The Royal College of Nursing Research Strategy: 2024-2027

Promoting leadership, voice and visibility of nurses in research

Introduction

The Royal College of Nursing (2023) [A New Dawn for Nursing: Five-year strategic plan 2023-2027](), outlined plans for the development of a new Institute of Nursing Excellence and, with this, the need for a research strategy. The Institute will comprise five academies: activism, international, leadership, practice and workforce. The research strategy will inform the strategic and operational directions of the institute whilst the activities of the Institute will operationalise the strategic goals and outcomes. The purpose of the research strategy is to promote 'the voice of nursing' within research; to develop high quality evidence and to support research education, careers and leadership for nurses. There have been increasing emphases on building research into health professional careers (NHS, 2021; Department of Health and Social Care, 2021; Health Education England, 2022). Research in health and social care is crucial to informing high quality, evidence based practice (Baker et al., 2021; NMC, 2018; O'Bryne and Smith, 2010; WHO, 2020). A well-educated professional healthcare workforce is essential to good health care outcomes (Baker et al., 2021; WHO, 2020). Research for nurses has widened the scope of the nursing profession, such as through clinical, research and academic careers; to enable efficient and effective changes using research to impact policy, practice and society (NHS, 2021; Department of Health and Social Care, 2021; Health Education England, 2022; NIHR, 2022). Nursing is the largest profession within the healthcare workforce, however, the profession remains underrepresented in research, research leadership and authorship of publications (NHS, 2021; Health Education England, 2022, NIHR, 2022). This creates disparities in health and social care; affecting what research questions are being asked, how research is being conducted and how research knowledge is mobilised and implemented (Baker et al., 2021; Hui et al., 2021; NIHR, 2022). Without the voice of nursing in research, expertise is lost and a lack of diversity and inclusion remains.

This research strategy aims to be ambitious in transforming the cultures of research:

- To promote the voice and visibility of nurses in research
- To harness recognition for the roles and value nurses have in research awareness, engagement, inclusion, delivery and leadership
- To support and inspire future generations and careers to be research and evidence centred.

Research should be at the heart of nursing, whether this is using best evidence to inform practice, understanding research processes to better engage patients and the public, or designing, delivering and leading high quality research studies to improve knowledge, health and social care. It is vital that research is represented at all levels of nursing and that an embedded culture of research becomes the norm.

The RCN occupies a unique space to influence, impact and leverage research with its membership, representatives and activists, expertise of fellows, forums and staff, and the voice of nursing at its core. A co-productive approach has been central to the development of the research strategy with engagement events supporting each iteration. The shared experiences and expertise of RCN staff, members, fellows, forums and expert reference group across the four nations have been invaluable to shaping our vision and we are immensely grateful for the conjoint efforts in developing this strategy.

Our mission

Our mission with the research strategy is to promote the voice and visibility of nurses in research; to develop research careers and leadership, and to embed cultures of research into everyday practice.

- To transform research cultures and embed research as core business to enable access, engagement, inclusion, delivery and leadership for nurses and nursing in research.
- To challenge current barriers, including inequalities and underrepresentation, and develop contemporary systems to enable high quality research, evidence, leadership and careers.
- To use and promote research to influence and improve education, policy and health and social outcomes.

These are in line with the wider objectives set out in the RCN's Royal Charter:

- To promote the science and art of nursing and education and training in the profession of nursing
- To promote the advance of nursing as a profession in all or any of its branches
- To promote the professional standing and interests of Members
- To assist Members who by reason of adversity, ill-health or otherwise are in need of assistance of any nature
- To promote through the medium of international agencies and otherwise the foregoing purposes in other countries as well as in Our United Kingdom.

Our goals

Our goals are to enhance research awareness, engagement, inclusion, delivery and leadership through:

1. Influence – transforming cultures to enable access, engagement, inclusion, delivery and leadership of high quality research for nurses and nursing.
2. Infrastructure – challenging current barriers and developing contemporary systems to enable high quality research and evidence, research leadership and careers.
3. Impact – using and promoting research to influence and improve education, leadership, health and social care, policy, society and the economy.

These three goals are with the objectives of ensuring that:

- The work of the RCN is collaborative and global-reaching

- The work of the Institute is high quality, evidence based and sustainable
- Nursing expertise and leadership is recognised and valued to implement, inform and improve research, education, policy and practice.

1. Influence

Nursing has encountered numerous challenges relating to identity, representation and career development (Hinkley et al., 2023; WRES, 2023). Nurses remain underrepresented in research despite initiatives to build capacity (NHS, 2021; Health Education England, 2022, NIHR, 2022). Consultation events with students in developing this strategy highlighted variable experiences of research education in the classroom, a lack of research placement opportunities and even negative attitudes towards supporting research placements and research careers. Yet, the importance of promoting research environments at the earliest stages of nursing careers and the benefits of research placements have been repeatedly highlighted (Brand et al., 2021; NHS, 2021; Naylor et al., 2014). There are currently gaps in the UK data regarding numbers of nurses with research qualifications, expertise and/or working within research roles (e.g. NMC, HESA). Our engagement events in developing this strategy highlighted that nurses who have teaching qualifications are able to register as nurse teachers, however, there is no comparable mode of registering as a research nurse. This is problematic in not knowing how many nurses are actively engaged in research, in what capacity and at which levels. Early engagement of research in nursing education is key to building confidence, transforming attitudes, cultures and practices, to inspire research active careers and 'release nurse's research potential' (NHS, 2021). Equitability is needed in ensuring nurses who actively lead or deliver research are recognised for their expertise. The RCN is a unique organisation comprising professional body, trade union, charity and publishing house. With over half a million members, 256 fellows, 43 forums and 978 staff members, there is ample diversity and expertise to influence, leverage and drive cultural and systemic change across research, education, policy and practice.

In order to influence and achieve this goal, the RCN will:

- Explore opportunities to better support student placements and career pathways in research, particularly through the establishment of the Institute
- Examine ways to collate data on nurses in research roles to promote voice, visibility and leadership, and to identify how nursing expertise might be better recognised
- Raise the profile of research within nursing and amplify research as core business through developing and strengthening collaborations with key stakeholders, including educators, funders, independent sector organisations and charities, to leverage and lobby change
- Promote research opportunities and celebrate research successes through working conjointly with the communications team, RCNi and RCN Foundation
- Establish a strong evidence base and clear dissemination plan, including effective use of social media platforms and research newsletters, to all staff and members to promote and enable research awareness, engagement, inclusion, delivery and leadership

2. Infrastructure

The development and implementation of the research strategy coincides with the establishment of the Institute, offering a unique time and space to co-influence these endeavours, ensuring contemporaneousness and sustainability. Infrastructure, in the context of this research strategy, is considered two-fold:

1) To set out the internal structures needed to ensure RCN and RCN Institute is agile, efficient and responsive
2) To identify, challenge and disrupt current barriers that impinge upon research opportunities for nurses and nursing.

2.1 RCN Infrastructure

The RCN Institute is a new development that will take time to become firmly established. In order to be a leading national authority for the nursing profession, the RCN and accompanying Institute will require a contemporary internal infrastructure that is agile, efficient and responsive to ongoing developments in research.

In order to achieve this, the RCN will:

- Develop a resource to outline the structure of the Institute, key roles and contacts. This will include 'staff pages' to improve visibility around expertise, current projects and associated publications.
- Establish a 'research activity database' providing oversight of the different research leads and projects. This will 'map' existing research and areas of expertise, whilst identifying gaps in knowledge and activities relating to the Institute's academies as areas for further development.
- Design and develop resources that are accessible and clearly signposted to support, build confidence and enable research. For example, educational resources (e.g. introductions to research, research designs, methods and processes, equality, diversity and inclusion, patient and public involvement, working with vulnerable people and sensitive topics), research templates (e.g. participant information sheets, consent forms), RCNi resources, personal and professional development opportunities and links to key funders and funding calls, including the RCN Foundation. Collaborative approaches between the Nursing, Policy and Library and Archive teams will be fundamental to this, whilst engaging with wider members and stakeholders to ensure shared knowledge, quality and expertise.

2.2 Systemic and structural barriers to research

Barriers to nurses being active and leaders in research have been well documented. These include challenges in securing competitive research funding alongside teams and professions with established track records in research, lack of career structures into research, competing priorities between research, teaching and/or clinical practice, and lack of diversity and leadership role models in research and senior roles (Health Education England, 2022; Kline, 2014; O'Byrne and Smith, 2010; Segrott et al., 2006). High quality mentorship, building multi-disciplinary teams and being situated in

research-supportive environments have been identified as being most important to research leadership and success for nurses (Farquharson, 2023).

In order to transform current research mindsets, cultures and practices, the RCN will:

- Establish a mentorship programme, bringing together the expertise of our members, forums, fellows and wider networks to support nurses to be research active, to develop research careers and become research leaders
- Co-develop regular webinars with our members, forums, fellows and events team to showcase the broad-ranging roles of nurses in research at different levels; including research pathways, career opportunities, specialisms, contexts and leadership; to inspire and promote research and visibility of role models
- Design and develop research focused resources as part of RCN Learn, such as podcasts, 'talking heads' and blogs, for members to access asynchronously, taking into account potential challenges with time

3. Impact

Impact, in the context of this research strategy, is about using and promoting research to influence and improve nursing education, leadership, policy and practice. Impact is also about harnessing the power of research to improve health and social care, society, economy and outcomes. The work of the RCN must be of high quality and evidence based, ensuring that research knowledge and expertise is accessible and far reaching. Having a strong evidence base, high quality publications and communities of practice will be crucial for impact, building and maintaining links and ensuring longevity and sustainability as the voice of nursing. Nursing is frequently cited as the most trusted profession in the UK (Ipsos Veracity Index, 2022). However, significant challenges are experienced in recruiting and retaining nurses. One such way of attracting and supporting candidates into nursing might be to showcase the wide-ranging research and leadership roles the profession offers. OECD data shows that nearly 18% of UK-based nurses are internationally educated (OECD, 2021). However, disparities in research, education and workplace opportunities are experienced, particularly by internationally educated, via processes of institutional injustice (Hui et al., 2021; WRES, 2023). This research strategy sets out ambitions to support and enable research for underrepresented individuals, professions and communities, ensuring that diversity and inclusion is prioritised in decolonising research and establishing equal opportunities. The RCN is unique in having regional offices, national reach across the four nations and international links and networks. This provides opportunities to work collaboratively with global leaders to coproduce research and share knowledge through which to transform research cultures and systems.

To achieve this goal, the RCN will:

- Partner with Country and Regional Directors and teams to identify national and local challenges; use civic-engagement approaches to develop evidence towards addressing health and social challenges, and organise local events to share findings, promote accessibility, engagement and reach

- Work closely with the four nations to establish current barriers, enablers and opportunities for research across the different countries; to build evidence and support research and leadership careers through sharing best practice
- Build and sustain international collaborations to develop research programmes to address global challenges; to coproduce and learn from international ways of working to inform best practice
- Ensure that the work of the Institute and the five academies; activism, international, leadership, practice, workforce; supports the research taking place at each of these levels, provides equal opportunities to meet the needs of underrepresented people, communities and professions, and ensures that research is accessible, engaging and inclusive towards supporting and sustaining leadership ways of working.
- Use RCN congress, conferences (e.g. International Nursing Research Conference, Education Conference) and events as platforms to network, showcase knowledge, share experiences, highlight best practice, have open discussions about current challenges and possible ways to problem solve, whilst celebrating success

This research strategy identifies the research priorities of the RCN over the next three years. The goals outline the ambitions of the RCN following extensive consultation and engagement. The research strategy will continue to be co-informed and influenced by RCN members and the Institute of Nursing Excellence as this work develops. The outcomes of the strategy will be periodically reviewed to ensure that the goals are being met and that these continue to be refined and developed in planning ahead for future productivity and sustainability ahead of the next research strategy in 2028. This research strategy has been developed following extensive consultation and engagement with our members, forums, expert reference group, fellows, professional nursing council and RCN employees. We thank each of those individuals for their time, patience and expertise in shaping this strategy and will continue consultations as we prepare for future research strategies to come.

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