



The journey: implementing the West Midlands Health and Social Care 'Scheme'

Elizabeth Davies-Ward

*Curriculum Lead, Health and Social Care,
Herefordshire and Worcestershire Lifelong
Learning Network*

Rosemary Shepherd

Principal Lecturer, Staffordshire University

Sarah Baxter

*Assistant Practitioner Workforce
Development Project Manager,
NHS West Midlands*

Following our article in *Forward* issue 20 (Tatum *et al*, 2010) the journey continues. This article illustrates how the West Midlands Health and Social Care Foundation Degree Scheme has been implemented in practice through two case studies:

Case study 1: the development and revalidation of the existing Foundation degrees in Health and Social Care at the Institute of Health and Development at the University of Worcester. It describes how these programmes embrace the Scheme's key tenets of sustainability, adaptability, accessibility, inclusivity and transferability.

Case study 2: the development of two new Foundation degrees in Learning Disability and Long-term Conditions at Staffordshire University and the University of Worcester, following their successful tender as part of the *fdf*/Skills for Care Foundation degree project (Thomson, 2010).

The West Midlands Scheme came at a time of considerable change both strategically and organisationally in relation to service delivery and modernisation. It also had clear synergies with the work of the relatively new Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). The four West Midlands LLNs¹ have been working strategically with *fdf*, the West Midlands Strategic Health Authority, Skills for Care and health and social care partners to progress the West Midlands Scheme within their sub-regions. They have played a pivotal role in the development and dissemination of the Scheme across the region.

A key tenet of the 'Scheme' is the provision of a **core knowledge and skills learning base** for all Foundation degree learners in health and social care sectors. However it is also recognised that to ensure learning is relevant to meet the needs of the workplace **Shared and Specialist** learning requirements need to be met. The Scheme does not prescribe the curriculum but sets out the principles, and the rationale, that should underpin Foundation degrees.

¹ The four LLNs cover the whole of the West Midlands Region, incorporating all the education providers.

1.

Case study: **The context**

The University of Worcester's Foundation degree in Health and Social Care had been developed in partnership with Herefordshire College of Technology and representatives from the NHS and the independent health sectors in 2005. The programme had been recruiting well for the first few years but it became clear that for a number of reasons, which included changes in policy and developments in practice, student numbers were declining. Comments from practice were that the course was no longer 'fit for purpose' as it did not sufficiently prepare students adequately for life as an Assistant Practitioner² or equivalent role in social care.

As the Foundation degree in Health and Social Care at the University of Worcester was due for its periodic review it was decided to bring this forward by one year in order to review its validity and sustainability. The review highlighted the need to make key changes to the programme to ensure the programme was fit for purpose and improve students' fitness for practice.

Discussions with the West Midlands Strategic Health Authority (SHA) indicated that it was imperative to ensure that any education provision was directly linked to specific employer requirements and SHA priorities. Learning should focus on developing knowledge and competencies with a clear outcome on role enhancement and service improvement (Tatum *et al*, 2010).

It was under these auspices that Foundation degrees were developed in Health and Social Care, Learning Disabilities and Children Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH) to ensure that the Foundation degrees were fit for purpose and illustrated the following:

- **Effective partnerships between education providers and employers**
A steering group was established using the LLN and the Institute contacts to discuss the needs of employers across the public and independent sector. This also included a representative from the Association of Care Trainers, which is the sub-regional arm of Skills for Care. Members of this group were consulted via email and face-to face on programme design and module content.
- **Confidence that the Foundation degrees were developed in line with employer needs**
Employers were consulted at each stage of the developments. The content of the Core and Shared modules has been influenced by the needs of employers while the work-based learning modules enable employers and students to define the content in relation to the particular work needs. To support the work-based learning modules, mentors are identified at the beginning of the programme and invited to the University to discuss the programme operation and the mentor role. The mentor is also visited in the workplace by the module leader and regular contact is maintained.
- **An approach to Foundation degree development that would foster, not stifle, innovation, enabling the education providers to showcase their unique expertise, development and delivery approaches**
The West Midlands scheme gave the Institute an opportunity to think creatively about the Foundation degree design. The model provided the opportunity to offer a range of pathways to students working in Health and Social Care, Learning Disabilities, CAMH and Mental Health that address economies of scale. All of the students would study the **Core** modules together. Students would study some of the **Shared** modules depending on employment needs. The **Specialist** modules were designed as 'open' modules which enable the employer and students to negotiate content in line with organisational needs. The assessment of the Specialist modules would be carried out by the Foundation degree team with employers attending a presentation of the students' project. A Specialist module leader provides support to the student through face-to-face, Skype, email and telephone contact outside of the normal working hours.
- **Development of the 'deeper skills' required for reflection, communication and critical analysis, evidenced-based research and practice**
The Core and Shared modules provide the students with opportunities to develop these skills. There are also opportunities to link theory to practice through the Specialist or work-based modules.

2 An Assistant Practitioner is a worker who competently delivers health and social care to and for people. They require a level of knowledge and skills beyond that of the traditional healthcare assistant or support worker. The Assistant Practitioner would be able to deliver elements of health and social care and undertake clinical work in domains that have previously only been the remit of registered professional (Skills for Health, 2009).

The University of Worcester Foundation degrees incorporate the key elements of the scheme – sustainability, adaptability, accessibility, inclusivity and transferability – in the following ways:

Sustainability: The Specialist modules are primarily work-based which allows the content to be adapted to fit the context of the work environment and contemporary practice. Economies of scale are achieved through the Core and Shared modules.

Adaptability: The learning experience links learning to practice and involves the employers. The Specialist modules can be adapted to meet the needs of the service, whereby students negotiate the content with their employer and the module leader. The design of the Foundation degree also allows for the creation of new pathways by adapting the Specialist modules and/or the Shared modules to suit the needs of the service. The University has recently added a Mental Health Foundation degree.

Accessibility: A substantial component of the Foundation degree is work-based supported by a blend of face-to-face contact and through the use of IT such as Skype. The students have access to all modules via the University Virtual Learning Environment. An 'out-of hours' contact service is in operation in recognition that the student is both working and learning.

Inclusivity: Flexible entry to the programme, certificated exit points for those not wishing to take the whole programme and seamless progression to the top-up honours programme. Credits are automatically awarded for 'approved prior learning' such as the NVQ 4 Registered Management Award or NVQ 4 Health and Social Care.

Transferability: As the Foundation degree programme meets the West Midlands Scheme requirements, those who achieve an Foundation degree should have a portable, recognised qualification.

2.

Case study: *The context*

The second case study relates to the partnership development of two Foundation degrees in Learning Disabilities and Long-term Conditions as part of the **fdf**/Skills for Care Foundation degree project. This follows a successful tender for funding from Skills for Care and **fdf**. The universities of Staffordshire and Worcester, along with their respective Lifelong Learning Networks, were awarded the project to develop these two streams within the national scheme. The process draws upon the West Midlands model of **Core, Shared and Specialist design principles**.

Skills for Care West Midlands and a number of stakeholders, including employers from both the statutory and independent sectors, and those who access services, were part of the development team.

Developing the structure: The Core learning requirements have been incorporated into the Foundation degree Framework through an articulation into seven 'Learning Themes'. These have been identified from extensive discussion with employers and those who access services within the West Midlands. They draw upon the wider work of the Skills for Care Project Group, which has been identifying the Core requirements for all those working in adult social care:

- Personal and academic development (Core)
- Communication (Core)
- Values (Core)
- Policy and Commissioning (Core)
- Promoting Independence (Shared)
- Partnership Working (Shared)
- Work-based practice (Specialist)

A range of steering group activities were undertaken to ensure the programme developments were reflective of the transformation and personalisation of adult social care agendas. This has included scrutiny of the *Better the education & training, better the workforce; better the business* (2008 and 2009) conference reports and Skills for Care publications.

Although transformations are taking place in how adult social care is delivered, this needs to be set within the practicalities of the roles that the potential students will work in. Role descriptions for social care workers in a variety of settings were reviewed and a review of the literature to support changing roles in social care was undertaken.

The approach being adopted is a Framework design. The content and design aims to reflect the ethos of service user-centred care, with the development of positive partnerships between those who access social care and those provide care to improve the individual's quality of life (WHO, 2005). Working with those who access services in this way has significantly informed the programme development. It has afforded the following insight into their requirements and the characteristics that they wish to see in the person who supports them in their daily life:

"Self thinking people who are able to communicate and converse, who are motivational and knowledgeable regarding services and who are skilled in researching services and funding from a variety of sources and who are aware of legal aspects of social care, for instance disability discrimination and safeguarding. They could be described as critical thinkers with problem solving skills and the ability to 'think out of the box.'"

This specification of the requirements of those who access services developed through our work has been taken on board by the Skills for Care project.

Debate has clarified the common features required of the Social Care workforce who support people with Learning Disabilities and Long-term Conditions. Common features identified as typically reflecting care needs relate to the impact of social, psychological and economic dimensions on their lives (WHO, 2005). Therefore the **Core and Shared** themes within the Learning Disability and Long-term Conditions awards reflect this commonality.

A range of Department of Health documents (Department of Health, 2006, 2007 and 2008) have also emphasised the need for adult social care users to have choice and control over their care and the need to promote well-being and independence. This requires a holistic approach to care by a **team of individuals** with the requisite knowledge and skills, working together. Therefore those working in the adult social care workforce will need to be effective members of a multidisciplinary team with appropriate knowledge and well developed interpersonal and communication skills.

The learning themes have been mapped against the relevant National Occupational Standards, the Skills for Care Learning Disabilities' Knowledge Sets and the Health and Social Care QCF Level 5 Diploma (latest drafting of the units). Mapping the themes to the National Occupational standards for Health and Social Care has been undertaken to support ease of accreditation between higher education institutions (HEIs). It also provides employers with assurance that a national quality benchmark has been applied to the programme development.

The two HEIs working together on this project both have 15 credit modular frameworks (or multiples of). This may not be the case for all the HEIs within the region. Therefore 'Learning Themes' have been identified to enable all HEIs to guide module content when designing their Foundation degree and its component modules. It is anticipated that students may under some circumstances wish to undertake study at more than one HEI. In such circumstances the accreditation process of the HEI awarding the Foundation degree should be used to ensure that award outcomes are met.

The journey continues...

In this article we have presented two examples of work in progress. We are taking the first, tentative steps to a West Midlands approach for both health and social care Foundation degree provision. The consultative and active partnership approach taken by the project teams across the region, is, we believe, its inherent strength.

References

- Department of Health (2006). *Our health, our care, our say*. Available at: www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4127453.
- Department of Health (2007). *Putting people first*. Available at: www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_081118.
- Department of Health (2008). *Transforming adult social care and putting people first – the whole story*. Available at: www.dh.gov.uk/socialcare/socialcareforum.
- Skills for Health (2009). *Core Standards for Assistant Practitioners*. Available at: www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/~/_/media/Resource-library/PDF/Core-standards-for-APs.ashx
- Tatum, S, Longbottom, A, Newbold, C and Baxter, S (2010). The Journey: developing a West Midlands Foundation degree 'Scheme' for Health and Social Care. *fdf Forward*, issue 20, pp 9-16.
- Thomson, M. Foundation degrees in the adult social care sector: an update on the *fdf*/Skills for Care Project. *Forward*, issue 20, pp 23-25.
- WHO (2005). Preparing the Health Care Workforce for the 21st Century: The Challenge of Long-term Conditions. Available at: www.contemporarynurse.com/archives/vol/22/issue/1/article/2158/a-new-direction-for-community-services-in-the.