HEE is in at the moment, you know the transformation etc, a lot of times like they needed all hands on deck and this corresponded with times for my research project. If I could have spent more time on that, that would have been helpful for me but I understand...I get paid to do the day job...I don't think HEE was as supportive as it could be...Participant 1, p2

Related to this, a number of participants referenced the need to strategically align project work to the roles participants undertake, and to broader HEE objectives. There was recognition that the closer the work of the internships is to the 'day job', the more the investment in terms of both time and funding can be justified;

I think people have struggled so I think the more entwined it is with your job and the more you can almost justify spending time on it. Participant 2, p9

Importantly the research topic should be related to something of interest to HEE. Its nice to give the skills but don't allow us to do that if the topic isn't related to something healthcare education related. So there needs to be a business link to justify it...in our current climate where we are making redundancies, we probably should Participant 3, p3

As well as being used for backfill, a number of those interviewed mentioned how the funding allocated had allowed them to tailor their own learning, and that this had been beneficial. Some participants had utilised the funding for supervision, as well as university modules and other related courses. The courses accessed varied across participants but included basic research methods modules and writing for publication as examples. Participants found these helpful but for some timing had been an issue as the commencement of the internships had not aligned with the academic year. This had created some challenges for those wishing to access university accredited courses;

I think the actual way that the programme was put together gave you quite a lot of autonomy to be able to do not as little or as much as you wanted...Obviously you had to do your project but I think it was quite good that the funding was there so that you could attend a conference related to it if you wanted to, you could use some of that money to do a short course...I think because it was quite flexible, it was great because you could tailor it to what you needed from it rather than you do x, y and z by the end Participant 2, p1

So the only unfortunate thing about the internship timing last year was actually they needed to have taken into consideration the enrolment timescale for the university modules. So even though we could use the funding for that, most of us had missed the boat, the modules had already taken place, it missed the enrolment period, the application process. Participant 4, p4

A number of those interviewed suggested that an improvement to the internship may be to focus more specifically on the pragmatics or practicalities of undertaking research, within the programme content. For example, ensuring input on the basics of research methodologies for those who have less or no experience of undertaking research. It was recognised that the internships were aimed at those with little experience, and that basic support around the practicalities of research may make this less daunting to HEE colleagues who may consider undertaking this in future;

...there were people on there who'd done Masters, there were people who were doing PhDs, so at least they're a lot more savvy about research. But the aim of the internship was to give an opportunity to people who'd never done research and I think it could have been a bit more tailored towards them...If that was the idea behind it then I think a bit more thought needs to go in it for what these people actually need. Participant 6, p4

All participants reported the benefits and helpful support and guidance that supervisors had offered throughout the internships. Participants reflected how supervisors had offered practical support and helped to refine their research ideas, making them more realistic and had given reassurance and encouragement at times of need. Supervisors were also playing an active part in encouraging publication and presentation of project work which was motivating to those interviewed. Participants found this a key support mechanism throughout the internship;

It was just that reassurance through the whole thing really that I was doing the right sort of thing...and I think as well because I was quite new to it all and I was in a bit of a panic thinking 'I can't do this, I don't know what I'm doing', especially one of my supervisors was brilliant, saying 'you can actually do this, stop panicking' and just giving that faith and confidence in you really. Participant 2, p3.

...I had an idea, but it wasn't really fully drawn out and she sort of let me go along, and then hold on, and pulled me back in and think about what you're doing, what can you actually achieve...she was supportive, and I think she sort of...if I went in and I wanted to do this, and she'd said 'no let's do this', I would have resented it. She sort of gave me enough room to start doing things, so I think she's been invaluable. Participant 1, p3

Where people were undertaking academic qualifications access to a supervisor was reportedly easier, however for others it was more difficult to identify a relevant supervisor. Funding had helped to support this but in some cases, pressure in the work environment meant that participants could not access as much support as they may have liked.

Development days were referenced as helpful and aided bonding across the cohort. Some participants found the content interesting, and acknowledged that content was co-created with their needs in mind. Generally participants welcomed the flexibility of this approach and the interesting scope of the workshops, with some acknowledging they would not have learned about those topics without it.

4.3.3 Rigour and Credibility: Creating purpose and Influencing future direction

Participants commonly described how undertaking the internships had helped them to have “credibility” and apply “rigour” to their work. This was one of the attractions of the internships for most of those interviewed, and they felt that underpinning their work with an evidence base would have a positive impact on the application and spread of their work. Participants felt that this had given more purpose to key pieces of work they were undertaking, and had supported them in feeling more of an “authority” in their area of interest/expertise;

This definitely gives me the credibility so that I can say...I've actually done this piece of research, so that will, when I've actually finished the thing, be very, very valuable...if I was to stay in a position in HEE it would definitely help to build my credibility as someone who knows what they're talking about in this field, so yes it has had a great impact for me personally which is brill. Participant 5, p8

Participants described examples of how their project work was influencing both local and national work and policy. For example, participants were sharing their work with local decision-making groups, informing business planning for the new financial year and utilising their research as a way of stimulating further thinking about current topics, and piloting approaches for wider roll out. The robustness of approach offered by the internships had been a key enabler to sharing and spreading work in some cases, and had helped work to have more of an impact;

I don't think I would have done any kind of research into the kind of idea that I was developing, without this internship. I think I would have done it but not researched it and would have probably just evaluated it afterwards, very simply, but it wouldn't have been as robust as what I did do...it has affected how robust I feel and how confident I feel saying 'this is probably something that we should be doing'...and now that idea is going from a pilot to full scale next year...because of the direct result of the research showing something that was valid. Participant 6, p7

On a personal level, participants also described the impact of undertaking the internship, on the way in which they now approached their day to day work. Participants described how undertaking practical research had aided their appreciation for creating an evidence base, and the need to ensure this underpins new approaches;

it's also as well sort of reiterated to me...really sort of highlighted the importance of evidence based decision making. I think sometimes decisions are made on a bit of a wing and a prayer actually, (it's) so important to have that evidence base...because it takes so much time to actually do the research to get the results to make the right decisions. That can't be done in a couple of months period, so I think its reiterated to me how important it is when you're making decisions about things big and small. Participant 2, p5

...by doing this its enhancing my day job and how I am able to challenge some of the things I am thinking of, with an evidence base...it allows me to conceptualise something a lot better, and visualise where we take it in the day job. Participant 3, p3

Some participants acknowledged that the internships had started to create a body of knowledge and insights that could be utilised and shared more widely across HEE. Participants reported a

willingness to share their work and utilise the information captured to influence more widely in HEE and beyond;

...there's quite a lot that we do in our everyday work in life that you could actually usefully share with other people by articles and that would be a useful contribution to knowledge really. I came away from it thinking there's a lot that we do in our work at HEE, and I know a lot of the work that I do specifically around the presentation and stuff, and I've got so much, a wealth of material that's sat there, used once and not shared anymore...you could take advantage of that really. Participant 4, p8

However, there were some comments about how the cohort and their work was made more visible to the broader organisation. Participants were unclear as to what the next steps were to continue to enable sharing and highlight the learning, knowledge and skills now available as a resource across HEE. Some of those interviewed questioned how strategically the group tied into HEE at a more senior level, and acknowledged that in isolation, it was challenging to influence with their work at a more senior level. A small number of participants referenced their level of seniority as having an impact on the influence they felt they could have with their work;

So I think that in terms of the wider organisation, they've got me as a resource now...Obviously you know we're not experts but we've got a little bit of knowledge and we were just conscious that the skills that people have developed and the work they've done, is not lost...we have put our toe in the water and said we would like to be involved and whether or not HEE moving forward utilises that I'm not sure. The project that we've done has all gone on HEE wire and been shared...so people's names are out there but what they choose to do in the future I'm not quite sure. Participant 2, p7

So the work that I'm currently researching is strategically quite important at the moment. There's a lot of discussion around it with the Department of Health politically for HEE as well...and I find it interesting that my work is not being listened to, by which I haven't published a report yet, so there's limits to what people can do or say, but it's just quite interesting I think. Part of my personal challenges are...I'm too junior, I don't have the influence to disseminate it strategically across HEE. Participant 5, p6

4.3.4 Personal Impact: Confidence, Skills and Career

Across the interviews participants shared insights into the personal impact that the internships had. Some have been previously explored such as increased networks, however one of the most commonly mentioned perspectives was that of increased personal confidence. As previously mentioned, supervisors had reportedly impacted confidence in a positive way, and there was a sense of community of practice across the cohort which helped participants to develop confidence in their ideas. Participants described how the internship had increased their self-belief in their abilities to undertake research, and in some cases reflected that this had “demystified” research, and made it less daunting when considering undertaking further research in the future;

I think certainly it's not this big scary thing that I thought it was, obviously the word research encompasses so many different things but...undertaking quite a small project and sort of gone through the different stages, getting governance approval, designing the research putting together the research plan, looking at the different resources that I needed, identifying your sample to do your data collection...just the whole process and then doing the analysis, it's all skills that I've not used before and I think it's just given me confidence that if somebody asked me to do something in the future, I wouldn't be like 'oh my word where do I start?', I know sort of, what would need to be done. Participant 2, p4

There were also examples of how participant confidence was building in applying the skills and knowledge they had acquired across the internships. For example, participants reported feeling “upskilled” in research and feeling more able to undertake key aspects such as literature reviews,

questionnaire design and evidence scanning. Those interviewed also commented on increased confidence to write and publish their work, and feeling more confident in presenting their ideas;

I've picked up some practical skills. I've got access now to the electronic library resources. I've had a librarian sat down with me for a few hours who actually took me through how to do the searching and put together a proper search. So a real practical skill there that I didn't have before...and right up to thinking about, actually I might be interested in doing another research project around this particular topic and having the knowledge of how to structure a research proposal and plan really. I've begun to think about that and other areas I'm doing around evaluation, and also around quality assurance...so that's where I thought this could benefit from the sort of skills and methods that I've picked up. Participant 4, p2

I think secondly and probably as importantly it's made me more confident to publish this and I do intend to publish this along with other stuff. So the course I went on just recently has really made me believe that I can publish but it's not, as some people think, something that only really, really clever people do, it's actually something you can do, that anyone can do with the right techniques and the right style and understanding in it all, so it's given me the confidence to actually publish something. Participant 6, p7

As mentioned previously, the cohort was fairly diverse in terms of participants experiences of research. Most of those interviewed, already had a strong interest in research and academia and it was acknowledged that this was part of the attraction to applying for the internships initially. Participants considered whether the internships had impacted their future career intentions, and for some, taking part in the internships had reignited an interest in pursuing further academic study such as a PhD. Several of those interviewed, had already been offered the opportunity to progress their work further and undertake a PhD;

It's helped me to formulate my ideas that I didn't necessarily have an outlet for before until now...I did my Masters 4 or 5 years ago and quite recently been offered the opportunity to do a PhD and actually what this research has helped me do is 1, to get my brain back into that kind of thinking space which I felt very much quite worried about...so that was really nice and it was a slight reminder to me that I actually do like doing research and so it's very important that I don't get to do that in my job, so trying to carve out that sort of space to do more thinking around the stuff that I do was really helpful. Participant 5, p4

In fact that's one of the outcomes of the internship for me is I know that I would still like to do (a PhD) but I know that right now isn't the right time and that's what the internship has given me, the opportunity to really understand I think and I think that's a good outcome...without the internship I could have...I'm going to go for it and do a PhD and failed because actually the commitment and dedication that I just wouldn't have been ready for and the internship was just right because I gave myself that dedicated day for 6 months...I think I could have gone into it blindly before whereas I'm not going into it blindly now. Participant 4, p5

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Increased confidence and skills in undertaking research; Participants consistently referenced the positive experience they had in undertaking the internships, and valued the opportunity to take part. The programme activity such as development days, supervision and undertaking the research based projects were all regarded as useful elements. There is evidence across data sets of the impact both personally for participants, but also on a wider scale across HEE networks and beyond. Participants reported increased knowledge, skills and confidence in undertaking research, and there was some evidence of impact on elements of the healthcare leadership model area of ‘evaluating information’. Participants reflected how the programme had impacted their views on the importance of evidence based decision making, and had helped them to challenge their thinking, and think differently when approaching new areas of work.

An opportunity for rigour to be applied to areas of work, increasing credibility; The internships created an opportunity for dedicated time and space to be allocated to key areas of HEE work. Participants felt that it was helpful to apply rigour, and gave their work credibility, as well as personally aiding professional development around areas of interest and expertise. There was evidence that this evidence-based approach had helped participants’ work to have greater impact, influencing decision making, business planning and local and national processes.

Strategic alignment and sharing for greater impact; Participants recognised the value in their collective knowledge and skills as a cohort, and how this could be applied and shared more widely across the HEE structure. Participants were keen that further thought be given to the ways in which the work and profile of the internships could be raised at more senior levels, to help utilise the outcomes at a more strategic level. There were some reflections that individually it was challenging to affect a large organisation such as HEE, on a larger scale but that a programme such as the internships aids HEE in becoming “thought leaders” in educational research and innovation, creating a platform for knowledge sharing and exchange.

Improvements to networks within and beyond; Participants developed networks across the cohort and HEE, as well as with other external agencies and colleagues. Some participants cited this as the most beneficial aspect of the programme. It was evident that these networks enabled ideas to be tested, project work to be spread and supported the ongoing development and refinement of continuing project work.

Variety in experience across the cohort, those with less experience may need more support; Participants were from a range of backgrounds and had variable experience in undertaking research. This aided learning within the cohort meetings/development days by enabling sharing of skills and knowledge. However, there were some views that those who are less experienced may benefit from more of a focus on basic research skills, across the internship. Further consideration to how this might be facilitated within the internships may help to ensure all those participating are equipped with the basic understanding of research methodologies as an underpinning knowledge base, from the outset.

Research enthusiasts, rather than novice researchers; Across data sets it was evident that many of the participants were undertaking the internship as part of either an ongoing PhD, Masters qualification, or to explore the possibility of undertaking further academic study in future. As such, the internships appeared to appeal, to those colleagues who already had an interest and some expertise in undertaking research. For future cohorts, HEE may want to consider how they can encourage and target people with less experience of research, if this is the intended target audience

for the internships. Some participants who had not experienced research previously referenced how research was a daunting prospect, but they developed their confidence throughout the programme and felt better able to apply these skills in the future.

Time allocation affected experience and participation; Participants found the duration of the internships too short, and evidence across all data sets reflected this. For some, the period was too short to both design and deliver the research project, and they felt that having a longer period such as 12 months would be more realistic and support people to complete their project work within the time of the internships. The ongoing organisational changes had impacted some participants ability to complete and there was some suggestion that aligning projects to HEE's strategic aims and objectives would help participants to justify the time spent during ongoing organisational change. Further consideration could be given to this moving forward, to encourage momentum and completion of projects and other associated learning.

Funding aided flexibility but backfill was problematic; The flexibility offered by the funding associated with the programme was welcomed by the participants and enabled them to tailor learning, access supervision and courses and in some circumstances, backfill their time. However, the practicalities of backfill were difficult for some and this had negatively impacted their ability to fully participate in internship activity as planned. Consideration should be given to how this might be better facilitated for future cohorts, for example, considering lead in time if recruitment needs to take place to enable backfill and release of time.