

BDCD Fellowship recruitment call process

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Introduction

The HDR UK [Big Data for Complex Disease \(BDCD\)](#) Driver Programme has awarded six fellowships via an open, competitive call. This is part of a £1.8 million fund aiming to support early career researchers and accelerate their future in health data science.

Two of the fellowships are jointly funded with the [Molecules to Health Records Driver Programme](#). The fellowships are designed to accelerate careers in health data science of the awardees, and help deliver the ambitious aims of the [Big Data for Complex Disease](#) and [Molecules to Health Records](#) Driver Programmes. All successful applicants demonstrated outstanding commitment to HDR UK's [mission](#) and values of [open science](#) and collaboration.

The Fellowship offer

The BDCD fellowship programme is designed to accelerate the careers of high potential early career researchers (ECRs) who wish to pursue a career in health data science, and help deliver the ambitious aim to harness whole population, national scale linked health data to improve the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cardiovascular disease, cancer and other complex diseases. The programme is led by [Mark Lawler](#) and [Cathie Sudlow](#).

Each fellowship will fund the salary and associated on costs of each Fellow, plus up to £15,000 per annum in research costs. Applications from both clinical and non-clinical prospective fellows were invited.

Recruitment process

Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and HDR UK coordinated a rapid, open competition to attract high quality applications from potential fellows. The recruitment process was delivered by the [HDR UK Training Team](#), led by Sarah Cadman and supported by Katie Morris. The approach enabled an open, transparent, agile and highly effective process with ambitious timelines. The infographic below outlines the rapid 3-month turnaround process from the competition being launched mid-December 2023, through to fellowships being awarded at the beginning of March 2024. The competition generated a high number of enquiries, demonstrating high levels of interest. Cathie Sudlow and Mark Lawler also conducted online calls with prospective applicants to answer questions in more detail. A total of 35 applications were received from HDR UK member universities across the UK.

BDCD FELLOWSHIP RECRUITMENT TIMELINE



A selection committee composed of associate directors and co-investigators from within the BDCD programme was rapidly convened to score the applications and attend a sifting panel meeting to discuss which applications to shortlist, with each application being scored by at least two different panel members. Applications were scored across various different criteria, including alignment with the BDCD Driver Programme, alignment with HDR UK values, scientific quality of the proposal, and experience and expertise of the applicant and supervisory team. The panel commented on the high quality of all 35 applications. After deliberation, 14 were shortlisted for interview.

Shortlisted candidates were interviewed by a panel consisting of; [Mark Lawler](#), [Angela Wood](#), [Georgios \(Yoryos\) Lyratzopoulos](#), and [Rachel Denholm](#). Candidates were asked to prepare a ten-minute presentation on their proposal, including demonstrating alignment to the BDCD Driver Programme. The turnaround time for candidates to prepare these presentations was short, however all delivered high-quality presentations which the panel were very impressed by. The answers to the ‘*Why an HDR UK Fellowship?*’, (as opposed to an MRC or UKRI fellowship, for example) also demonstrated good knowledge of HDR UK and its mission. Many of the candidates expressed enthusiasm to join HDR UK’s health data science community and networks if successful. Efforts have continued post award outcome to ‘matchmake’ some of those not awarded a Fellowship with key leaders across the HDR UK community.

Due to additional co-funding from the Molecules to Health Records Driver Programme, six fellowships were able to be funded. The integration and collaboration across these two Driver Programmes will be strengthened by the co-funding of these two fellowships. Feedback was provided to those who were not awarded a Fellowship after interview. Final decisions on what fellowships to fund were challenging – all were high quality and deemed appointable to equivalent but

more traditional, fellowship schemes. However, decisions were made not just on the quality of the proposal, applicant and supervisory team, but also on how well the proposal was aligned with the BDCD Driver programme and core HDR UK values and mission. Mark and Cathie wish to highlight and celebrate the high quality of applications throughout all stages of this process and are keen to continue liaising with the applicants and HDR UK community to investigate wider potential opportunities across HDR UK which may be suitable.

Out of the six awarded fellowships, three are clinical, and three are non-clinical. The fellows and their supervisors are from HDR UK member universities across the UK: UCL, Cambridge, Leeds, Oxford, Nottingham, Swansea, Edinburgh, Queen's University Belfast, LSHTM, KCL, Dundee, and Leicester.



The projects

The projects of the successful fellows are summarised on the HDR UK website.

- [Naomi Launders](#)- Health Inequalities in CVD and Cancer in People with Severe or Complex Mental Illness
- [Elias Allara](#)- Identifying preventative opportunities for coronary heart disease and stroke in multi-ancestry patients with non-cardiovascular conditions
- [Katie Spencer](#)- **ENQUIRE**: Using routine health data to understand equity in NHS cancer care
- [Ramesh Nadarajah](#)- **FIND-HFpEF**: Data phenotyping, patterns of incidence and outcomes by inequalities, and risk prediction for heart failure with preserved ejection using whole population national linked health data
- [Genevieve Cezard](#)-Understanding the relationship between diabetes and the development of multiple long-term conditions in Scotland, England and Wales
- [Ralph Akyea](#)- Improved Risk Stratification in Primary Care: Leveraging 'Big Data' and Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence

The selection of these fellows signifies the conclusion of a rigorous selection process, and the start of exciting collaborations which will drive forward understandings of complex diseases and contribute towards addressing healthcare disparities. These fellows will play a key role in propelling forward health data science for improved health and well-being in the years ahead.