

Developing a distance learning post graduate qualification for professionals in dementia care – our journey

Knowledge of best practice is essential for care staff who support people living with dementia, but how can it be made accessible to everybody? **Teresa Atkinson** and colleagues discuss the development of an online programme that has enabled more practitioners to study at an advanced level

Ensuring that those employed to support people living with dementia are skilled and knowledgeable in best practice is recognised as essential to ensure quality care (Surr et al 2020). But education is not a level playing field, so reaching professionals can be challenging where their educational opportunities are restricted.

For example, non-traditional students such as practitioners in dementia care and support are often working full-time, alongside family commitments and perhaps their own caring roles. They need education that is accessible and flexible.

This was the catalyst for the development of a fully online Postgraduate Certificate in Person-Centred Dementia Studies, which gives those working in this field the opportunity to study at an advanced level. The programme aims to take practitioners on a learning journey to challenge their thinking, extend their knowledge and empower them to enhance their practice.

Seven modules comprise the full postgraduate certificate:

- Person-centred leadership: the VIPS approach
- Applying the Admiral Nurse Competency Framework
- Expert practice in dementia care
- Supporting people with advanced dementia
- Enabling environments for people living with dementia
- Engagement and empowerment in dementia studies
- Dementia in the family context.

Developing a fully online programme which still fosters the experience of a learning community can be a tough proposition when students don't have the opportunity to meet up or study together in traditional ways. Working within the ethos of person-centred dementia care and appreciative inquiry, the Association for Dementia Studies (ADS), University of Worcester, was able to develop a programme that has successfully run for three years and has recently seen its first cohort of students graduate in Worcester Cathedral.

Teresa Atkinson is senior research fellow, Dr Chris Russell is course lead, Mary Bruce is senior lecturer, Nicola Jacobson-Wright is dementia practice development coach, and Jennifer Bray is research assistant, all at the Association for Dementia Studies, University of Worcester.

As an action research technique “Appreciative Inquiry” suggests that change in human forms of organisation – be it family, society or other form – can be based on a relational process of inquiry that is grounded in affirmation and appreciation (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom 2003). Conklin (2009) advocates that “using Appreciative Inquiry in social systems such as classrooms creates opportunities for students and teachers to voice their thoughts, ideas, hopes, and aspirations in the creation of the ideal learning experience” (p. 772). Teaching and learning in this way is then an iterative process of affirmation and appreciation which builds and strengthens the relational process of inquiry.

So what makes our programme different and of particular value? Firstly, the programme was built with the support and involvement of people affected by dementia. Their voices resonate throughout the programme and bring learning to life. For example, discussions were held with them early in the development of modules to gather the key themes that would underpin the offering. Involvement continued throughout development so these ideas were progressed and became a core part of the learning and teaching.

Secondly, every module is built on evidence generated from research undertaken by the ADS or drawn from leading practice in the field. This means educators are close to the

Key points

- The Postgraduate Certificate in Person-Centred Dementia Studies is a fully online offering that builds on existing research evidence.
- The experiences of people affected by dementia resonate throughout the course.
- Although delivered online, the course focuses on creating an interactive learning community.
- A key aim of the course is to encourage students to put their learning into practice, and this has been seen to happen at both professional and personal levels.
- The course empowers students, enabling them to enhance quality of life for people affected by dementia.

source of the evidence that underpins the teaching material and can give first-hand accounts to enrich the learning experience.

Thirdly, the postgraduate certificate is delivered fully online. The concept of a fully online course was radical – the first of its kind at the University of Worcester – and was founded on our commitment to equality of learning for practitioners recognised as “non-traditional students”, students who are skilled professionals in their own practice and who deserve to be supported with “non-traditional learning”.

Delivering the course fully online is a whole new concept for us as a teaching team; this is not e-learning to be clicked through in order, but an interactive programme of videos, lectures, podcasts, activities and live tutorials. Research tells us that e-learning can only take students so far in their understanding (Surr *et al* 2017, Royal College of Psychiatrists 2019, Smith *et al* 2019). While it is a useful tool for mandatory, compliance-orientated learning, it does not go further into the realms of practice-based change that professionals of today require.

Dr Sarah Housden, external examiner for the programme, believes that these three attributes give the course a unique value in assisting practitioners to improve services for some of the most vulnerable in society since it is, as she puts it, “founded upon a very strong ethos of research-informed teaching supporting students to deliver evidence-based practice with confidence. This sets this programme of study above many other dementia-related postgraduate courses in terms of quality.”

This approach creates a strong framework for education, supported by research and drawing upon best practice.



This model ensures students can be confident of taking the best possible learning into their professional practice.

For many who work in practice, academia can feel out of reach. A collegiate and nurturing team is essential to fostering the sense of community and practice which can help students to achieve their goal. However, academic accomplishment is only part of the story. The skills and confidence fostered along the learning journey and the



The Hennell Award Ceremony at UK Dementia Congress 2019. Pictured (l-r) are David Moore, Clementinah Rooke, June Hennell, Suzanne Mumford and Dawn Brooker

networks created between students have a lasting impact.

As educators, we have noticed four themes emerging from the initial three years of programme delivery:

Creating a learning community

Good learning does not happen in isolation: “Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated” (Chickering & Gamson 1987).

Although our programme is fully online, care is taken to foster a sense of belonging. Our students volunteered these comments:

“There are opportunities to meet with others in online tutorials, and to contribute to online discussions where we can learn from others,” said one, while another remarked, “I found this module to be very user friendly and the input from tutors has been amazing, always felt supported and encouraged. It created a friendly, welcoming atmosphere even through virtual collaboration sessions.”

Encouraging peer support and peer learning is congruent with our person-centred approach with valuable opportunities created through online discussion boards, group work, and live collaborative sessions. On one module, an online community of practice encourages students to continue their learning journey, keep up with latest research developments, and connect with colleagues nationally and internationally.

Taking up this theme, the external examiner commented that “the whole programme team should be commended on the way they work together to ensure the currency, relevance, and interest of each module site, and for exploring new ways of generating discussion with and between students within the online learning environment.”

Putting learning into practice

One student, Clementinah Rooke, took learning from the

“Expert Practice in Dementia Care” module to Zimbabwe, linking with a university and hospital there to support health care professionals to improve dementia care, and she is continuing this through institutions in other parts of Africa. She has previously won the Hennell Award, an annual prize given by the University of Worcester to the student who demonstrates most strongly how they have put their learning into practice to benefit people affected by dementia.

Another student, Stu Wright, from a more recent cohort of the same module has been implementing learning from the Focussed Intervention Training and Support (FITS) programme for people with dementia who have complex needs and distressed behaviour.

FITS is an evidence-based training and support intervention that improves psychosocial care and reduces the use of restrictive interventions such as anti-psychotic prescribing. Stu has implemented this programme at Brunel Care, a group of care homes in the south-west of England (Brunel Care 2022).

“Delivering the first cohort of FITS into Practice has been a perfect antidote to the last two years of Covid,” he says. “Staff participating have really embraced the learning, found it challenging at times but more importantly became as excited as myself at being able to see research coming to life and the aspirational nature of research becoming achievable.”

Stu, who is writing a joint article for publication with us, gave a presentation on his experience of implementing FITS at the UK Dementia Congress in November and won the Hennell Award for 2021-22.

Linking with employers

Our “Applying the Admiral Nurse Competency Framework” module arose following work with Admiral Nurse charity Dementia UK. Their professional and practice development facilitator Gayle Madden shared her reflections on the module:

“As much as Dementia UK had reservations about the modules being run wholly online it has actually proved to be so accessible to all of the Admiral Nurses across the country. So, I see the benefits of that and I think it is the way forward really.

“In terms of practice and changing practice, what we are hearing back from the nurses is that following the course they have got much more of an awareness of the competency framework, of what it means and how it can be purposeful for them when they are out in practice. That is essentially what we, as an organisation wanted, so the course is doing what we wanted it to do”.

Beyond the curriculum

One student, Jemma Mickleburgh, was inspired by their learning from the “Engagement and Empowerment in Dementia Studies” module to team up with Dr Rebecca Oatley from ADS and a woman living with a rare form of dementia who contributes to our teaching. They took on a fundraising challenge, walking 100km along the Jurassic Coast and raising over £2,000. We’re proud that our students not only learn how to lead care and support to meet the needs of individuals, but also how to support people living with dementia to maintain their place in the world as

people with agency and aspiration.

Our students are testament to the difference education is making to their lives, confidence and professional practice. “Having no educational background at all it was daunting to embark the module and I had no intention of going any further,” remarked one of our students.”I found the module hugely beneficial and affirming, both personally and professionally to the point where I have chosen to continue to study because of the encouragement and support of the tutors.”

Another said: “(Studying on the course)... has challenged my perceptions and enabled me to reflect on my experiences and skills. My learning has been especially valuable in providing opportunities to consider how it can be applied in my practice to influence positive change.”

Conclusion

Education should build confidence and empower students to become agents of change in their chosen profession. We are proud that our education team at the Association for Dementia Studies has won the Teaching Team Award – a prestigious award from the University of Worcester recognising excellence in delivering innovative education. For professionals working in the field of dementia care, education enables them to enhance the quality of life for all those affected by dementia. As one graduating student succinctly reflects:

“What I take away from this course is so applicable in many fields - mostly it is the power of empathy, the need to centralise our actions around the voices/needs/wants of those with lived experience, and the incredible power we all can have as leaders at any level, and the importance of deeply understanding issues from a range of perspectives in order to make valuable change.”

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