



## **How do employers promote a diverse and sustainable work force? A Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) project in partnership with the Open University sheds some light.**

Debates around how to retain staff and create a workforce culture which encourages and supports employees have been around for many years. The origins of the Open University was founded in 1969 in order to open opportunities to 'people, places, methods and ideas'. One of the strongest ideas has become the main basis upon which the University continues to support workforce retention and widen participation of students who are in paid employment whilst they are studying for a social work career.

Next year the sixth route into social work education will be introduced; The Social Work Degree Apprenticeships. Subject to final sign off by the Institute for Apprenticeships (IFA) it is hoped that this new route will break through workforce retention and widening participation in social work. Through the fresh eyes of employers who established the Trailblazer group working with Higher Education Institutions and supported by Skills for Care, the aim is to collaborate on common issues and challenges around workforce planning and career pathways in order to develop and sustain a committed workforce representative of the community it serves.

See further <https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Home.aspx>

This raises many questions about how best to do this.

Over the past year the Open University has undertaken a scholarship and research project funded by HEFCE to explore this issue for the social work degree apprenticeships which has illuminated some of the issues and challenges facing employers and staff. The research began with an online survey asking employers to identify under- representation of staff in the workforce. The main areas were identified as men, disabled people and BME. The next phase of the research involved running focus groups across England hosted by employers. Discussions here covered a much broader range of under-representation and proposed some underpinning reasons for this. For example young people leaving care are less likely to consider going into higher education as highlighted by a recent report, only 1% of care leavers go onto University compared to one in 3 other young people:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/1061777.stm>

The reasons for this are varied however as young people who have an understanding of the social work role, potentially this could be a positive career path for them. The possibility of going to University and pursuing social work as a career option needs to be introduced at school.

Other examples from the focus groups addressed issues of equality, discrimination and support. A common view was shared that the impact of austerity has led to a significant loss of training budgets which has created a new culture of online training by individuals. This is further compounded by increased remote working and 'hot desk' office culture which means discussions around challenging discrimination and supporting employees are marginalised and in some workplace contexts felt to no longer be taking place. Anyone who recalls the value of two day equal opportunities training

programmes generating stimulating debates will possibly be feeling the inadequacies of the e - learning approach to professional updating the most.

The social work degree apprenticeships route presents an opportunity to revisit some of the best practice we have lost. The renewed focus on promoting diversity and building a sustainable workforce will hopefully re- invigorate debate.

This is not to suggest that the only route for achieving this is via the social work degree apprenticeships. The development of Postgraduate and MA routes into social work have opened up different avenues for staff to develop and achieve higher levels of career development.

Further information about both routes into social work with the Open University can be found here;

<http://wels.open.ac.uk/overview/school-health-wellbeing-and-social-care/professional-programme-social-work/postgraduate>

A new website for all employers and apprentices is being launched by the Open University as an outcome of the HEFCE funded research project. We hope employers and apprentices will engage in discussions via this forum, and share the message that 'Social Work is For Everyone'.

<http://wels.open.ac.uk/swfe>

Helen Casey

Staff Tutor, Social Work

[Helen.casey@open.ac.uk](mailto:Helen.casey@open.ac.uk)