

Appointed to the Programme and Looking Ahead – Kate Taylor (July 2025)

I am a dietitian with an interest in nutrition and healthy ageing, also with a speciality in interstitial lung disease. I am excited to be starting a PhD Award in 2026. Having been interested in research since my undergraduate degree, my clinical work only left me with more questions – a downside to a curious nature! It would be good to say that it has been a story of easy wins and success, but it has felt more like a long and winding road at times and I would really like to encourage others not to give up on a research journey.

I originally interviewed for GW4-CAT HP in 2023 but was unsuccessful and decided to submit an application again when the call opened in 2024. After my previous application I was given written feedback and one of the local directors met with me to help look at developing my ideas and myself as a candidate if I wanted to apply again. The main feedback I received was to focus on developing a publication record through academic writing. Regarding my ‘big question’ it was seen as an interesting project, but I was encouraged to explore alternative approaches to deepen my understanding of different research methodologies and carefully consider its feasibility for a PhD project. My initial approach of a randomised control trial was not recommended for a PhD and did not fit with the programme remit of biomedical research.

Over the past two years with some funded research time through smaller grants alongside clinical work, I have presented

abstracts at conferences and worked on completing two academic papers for submission. I attended some research focused conferences in my area of interest and have actively sought out opportunities to expand my learning and refine my thinking about the potential direction of my PhD.

Approaching interview this time around I went with a much more open mind, much more out of my comfort zone in terms of methodology. I had looked at the named supervisors across the four universities and thought about how a project could be addressed in different ways with the specialist knowledge available. I contacted a few of the supervisors to discuss ideas. One of the directors from Exeter, who was not on my interview panel, along with a post graduate researcher, conducted a mock interview for me. Giving me the chance to run through my presentation and possible questions which was invaluable. A few of the previous and current GW4-CAT HP cohort were also very willing to meet with me and help me navigate the process and think through my ideas. I found them all friendly and enthusiastic.

I am not going to say the interview was easy – it was intense with about ten people in the room taking it in turns to ask questions and

all writing notes. However, they were friendly and I came away with the impression that they are genuinely helping develop people and ideas. If I could overcome nerves, I could even say it was exciting to discuss research ideas with a room full of significant expertise.

I am now looking forward to my Pre-PhD year and have already met with my allocated director mentor who is helping guide me in the process of finalising my supervisors and project ideas. During the pre-PhD year progressive iterations of my proposal have to be submitted on a regular basis culminating in a final project interview in June 2026. Currently I face the year feeling excited at the possibilities that this scheme allows in developing as a researcher but also overwhelmed by the slightly blank page in front of me! I am now in the process of meeting potential supervisors so we can discuss where their expertise can potentially support my research project.

I have a little of my current NIHR PenARC pre-application support funding left to support this process. When this finishes, I plan to work part time for a while to afford me the space to write the proposal alongside family life. My children are teenagers now, and whilst I don't have the demands I used to have, gone are the days of tucking them into bed and having a clear run of hours at the kitchen table studying. I aim to be realistic in balancing home and work, but they may tell you otherwise!

Starting my PhD proper seems a far-off dream still, but I am really looking forward to learning new skills and developing current

ones. Being employed to concentrate on a PhD is a privilege and having the breadth of universities within the scheme to work with exciting. I have also heard that the cohort days are invaluable, with the opportunity to meet and learn from peers within the scheme.

I have spoken to many PhD students about the highs and lows of PhD life and think I am prepared. The main challenge for me will be maintaining that work and family balance. I also know as an Allied Health Professional (AHP) the research route is not well defined so the pathway ahead remains a little uncertain. However, I know that the programme also provides post PhD support.

My future ambition is to deepen understanding of dietary advice for healthy ageing for those with chronic conditions, to add to the evidence base from which we can provide best advice for our patients. This scheme allows me the funded time for training, working with experts in different fields in a truly interdisciplinary way to explore new, cutting-edge ways of investigating inflammation, diet and health. I am excited!