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**Vocational Education - Your Options**

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**Introduction**

Vocational education is training that is specific to your area of work. This could be learning a new skill, having an update on a care intervention, or developing an area of therapeutic practice. Vocational education therefore applies to all professions working in healthcare. New evidence is being published regularly which can improve patient care; it is through education that it has an impact in practice. In a more broad sense, vocational education can also give you greater job satisfaction, help you progress in your chosen career and fulfil your ambitions. It can be described as an education journey, and every journey has a beginning.

**Care Certificate**

For new healthcare support workers (HCSWs), the Care Certificate is a twelve week course with the aim to provide all HCSWs with the fundamental knowledge, skills and approach of working in the healthcare professions (Skills for Health, 2016). The Care Certificate is in addition to your induction training that your employer provides for you. Traditionally just 5% of the NHS education budget was spent on HCSW development, despite 60% of patient care being provided by HCSWs (Health Education England, 2016). Clearly this was a huge educational gap and arguably contributed to failings of the healthcare system such as Mid-Staffordshire. The Francis Report (2012) was published as a response and subsequently the Government commissioned Camilla Cavendish to investigate the support HCSWs had. The report highlighted that HCSW training was inconsistent across the country, reflecting the various standards of care for patients and service users. As a result Camilla Cavendish recommended the introduction of the Care Certificate to standardise initial training for HCSWs (Cavendish, 2013). It is now a requirement that all HCSWs complete the Care Certificate however existing support staff can put together a portfolio to provide evidence that they are meeting the fifteen standards. In comparison to previously, this is the first nationally standardised training HCSWs have access to, which allows a platform of knowledge to build on.

**Workshops**

Although the Care Certificate is once only training, mandatory training is completed annually. However, you may develop an interest in a particular area of care or you work in a specialist area. If so, participating in workshops can deepen your knowledge and strengthen your skills in these areas. Typically workshops are for one day only, however some may be more. Workshops could be arrange on site in your area of work however many Hospital Trusts opt to use an external provider. Choosing in house training or outsourcing it may be dependent on the educational need, for example an external provider such as a university is likely to have advanced educational facilities. It could be argued that learning in an unfamiliar environment can reduce participants’ confidence in the classroom however mock wards and simulations suits provide a safe but realistic learning environment. Participants can feel more comfortable knowing that making mistakes in an area where no patient will be affected, then learning from these mistakes, is encouraging. Furthermore being away from the busy workplace allows you to focus on learning, rather than your next shift at work. Attending workshops does not have to be related to your area of work. You may have a personal interest in an area completely out of your comfort area, in which case sharing ideas and learning from others with a similar interest will be a positive learning experience.

**The London South Bank University University Certificate of Competence and University Foundation Course**

Once you have some experience being a HCSW, you may start to consider gaining accredited qualifications at a university. One of the benefits of this is gaining recognition of the knowledge and skills you have developed during your years of service, and develop them to an advanced level. Many HCSWs have worked full time for a number of years and therefore have been absent from formal education. It can be daunting returning to education after a break, therefore a course such as the University Certificate of Competence (UCC) and University Foundation Course (UFC) or equivalent will smooth the transition back into studying. These courses are at academic level 3, which equates to A Level study, however choosing to study at a university for these courses will provide you with a taste of higher education and learn how to study at university. It may seem a strange concept of learning how to learn however the transition to studying at university is something many students find a challenge. Adult learning has a strong focus on self-directed learning, facilitated by academic staff, therefore there is less contact time with lecturers compared with teachers at a college. In context this means much of your learning is outside of the classroom, applying what you have learnt at university to your practice at work. One of the benefits of this is developing an independent, critical thinking approach to your practice thus you are enabled to critique your practice and improve it. Therefore the UCC and UFC courses will make you more familiar with directing your own studies, and may encourage you to consider other options.

**Foundation Degree Health**

Many HCSW do not wish to become registered Nurses or allied health professionals because they enjoy consistent patient contact. This however does not mean you cannot gain other higher education qualifications. Completing a Foundation Degree (FdSc) in health is a two year course at academic level 4-5. Similarly to the UCC and UFC, the FdSc Health is one day per week at university during which you study a broad range of modules, thus developing your wider knowledge as well as your specialist area. Some modules have an element of student choice whereas others are applicable to all multidisciplinary areas. Depending on your local policy, this qualification could enable you to apply for a specialist band 4 assistant practitioner role.

**Nursing Associate**

One of the most recent additions to your educational development options is the Nursing Associate. The current Government has commissioned two thousand nursing associates to begin their training in January 2017 (Bayliss-Pratt, 2016). This qualification is non-specialised and will therefore enable graduates to work in a variety of areas. The Nursing Associate initiative is an apprenticeship style educational model leading to an academic level 5 qualification. The significance of an apprenticeship style method of learning is students maintain their current employment status while studying for a qualification. In other words there are no tuition fees for the student and you have an income throughout your studies. Some may argue that apprenticeships are not academic however the final qualification equates to a Foundation Degree at level 5; it is only the style of learning that is different, not the learning outcomes or academic level (Ford, 2014). Introducing this style of learning arguably makes the support workforce more inclusive, providing people with an opportunity to become a qualified practitioner who can make a positive difference to patient care.

**Undergraduate degrees**

Completing an undergraduate degree evidently allows you to practice as a fully registered Nurse or allied health professional (AHP). However there are a small number of degrees related to health that you could choose to study as an alternative. The BSc Health and Social Care Administration and Management is closely related to practice based qualifications however this degree could lead you to a non-clinical role within the NHS. People who prefer working in an administrative environment, using skills such as organisation and leadership to contribute to patient and service user care would be especially interested. Each course is a three year full time degree, which means you could not work full time simultaneously. For this reason many very able HCSWs choose not to become registered health care professionals or study for an undergraduate degree. However the scope of education is on the cusp of changing.

**Apprenticeships**

There is currently a movement to introduce degree apprenticeships into all industries, including health and social care. In the future aspirant healthcare professionals will be able to gain registration through the apprenticeship educational framework. Similarly to the Nursing Associate, degree apprenticeship trainees will be employed by a hospital Trust therefore have no tuition fee debt and earn a wage throughout their training. This is a radical evolvement of nursing education, which is still being debated. One of the positives of this movement is the trainee having a sense of belonging to a hospital Trust, increasing the likelihood of remaining in the same Trust following registration. This could help reduce the current Nursing shortage that most hospitals are coping with at present. The degree apprenticeship is an academic level 6 qualification, following on from the level 4 and 5 at the Nursing Associate course. It is therefore likely that the credits gained during the Nursing Associate programme can be used towards gaining a degree apprenticeship. Overall this increases the number of options students have to gain registration.

**Conclusion**

In summary there is a wealth of options for HCSWs. Depending on your background and experience, you have many options to choose throughout your career. Lifelong learning not only develops you as a safe and effective practitioner but gives you greater job satisfaction. No matter how many years of service you have dedicated, there is always a need for educational development that ultimately has a positive impact on the care we provide for patients.

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