Embedded researchers in public health:
A research briefing for universities
and research organisations

Why consider becoming involved in an embedded researcher scheme?

- Major Research Funders (for example the National Institute for Health and Care Research) and Research Councils (for example the Economic and Social Research Council) are increasingly expecting academic researchers to demonstrate the impact of funded research. Impact has several meanings, but in broad terms, it is understood as the demonstrable contribution that research makes to society.
- In the case of public health research, impact means providing those working in public health with the evidence they need to improve the health of the public and ameliorate inequalities. Within public health, Local Authority (LA) public health teams are at the forefront of developing policies and providing services to protect and improve the health of the population. Ensuring LA public health teams are using research evidence to inform decision-making is therefore a key indicator of public health research impact.
- However, research often doesn't influence LA public health decision-making as much as it could due to several factors that mainly reflect a disconnect between LAs and Universities. Universities are therefore missing out on opportunities to ensure that their research is creating impact.
- Embedded researchers are a way of working that can bridge the gap between research and policy/practice, ensuring research evidence directly addresses policy/practice needs and helping to facilitate the flow of research evidence to inform decision-making.

What are embedded researchers?

- Embedded Researchers work with dual affiliations: a university (or other research organisation) and a policy/practice organisation.
- 'Embedded researcher' is a term that describes a wide variety of models. Embedded researcher positions differ across several dimensions including who becomes embedded, how they become embedded, and the activities they undertake.
- Embedded researchers represent a collaborative approach between universities/research organisations and policy/practice organisations. Our work largely focussed on LA public health teams, although the lessons are likely to be applicable to other settings.
- Rather than entering policy/practice organisations with a fixed protocol in place, embedded researchers co-create a more equitable and collaborative way of working to identify how LAs (or other organisations) can become more research active. In doing so, embedded researchers become integral host team members as well as retaining their affiliation with the home institution (university/research organisation).

> *"...I believe that roles such as these can produce more impactful and useable data. I also believe furthering the links between policy and practice is key. Moreover, I believe the quality of evidence is significantly improved through roles like this."*

What value can the experience of being an embedded researcher bring to universities and individual researchers?

- Embedded researchers can be viewed as presenting a challenge to a power dynamic which perpetuates the unhelpful belief that well-conducted (but often de-contextualised) research should automatically inform decisions, and that this happens in a linear and unidirectional way. Embedded researchers can help to create mutually beneficial, respectful and reciprocal relationships between academia, policy and practice organisations to promote an open learning culture alongside opportunities for collaborative work at all stages of research-policy processes (from agenda setting through to dissemination).

- From a university's standpoint, supporting embedded researchers to work at the interface of research and policy/practice can ensure that (i) research is co-created and helps to meet the needs of consumers of research; (ii) the uptake of research is maximised which can increase its impact; (iii) universities have a direct link with policy and practice partners that can ensure that the focus of research better meets the realities of public health needs; and (iv) co-creating research with policy and practice partners ensures that research incorporates multiple perspectives which leads to better quality research.
- In our research, we document examples where embedded researchers developed strong trusting relationships with LA public health teams. These relationships were the foundation for further collaborative working between research organisations and public health teams which subsequently led to successful large scale research projects being funded.
- Embedded researcher opportunities offer individual researchers with fulfilling opportunities that broaden their horizons and can offer alternative career pathways. It can also prevent burnout and reinvigorate researchers' interest by allowing them to see the impact of their work.

> *"[Being an embedded researcher has been] positive: it has personally transformed and opened horizons (the more I know the less I know); I had a very varied career and it never gets boring"*

What types of embedded researcher opportunities are preferred by academic researchers?

- Our research with academic researchers highlighted that researchers were interested in becoming embedded researchers in a variety of organisations including LAs but also schools, NHS settings, and central government.
- Academic researchers would welcome a variety of embedded researcher models, including long-term placements. About a third of respondents preferred placements under a year, another third for approximately a year, and the final third for 2-5 years.
- Most frequently, respondents preferred to commit to the host setting for a large proportion of their time (i.e. on a full-time basis or with 75% of their time spent in the host organisation).

What further support do embedded researchers need from universities?

- While the clear majority of academic researchers involved in this study were interested in the opportunity to become an embedded researcher, several expressed concerns that the experience could have negative implications on their current working conditions and future career trajectories.
- Participants sought reassurance that workloads would be managed, contracts would be extended, and universities would invest in relationships with host organisations.
- Embedded research, a model of applied research, can have significant impacts within organisations. However, universities and Higher Education Institutes may not always value this type of impact, despite its potential for direct and traceable transformation. Universities need to celebrate these forms of impact, and challenge conventional measures of research impact that place greater emphasis on the surface-level scale of the impact (global or national) rather the depth, which can be transformative but localised in the case of embedded research.
- HR and workload management systems within academic institutions need to better support flexible career pathways at the interface between research and policy/practice.

Are there any future opportunities for supporting embedded researchers in public health?

- At the time of publication (October 2023), some of the ways in which universities can support embedded researchers include:
  - (indirectly) NIHR-funded Health Determinants Research Collaborations which support LAs to work with partners in creative ways (including through embedded researchers) to address health inequalities.
  - (directly) The NIHR is planning to fund >120 Local Authority Research Practitioners (LARPs) by 2028 that mirror the scheme under consideration in our research (see link here).
  - (directly) the Applied Research Collaborations (ARCs) supported nationally are also intended to enable greater space for working at the research-policy interface and have supported a number of embedded researchers.

About this briefing: To investigate how embedded researcher roles manifest in public health settings, we undertook a mixed methods programme of research which involved examining published literature, undertaking a survey of academics, and investigating a case study in which researchers were placed into Local Authority public health teams across England. This briefing presents a summary of our findings tailored to Universities.

Further resources

- You can read our research report in full here
- Follow us on X
- Join the FUSE Embedded Research in Council Network (contact page here)
- Read about embedded researchers in the NHS: Embedded Researcher Project
- Read firsthand experiences of two embedded researchers in local government: Dr. Alessia Rose and Dr. Sharea Ijaz

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Conflicts of interest and contributions

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