

Developing NHS leaders:

The benefits of overseas leadership fellowships

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Background to the scheme

Since 2008, 150 NHS employees from a range of healthcare professions have completed an Improving Global Health (IGH) through Leadership Development Fellowship.

The aims of the programme are to:

- support sustainable improvement in healthcare;
- provide an unparalleled personal and leadership development experience, and
- create a cadre of skilled leaders who will apply these skills on their return to the UK.



Placements are typically six months in duration and Fellows work closely with an overseas partner organisation. Placements are non-clinical, with a focus on service and quality improvement, and developing capability. Placement sites include Cambodia, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia. Fellows complete a bespoke pre-departure induction programme focusing on leadership development, and are supported on placement by an in-country and UK-based team, including a dedicated mentor.

The aim of the present study is to explore the impact of completing the programme on returned Fellows and on the NHS.

What we did

Past Fellows (n.109) from the inception of the programme were invited to complete an online questionnaire (70% response rate). Emergent themes were then further explored with 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed by the authors using thematic analysis. Key findings from the analysis are presented below.

Results

Respondents comprised of: 87% female/13% male; aged 26 to 46 (70% between 26&35). Representation from every year the programme has run and each placement site. A range of professions were represented: Dietician, Doctor – Primary Care, Doctor – Secondary Care, Manager, Midwife, Nurse – Primary Care, Nurse – Secondary Care, Occupational Therapist, Physiotherapist, Podiatrist, Pharmacist, Doctor – Public Health, Public Health Researcher with the majority (70%) being doctors.

Theme: Leadership potential

	Yes	No	Don't know
Did you see yourself as a leader before your Fellowship?	33%	47%	20%
Do you see yourself as a leader now?	81%	5%	14%

"I felt I had some potential, [the programme] helped unlock it."

"I understand the varied way in which one can be a leader - you don't have to be head of the department or a consultant to be a leader."

"The experience empowers you to develop leadership skills ... it brought a lot of motivation and belief in what I am capable of as a professional and as a person."



Theme: Learning transferrable skills

78% of questionnaire respondents stated they developed skills on placement that they have been able to put into practice since returning. Of those that had not, only one attributed this to a lack of relevant skills teaching. The remainder stated that it was too early to say, or was not applicable to their current role.

"My self-awareness of my leadership and management skills has greatly increased and I am much more effective as a doctor on the ward."

"I was able to apply the skills I learnt in research and public health to complete my Masters in Global Health."

"I am much more tactful when expressing opinions or facts that others may find difficult ... I am much better at networking ... my planning skills are more tailored ... I am also influencing others to make sure that patients are always consulted and that the easy option is not necessarily the right one."

"The IGH Fellowship enabled me to develop and improved generic skills in leadership and team working that are useful in many roles."



Theme: Impact on current role

91% stated that the programme changed their approach to work, including all of the original cohort who had completed their placement in 2008, suggesting a long lasting impact.

"It helped me take a step back ... and take a longer term view rather than just getting on with the day-to-day management of patients."

"[I am] less frustrated by system inefficiencies and [I have] more desire to change them."

"I spend a lot more time supporting and encouraging those around me and helping their ideas to be heard."

98% of respondents would recommend the programme to NHS colleagues:

"I'd recommend it to anyone. It's still the best thing I ever did for myself and for my career."

"It provides you with an opportunity to challenge the status quo and your own thinking; really valuable skills when you are back in the NHS."

"I think it should be compulsory! It makes people aware of global healthcare and important public health issues."



Conclusion: Comparable in cost to other conventional leadership development experiences, the IGH programme has provided returned Fellows with a solid foundation from which to continue their development as the NHS leaders of the future.

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