

PhD Studentship

Enhancing Mental Health Care in Rural Settings through Electronic Patient-Reported Outcome Measures (ePROMs): The EMPOWER Study

Supervisory Team

Director of Studies:

Professor Dez Kyte, Professor of Physiotherapy, School of Health & Wellbeing, University of Worcester, UK.

Supervisors:

Professor Elizabeth Hughes, Professor of Mental Health Inequalities, Director of Rural Mental Health Research Unit, lead for NIHR THRIVE Programme, University of Worcester, UK.

Dr Molly Miley, Research Fellow, THRIVE Rural Mental Health Research Unit, University of Worcester, UK.

Research Unit:

The University of Worcester has been awarded a National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Mental Health Leaders Award to establish a programme of research designed to address mental health inequalities in rural settings. The programme has three areas of focus: Earlier Intervention and Detection of Severe Mental Illness (SMI); Suicide Prevention; and Digital Support. THRIVE sits within the Rural Mental Health Research Unit at the University of Worcester and has been developed in partnership with colleagues at the Institute for Mental Health, University of Birmingham. There will be opportunities for collaborative working across both institutions.

The PhD Studentship:

Applications are invited for a full-time PhD studentship for the project:

Enhancing Mental Health Care in Rural Settings through Electronic Patient-Reported Outcome Measures (ePROMs): The EMPOWER Study.

Context

Mental health inequalities remain a pressing concern in rural communities, where access to timely and appropriate care is often limited by geographic, socioeconomic and systemic barriers. Individuals living in rural areas frequently experience elevated levels of psychological distress yet face challenges in accessing mental health services and sustaining engagement with care.

Electronic Patient-Reported Outcome Measures (ePROMs) offer a promising approach to supporting mental health care delivery for those SMI. ePROMs allow individuals to report symptoms, wellbeing and treatment outcomes remotely, facilitating continuous monitoring and more personalised care. Evidence from other clinical populations suggests that ePROMs can improve symptom management, strengthen communication between patients and clinicians, and enhance health outcomes.

Despite their potential, the application of ePROMs within rural mental health services remains underexplored. Questions remain regarding how these tools can be effectively implemented, integrated into existing care pathways and adapted to meet the needs of people with SMI in rural populations. This project will contribute to the evidence base by exploring how ePROMs may support equitable access to mental health care and improve outcomes for individuals living in rural communities.

Aims and Objectives

In alignment with the THRIVE People and Community Involvement and Engagement Strategy (PCIE), the successful applicant will work alongside people with lived experience, clinicians and other stakeholders to co-produce a programme of research that will:

- Explore the potential role, feasibility and acceptability of ePROMs in supporting the care of people with SMI in rural mental health settings.
- Identify barriers and facilitators to successful implementation.
- Examine the potential impact of ePROMs on patient outcomes, engagement, symptom monitoring and care delivery.
- Co-design recommendations and implementation strategies to support sustainable integration of ePROMs into rural SMI health services.

Research Questions

1. What evidence currently exists regarding the use of ePROMs in SMI health care, particularly within rural populations?
2. What are the perceived benefits, barriers and implementation challenges associated with SMI ePROM use in rural mental health settings?
3. How can ePROMs be adapted and integrated into rural SMI health services to improve accessibility, engagement, patient outcomes and quality of care?
4. What co-designed implementation approaches can support the long-term integration of ePROMs into rural SMI health services?

Indicative Methodology

Phase 1: Scoping Review

A systematic scoping review will be undertaken to map the existing evidence relating to the use of ePROMs in SMI health care. The review will explore evidence relating to feasibility, acceptability, implementation and effectiveness and will identify important knowledge gaps to inform subsequent research phases.

Phase 2: Qualitative Exploration

Semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups will be conducted with people with lived experience of mental illness, mental health professionals, service managers and other stakeholders involved in rural mental health care. This phase will explore perceptions of ePROMs, barriers and facilitators to implementation, and contextual factors that may influence adoption and sustainability.

Phase 3: Co-Design and Implementation Planning

Findings from the scoping review and qualitative work will be used within a structured co-design process involving rural service users, carers, clinicians and service providers. The aim will be to develop a contextually appropriate framework and implementation strategy for the use of ePROMs within rural mental health services. Depending on the emerging findings and interests of the successful candidate, opportunities may exist to undertake additional feasibility testing or implementation evaluation work

Details of the Studentship

The studentship is offered for a four-year period on a full-time basis. During the period of your studentship you will receive:

- A tax-free bursary of £20,407 for 3 years.*
- A fee waiver for 4 years.
- A budget to support project costs.
- A laptop and other IT equipment or software as appropriate to the project.
- Use of the Doctoral School facilities.

You will be expected to play an active role in the life of both the Doctoral School and the School. Opportunities to gain experience in learning and teaching will be available under the guidance of your supervisory team.

*Subject to the prevailing UKRI doctoral stipend rate at the time of appointment.

Application Process

The closing date for this studentship is 18th September

To begin the application process for this studentship please visit the University of Worcester PhD studentships webpage and click "Apply Now" next to the project.

It is expected that applicants will have:

- A Masters degree in a relevant subject area or equivalent professional experience.
- A First or Upper Second-Class Honours Degree.

It is also expected that applicants will be able to demonstrate:

- A sound understanding of and interest in both the project and the wider subject area.
- Experience of relevant research methods and skills.
- Ability to contribute to the research design of the project.
- Proficiency in oral and written English.
- Proficiency in IT relevant to the project.
- Ability to organise and meet deadlines.
- Good interpersonal skills.
- Ability to work independently.
- Ability to work as part of a team.

Completing the Personal Statement on the Application Form

To support a fair and consistent shortlisting process, all applicants are required to submit a personal statement of up to 1,000 words, using the structure below. Statements that do not follow this structure, or that rely on generic or non-specific content, may be disadvantaged. Write in your own authentic voice; AI-generated content is easy to detect and weakens an application. Provide specific examples throughout to support your personal statement. Finally, ensure your statement is well structured, clearly written and carefully proofread.

1. Motivation for Applying (approx. 150 words)

Explain why you are applying for this specific PhD project. Demonstrate your understanding of the topic, why it matters, and what motivates you to pursue doctoral study in this area. Outline your longer-term career aspirations and how this studentship supports them.

2. Relevant Research Experience (approx. 200 words)

Provide a focused summary of your research experience, including undergraduate or Masters dissertations, involvement in audits, evaluations or research projects, and any research assistant work. Describe your specific contributions, methods used, skills developed and outcomes achieved.

3. Research Outputs, RKE Activity or Scholarly Achievement (approx. 150 words)

Summarise research-related achievements such as publications, reports, conference presentations, workshops, knowledge exchange activities, involvement in funding applications or academic awards.

4. Professional or Employment Experience (approx. 200 words)

Outline employment or voluntary roles relevant to this programme of doctoral study. Highlight responsibilities such as data collection, participant engagement, safeguarding, communication or project coordination.

5. Skills, Values and Personal Attributes (approx. 200 words)

Provide evidence of the qualities expected of a doctoral researcher, including a strong work ethic, conscientiousness, commitment to ethical practice, curiosity, critical thinking, independence and effective communication.

6. Fit with the Project and Supervisory Team (approx. 100 words)

Explain how your experience, interests and career goals align with the project and supervisory team. Demonstrate clearly why you are a strong match for the EMPOWER project.

The Interview

Shortlisted candidates will be given at least seven days' notice of interview. In advance of interview, shortlisted candidates will be asked to submit their CV and a sample of written work (e.g. a publication, dissertation, report or thesis chapter).

Alongside the interview, shortlisted candidates will be asked to deliver a brief presentation (10 minutes) on a topic related to the studentship. This will provide an opportunity to demonstrate understanding of the project context and potential research approaches.

Candidates are invited to present on the following suggested topic: “The role of electronic Patient-Reported Outcome Measures (ePROMs) in addressing SMI health inequalities in rural communities.”

To support their presentation, candidates are encouraged to use a concise slide deck and reflect on how their background or interests align with the aims of the EMPOWER project.

Research at the University of Worcester

Research is central to the University's mission to make a difference in everything that we do. We are committed to delivering excellent research which extends the boundaries of human knowledge but which also improves people's lives by enabling better health outcomes, improving food security, developing environmentally sustainable solutions for crop production and socially sustainable solutions to our ageing population, enhancing public knowledge and understanding of the past and present.

The University hence focuses its research around five high-level challenges facing society, locally, nationally and globally:

- [Human Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [Sustainable Futures](#)
- [Digital Innovation](#)
- [Culture, Identity and Social Exclusion](#)
- [Professional Education](#)

The success of our research is reflected in our continuous improvement in external research assessment processes. In the most recent Research Excellence Framework, REF 2021, the University saw a near 50% increase in the scale of its research and 12% increase in quality, building on its performance in REF 2014 when it was the UK's most improved university in terms of Research Power, a combination of scale and quality.

Research Degrees at Worcester

Our research students are central to our overall mission for research. They are working at the cutting edge of their disciplines and driving forward the quality of our research whilst enriching our research culture. We are looking to increase our research student numbers as a strategic imperative.

Our commitment to our students is reflected in the results of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2023 in which we ranked 3rd for overall research student satisfaction nationally. Key to our success in this area is the Doctoral School, a focal point for all our research students.

It provides:

- day-to-day support for our students, both administrative and practical, through our dedicated team
- a Research Student Study Space with both PCs and laptop docking station
- a comprehensive Researcher Development Programme for students and their supervisors
- a programme of student-led conferences and seminars

Widening Participation:

As part of its mission statement the University is committed to widening participation for its higher degrees. Although most candidates will have an undergraduate and/or a Masters degree, the University is happy to accept applications from candidates with relevant professional qualifications and work-related experience.

For further information or an informal discussion on this project, please contact Professor Dez Kyte via email: d.kyte@worc.ac.uk