

Executive

Learning in the virtual classroom

From healthy ageing to cutting-edge dementia care, aged care professionals are increasingly going online for the latest in education.

DARRAGH O'KEEFFE reports.



Gone are the days of travelling to a university campus for a three-hour lecture in the evening after a long shift at work. Aged care professionals seeking to gain the latest knowledge are increasingly turning to online courses so they can study in their own time.

From free short courses to graduate certificates and even bachelor's and master's degrees, a wide range of university courses can now be completed by distance education.

Australian Ageing Agenda speaks to three aged care professionals about their experiences completing university courses online and how they juggle full-time work with study.

Wide snapshot of ageing

"I wanted a broad overview of ageing issues and what appealed to me was that the course was influenced by people from industry," says Toni Wallwork, who is undertaking the Master of Ageing online with the University of Melbourne.

Wallwork, who has been undertaking the course since July 2015, says she's enjoying the focus on policy and research and how this interacts with ageing and aged care.

The course has core units including the economics of ageing and ageing in society, and offers electives in subjects such as design for ageing, leadership for an ageing workforce, and mental health and ageing.

"I'm particularly interested in how older people can remain socially connected and the importance of family and relationships in that," says Wallwork. "I've also really enjoyed learning about other models of care from around the world."

As acting group diversional therapy manager with Living Care, an aged care provider based in NSW, Wallwork says she is looking for ways to align her studies with her full-time work.

For instance, next year she will undertake a research project as part of the course and is hoping to base this on the introduction of a new cognitive stimulation therapy within Living Care facilities.

Wallwork says she prefers online study as it enables her to learn at her own pace.

"I'm very structured and disciplined because I have so many roles; I also teach part-time at TAFE in leisure and health.

"Online study suits me because I get up early in the morning and can commit to a few hours of work. I probably do 20 hours a week."

She admits that currently study leaves little room for leisure time: "It's mainly work and study but I really enjoy learning, so for me it's a joy."

Wallwork praises the university's approach to supporting students online, which includes making support officers available to provide assistance. There are also online forums where students can discuss issues and share resources.

"I would say online learning is perfect for working professionals," she says. "Obviously we don't have the time or capacity to stop working; in regards to professional development we have to be on top of our game and have current information. It's about improving ourselves and our practice. I would certainly recommend studying online if you're in the aged care industry."

Wallwork expects to complete her course next year.

Dementia trio

For Rowena Leitch, an assessor working with an Aged Care Assessment Team in Hobart, undertaking a short-term course in dementia was attractive because it would provide "a taster" of subjects that could be explored further in a bachelor's degree.

In 2015 Leitch signed up to the University of Tasmania's massive open online course, commonly referred to as a MOOC, in Understanding Dementia.

The MOOC, which ran for three months, provided information on how dementia occurs in the body, the physiology of different forms of the disease, and understanding dementia from the perspective of the person living with the

disease as well as their carer, says Leitch.

"That initial course was very good, it piqued my interest in learning more," she says. Last year Leitch signed up for UTAS's other MOOC, the six-week Preventing Dementia course.

"I was interested in doing that course because there are more women dying of dementia than men. I wanted to not just inform my practice as a nurse but also for my own health seeking behaviour," she says.

"Doing the Preventing Dementia MOOC has enabled me to inform others about the differences between evidence-based facts and the other stuff that is online and out there in the community."

Leitch has since enrolled in the Bachelor of Dementia Care with UTAS, which is again delivered online.

She says the degree is tackling many topical subjects that she sees in her daily work, such as the management of challenging behaviours and how aged care services handle the "dignity of risk."

As Leitch has hearing loss, she sometimes struggled to hear some of the videos on the site as the speakers had accents or the volume was set too low. After she contacted the university's disability services she was provided with special equipment including enhanced headphones.

In addition, the university has made a typist available to transcribe videos on request and provide a written transcript, Leitch says.

Leitch's advice to fellow aged care professionals considering online study is simple: go for it.

"It's one thing to be compassionate and enjoy working with older people but you really need to get that training behind you so you understand the changing evidence-base."



Toni Wallwork



Rowena Leitch



Linda Addison

'Give myself additional knowledge'

"This course is exactly what I was looking for. I really love the experience," says Linda Addison, learning and engagement facilitator with Southern Cross Care SA and NT, who is undertaking a Graduate Diploma of Healthy Ageing.

Addison's role at SCC is predominantly around supporting staff in delivering the provider's focus on healthy ageing.

"We're rolling out the healthy ageing framework into all our facilities, which includes having gyms at our facilities. We're really promoting movement among our residents, rather than a sedentary life. So I'm here to educate staff in those concepts."

The CQUniversity Australia course appealed to Addison because it would impart the latest research and knowledge in positive ageing, particularly from a frontline practice perspective.

"Because I'm full-time at work, online study was definitely the way to go for me," says Addison, who adds her employer is supportive of her learning. She began the course three weeks ago and expects to complete it in two years.

Addison is undertaking two units per semester, which she says is manageable. Right now she's studying cognitive and sensory changes and age, and opportunities and challenges of healthy ageing.

Like Wallwork, Addison is hoping to base one of her assignments on some of her day-to-day work at SCC. "I can pull a lot of information from what I already do and put that into my assignments, which is great."

Asked about the challenges of balancing study with a full-time job, Addison says organisation and dedication is key.

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