

SPHeRE Programme PhD scholars adapt to life under COVID-19

Eight SPHeRE Programme PhD students are based in the Centre for Health Policy and Management at various stages of their research and have all had to adapt to life under COVID-19. The two most recent SPHeRE cohorts have seen major disruptions to their mode of learning, with weekly in-person teaching having moved online. An important feature of the SPHeRE Programme is the social connection between peers within and across cohorts which has also been curtailed without shared lunches, social gatherings and in-person peer-learning days. But one cohort did manage to go away together for a few nights over the summer for socially distanced interaction and fun!

With regards to their research, some students are primarily engaging with existing datasets and have been able to transition to working from home fairly easily with ongoing supervision carrying on via Teams. Others have faced minor challenges in moving qualitative data collection online. Counter to expectations, a challenge the students have not faced has been engagement with frontline health professionals who have made themselves available to scholars even during these extremely busy times. One of our students, Lisa Corrigan, has had a major disruption to her planned pregnancy yoga programme for use in a face-to-face pilot randomised control trial which was due to run this autumn over a number of weeks in person. Due to COVID19 restrictions the study protocol had to be re-designed to run online as a feasibility trial without a control group. Not only did the study design change but the outcome measures too shifting from birth outcomes in medical charts to online post programme questionnaires exploring perceived stress, anxiety and fear of childbirth and a new ethics application had to be submitted to support this. However, it turns out that while challenging, the shift to online may actually have increased access to the target audience! All of our scholars have risen to the challenge of COVID-19 and have made the best of a difficult situation, learning which will stand them in good stead in their future research careers. They have all shown resilience and adaptability which will prepare them to respond to the challenge of a research career.