

The Yorkshire Neonatal Network tackles flexibility in education

In Britain there are seven million people with literacy and numeracy difficulties either because of unpleasant previous learning experiences or because English is not their first language¹. This means 1 in 5 adults have a learning need that has not been addressed and that may be preventing them from reaching their maximum potential and filling many of the skills gaps that UK employers experience. To put this into perspective, the skill shortage vacancies costs the country £10 billion in lost revenue due to poor employee productivity or lost business as the right people for the job are unavailable¹. It is clear that the NHS and indeed neonatal services are not immune from the skills deficit that ultimately affects service delivery^{2,3}.

To help overcome some of the challenges presented by a skills shortage that is likely to get worse in neonatal nursing, the Yorkshire Neonatal Network is taking a holistic approach to education and training. Recently the network has been examining the role of the non-registered workforce and ways in which training and education can be provided in a more innovative and flexible way. Our goal is to encourage staff to plug their personal skills gap and to build their confidence so that they can follow the more traditional educational paths if they choose to undertake nurse training. To do this many learners will need to progress from a basic skills level in adult literacy and numeracy through the progressive qualification routes offered by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (FIGURE 1).

As FIGURE 1 illustrates, the NQF gives adults the opportunity to build on their existing education through the basic skills pathway up to level 2, whereupon learners can confidently move onto higher levels to prepare for graduate and post-graduate study. This means that life long learning is promoted whilst staff gain confidence in their own abilities. They can then gradually progress through the framework to their full potential via education and training that is relevant to their place of work. For example an employee who successfully achieved the level 2 NVQ Certificate in Infection Control could map this qualification across the NQF to compare it with the level 2 in adult literacy and a GCSE A*-C in the national curriculum. Whilst it is possible to compare qualifications it should be emphasised that they are not the same, but equivalents. This is to ensure that subject matter and teaching and learning methods are appropriate for specific groups. Many adults do not study for GCSEs because they are focused on teenage learners, unlike NVQs which target adult workers like those found in health care.

As a network we want to ensure that all staff have access to adult friendly education and that they have a minimum of level 2 qualifications, which is in line with the government's current literacy and numeracy agenda for adult education.

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If adult learners want to obtain a level 2 qualification in literacy or numeracy, there are a number of government funded initiatives to help staff and employers achieve this aim. However, the Yorkshire Neonatal Network wanted to respond to the demand from managers and staff that education and training at this level should be related to nursing care and flexible enough for staff to access in different settings. Many of the non-registered staff within the network are in the process of completing National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), but the criticism of NVQs is that they are adult focused with little neonatal content. It is recognised that NVQs are concerned with work based competency, but even this does not always address the learning needs of neonatal staff.

The network is now investigating the possibility of becoming an education provider. Following conversations with the examining bodies like Edexcel and City and Guilds it seems that a prudent approach might be to write our own neonatal-specific courses and to get these courses approved by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), which is committed to verifying the quality of educational courses and ensuring that they meet the changing needs of individuals, business and society. However, there are considerable administrative components to a project of this nature, in that a centre wishing to deliver education with examination board approval must meet the conditions of the examination board and where appropriate the NMC. These conditions are not insurmountable, but becoming a centre does require robust planning and organisation. We are still working through the details associated with collaboration with the examination boards and are in the very early stages of course designs. In the mean time the network has approached Network Publishing who have well established

National Curriculum – Framework for Higher Education Qualification Levels (FHEQ)	Basic Skills (Adult literacy and numeracy)	National Qualifications Framework		
		Original levels	Revised levels	Examples
D (doctoral) Doctorates		Level 5	Level 8	BTEC Advanced Professional Diplomas, Certificates and Specialist Awards
M (masters) Master's Degrees, Postgrad Certificates & Diplomas			Level 7	BTEC Advanced Professional Diplomas, Certificates and Awards
H (honours) Bachelor's Degrees, Graduate Certificates & Diplomas		Level 4	Level 6	BTEC Professional Diplomas Certificates and Awards
I (intermediate) Diplomas of Higher & Further Education Foundation Degrees, HNDs			Level 5	BTEC Higher National Diploma
C (certificate) Certificates of Higher Education			Level 4	Certificate in Early Years Practice
A levels		Level 3	Level 3	NVQ Level 3 Certificate in Safe Use of Infusion Devices
GCSEs Grade A*-C	Level 2	Level 2	Level 2	NVQ Level 2 Certificate in Infection Control
GCSEs Grade D-G	Level 1	Level 1	Level 1	NVQ Level 1 National Certificate in Health and Social Care
Key stages 1-4	Entry levels 1-3	Entry	Entry	Certificate in Adult Literacy/ Numeracy/ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages)

FIGURE 1 The National Qualifications Framework. The diagram enables learners to map their courses to existing qualifications. However, it should be noted that the NQF was revised in January of this year to include 8 levels. Unfortunately NVQs at level 4 and 5 are not yet revised in line with the new framework, but this is planned for the future. NVQs at levels 1-3 are not affected by the revised framework. Up-to-date information can be found at www.openquals.org.uk

distance learning courses related to healthcare. We have recently examined several courses produced by Network Publishing including their level 2 Infection Control course. This course has three units regarding the general principles of infection control, but they are relevant to non-registered neonatal staff. The course material is well written and user friendly. Learners undertaking the course have some flexibility over how long they take to progress through the course and they are supported by a tutor who provides robust feedback for all assessments. At present the network is in discussion with Network Publishing to see how viable it is for us to become a distance learning education provider with the potential of writing courses that are published through Network Publishing. The company have confirmed an interest in our idea and we have negotiated a deal that will enable the network to develop this project without paying development costs to the publishing company.

As many of the units within the Yorkshire Neonatal Network are geographically isolated, distance learning courses like those produced by Network Publishing give staff a more flexible approach to their learning as they are not required to travel long distances to the nearest college or university. As the programmes have tutor support these courses are also an ideal way for staff from overseas to boost their English Language skills in a work related topic. Further support is

available to staff who speak English as a second language from one of the network educators who is training as a specialist English Language teacher so that neonatal nursing care and language can be taught in an embedded manner.

Our approach to education is underpinned by a belief that if staff attain some self-belief in their capabilities their confidence will grow enabling them to become independent learners and progress through the National Qualifications Framework. The National Audit Office¹ believes that building a learner's confidence will encourage a positive attitude to future training thus improving the productivity of an employee and enhancing service delivery. We hope that investment in non-registered staff will contribute to a workforce with a strong skills base that is sustainable and fulfils the individual. Our ultimate aim is to use this strategy, among others, to address workforce issues by encouraging assured learners to consider nurse education and neonatal nursing as a future career.

References

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