Collaboration is key to successful staff development

Glasgow City Council's principal officer for learning and development in social work services, Tony Mackie explains more about the council's partnership with The Open University.

Social workers in Glasgow will be able to serve their clients even better now under a new arrangement that enables them to study with The Open University (OU).

Staff can work towards an honours degree in social work in a collaborative programme between Glasgow City Council and the OU, delivered through the OU in Scotland, that brings the entire qualification into their working environment.

The staff do most of their studies within their day to day jobs, attend tutorials within the department’s own training centre and are even taught by three colleagues who have trained as OU lecturers.

“IT all works extremely well,” according to Tony Mackie who, as Glasgow City Council's principal officer for learning and development in social work services, manages the training of 4,500 staff across the city.

“We had purchased places on an OU qualification for our staff and they developed very positively as a result. However, last year we decided to go into a collaborative arrangement with The Open University, which has several benefits for us, our students and ultimately, of course, the people our staff work with.”

This collaborative arrangement brings what was already an effective honours degree in social work entirely ‘in-house’, a move that offers the department several advantages.

Mackie said: “It gives us control over where the staff are at in their studies. It also contextualises their studies in their working environment and their everyday roles.”

There are other benefits, too. “Three of our staff, who had worked here for a number of years, had been involved in developing staff and helping to teach students on placement with us. We gave them the opportunity to train as Open University associate lecturers (ALs) teaching the social work degree modules. All three really embraced the idea – they were really keen to help their colleagues and of course it is another string to their bow.

“Having the three ALs in the organisation means students have even more access to their tutors. We also hold our tutorials in our own training centre, which is another advantage. The OU qualification encourages the students to apply what they are studying to their own jobs. Everyone there is from the city council and can talk freely about applying the theory they have learned to practices in their own part of the organisation. It is this relevance to their day to day work and the quality of the teaching modules that benefits our employees and ultimately the service users.”

Staff who want to apply for places on the qualification do so by filling out an application form, writing a personal statement, their line manager’s reference and attending an interview to ensure they are willing and able to take on the extra workload. “It’s great that people want to develop themselves,” said Mackie, “but we have to ensure they are ready for study. So we work with them to make sure they are in a good position to start study.”

And once they are, they will benefit from what he calls “a first-class” degree programme. “There are so many advantages to OU study,” he said. “It offers a flexibility you just don’t get from any other university. The quality of learning is fantastic.

“We are committed to giving our staff the best possible degree training available – and the combination of both of those things mean we can do just that.”

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