



Cat Rolls, Physiotherapist, who joined the GW4-CAT HP programme in the third cohort shares her thoughts on her PhD journey so far.

Where are you in your PhD journey?

I am halfway through the second year of my PhD, I am working less than full time so I have to keep reminding myself I have plenty of time left.

How was the transition from work into your PhD?

Having worked clinically for about 15 years before starting my PhD I have loved the transition. I am really enjoying having full autonomy over how, when and where I work. Having worked as a physiotherapist where the hours have always been very prescriptive it did take me a good year to shake the feeling that I should be working set hours!

What helped you navigate the transition successfully?

Mainly my peer group. We all have different working styles and talking at cohort days has helped me to look at how productive I am being rather than just am I present.

What would you do differently or what advice would you give to health and care professionals looking to do a PhD?

I would think bigger, the GW4 set up allows amazing collaborations and really encourages cross disciplinary working, to be honest I'm not really sure I understood what that meant when I started. I think it is helpful to get someone on your team early who understands and is an expert in research topic/clinical area - and that person doesn't have to be limited to the GW4 supervisory team, but then really think about what you can tap into across all of the expertise from the GW4 institutes.

How is your research going compared to your proposal/timeline/expectations.

What's big challenges have you've faced so far during your PhD, and how have you overcome them?

I am working mainly with secondary data from UK Biobank, having no experience of coding prior to my PhD it has been a massive learning curve. My husband describes my PhD like making a cake, but before I can bake the cake, I am having to build the oven...that is what coding has been for me, but I have surprised myself with how much I have achieved.

I have changed my plans a bit as I have gone along, not because anything has gone wrong but certain aspects have been more interesting than others. I am looking at physical activity and had planned some genetic work but have become really interested in accelerometry data – the joy of a PhD is you have the flexibility to change as you go.

What are you most pleased with / what has worked better than you expected?

I felt at the start that I had come up with a project that I was interested in but was guided by my supervisors interests, as I have progressed, I now feel this is very much my work and have gained the confidence to follow my own research interests.



What aspects of the GW4-CAT HP programme have helped you most so far?

As a non-medic the research community is quite small, and the basic science research community is even smaller. I came from an NIHR pre-doc where I didn't really know anyone else doing what I was. My intake cohort as well as the whole current and alumni group is so supportive. If you have questions on ethics, HR, data, basically anything, there will be someone either with the answer or willing to help you find it. I love that.

What is the best part of your PhD?

It is a complete privilege to be paid to study something I am really interested in, constantly learning new skills, and being my own boss.

What advice would you give to other health care professionals, wishing to follow a career in clinical academia?

To non-medics, it is a bit of a leap of faith as the pathway to clinical academia is not clear cut at all. On the flip side there is momentum building and growing recognition for what we can bring. The reality at application is that you probably won't have a comparable research CV to your medical colleagues but GW4 know that and do take that into account – they want to see that if they invest their time and money in you that you are going to do something with that. In relation to the GW4 fellowship itself I would advise reaching out to current/past GW4 fellows – especially if you are from a non-medical background. It will help you to understand how GW4 differs to other funders like NIHR. GW4 has a strong focus on basic science and underlying mechanisms, it is good to think about how to frame your research ideas in this light.

Cat Rolls – GW4-CAT HP Fellow, Cohort HP3
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