

Evaluation of the NHS R&D NW InRes: Introduction to Research online pilot programme

Executive Summary

This report presents the evaluation of the 'InRes: Introduction to Research' online pilot programme. Developed by NHS Research and Development North West (NHS R&D NW) in collaboration with the University of Liverpool (UoL), InRes was designed as an online alternative to the Early Career Researcher Development Pathway (ECRDP), in alignment with the health system's wider digital agenda.

The programme supported nurses, midwives and allied health professionals to explore their potential as researchers, build core skills and competencies, and begin engaging with future leadership roles. Learning outcomes centred on critical evaluation of research, leadership, reflective practice, networking, and early career research skills, and were aligned with the University of Liverpool's Level 7 requirements, although not formally accredited. Sixteen practitioners took part.

The InRes pilot ran from October 2024 to July 2025, comprising 10 online workshops structured around the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF), 8 group coaching sessions, one-to-one mentoring, and a flipped learning model in which participants engaged with pre-learning materials in preparation for the online sessions. At the end of the programme, participants submitted a reflective portfolio assignment and presented their 5-year career plan at an online celebration event.

The evaluation examined how effectively the programme fostered participant engagement, the wider enablers and barriers to engagement, and the extent to which it achieved its stated aims and learning outcomes. It also provided timely feedback to support ongoing development and refinement of the pilot and to generate practical insights and recommendations for future iterations.

To this end, the evaluation adopted a primarily formative and developmental design, employing a mixed-methods approach drawing on surveys, interviews, and documentary analysis at different stages of the pilot. A programme-specific theory of change and the Online Engagement Framework (Redmond et al., 2018) provided the basis for framing questions, guiding data collection, and interpreting how programme design supported participant engagement, whilst the Vitae RDF was used to structure analysis of outcomes.

The programme was largely successful in fostering participants' emotional engagement. A strong sense of psychological safety was established early and deepened over time, enabling participants to feel supported, take part in discussions, and gradually build confidence to share more openly in larger group settings. Coaching groups were particularly effective in reinforcing this safety, combining social connection with emotional support, whilst inclusive facilitation and activities such as MBTI further encouraged openness and trust. The online format also offered some participants a safe and flexible environment, although for those joining sessions from their workplace, the lack of a confidential space occasionally constrained their ability to contribute.

Managing energy levels emerged as a challenge, with afternoon fatigue noted in the early workshops, but this did not undermine overall motivation. Interactive and creative activities helped re-energise participants and sustain focus, and full-day sessions were valued for supporting immersion, with suggestions of half-day formats likely to reduce fatigue, but risk reducing the depth of engagement. By the end of the programme, participants reported high levels of enjoyment, satisfaction and enthusiasm, reflecting a supportive and motivating environment that underpinned their engagement.

The programme was generally successful in fostering behavioural engagement, though experiences varied across its different elements. Engagement with pre-learning materials was mixed. Whilst most participants valued the pre-learning as preparation for meaningful workshop participation, completion was uneven and influenced by timing, workload pressures, and the volume or complexity of content. Materials were most effective when clearly relevant, accessible in format, and released in good time, with engagement strongest when preparatory tasks were essential for workshop activities.

Participation in the online sessions was strong overall, with high attendance, adherence to ground rules, and positive responses to varied interactive activities that supported active learning and maintained interest. Creative methods enhanced behavioural engagement for many by making sessions more enjoyable and stimulating, though a minority found some activities uncomfortable and/or not clearly relevant to their learning. Assignment completion provided further evidence of sustained engagement, with most participants finding them useful for consolidating learning and extending their development and all but two participants submitting their work. Overall, behavioural engagement was strongest when tasks felt purposeful, formats were varied, and the rationale for activities was clear.

The programme fostered collaborative engagement through a range of mechanisms, though effectiveness varied across settings. Small-group discussions were consistently valued as inclusive spaces that encouraged contribution and interaction, with many participants identifying them as one of the most useful aspects of the programme. Their success, however, depended on group dynamics, preparation, and clear structure, with uneven participation and limited facilitator input sometimes constraining the depth of discussion. Whole-group discussions were less consistently engaging. Whilst these discussions offered opportunities to share perspectives and build peer learning, some participants were hesitant to contribute, reflecting personal anxieties and initial unfamiliarity. These forums worked best when carefully structured and inclusively facilitated, with alternative ways to contribute such as through using the chat function, although this needed to be well-integrated to avoid distraction or marginalisation.

Coaching emerged as one of the programme's strongest vehicles for engagement, offering protected and supportive spaces that fostered reflection, confidence, peer learning, and meaningful relationships. Mentoring was also valued, but experiences were more uneven. Whilst some participants benefited significantly from guidance on career planning, confidence, and access to networks through their mentors, others struggled to establish effective relationships, citing issues such as mentor availability, unclear expectations, or lack of confidence in seeking support. Clearer guidance and earlier support were identified as important for strengthening mentoring in future iterations.

Social engagement developed gradually over the course of the programme, supported by early induction activities and strengthened through small-group discussions and, in particular, the coaching groups, which created the strongest sense of community. Participants explained that the structured yet supportive nature of the coaching groups encouraged openness, which in turn fostered trust, deeper connections, and collaborative learning. This dynamic helped make coaching one of the most effective spaces for building both social and collaborative engagement in the programme, with many expecting relationships to extend beyond the programme. However, outside of the coaching groups, the online format limited the informal "in-between" moments that often build rapport in face-to-face settings, meaning relationships generally took longer to develop. Attempts to create informal online spaces, such as a Canvas "common room" and a WhatsApp group, saw little uptake, suggesting that such platforms need clear purpose, early introduction, and active facilitation if they are to succeed. Incorporating face-to-face elements, particularly early in the programme, is also likely to accelerate trust-building and community formation.

Cognitive engagement developed unevenly across the programme. Early on, some participants were unsure how workshops related to the programme's overarching aims or the Vitae RDF, which at times made it harder to integrate ideas across sessions. By the end, all participants reported a clear understanding of the programme's purpose, although links to the RDF remained less evident. Alignment with individual aims and expectations was also mixed. Many found the content relevant and came to view personal development and self-awareness as integral to becoming a researcher, whilst a minority continued to want greater emphasis on research methods and critical appraisal. These differences often reflected prior experience, with some seeking more advanced, research-focused challenge and others gaining greater value from the reflective and developmental elements.

Reflection, however, was consistently valued for consolidating learning, connecting ideas between sessions, and applying insights to professional development. Guest speakers and real-world examples further enhanced accessibility and relevance, strengthening both cognitive and emotional engagement. Critical thinking was also supported, particularly through reflective inquiry and exposure to different research paradigms, though experiences varied. Some participants felt opportunities for structured debate and deeper analysis were limited, leaving them less challenged than they had hoped.

Future iterations would benefit from clearer early signposting of aims, closer integration of the RDF, and more explicit framing of how personal development, research skills, and different forms of critical inquiry are intended to work together.

A range of wider factors influenced participants' engagement and the effective delivery of the programme. Technology was generally not a barrier, with high levels of digital confidence and proactive support helping participants navigate new platforms. Canvas was widely regarded as intuitive, but experiences with Miro were more mixed. Induction activities were important in building familiarity with the technology and addressing any issues upfront.

Workspace conditions also shaped engagement. Participants joining from busy professional settings sometimes faced distractions and limited privacy, which constrained their ability to focus and contribute fully. More broadly, professional demands were a recurring challenge for some, with competing responsibilities limiting time for pre-learning and reducing the depth of participation.

The online format was widely valued for removing travel barriers, reducing stress, and making participation more manageable alongside work, as well as enhancing accessibility for some by easing social anxieties. However, many expressed a preference for a hybrid model that would combine online flexibility with opportunities for face-to-face connection.

Delivery team structure and dynamics were also influential. A small, consistent core team fostered stability and safety, whilst a diversity of professional backgrounds, facilitation styles and guest speakers enriched learning and made it accessible to different preferences. Effective delivery was underpinned by strong leadership, clear roles and responsibilities, and regular planning and reflection, although facilitators noted that strengthening relationships and building a shared vision within such a diverse team required dedicated time and space.

With regard to the learning outcomes, the evaluation indicates that InRes made a clear contribution to developing participants' knowledge, skills and confidence as practitioner researchers. Growth in curiosity, openness, and the confidence to ask challenging questions was particularly strong, with creative activities and a supportive environment fostering a more inquiring mindset. Most participants also reported improved confidence in identifying and accessing reliable research sources and in developing research questions from practice-based problems. Critical thinking also improved, with stronger progress in evaluating the components of successful research than in critically appraising research findings, where change was more modest.

Improvements in personal effectiveness was another important outcome. Participants reported increased confidence, self-reflection and enthusiasm for research, though gains in the latter two were less often described as substantial, suggesting some already entered the programme with strengths in these areas. All participants reported some positive change in how they saw themselves as researchers, but shifts were uneven and often modest, underlining that identity formation is a longer-term process.

Professional and career development outcomes were broadly positive. Participants reported stronger confidence in identifying their development needs, planning next steps, and, for some, broadening their view of possible career routes. Networking and collaboration were also amongst the strongest areas of growth, with participants building new connections within and beyond the cohort. Most also expressed intentions to continue engaging in research-related training and development, although a minority were less certain about their future engagement. In addition, confidence in using the Vitae RDF and in pursuing funding or development opportunities was more mixed, pointing to areas where further emphasis may be needed.

Participants also reported notable improvements in communication skills, gaining confidence in presenting research to different audiences and experimenting with creative approaches to share their work. Awareness of the social and cultural context of research also increased. Leadership outcomes, however, were more tentative. Most participants indicated improved confidence in their understanding of leadership and in demonstrating it in practice, but very few described substantial improvements, and shifts in leadership identity remained limited. Whilst the programme helped participants to begin to reframe leadership in collaborative and relational terms, further emphasis and clearer framing will be needed to strengthen leadership outcomes in future iterations.

In conclusion, the evaluation findings were synthesised into a revised theory of change, which captures how the programme's mechanisms fostered engagement, the outcomes achieved, and the wider system drivers shaping delivery. Drawing on these insights, the report then sets out recommendations for future iterations of InRes. These recommendations highlight ways to strengthen engagement across its emotional, behavioural, collaborative, social and cognitive dimensions, to address wider contextual factors that influence engagement and delivery, and enhance the programme's capacity to achieve its intended outcomes.