Evaluation of the GROW Mental Health Researcher Development Programme Pilot 2022

Emerging Minds

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Part 1:
Introduction to the GROW Programme

Introduction to the Emerging Minds Network

The Emerging Minds Network was a mental health research network funded by UK Research and Innovation between 2018 and 2022. Our aim was to facilitate research with the potential to reduce the prevalence of mental health difficulties experienced by children and young people.

We encouraged and enabled research focused on promoting good mental health, preventing mental health difficulties, and on increasing access to early treatment and support.

We particularly set out to encourage collaboration in mental health research across sectors and disciplines, and to help build mental health research capacity by supporting early career researchers (ECRs).

Defining Early Career Researchers

The term "early career researcher" can be defined in a number of ways and there is recognition that this definition requires flexibility to account for a variety of career paths and breaks e.g. due to taking parental leave.

The UKRI, for instance, defines an ECR by their academic research stage: undertaking a PhD, postdoctoral researchers, and those transitioning to independent research.

The Emerging Minds Network worked to a broader definition to make opportunities as widely available as possible. For instance, including those undertaking master's degrees enabled inclusion of researchers working in disciplines such as design which have different entry points and career pathways. Opportunities were open to anyone who identified themselves as an early career researcher working in the field of children and young people's mental health.

Supporting Early Career Researchers

Over the life of the Network, Emerging Minds offered a range of training and development opportunities for those who identified themselves as early career researchers. We aimed to offer opportunities for ECRs to develop their research and careers as part of efforts to further develop the workforce undertaking mental health research in the UK. In addition, we identified that this is a key career stage in which to support researchers to develop the skills and experience needed to work across sectors and disciplines in a way that is likely to make an impact on children and young people's mental health.

Our activities included:

- Dedicating ring-fenced funding for Early Career Researchers to:
    - o   undertake placements across sectors
    - o   access training and opportunities to form cross-sector partnerships through seed funding for Special Interest Research Groups
    - o   undertake internships to gain research experience, helping to broaden the diversity of the mental health research workforce.
- Working with our 7 sister UKRI funded mental health research networks to offer joint online events for ECRs e.g. focused on securing funding for research and navigating careers in mental health research.
- A workshop in January 2020 co-led by Professor James Stark (University of Leeds) and Professor Cathy Creswell (University of Oxford), and hosted by the Mental Health Museum Wakefield, focused on exploring interdisciplinary working in mental health research.
- Encouraging and supporting ECRs to apply for small grant funding for research projects through our 4 funding calls.

Developing the GROW Programme

Feedback from these activities included a request from ECRs to have more opportunities to become part of an ongoing cohort of peers rather than just joining a one-off online session with other ECRs. This feedback seemed particularly important as ECRs had missed many usual networking opportunities during the COVID-19 Pandemic (lab meetings and conferences tending to be online during the pandemic).

We therefore initiated the pilot GROW Researcher Development Programme with the following aims:

- To develop a network of researchers focused on children and young people's mental health, who could support each other through the programme in 2022, and beyond the life of the Network.
- To support the professional development of researchers taking part so they could work towards and achieve professional goals they set themselves.
- To support participating researchers to develop the networks, skills, and experience needed to work successfully across sectors and disciplines to make a difference to children and young people's mental health.

Emerging Minds GROW Programme Pilot 2022

We held a competitive application process in the autumn of 2021 and received 35 applications from mental health early career researchers across the UK.

Our assessment criteria included considering the extent to which applicants could bring an important or distinctive perspective to the programme cohort, and the extent to which they could benefit from the programme.

We received applications and offered places to both pre- and post-doctoral researchers, including those moving towards independence as researchers.

We awarded 19 places to researchers working in a range of settings including the NHS, charity sector, and UK universities. Most places were awarded to researchers who had completed a PhD, with two places awarded to researchers in the final stage of completing their PhDs.

The pilot programme ran from January to July 2022 and included:

- Four individual sessions with a qualified coach.
- Monthly online workshops on a range of topics including securing funding for research, establishing research collaborations, and involving children and families in research. These sessions included peer to peer discussions, and presentations from senior colleagues and other experts.
- An in-person workshop with overnight stay in London.

GROW Programme Pilot Participants

*Table reflects titles and affiliations as of summer 2023.

Name, Role, and Institution	Research Interests
Dr Tessa Reardon Postdoctoral Researcher, Department of Experimental Psychology University of Oxford	Anxiety disorders in children. Improving access to evidence-based treatment for families affected by child anxiety problems.
Dr Jeanne Wolstencroft Research Fellow, UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health University College London	The impact of co-occurring mental health difficulties in children and young people with neurodevelopmental and/or rare genetic disorders. How best to use technology to improve the identification of autism and digital approaches to psycho-social intervention.
Dr Kimberly Peterson Lecturer in Psychology of Childhood and Education, School of Education University of Leeds	How the school environment can influence pupil mental health and wellbeing, and the impact of school-based interventions. Children's social relationships, including the role of social support and child loneliness.

Dr Hannah Jones Research Fellow, Bristol Medical School University of Bristol	The role of biological processes in mental health conditions. The genetic aetiology of psychosis.
Dr Hannah White Lecturer in Psychology, Schools of Sport, Exercise, and Health Sciences Loughborough University	Disordered eating and mental health among adolescents and young adults with a focus on: - Experiences of family mealtimes: interactions and technology use. - Broader family interactions relating to body weight, shape, and physical activity.
Dr Tim Clarke Principal Research Clinical Psychologist Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust	Improving children and young people's services by adapting and implementing evidence-based psychological interventions in individual contexts.
Dr Josefien Breedvelt Prudence Trust Research Fellow, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry King's College London (National Centre for Social Research during programme)	Preventing the onset and relapse of common mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. How to improve the outcomes of current approaches to prevent depression and anxiety in children and young people.
Dr Hazel Marzetti Research Associate University of Edinburgh	Interdisciplinary research focused on suicide and suicide prevention, particularly within the LGBTQ+ community.
Dr Anna March Research Fellow, Children and Young People's Mental Health Research Collaboration University of Exeter (UCL / Anna Freud Centre during programme)	Prevention and early intervention in the field of children and young people's mental health in different contexts including schools and the wider community. Co-design of strategies to improve adolescent mental health and address the underlying social drivers.
Dr Buket Kara Senior Research Fellow, Centre of Resilience for Social Justice Lancaster University (University of Brighton during programme)	Investigating individual, familial, and contextual risk and promotive/protective factors linked to the well-being and development of young people. Socio-ecological approach to the theory and practice of resilience.
Dr Eleanor Chatburn Clinical Psychologist and Lecturer, Norwich Medical School University of East Anglia	Mental health and wellbeing of those with physical health conditions e.g. asthma and skin conditions. Clinical research focused on children and young people, including those who have experienced social work involvement.

Dr Aislinn Bergin Research Fellow, National Institute of Health Research MindTech Co-operative University of Nottingham	Development and use of digital mental health interventions, such as use of immersive virtual reality to help people with psychosis who experience anxiety.
Dr Leanne McIver Research Fellow, Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection University of Strathclyde	Evaluation of health and education services, particularly focused on care-experienced and looked after children.
Dr Catt Turney Programme Manager: Research, Policy, and Major Projects The Kite Trust Cambridge (and Off the Record Bristol during programme)	LGBTQ+ young people's mental health and wellbeing, with a particular focus on co-produced and creative research that can directly impact practice.
Dr Ruth Knight Lecturer, Department of Psychology York St John University	The mental health experiences of minoritized and marginalised communities, such as the LGBTQ+ and disabled communities, using mixed methods and co-production.
Dr Jackie Parsonage-Harrison Occupational Therapist and Research Fellow, Centre for Movement, Occupation, & Rehabilitation Science Oxford Brookes University	Understanding the relationship between what we do and how that affects our mental health, particularly in adolescence. Developing occupation- and activity-based interventions that can help inform clinical practice.
Dr Vilas Sawrikar Lecturer in Clinical Psychology and Clinical Psychologist University of Edinburgh	Transdiagnostic modelling to study common risk factors that underpin emerging mental illness. Evidence-based practice in psychological interventions, and implementing new systems of transdiagnostic assessment and treatment for children and young people.
Dr Eva Sprecher Research Associate, Anna Freud Centre University College London	Understanding the experiences of care-experienced young people and how these impact upon their future wellbeing and mental health, e.g. relationships with foster carers.
Dr Ola Demkowicz Senior Lecturer in Psychology of Education, Institute of Education University of Manchester	The contexts and mechanisms that contribute to the emergence of mental health difficulties across adolescence, including systematic inequalities, and the impact of youth spaces such as schools.

Part 2:
Evaluation of the GROW Programme

Aims of Programme Evaluation

We wanted to understand the impact of the programme on our participants as individuals, and the extent to which the programme contributed to furthering the aims of the Emerging Minds Network. As this was a pilot programme, we were also interested in our participants' experiences of the programme and their ideas about how it could be improved for future cohorts.

Evaluation Methods

We invited all participants to complete an online survey before the programme began which asked them to self-rate their skills and confidence (using a likert scale between 0 and 10, with 0 being strongly disagree and 10 being strongly agree) against four statements related to the programme aims:

- I feel I am working towards clear professional goals
- I feel part of a supportive network with my peers in mental health research across the UK
- I feel confident and able to work across sectors and disciplines
- I have the networks, skills, and experience to make a difference to children and young people's mental health.

We also asked participants to identify three development areas they wanted to focus on during the programme, and to self-rate their current skills and confidence in those areas.

We then invited all participants to complete a post-programme online survey after the final session of the programme which asked them again to self-rate their own skills and confidence against the same core capabilities, as well as the personal development areas they had identified before the programme. In addition, we asked some open questions, with free-text responses, including 'What have you gained from participating in the Grow programme?' and 'Which elements of the programme were most helpful to you?'.

In addition, each coach invited the coachees they worked with to reflect on their coaching experience by email immediately following their final coaching session. Two of the programme coaches, Anna Sanders and Clare Wakeham, compiled this feedback and produced a report specifically on this element of the programme. Their findings are embedded with the survey results below.

In January 2023, we invited participants to complete a follow-up survey, 6 months on from the end of the programme. This again invited them to self-rate their skills and confidence in the same core capabilities and asked open questions inviting a free-text response.

Quantitative Responses to Survey Over Time

As shown in the table, the size of the changes in the responses to the survey questions over time were large by conventional standards, and sustained at the 6 month follow-up.

Survey Questions	Pre-Programme Mean (sd) N=16	Post-Programme Mean (sd) N=11	6 Month Follow-Up Mean (sd) N= 13	Effect Size Pre- to Post-Programme Follow-Up (d)[1]	Effect Size Pre- to 6 Month Programme Follow-Up (d)[1]
I feel I am working towards clear professional goals. *1 = strongly disagree, 10 = strongly agree*	6.25 (1.65)	8.27 (1.10)	8.08 (0.95)	2.11	1.89
I feel part of a supportive network with my peers in mental health research across the UK. *1 = strongly disagree 10 = strongly agree*	4.31 (1.70)	8.64 (1.03)	8.08 (1.38)	2.24	2.95
I feel confident and able to work across sectors and disciplines. *1 = strongly disagree 10 = strongly agree*	5.81 (2.51)	7.73 (0.01)	7.62 (1.32)	1.96	2.66
I have the networks, skills, and experience to make a difference to children and young people's mental health. *1 = strongly disagree 10 = strongly agree*	5.44 (1.99)	7.64 (1.29)	7.85 (0.99)	1.12	1.97
Rating of current ability in 3 self-identified areas where individuals wanted to develop skills, knowledge, or confidence through the programme. *1 = very low 10 = outstanding*	4.04 (1.43)	7.02 (1.38)[2]	Data not collected at 6 month follow-up	1.13	N/A

[1] based on paired data
[2] n=9

Insights Immediately Post-Programme July 2022

17 participants filled in the post-programme survey which invited them to reflect on whether they had improved in the core programme capabilities, their self-identified development areas, and their thoughts on the programme overall. In addition, each coach invited the coachees they worked with to reflect on their coaching experience by email following their final coaching session.

The main three aspects of the GROW Programme recurring through the feedback were the networking and connection opportunities, the coaching, and the workshops.

Networking and Connections

In the pre-programme survey, networking came up repeatedly as an area in which participants wanted to develop their skills and confidence. Participants wanted to network both with peers at a similar point in the research journey, those in their field of research, and also with policy makers and stakeholders. The post-programme responses suggest that participants developed their networking and highlighted the 'network of peers' that the programme had enabled.

> *'I feel like the GROW Programme has allowed me to make connections to a motivated group of like-minded ECRs working in the child and young people's mental health research space.'*

Much of this networking was enabled by the fact that participants were all in similar fields of research and so could often connect over common research interests. The opportunity to meet the senior researchers involved in the Emerging Minds Network and expert speakers was also raised as something which gave the participants contacts who were at a different stage in their research journey.

> *'It has [...] been really helpful to meet the GROW leadership team who have kindly shared valuable advice and experiences.'*

The format of the programme was identified as beneficial to this networking aspect as it allowed for networking opportunities in person and gave the participants time to get together and identify colleagues with common areas of interest.

> *'Meeting everyone in person was definitely a highlight - the connection and excitement about the field and our research was great after years of Covid and more isolated working.'*

Coaching

All GROW participants were offered the opportunity to undertake four sessions of 1:1 coaching with qualified coaches. When asked whether they would recommend coaching to a future GROW participant, all who had taken part in the coaching said 'yes'.

It was described as 'protected time' and each participant was able to focus on the areas that they wanted to work on specifically, resulting in the coaching feeling more personalised.

> *'It was the most incredible process, to start from such a position of uncertainty and to develop so quickly some really clear goals. It was then possible to begin taking the steps I needed to achieve those goals.'*

13 of the 17 survey respondents said that the coaching had helped them to achieve the initial personal goals they had identified at the start of the programme. Three respondents did not answer, and one said 'not sure' as they had taken up a new post and no longer had the same goals they had started with.

Most of the participants who had worked with a coach reported that the experience had provided an 'external' perspective, and brought them new perspectives, insights, clarity, and understanding.

> *'I feel I now have a better understanding of the way I work and what my goals are for the future. I've already noticed the positive impact from having this increased insight.'*

The opportunity to reflect and explore had enabled participants to gain a sense of purpose and direction, to reframe experiences and achievements, and to explore and identify priorities.

Most of the participants who took up the coaching offer reported the greatest benefit was the increase in confidence in their own capabilities.

> *'The coaching helped with developing my confidence as a researcher by helping me to reflect on and reframe my experiences and achievements to date.'*

This increase in confidence was also helpful in relation to aims that the researchers had identified before the programme, such as networking.

> *'Very quickly I found myself building professional relationships with people across my university and at other institutions - I was amazed at how quickly my confidence grew and how easy networking became.'*

Participants also noticed benefits in their ability to plan their careers. Whilst this was not something that many participants had identified as a development area before the programme, it came up throughout the post-survey views on coaching. Several of the participants said that they had been able to discuss ways forward and think about their career trajectory.

> *'Coaching has been a really beneficial chance to reflect on specific aspects of my career. This has helped me to understand more about my own journey as a researcher and where I want to go.'*

This focus on the future required participants to develop various skills relating to goalsetting, decision-making, overcoming obstacles, and organising their time.

> *'The sessions really helped me develop and implement new ways of planning/ managing my time that have been very useful and I'm confident I can continue to use going forwards.'*

11 survey participants responded when asked why they would recommend coaching. Responses fell into three main categories:

1. Time and space to reflect on individual needs, expectations, and priorities in a career.
2. The experience of being coached helping them to develop a sense of autonomy and confidence, and learning useful strategies to reach goals and overcome challenges and uncertainty.
3. Getting an 'external' perspective from a completely independent person who asked insightful questions to enable their personal development.

> *'I definitely have gained a new perspective on problem solving and organising my thoughts/making plans. I now try to stop and coach myself at times when I feel the need to take a step back and work out a way forward.'*

The Programme and Workshops

Participants were also asked about the programme more generally, and what they felt they had gained from it. The responses suggest that participants felt that they had gained more knowledge, both in career development areas, such as funding opportunities and expectations, and from hearing different perspectives on working in the field of children and young people's mental health.

> *'It was clear that the workshops were carefully planned and structured. A range of subjects relevant and vital to ECRs were covered: funding, co-production, impact, working across sectors... The opportunity to learn from more experienced researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders and get their advice, tips, and strategies was fantastic.'*

The participants also appreciated the flexibility of the workshops, and it emerged that whilst they saw the benefits of in-person sessions for networking opportunities, the online sessions offered them flexibility and were more accessible.

> *'Having most of the sessions online has helped with being able to access them all.'*

Overall, growing in confidence emerged as a theme throughout the survey responses. Some participants had tangible gains such as increased confidence leading them to start working towards funding applications, but overall, there seemed to be a sense that the participants felt more confident to pursue their interests. Participants noted the involvement of senior figures in the programme as something which made them feel valued.

> *'Awesome that Prof Cathy was so involved [...] It sent a message that senior leaders really do value our input.'*

Improvements

Participants were also asked if they had any suggested improvements for the coaching aspect in particular, and the programme more broadly.

The majority of participants raised the possibility of coaching starting earlier in the programme, or the offer of more coaching sessions.

For the programme more broadly, the main suggestion raised was for more chances to connect with others. Participants would have liked more in-person sessions, e.g. at the beginning of the programme in order to establish connections between the participants right from the start.

> *'By including a face-to-face session at the start and the end of the programme, I think it would help create a sense of being in a network much earlier.'*

There was also interest in more chances to hear more about each other's work. Although the guest speakers were viewed as beneficial, there was a suggestion that the researchers could have had more facilitated opportunities to talk about their own work with each other.

> *'I think perhaps building in more time during sessions for participants to discuss their pathways in small groups and perhaps slightly less didactic sessions from external speakers would have been valued.'*

One specific improvement raised was for there to be more choice about programme sessions, as not all of the sessions were specifically relevant to every participant's current work.

Another participant identified the particular needs of minoritised groups.

> *'You could offer the option of personal mentors for minoritised GROW members next time who would like to explore these issues privately with a mentor.'*

Insights from Six Month Follow-Up Survey January 2023

13 participants completed the six-month post-programme follow-up survey which invited them to reflect on the longer-term impacts of participating in the programme. We also asked participants to identify areas where the programme could be developed for the future.

Participants noted that the networking and coaching opportunities had been particularly useful to them. Participants also highlighted the ways in which the programme has affected their career directions.

All respondents reported that even 6 months on from the end of the GROW programme, they were still behaving and thinking differently as a result, with 38% respondents reporting significant changes.
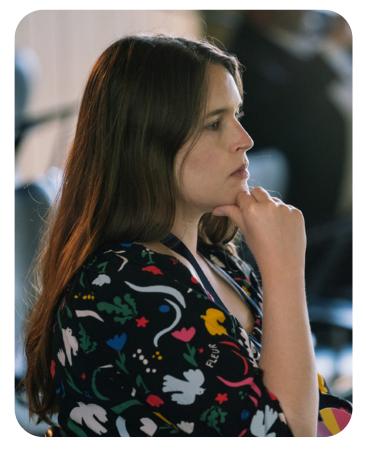
Identifying and Making Progress on Professional Goals

In the free-text comments, over half of respondents mentioned having identified and made progress against professional goals since the start of the programme.

> *'I think I have a far clearer idea of the different directions that I might go next in my career and the way to frame what I have done so far.'*

> *'I found the programme very helpful for providing a space to reflect on my career and future aspirations. The coaching also helped me to understand more about the skills I have and the way I work which have helped me to increase my confidence as a researcher. I have noticed the positive impact from this in my work.'*

Skills and Confidence to Work Across Sectors and Disciplines and Make an Impact

Participants expressed appreciation for the mental health research skills and knowledge they gained from the programme.

> *'[I have gained] a better awareness of the breadth and depth, and the challenges, of research around children and young people's mental health in the UK.'*

> *'[I have gained] A stronger understanding of translation of research to impact and the various stages involved in achieving this. It's about moving past just research projects and connecting the work I do to some translational outcome.'*

Participants also noted their greater focus and confidence in working across sectors and disciplines, and involving a wide range of stakeholders.

> *'Regular meetings with members of the programme have encouraged me to continue to think about interdisciplinary collaboration opportunities which have been really beneficial in helping me grow as a researcher.'*

> *'Feeling more confident to take on and seek out cross-sector and interdisciplinary research projects and opportunities. A stronger focus on the impact of the research that I do. A confidence to network and understanding of the importance of building strong research teams. Thinking about opportunities for co-production or involving stakeholders more.'*

Connections Maintained Following the Programme's End

Forming connections with other researchers was identified by participants as one of the best things about the programme.

> *'Definitely the network of researchers working in a similar field has been a huge gain, confidence, a broader understanding of the field of child and adolescent mental health... I have just started a postdoc role and have realised what an advantage it has been to be linked in to other researchers.'*

> *'I feel I have gained a supportive peer network through meeting regularly with other members of the programme and working together on projects.'*

> *'The biggest [benefit of the programme] is connecting with other ECRs and building collaborations which could lead to other projects.'*

Participants noted how connections have continued following the programme's conclusion. All participants but one reported they had maintained at least one connection established with other early career mental health researchers from the programme, and 62% respondents indicated they had maintained three or more connections.

The participants reported a variety of different ways that they have kept in touch and worked together. Participants mentioned writing groups, co-authoring papers, shared funding applications, and monthly meetings.

> *'Initial discussions and plans to develop a funding application focusing on understanding parental experiences in the context of children and young people's mental health research. Co-authoring position paper on ECR views of growing capacity in children and young people's mental health research. Monthly meetings for updates on projects..., knowledge sharing, and peer support.'*

> *'I am co-writing a commentary paper for publication with GROW collaborators. I am co-writing a proposal for a book with a GROW friend. I was invited to join the Mental Health Research Incubator.'*

> *'Social support from ECRs. Working with other GROW members to create and deliver a workshop at the EM Summit and to write a position piece paper.'*

> *'I have links with two [GROW members] on two different research projects I am working on. I have another link as part of a writing group. And meet the others at regular catch-up events.'*

Barriers to Embedding Learning from the Programme

Challenges to Maintaining Connections beyond Formal Programme Activities

Participants noted the difficulties around maintaining their cohort relationships after GROW had concluded.

> *'Maintaining the connections with the rest of the group is infinitely more challenging without structured events and funding for meetings. It was so valuable to have time in the room together to discuss ideas and research proposals and this is just much more difficult to do from afar!'*

Six respondents suggested further in-person meet ups and funding to support this:

> *'If there was a follow-up session or pot of money for meeting up further past the end of the programme that would be extremely helpful.'*

Difficulties finding further funding for collaborative work and missing the coaching support were also mentioned.

Limited Ongoing Opportunities and Support to Embed Learning

Several participants mentioned how much they had appreciated having support as early career researchers and wondered where they might be able to find further similar programmes or ongoing support after the programme's end.

> *'I think just ongoing support in relation to funding and training. I have been trying to implement what I learnt but I am not being supported in my current institution - so then the question is where can I get that support?'*

Several participants mentioned that they would like on-going coaching or mentoring.

> *'I found the coaching really helpful. If possible it would have been amazing to have an extra session or two, or perhaps a session after the programme had finished to reflect on progress and growth and how to move forward with this.'*

In addition, another respondent mentioned that limited time was the biggest barrier to embedding the learning from the programme further. Managing limited time when facing heavy demands continues to be a key challenge for early career researchers, the same participant also noted that they had gained most from the programme included:

> *'Strategies for managing my time, and when to say yes/no to requests.'*

Several respondents working in non-academic settings remarked it was more difficult for them to apply their learning into their on-going work.

> *'As I don't work in a traditional academic department, nor for an explicitly mental health related organisation, I don't have the autonomy to pursue projects relating directly to my learning, and so far haven't had opportunities in the work I am engaged in to bring in much of my learning from the programme.'*

This raises broader questions about ensuring that the programme and follow-up activities are as useful as possible for researchers who come from a non-academic setting. For example, another participant requested:

> *'Learning that is more appropriate for researchers working outside universities.'*

Conclusions from 6 Month Follow-Up Survey

Overall, participants do seem to have seen their GROW Programme experience as extremely positive and one that will have a lasting impact on their career trajectory.

> *'Thank you very much. It has been a great experience which helped enormously in the transition from PhD student to academic. It has made a lasting impression on me and the way that I will carry out research in the future.'*

> *'I enjoyed being part of the programme so much and feel it has been so beneficial to me, thank you so much for the opportunity.'*

> *'Loved in the in-person day in London and the chance to present at the Big Summit. It's been such a wonderful experience, thank you.'*

> *'All of you are doing amazing work and I will forever be grateful for being included in the programme.'*

Part 3:
Wider Impact of the GROW Programme

In summer 2022 we held our final Emerging Minds funding call, offering 'research development' seed funding to those who had been supported by the Network in some way. We were thrilled to receive applications from, and fund, five new projects all led by members of the GROW Programme. Several of these projects arose specifically out of connections made between participants during the Programme.

For example, Dr Ola Demkowicz (University of Manchester) and Dr Hannah Jones (University of Bristol) combined their respective interests in psychological and physiological stress, and frustrations at the limited evidence-based in this area, into a project to understand the role that stress may play in the development of mental health difficulties.

Similarly, Dr Hazel Marzetti (University of Edinburgh) and Dr Catt Turney (The Kite Trust Cambridge/Off the Record Bristol) discovered a shared interest in LGBTQ+ youth mental health through their participation in GROW. With funding from Emerging Minds, they launched an LGBTQ+ Mental Health Network for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and members of the public passionate about improving the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. Through this network, Catt and Hazel led a hugely successful online conference in October 2022 featuring sessions from a wide range of researchers, practitioners, and third-sector workers. They plan to host quarterly brunches to develop the Network and research priorities.

Members of the GROW cohort were also involved in leading six of the 24 [workshops at our Big Emerging Minds Summit](#) in October 2022 on a variety of topics including young people's involvement in digital mental health, the implementation of evidence into practice, and LGBTQ+ youth mental health. The cohort also came together to lead the workshop ['Meeting of the Minds: Imagining the future of children and young people's mental health research'](#).

Finally, with funding from Emerging Minds, the cohort also came together as a whole to host their own independent Away Day in October 2022. The agenda included:

- Next steps for the group including how to maintain their network and provide space for continued peer collaboration and support.
- Developing a position paper on growing capacity in mental health research, and other discussions on how to build research capacity.

Ongoing cohort activities include monthly online catch ups and writing retreats, plans for annual Away Days, knowledge-sharing via a shared Teams channel (for instance papers, funding calls, and conferences of interest), finalising their position paper, and considering a future book on early career researcher experiences of mental health research.

Part 4:
Conclusions and Next Steps

Our findings from this evaluation of the UKRI-funded Emerging Minds GROW Programme pilot are hugely encouraging, suggesting that participants:

- Felt part of, and valued having, a supportive network of peers working in mental health research across the UK, during the Programme itself and sustained for many since its conclusion.

- Felt supported through the Programme, and the coaching element in particular, to establish and work towards clear professional goals.

- Developed the networks, skills, and experience needed to work successfully across sectors and disciplines, and to make a difference to children and young people's mental health.

Overall, the reflections of our pilot cohort strongly demonstrate the value of offering dedicated opportunities to support the professional development of mental health researchers early in their careers.

Next Steps

We were delighted to receive funding for two further early career researcher development cohorts in 2022 and 2023 from the National Institute of Health and Care Research (NIHR) mental health research initiative, via the NIHR School of Primary Care (SPCR).

The recommendations and ideas shared by participants in this Emerging Minds-led pilot phase were hugely helpful in planning for the NIHR-funded cohorts. For example:

- Building in more in-person sessions earlier in the programme

- Creating more flexibility and space in the programme for participants to share and discuss their own research and experiences.

- Ensuring that we are considering and addressing the needs of those working in non-academic settings, and also minoritised groups.

- Piloting alumni activities to allow those who have finished the programme to stay in touch more easily.

These two cohorts were run under the umbrella of the Mental Health Research Incubator, one of a series of incubators established by the NIHR to build research capacity in priority areas. Led by Professor Cathy Creswell, it was created to increase capacity in mental health research.

The second GROW Programme had 77 applicants, and the third 107, with 17 and 20 researchers selected to take part respectively. These two further iterations of the programme particularly prioritised researchers from regions and professional backgrounds currently under-represented in mental health research.

You can find out more about the Incubator GROW Programme via the Mental Health Research Incubator website.

Acknowledgements

Funders and Partners

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