

## Guidance for applicants: 2021 competition

# Post-doctoral fellowships

Applicants should read this guidance in full before preparing an application and refer to the relevant sections at the time of completing the online application form.

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### 1. About The Healthcare Improvement Studies (THIS) Institute

At THIS Institute we aim to create a world-leading scientific asset for the NHS by strengthening the evidence-base for improving the quality and safety of healthcare. Co-created by two exceptional organisations - the University of Cambridge and the Health Foundation – THIS Institute is founded on the guiding principle that efforts to improve care should be based on the highest quality evidence. We combine academic rigour with the real concerns of the people who use and work in the NHS. And we're highly collaborative, working closely with patients, healthcare staff, and other sectors, to provide a unique range of perspectives.

*THIS Institute is made possible by the Health Foundation, an independent charity committed to bringing about better health and healthcare for people in the UK.*

### 2. Background to post-doctoral fellowship funding awards

Growing capacity and capability in healthcare improvement research is one of the THIS Institute's key goals. Building on the improvement science programmes previously run by the Health Foundation, we are committed to funding awards to support post-doctoral fellowships in improvement studies at UK universities. By

supporting promising early-career researchers, this programme will help to build critical mass for future research and improvement leadership. The Institute will fund three cohorts of post-doctoral fellows over the period 2018 – 2027.

Our three-year post-doctoral fellowships, which may be held at any UK university, offer a career-boosting opportunity for exceptional post-doctoral researchers to lead high-quality studies that will advance the field, to join a supported community of improvement researchers, and to develop their research leadership skills.

**Applications are welcome from individuals with a clinical or non-clinical professional background in any discipline that can make a contribution to research focused on improving healthcare for people in the UK. Applicants must have sponsorship from the head of an academic department (or equivalent) at a UK university. Applications to host a fellow between two or more departments / disciplines are welcome. Applications cannot be made directly by individuals to THIS Institute without a host university in the UK.**

We are looking for individuals who are between two and six years post award of their PhD, who can demonstrate that they can deliver the highest standards of research excellence and are driven to apply their skills to studying improvement in healthcare quality and safety. Alongside disciplines already active in this area (such as, for example, health services research, epidemiology, and social science), we're looking for fresh thinking and contributions from many fields within and beyond healthcare, including, for example, law, business studies, philosophy, engineering and many more. The requirement will be to show how the proposed research will add to the evidence-base and will be of relevance to the UK health system.

Fellowship awards will include a salary/stipend and research expenses. Though the fellowships are not Cambridge-based, fellows will convene in Cambridge as part of THIS Space and will have access to a mentoring scheme. In addition, the Institute will facilitate leadership development through a cohort learning set, with expert facilitation for fellows to develop skills in reflection, communication, leadership strategies and change management, as well as a specially tailored strand of activity at the annual meeting at Homerton. All fellows must commit to attend the leadership development learning set sessions. Where in-person events are not possible due to Covid-19-related restrictions, we seek to provide online alternatives.

### *Membership of THIS Space*

THIS Institute fellows will have a unique opportunity to be part of a vibrant and intellectually stimulating interdisciplinary and intergenerational community, centred on the study of improvement in healthcare. THIS Space will meet regularly at Homerton College in Cambridge and will also function as a professional learning

community, providing a 'home' for researchers from a wide range of disciplines. It is expected that all post-doctoral fellows will be actively involved in these activities.

### *Mentoring*

Fellows will benefit from mentorship tailored to their career stage. Mentors will be experienced in research and career development linked to the broad field of improvement studies. Individual mentors will be approved by the Institute and agree to the ethics and standards of the Institute scheme.

Successful post-doctoral candidates will begin as a cohort in **December 2021**.

### **3. Overview of the application process**

Any UK university may apply to the scheme. More than one application per university can be submitted. An individual wishing to apply for a fellowship will need to identify their desired host institution for the fellowship and approach the head of school/department (or equivalent) to gain departmental sponsorship for their application. The candidate fellow may already be associated with the department or may seek to move to a new host institution. Applications are welcome from individuals working in any discipline or research sector that can demonstrate a role in, and contribution to, research that is focused on improving healthcare for people in the UK.

Nominated individuals should have received their PhD between two and six years prior to the application (at 100%FTE or the equivalent part-time FTE). Their PhD should be in a discipline that is relevant to scientific efforts to improve healthcare. Applications will not be accepted from those currently undertaking PhDs or those with less than two years' post-doctoral experience on the submission date.

A post-doctoral fellowship is intended to be held full-time for three years in order to maximise cohort benefits. Part-time fellowships, at a minimum of 0.6FTE, can be held over a maximum of five years. These will be considered where, for example, applicants are undergoing clinical training or other circumstances apply. Those in clinical speciality training will be responsible for making their own arrangements with the relevant deanery or Local Education and Training Board, or equivalent, where appropriate.

All applications must be submitted via our [Fellowship Management System](#). All applications should be submitted by an administrative authority/finance office in the applying university.

The closing date for applications is 11 May 2021, 12.00 GMT. We do not accept late applications.

#### 4. Assessment criteria

The Institute will run a competitive assessment process to select the post-doctoral fellows. Candidates will need to demonstrate how their PhD research and/or subsequent research is relevant to efforts to improve quality and safety in healthcare in the UK. The nominating university department will need to demonstrate how their research and programmes of study will provide fertile ground for the development of a well-supported post-doctoral fellow.

Applications should provide evidence of relevant experience relating to all the assessment criteria detailed below:

##### *Nominated candidate*

- Demonstration of a commitment to developing a career in improvement research evidenced by the type of research carried out to date and the level of involvement in broad improvement research and implementation activities.
- Confirmation of award of PhD, with a minimum of two years prior to submission.
- Application of rigorous research methods and scientific theory (appropriate to discipline) evidenced through outputs from doctoral and post-doctoral research.
- Evidence of publication in peer reviewed journals.
- Potential for forming collaborations, influencing and impact in activities to further the improvement of quality and safety of healthcare services, at team, local or national level.
- Vision, drive and ability to influence at system or organisational level and potential to act as a leader and advocate for improvement studies in the future.
- The suitability of the host organisation for the research and for developing an independent career.
- A medium to long-term view of how it is hoped the fellowship work will make a difference in the broad field of healthcare improvement research.

##### *University*

- Centre of academic excellence with a strong record of research and career development for researchers.
- Extent to which the university is undertaking multidisciplinary research that will inform the development of theory, methods and application relevant to improvement studies, broadly defined to include health services research, law, engineering, organisation / management /

business studies, economics, social science and psychology), and other cognate areas (including, where relevance can be demonstrated, fields such as, but not limited to, the humanities, architecture, data science, and information studies).

- Capability to provide a suitably supportive and dynamic context for the delivery of the proposed research programme and to contribute to the programme overall.
- Quality of environment, including facilities, collaborative networks, and ability to work productively with the NHS.
- The department's ten most significant publications relevant to healthcare improvement studies, broadly conceived. The contributions to these papers from post-doctoral researchers should be identified.
- Approach to patient and public involvement in research.
- A supportive environment for the fellow to aid personal and career development, including a suitably senior academic as named mentor and a commitment to advancing the fellow's career.

A university may, in its application, optionally propose ways in which it would maximise the impact of the award through approaches to cross-funding, matched funding or additional funds to attract clinical and other high-calibre applicants etc.

## 5. Proposed research study

Fellows will lead on a significant piece of original research during their fellowship. The university department and the candidate fellow will need to demonstrate how the proposal builds on the individual's research to date and how it will synergise with other research in the department. Research proposals should have potential to take the field of healthcare improvement studies forward.

THIS Institute particularly welcomes applications that seek to generate systematic knowledge about:

- What works and why in approaches and interventions aimed at improving quality and safety.
- Challenges related to standardisation, harmonisation, replication and scaling.
- Methods and theory in studying improvement.

Research proposals should ideally address at least one of these scientific goals. As illustrative examples (only), this might be by developing evidence for improvement interventions and approaches, perhaps drawing on evidence from other fields such as business and management, engineering, or safety science;

developing measures of quality and safety; conducting scholarly analysis of legal issues in improvement; or producing methodological advances.

Research proposals need to demonstrate how the work will add to the evidence-base (broadly defined) for improving quality and safety in healthcare. Projects should show their relevance to the UK health system, and should ideally target areas that are either currently not supported or receive only limited support from existing funders. Projects that focus on neglected areas for improvement research are especially welcome, as are those that make use of existing data infrastructures (for example, routine data, national clinical audits, etc) and those that extend the range of disciplines (e.g. philosophy, engineering, law, economics, social science etc.) that can be used to study how to improve the organisation and delivery of healthcare. Projects that create novel interdisciplinary links will also be especially welcome.

We do not fund the following types of research projects:

- Global health.
- Projects targeting behaviour change or self-management in patients.
- Descriptive projects without an improvement strategy to be evaluated.
- Projects describing variation in healthcare or the epidemiology of a specific disease without an improvement strategy to be evaluated.
- Animal research.
- Basic research in the biomedical sciences (including but not only wet lab work).
- Projects seeking to develop patient-reported outcome measures
- Creation of cohorts.
- Development or testing of computer apps.
- Projects that seek to do an improvement project (e.g. applying the Model for Improvement with PDSA cycles, Lean etc.) unless embedded within a research study.
- Audits.
- Population/public health except where relevant to quality and safety in healthcare organisation and delivery.
- Projects that seek to develop devices, technology and/or pharmaceutical agents.
- Projects without potential for generalisation or transferability beyond a single clinical group/condition.

**Applicants are strongly encouraged to contact THIS Institute to confirm whether their proposed research is within scope before starting their application. Please contact [fellowships@thisinstitute.cam.ac.uk](mailto:fellowships@thisinstitute.cam.ac.uk).**

Assessment will consider the extent to which the research proposal:

- Relevant to improving quality and/or safety in UK healthcare.
- Synergistic with the department's research programme.
- Specified appropriately to be completed in a three-year fellowship.
- Demonstrates appropriate study design and research methods, taking into account different disciplinary norms.
- Reflects an appropriately scoped review of the relevant, existing evidence and systematic reviews of that evidence.
- Likely to make a valuable contribution to the field of improvement research.
- Well-presented and clearly written, and includes a high-quality plain English summary.

## **6. Budgeted costs and use of funding**

The award has a maximum value of £225,000 over the period of funding, regardless of length or clinical/non-clinical status of fellows. Universities may choose how they break down and allocate this sum. It is expected, at a minimum, that a university will use the funding to pay for:

- Salary costs for the fellow including all on-costs (superannuation and NI). If the application is for a fellowship to be undertaken part time (at a minimum of 0.6FTE), the percentage of time on the fellowship must be clearly stated and costed for. Universities must ensure that they offer an adequate salary to post-doctoral fellows.
- Research costs (e.g. conference attendance, items of small equipment, data access, transcription costs, meeting costs, and expenses for service-user participants).
- Dissemination and publication costs, including at least two open-access publications.
- The cost of travel to Cambridge/London for fellowship events.

We offer membership of THIS Space and access to a mentoring scheme at no cost to post-doctoral fellows. Fellows will be expected to participate in learning sets and other leadership development opportunities provided by THIS Institute.

Applicants are asked to provide a breakdown of all costs for supporting a post-doctoral fellowship.

Where a university is proposing to cross-fund, match fund, or bring in additional funds to leverage the grant from the Institute in order to support additional post-doctoral fellows, this should be clearly outlined in the application form.

The Institute will only fund the directly incurred costs for the post-doctoral fellow and their research. We don't provide funds for estates; directly allocated or indirect costs<sup>1</sup>. This funding is not offered on a proportion of full economic costs (FEC) basis.

Funding is made available exclusively to support the name post-doctoral fellow and is not intended to be used to support other salary costs (for example, costs for supervisors). Successful organisations will be issued with a formal funding agreement between the University of Cambridge and the recipient University.

## 7. Assessment and selection

All applications will be checked initially for eligibility and completeness. A preliminary assessment and scoring against the selection criteria will then take place by a selection panel, at the end of which high-scoring applications will be sent for external peer review.

Applications shortlisted following peer review will be invited for a panel interview, to take place **07 September 2021**. After the interviews (which may include a short presentation), the panel will select post-doctoral fellows based on how far they demonstrate fulfilment of the selection criteria and how they aim to maximise the opportunity of the fellowship to contribute to the field of improvement research.

All shortlisted applicants who are interviewed will be informed of the outcome of their application following the selection panel meeting. All peer-reviewed applicants will receive brief written feedback.

## 8. Monitoring and reporting requirements

The Institute will require post-doctoral fellows to submit an annual report to include:

- A research progress report, including a summary of research undertaken for the fellowship and any slippage against the proposed project timescale.

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<sup>1</sup> THIS Institute will only fund directly incurred costs – costs that are specifically purchased for the project and are charged on the basis of cash amount spent and are verifiable and auditable (e.g. fellow's salary/stipend, travel, materials). We don't provide funds for directly allocated or indirect costs: Directly allocated costs – costs of resources used by a project that are shared by other activities and based on estimates (e.g. principal and co-investigator costs, estates costs). Indirect costs – non-specific costs charged across all projects that are based on estimates (e.g. HR and finance services, library costs).

- Information on the fellow’s relevant publications, presentations, other activities to promote improvement research and/or to influence quality and/or safety of care services.
- A reflection on personal development to include the contribution from and to learning sets, mentoring and THIS Space.
- A summary of the Fellow’s host institution’s contribution to improvement research and its development/ application over the year.
- Report of expenditure against the fellowship budget with any variances noted and an explanation provided.

Following completion of the post-doctoral fellowship, the fellow is expected to have successfully completed a robust research programme and can show evidence of:

- Completion of the research proposed in the application.
- Increased research skills in existing and new areas.
- The ability to independently lead a research programme.
- Leadership skills relevant to an academic career.
- A range of publications (including as a minimum two open access) and other outputs arising from the fellowship research within two years of completing the fellowship.
- Contribution to improvement research capacity-building, through for example, generating new research grants, mentoring Masters and /or PhD students, teaching on improvement research.
- Increased leadership and management skills.
- The establishment of a broad range of collaborative relationships.

The institute’s communications team will develop a set of core messages and acknowledgements for the post-doctoral fellowship awards, and recipients are expected to use these when communicating externally about the fellowship awards. Fellowship award recipients should adopt the agreed institute branding in all communication and media, for example presentations, publications, academic articles, websites or videos, both internally and externally.

## **9. Application, selection and recruitment timetable**

**Competition opens** – 02 March 2021, 09.00 GMT

**Application deadline** – 11 May 2021, 12:00 GMT

**First stage assessment completed** – 19 May 2021

**Short-listed candidates notified of interview – 03 August 2021**

**Interviews – 07 September 2021**

**Funding decision – 09 September 2021**