

# LIVING AND LEARNING

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**J**uggling a busy career in nursing with a second role training student nurses keeps Dr Gemma Ryan busy. She's a registered adult nurse, a nursing tutor and a lecturer with the Open University (OU). 'It's the best of both worlds,' she says.

For 15 years, the OU has worked with the NHS to train nurses around the country and Dr Ryan is able to draw on her hands-on experience when teaching. 'The very reason I wanted to go into nursing in the first place was because I wanted to make a difference and whilst you can do that in education, it's often at arm's length,' she explains.

She's worked in many areas of nursing, from community and GP practice through to general surgery, the acute sector and elderly care. She went on to take a higher education teaching qualification before returning to the NHS as a research nurse and has been a tutor with the OU since 2008. She's also one of the OU's central academics, responsible for keeping nursing degree materials and content up to date and relevant. 'The best thing about combining both careers is that I can fulfil my desire to help people.'

Student nurses train with the OU in a flexible way – they're all working in some part of healthcare and manage to fit study around their day jobs over the four years of their nursing degree. During this time, they're supported by online academic staff and face to face visits – Dr Ryan regularly sees the OU student nurses at work to ensure their studies are progressing smoothly. Since 2002, some 1500 nurses have qualified with the OU and more than a thousand are currently studying with the institution, some for the new Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship.

As they study, they continue their work in a range of health settings

from large hospital trusts through to nursing homes, GP services and hospices around the country. There's an urgent need for more qualified nurses – the NHS spends an estimated £1.46 billion a year on temporary staffing to fill shortages. Attracting new recruits has been challenging; since student loans were introduced, applications to study nursing have fallen by about a third.

'One of the big sells for our OU nurses is that they're invested in their organisation, because they've worked in the field prior to studying for their degree,' says Dr Ryan. 'They understand healthcare better. OU student nurses know it's hard work and they're usually very determined.' OU student nurses are also highly engaged – 91 per cent say they're satisfied or more with their course. 'They're self-starters – they have to be,' says Dr Ryan, 'and they're good at time management. Because they've worked in practice, they also understand patients.'

As an OU academic, Dr Ryan draws on her clinical experience to keep things fresh in online tutorials. 'Students seem to like that I still work in practice and I can use current examples of things I have been doing recently.'

*Things change a lot in nursing so still working means I'm up to date. I really think about what students need to know and the relevant skills they need.'*

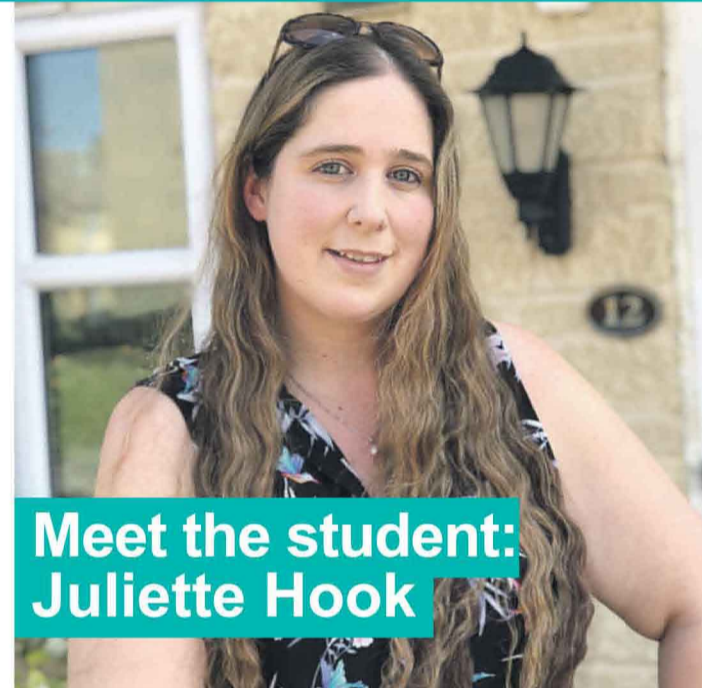
In her spare time, Dr Ryan is still an OU student studying for a law degree. 'I think it complements nursing quite well – learning about legal and ethical issues. I'd definitely recommend OU study. I wouldn't be where I am now if it were not for the OU.'



**Making a difference:** Regis nurse Gemma has been training student nurses for 15 years

## DID YOU KNOW?

The Open University provides nursing qualifications across the UK, offering the chance for healthcare support workers, who are supported by their employers, to study part-time. This enables them to become a nursing associate via a higher apprenticeship route, a registered nurse by studying for a BSc (Hons) Adult Nursing, or via a BSc (Hons) Mental Health Nursing degree. These qualifications are also offered via the Registered Nurse Degree Apprenticeship.



## Meet the student: Juliette Hook

Healthcare assistant Juliette Hook, 32, is studying with the Open University (OU) for a degree (BSc) in adult nursing.

'I left school at 16 and didn't start my OU degree until I was 29,' says Juliette. 'There was a big gap, so it was pretty terrifying, but I wouldn't have been able to study by any other means. I had good grades in English and maths at GCSE, but I wanted to get a job straight after school – as many teenagers do – so I decided not to pursue a degree.'

'I also had my son fairly young, so it was a case of knuckle down and crack on. After his birth, I secured a job as a healthcare assistant at a community hospital, where I've been for about eight years. My boss encouraged me to apply for the qualification and I've not looked back since.'

Juliette wanted to study at a higher education institution but never thought it would be possible. 'I looked at studying with my local university,' says Juliette, 'but it was a restrictive course and with a career and young child, I just wouldn't have been able to fit it around my lifestyle. I love the flexibility of the OU; I've got an 11-year-old son and if I want a day out to watch him in a play, or support him moving up to secondary school, I can fit my studies around this to ensure I don't miss out on anything.'

So far, Juliette's experience has been nothing but positive. 'Time management can be a bit of an issue, particularly when you are young and have a family. But the support you get is second to none,' says Juliette. 'If you want to write your essay at 2am, no one will frown,' says Juliette, 'or if you want to sit and run through module material at 4am when you're on a night shift and it's quiet, then that's absolutely fine too. When I go back to work during gaps in modules, it reminds me why I am studying.'

'I love the freedom of it. I believe it's never too late and there are always options out there available to you.'

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