How to… support others in developing a career in clinical education research

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Abstract

The Incubator for Clinical Education Research (ClinEdR) is a UK-wide network, established with support from the National Institute for Health Research, to lead initiatives to build capacity in the field. A key barrier identified by this group is that many experienced educators, clinicians, and researchers, who may be committed to supporting others, have little guidance on how best to do this. In this "How to …" paper, we draw on relevant literature and our individual and collective experiences as members of the National Institute for Health Research ClinEdR incubator to offer suggestions on how educators can support others to develop successful careers involving ClinEdR. This article offers guidance and inspiration for all professionals whose role involves research and scholarship and who encounter aspiring or developing clinical education researchers in the course of their work. It will also be of interest to researchers who are starting out and progressing in the field.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Clinical Education Research (ClinEdR) is increasingly recognised and valued across the health professions. Research aimed at improving health care professionals' education and training benefits practitioners and improves clinical practice.[1] An example of this is the impact of changes to medical training on improving care for patients with multimorbidity.[2] Understandably then, many professionals interested in creating change within health care are turning to ClinEdR.[3]

This article draws on the perspectives of a group of multidisciplinary professionals with interests in ClinEdR to suggest ways educators, clinicians, and researchers can support those developing careers in this field. Why is guidance specific to ClinEdR necessary? The answer is that, while establishing any research career is difficult, ClinEdR is a contested space that is particularly challenging for early-stage researchers to navigate. Despite growing recognition of its contribution to patient care and health care professional development, the role and value of ClinEdR is disputed.[4] Methodologies and theories used are wide-ranging, often unfamiliar to those without social science or educational backgrounds, and tensions exist between them, for example, with quantitative research often valued over qualitative research.[4] Further, researchers can face stigma based on their professional backgrounds (particularly "nonclinical" or "nonpractising" individuals).[5] Such issues mean that starting out in ClinEdR is not just about learning new skills but involves becoming a member of a new community of practice and developing an identity as a clinical education researcher. The consequence is that career progression often relies on serendipity,[6] and this, we argue, makes individualised support all-important.

This guidance was inspired by discussion amongst members of the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Incubator for ClinEdR, a UK-wide network, established with support from the NIHR, which is leading initiatives to build capacity in the field. A key barrier identified by this group is that many experienced educators, clinicians, and researchers, who may be committed to supporting others, have little guidance on how best to do this within ClinEdR. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to help build capacity by focussing on the needs of those able to support or supervise developing researchers. We anticipate this will include midcareer educational researchers but also a diverse range of others (e.g., educators and experienced clinicians). The five sections that follow take account of the ClinEdR landscape, and its opportunities and challenges, to reflect on what "good support" might look like. This article complements "How to... begin a career in ClinEdR," which provides guidance for aspiring researchers themselves. Together, these articles will help optimise both individual career development strategies and research environments as we seek to lead change in health professions education and training.

2 | HOW TO... EMBRACE PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUNDS

Good, supportive relationships are central to effective career development. They begin with establishing an understanding of a supervisee's professional (and personal) background. This is particularly true in ClinEdR, where researchers hail from a wide range of professions, both clinical and educational, and often bring significant experience that informs research activity. To effectively harness these perspectives and provide guidance that meets a researcher's specific needs, an understanding of the distinct characteristics of different professional contexts is required.

Profession-specific norms, values, conditions, and cultures can enable or obstruct careers involving ClinEdR. The research activity of nursing, midwifery, and allied health care professionals (allied health care professionals are a diverse group of clinicians, e.g., occupational therapists and operating department practitioners), for example, can be limited by contractual challenges around "buying out" of clinical time to do research. Cultural barriers relating to the perceived value of research being tied to patient outcomes[7] may limit practice-based ClinEdR opportunities. A vicious circle can thereby ensue, where nursing, midwifery, and allied health care professionals are not as exposed to educational research as they are to clinical research and, therefore, do not see its value. By contrast, medical and dental professionals may be able to access formal opportunities as part of postgraduate training or as structured early career placements, for example, UK Specialised Foundation Programme positions.[8]

As an advisor, you must be aware of professional context so that you can create opportunities that work for your supervisee. This might mean practical steps such as offering flexible working arrangements or finding funding opportunities to buy out clinical time. It might mean orienting research towards areas of inquiry that are more directly linked to patient care and allow you to make a strong case for need and potential impact. Further, we should all consider ways in

TABLE 1 Practical tips for faculty regarding supporting developing clinical education researchers within the diverse professional landscape of the field.

Practical points: Supporting developing researchers within a diverse professional landscape
1. Knowing profession-specific career structures, expectations, and limitations will help you assist others to identify and navigate career paths within that profession.
2. Having a good understanding of the resources, services, and opportunities provided by your institution (e.g., your university or research centre) and the ways in which you can access and interact with them can help you to better connect developing researchers with these.
3. Having an awareness of profession-specific cultures, including vocabulary, can help you promote the importance of ClinEdR to these groups. Further, while ClinEdR may share common themes and methodologies across professions, the contexts and cultures of different professions may influence research design, data collection, and interpretation.
4. Supporting researchers to develop a specific area of expertise within clinical education, with an appropriate skillset for that area of expertise, can help developing researchers to articulate their impact and the value of their research.
5. Finding ways to provide practical support for your supervisee, including accommodating flexible working arrangements, ring-fencing time for research, and supporting them to identify areas of research that will lead to patient benefit so that they are more likely to secure funding.
6. Raising awareness of what ClinEdR involves by connecting with relevant clinical groups may promote interest. For example, seeking their views on project design and research findings and publishing in a range of formats that encourage accessibility and reach, such as newsletters and practitioner-focussed journals.

Abbreviation: ClinEdR, Clinical Education Research.

which we can raise the profile of ClinEdR within clinical settings, for example, through collaborating with profession-specific associations and relevant clinicians in research activities, and carefully planning a strategy for supervisees to disseminate their work (Table 1).

3 | HOW TO... PROVIDE EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP AND COACHING

Once you have developed an understanding of your supervisee's formative background, the next step is to consider how you can provide them with individualised support. Literature on different approaches and styles abound. In reality, we suspect that good support involves multiple approaches that run in parallel. Nevertheless, focussing on principles of mentoring and coaching provides a helpful starting point, as getting to know a developing researcher using these approaches fosters appreciation of their goals, strengths, and areas for development.[9]

Mentoring involves advising mentees on career development, while coaching guides participants to identify their own goals and skills without offering advice.[9] Both are beneficial: Mentoring offers experiential tips, while coaching enables reflection on practice and

TABLE 2 Description of the TGROW communication model and example questions to facilitate coachee or mentee self-inquiry.

Domain of TGROW model	Topic	Goal	Reality	Options	Way forward
Description of domain	What the coachee would like to focus on, discussed at the start of each meeting	What the coachee wants to achieve or their reasons for their topic focus	Description of the coachee's current situation in relation to their selected topic	Exploring and evaluating options for moving forwards, coachee-generated suggestions	Deciding on a way forward and agreeing specific time-bound actions
Example questions coaches may utilise	• What would you like to talk about today? • What do you want to achieve by the end of this meeting?	• What are you looking to achieve [within this topic]? • What's the bigger picture of what you are trying to achieve? • Why do you want to focus on [this topic] today? • What does success look like for you within [this topic]? • If I could wave a magic wand so that you woke up tomorrow and had achieved your goal, what does that look like? • What is the most important thing to you in doing this work?	• Can you tell me about how things are going at the moment in relation to [this topic]? • What is your biggest challenge? What is the impact of that right now? • How far off is the achievement of your goal? • Challenge assumptions—how do you know that? What would happen if you did do that? What could be the worst thing that might happen? What could be the best thing that could happen? • Have you faced any similar challenges in the past? Can you tell me more—how did you respond to these challenges? What could you apply here?	• What have you already tried? What worked well, and what worked less well? • How could you do things differently? • What support or resources could you access? • How will you decide between your options? • How does [this option] help you reach your goal?	• What is the first thing you need to do? • What strategies are you going to put in place to pursue this way forward? • When are you going to take the first steps? • How will you know when you have achieved your goal? • How can I support you with this plan?

Note: Adapted from Downey[12] and ASME.[11]

identity development (or who mentees wish to become).[10] There can be additional benefit in helping researchers find an independent mentor in addition to the support you are providing. Independent mentors can offer a fresh perspective, connect researchers with a broader network of contacts and resources, and act as an external sounding board.

Principles of effective mentoring and coaching include establishing goals and expectations, building trust and rapport, fostering self-inquiry, and providing guidance on topics of importance to the mentee. Mentoring is often provided informally, but considering a structured approach can be beneficial for your mentee, and in helping you reflect on your own style. You could consider undertaking mentoring/coaching training, which may be available within your institution or via professional associations. Training is likely to include advice on the structure of meetings and use of communication models, such as TGROW[11,12] (Topic, Goal, Reality, Options, Way forward; Table 2).

4 | HOW TO… SUPPORT COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Developing a career in ClinEdR, beyond the supervisor–supervisee relationship, relies on becoming part of a community of practice. You can promote this by connecting the developing researcher with professional networks.[13] A local network or group gives researchers a "home," with access to peer support and additional training opportunities. National networks (e.g., through clinical education societies) can link the researcher to conferences, events, special interest groups, and mentorship schemes. Methodological diversity

TABLE 3 Suggestions for supporting the development of researchers' professional networks.

Suggestions for supporting the development of researchers' professional networks	
What to do	**Why this matters**
Offer opportunities to participate in established research projects	Provides opportunities for networking with project collaborators and other researcher peers. Often leads to further collaborative research opportunities
Take steps to expand your own professional network through engagement at relevant clinical education events and within professional bodies/societies	Creates a wider academic network you can connect developing researchers with; helps you stay up to date with recent research developments; provides a route to new research opportunities/collaborations/funding sources; and enhancing your professional profile in the field
Make introductions between the researcher and members of your professional networks	Opens conversations about future research opportunities; enhances understanding of international contexts/issues; and provides opportunities to gather information about diverse clinical education careers
Familiarise yourself with clinical education professional societies but also professional societies relevant to the researcher's usual practice or background	Attending conferences, workshops, or other events can provide researchers with valuable opportunities to learn from others, present their own research, and receive feedback. Societies relevant to the researcher's practice background can offer additional opportunities for learning and collaboration, as well as access to resources and support networks that are specific to their profession. Peer support and friendship within the field can help developing researchers make sense of their own developing work and identities
Assist developing researchers in sourcing funding for attendance at professional conferences or events	Academic events give opportunities to learn about the latest research, network with peers and experts in the field, and share research findings with a wider audience. However, conferences and events can be costly and helping developing researchers to source funding can enable them to participate fully
Assist developing researchers to grow their networking skills, for example, rehearsing an "elevator pitch"[13] of their interests and needs	Building strong professional relationships and networks can help researchers identify new research opportunities, collaborations, and funding sources. Practising and rehearsing an elevator pitch can help researchers become more comfortable and confident in their ability to communicate their research interests and needs
Ensure that a researcher's supervisory team represents diverse perspectives on their topic of interest (e.g., academic perspectives and clinical perspectives)	Facilitates both an appreciation of context within data analysis but also access to wider professional networks, for example, through academic and clinical routes

with ClinEdR means that it is often helpful to look further afield for contacts. Helping trainees connect with international collaborators can benefit their work and open doors to global opportunities, including travel fellowships, and increase their appreciation of varying contexts.

We have outlined additional suggestions for supporting community of practice development (Table 3). In brief, these strategies include offering researchers opportunities to work alongside, and network with, a diverse range of research colleagues; broadening your own professional network and ClinEdR reach; and assisting researchers to develop their networking skills.

5 | HOW TO… PROVIDE PRACTICAL, TASK-BASED SUPPORT

If supportive relationships and networks provide the structure for career development, active involvement in research teams provides the substance. There are almost always opportunities for developing ClinEd researchers to contribute to ongoing research projects. In doing so, advisors can support them to develop research skills. Participation as a member of a project advisory group, for example, can allow developing researchers to use their professional experiences (e.g., as a nursing student) to shape project design and delivery. This is mutually beneficial—their lived experiences ensure that research is focussed and relevant to the professional group, while they gain understanding of research processes. Being part of a wider research team can give aspiring researchers opportunities in skill development as well as access to peer support and mentorship. Considering what is appropriate for the researcher's development needs and career goals, it is important to align opportunities with researcher's interests, map these to the different stages of research, and continue to support progress through mentoring.

Figure 1 describes a range of tasks that allow developing researchers to experience, in a range of flexible ways, the stages of a research project.

FIGURE 1 Practical task possibilities for developing researchers in Clinical Education Research.
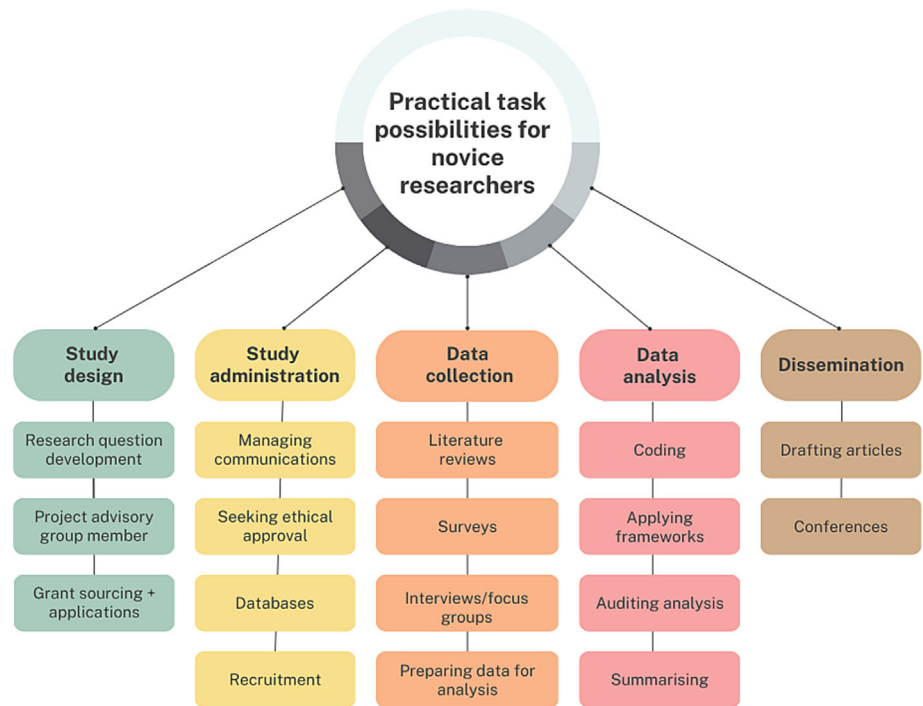

TABLE 4 Practical tips for Clinical Education Research supervision.

Practical tips for Clinical Education Research Supervision

Seeking mentorship from an experienced supervisor (either within the supervisory team you are part of or from another supervisor) can be very beneficial. Some universities may offer this support for new supervisors, but in others, you will need to agree this informally (e.g., cosupervising alongside an experienced person where mentorship is part of the cosupervision opportunity).

Identify local training opportunities to make sure you understand the relevant academic processes involved in supervision and that you are clear on the institution's regulations and your responsibilities.

Discuss and agree expectations of your role and any practicalities of supervision meetings with your cosupervisors and the supervisee.

Reflect on your own beliefs, values, perspectives, and experiences regarding ClinEdR and supervision and consider how these might influence your student's experience.

Clarify feedback preferences and expectations—agree with a student how you will provide feedback on their work and establish reasonable time frames in which you will return feedback. This allows students to plan their work more effectively.

Where there are differences of opinion amongst a supervisory team, consider the student's position, perspectives, needs, and goals. Aim to resolve differences in opinion quickly and without involving students in any tension.

Make sure you have agreed sufficient time in your working timetable to allow you to commit fully to supervision.

If supervision is largely or wholly remote, build in regular, defined check-in points to monitor progress and troubleshoot.

Advisor development events (such as provided through the Incubator for Clinical Education Faculty Development Series) can help you to navigate this commitment and form long-term professional relationships through collegiate discussion with near and experienced peers who understand the challenges (and opportunities) of Clinical Education Research.

6 | HOW TO… LOOK INWARD AND FOCUS FORWARD

The final advice we offer is this: look inward and focus forward.

6.1 | Look inward

By this, we mean reflect deeply on your own development needs as an advisor. Working with and helping to grow the community of ClinEdR is a rewarding experience. Focussing on your own professional development needs will enhance your success in this role. Effectively supporting others requires time and a wide skillset, including mentoring, coaching, pastoral skills, conflict resolution, advanced time management, and flexibility.

The nature of your needs depends on your experience but also on the type of relationship you have with the researcher—formal supervisors accept a greater commitment to the development of the individual than they would as an informal mentor. We have outlined practical tips for new supervisors in Table 4.

6.2 | Focus forward

Here, we mean keep an eye on changes happening in ClinEdR at national and international levels and what these might mean for learners, practitioners, and organisations. The rapidly evolving health care landscape (e.g., with new professional groups and changes in care delivery) offers opportunities for ClinEdR. For example, increasing attention on issues such as staffing shortages[14] and practitioner well-being,[15] along with recognition that ClinEdR has the potential to generate evidence to support meaningful solutions, means that there are new possibilities for large-scale research funding. As you consider the ClinEdR landscape, reflect on the direction of your programme of research and how developing researchers might contribute. This could range from participation in a Project Advisory Group (see Section 5) to the basis of a doctoral project application. Consider your own network and how you might collaborate with researchers in other institutions. The diversity of expertise in a collaborative team introduces learners to a wider range of skills and opportunities, enhances research rigour and potential for impact, and, in this way, increases chances of securing competitive research funding.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have drawn on our experiences as clinicians, educators, and researchers to offer practical advice on how to enhance the support we offer aspiring "others." This matters because individuals often lack support; and because, as a ClinEdR community, the support we offer emerging researchers is fundamental to our future development as a research discipline. This paper enters this conversation (asynchronously), but there are established networks that present opportunities to continue it. The NIHR Incubator for ClinEdR is one example of such an opportunity—where new and experienced researchers work together to further the field of ClinEdR. We hope this guidance helps you, and those in your local networks, to take up the mantle to engage and support a diverse group of talented future researchers.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

G. V. was responsible for conceptualisation of this paper, with M. B., R. S., A. A., A. D., and R. C. all contributing significantly to design and analysis. M. B. led on writing the first draft, which was reviewed and edited by all team members. All team members approved the paper prior to publication.

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None.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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