



Open University in Wales Access to Education for Carers Project

This was a year-long project which ended in September 2011 and was funded by The Waterloo Foundation. The project was to engage carers of all ages in learning opportunities, specifically aiming to raise the aspirations and opportunities for carers to study at higher education so that they can enhance their knowledge, skills and confidence.

"I'm a wife, mum and a carer, I'm a student now too and this is my thing I'm learning for me too"

Kim Crocombe, Wrexham

The innovative project enabled us to build on the OU's existing widening access programme, largely focused on those living in high deprivation areas, and extend it to benefit carers.

The OU's unique flexible distance learning methods are ideally suited to carers, who often have to study at unconventional times to fit in with their caring roles. One carer on the project studied through the night as she had to be awake anyway to change her daughters' medical tubes.

Through this project we were able to reach out to carers and provide them with access to our flexible and supported distance learning curriculum of over 500 courses.

Project outcomes and impact

The main outcomes of the project are that we:

- Engaged directly with 64 carers across Wales, 33 so far have gone on to formal accredited HE study, mostly through our Openings courses offering 15 credits as an introduction to HE study.
- Built our database of carers' organisations and contacts in Wales, through which we were able to reach carers directly. The community link and partnership work has been crucial to the success of the project and we are now able to sustain this contact with minimal additional resource.
- Helped to influence wider discussion about carers needs throughout the OU at a UK level, carers are now one of the priority groups for the OU for widening participation across the 4 nations.
- Further tested our engagement methods and now have a model that's transferable across different widening access groups.
- Secured further funding for a sustainable future. The Waterloo Foundation (funding body) were so pleased with the success of the project that they have agreed to a further 2 years funding to help ensure the activities are fully mainstreamed and sustained beyond the project timescales.

Project detail

The project had 5 main strands to it:

- **Development of information specifically aimed at carers.** We developed specific marketing materials, a webpage and a carers' information leaflet with endorsement from all the 3 main umbrella carers organisations in Wales, Carers Wales, Crossroads Wales, and the Princess Royal Trust for Carers. This helped us to address carers directly and provide answers in the leaflet to many of the questions they would have about study.
- **Working through carers groups.** We disseminated regular information via 53 carers groups and networks across Wales and put articles in newsletters, sent e-bulletins and provided promotional materials and information via these networks.
- **We worked in close partnership with a few key carers groups** to complement their informal learning programmes and provide enhanced support through taster sessions and face to face study clubs. A partnership case study can be found here: www.tapemusicandfilm.co.uk/?page_id=1130

"We have been running a number of coursesincluding IT, Welsh, Employability, CV writing, Art & French taster sessions and digital photography. The Open University offers opportunities to progress from these courses into higher education and many of the carers we are working with are keen to develop themselves and enhance their job opportunities for the future."

Simone Percy, NEWCIS

- **We ran a bursary programme** to help towards the cost of course fees for carers who were not eligible for other financial support. A substantial number of students were just over the income threshold for financial support and the bursary funding enabled them to access the courses for a fraction of the price.
- **We shared our practice and helped to influence the way the University responds to and supports our students who are carers.** The University is now working on developing a carers 'flag' to highlight students who are carers. A University-wide conference was held in May 2011, and we were able to share the practice and lessons learnt from the Wales project there. Carers have now become one of the widening access priority groups for the Open University across the UK, We believe the decision was influenced in some way by this project along with other carers' champions across the OU.

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