

*Independent evaluation of the European Union's Education,
Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency funded Project to
develop a Master programme in Mental Health Recovery
and Social Inclusion*

2014

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Contents

- Introduction
- Programme Evaluation Methodology
- Overall Programme Evaluation
- Survey Data Overview
- Student Interview Data Overview
- Staff Interview Data Overview
- Appendix A : Details of the background of the independent evaluator

Introduction

This evaluation was undertaken in addition to, and complements, the evaluations of both Prof. Larry Davidson of Yale University and the University of Hertfordshire's own evaluation process, which will each be available on the Programme's website (raiseinrecovery.com/index.html)

Programme Evaluation Methodology

The survey was constructed and evolved through discussion and appraisal between February and mid-April 2014, with the construction of the Bristol-on-line format of the survey taking place by the end of April. The brief for the range and focus of the evaluation was agreed by the Programme project team at the University of Hertfordshire with the other partners.

All students enrolled on the programme at the time (N=60) were contacted by the programme tutor on 21st May, 2014 and invited to complete the survey on line, and informed of the opportunity to consider taking part in follow up interviews. Dr Charles Simpson sent out an email on 28th May 2014 as a reminder and to personally introduce himself as the independent evaluator. Dr Charles Simpson sent out reminder emails to students on the 4th June and 15th July, 2014, with a further email encouraging responses on the 27th June 2014.

The survey data was initially retrieved on the 18th July, 2014; with no further students undertaking the survey via Bristol-on-line, the replies from eight students constituted this data set; analysis of the survey data began at the end of July 2014. The survey data collected from Bristol online was transferred into an excel sheet; thematic analysis and coding of the data in line with the production of descriptive statistics informed the writing of the data summary for this report.

With the same number of students being invited to take part in follow-up interviews, 6 students contacted the independent evaluator showing an interest in being interviewed. With two interviews finally successfully being undertaken, these were conducted via telephone – Skype was also offered as a medium – were between twenty and twenty-five minutes in length, and took place between the 9th June, and 29th June 2014.

Dr Charles Simpson emailed staff involved in producing and delivering the programme on 5th June 2014 to personally introduce himself as the independent evaluator and to invite them to take part in the staff supplementary interview; a reminder email was sent on the 18th July, 2014 to staff who had not made initial contact. Six staff made initial contact, with follow-on emails being sent personally to these to arrange interview times; three staff interviews were finally conducted. Interviews were undertaken at a time most convenient to the interviewees and interviewer. Interviews ranging in duration from twenty-five to thirty minutes, and were conducted between the dates of the 13th June and 20th July 2014.

The layout of the survey questionnaire was used as an aide-mémoire to support semi-structured interviews; scope to address any relevant issue also allowed students and staff to direct and inform the questioning/interview process. Interviews from both student and staff were transcribed, and coded using NVivo software. Thematic narrative analysis of the data, in line with the configuration used to report the summary of the survey data, informed the writing of the data summary for this report.

Overall Programme Evaluation

This is clearly a high quality, professionally relevant programme, which has been delivered by a committed and very experienced team. Students were in the main extremely positive about their learning experience – particularly commenting on the relevance of the programme to their practice, the quality of teaching and the value of a supportive staff and tutor team. Staff members were knowledgeable of how the programme had met student expectation, of the strengths of the programme and its challenges; particularly surrounding the production and delivery of such a programme for the distance-learning market via an online format. In light of the challenges outlined by students and staff, alike, I would ask the team to consider the following recommendations:

1. Explore how the teaching of research methods can be delivered to aid in breaking down any perceived difficulties reported by this particular student population.
2. To revisit the learning units and review if the sum of the workload required for these is appropriate to a part-time programme of study.
3. Give consideration to supporting students and their ability to network via the StudyNet site, and explore the possible use of technologies, such as Skype and/or Adobe Connect, to offer student group meetings and sessions at regular times across the academic year.

Overall, I perceived this to be an impressive programme that is well managed and supported by a committed team. Teaching and staff support is also seen to be of a high quality, and that the students are so very positive about their practice-relevant learning experience is to be commended. Below I give a summary of the survey and interview findings; what must be noted when reviewing the relevance of the detail given in this summary is the fact that only a small number of students and staff participated in the survey and interviews.

Survey Data Overview (participants N=8: 100%)

The range of Programme Expectations (**Q1**) outlined by students spanned the following:

- A professionally relevant course, exposing students to diverse models and interpretations of mental health recovery;
- To gain Masters level academic & research skills, and access to practice relevant material/literature;
- Opportunities for discussion with professionals, both students and staff, from differing countries regarding practice, policy, legislation and theory; and,
- Flexible workload to fit in with work schedules.

The majority of these expectations (**Q2**) when discussed in more detail (N=22), were seen to have been met 'very well' (n=13) or 'quite well' (n=4) by the majority of students. In comparison, the flexibility of workload was seen to be 'not very well' (n=2) met by the programme; and difficulty of holding discussions with fellow/international students was seen to be 'satisfactorily' (n=1) or 'not very well' (n=2) met by the programme. A mean aggregate of the Likert scales used to explore the meeting of these expectations across the three elements of the second question was 4.18.

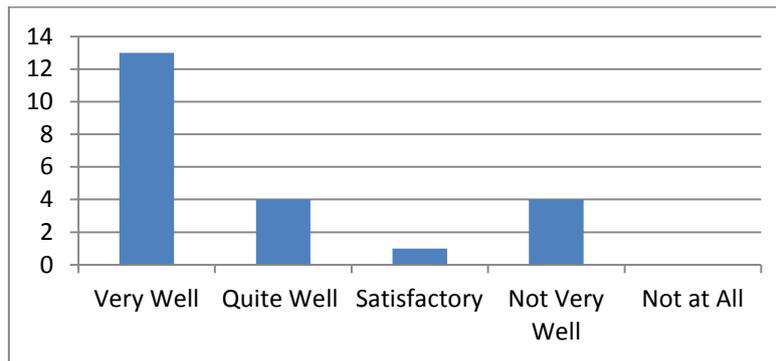


Figure 1: **Q2 (a, b, c)** To what extent the expectation has been met so far?

The most interesting aspect of the programme (**Q3**) for students was the ability to be involved in a taught programme focusing specifically on mental health recovery (25%), have access to relevant literature (50%), and develop academic research and writing skills (25%); all within a supportive trusting environment. This was enhanced for some (25%) by the ability to do so via an online platform offering differing ways of interacting; e.g. videos and activities. The most interesting aspects (Q3a) were reported to be the course content, structure and literature, the ability to share learning with others, and the support given by staff.

Of most value for students, in terms of the programme (**Q4**) were the following:

1. Every aspect of the course material was seen to be interesting and of value (75%); with module one content seen to be of specific practical use and to have a direct, positive impact on student professional practice (37.5%).
2. Being able to compare and share learning and knowledge with others, via the online space (25%)

Within this question students also gave credit for the ability to communicate with tutors; who were seen to respond 'immediately' and give useful feedback.

While addressing this question (Q4) students also expressed some challenges. Linking with other students was seen to be specifically difficult (25%); although where this was reported to be successful was believed to have great promise for impacting on future practice. Module two (Research) was seen to be less relevant to practice (25%), and 'unclear' to comprehend (25%).

Of most value for students, in terms of the online learning for the programme (**Q5**) were the following:

- The flexibility of the online learning, rather than a regular schedule, provided opportunities for reflection.
- The combination of video, PowerPoint, downloads and the discussion blog.
- Library access, access to provided materials, and range of literature available.
- Ability to interact with others, particularly tutors, whose communication was good and involvement excellent.

Students reported that to improve the course (**Q6**) the following needed to be explored.

For two students writing was seen to be 'not an equivalent of discussion'. With the online community of students seen to 'not really develop', the 'discussion' board was believed not to offer the ability to have discussions. This was seen to be an issue to be addressed in the future with one student suggesting that live online discussions might be one opportunity to explore.

For a part-time course, it was perceived that: there were too many weekly activities to be completed within an 'unrealistic' allocated time, with some tutors expecting daily completion of written tasks (1); that the tutorial workload was 'ridiculous' (1); with exercises from one-week to another seen to be 'strenuous' and the workload pacing irregular (1). One student requested the load be 'lightened' and the optionality of completing the online exercises outlined more specifically. Another expressed the option of completing a percentage of the activities; those that were found to be most useful to each student individually. One student requested the possibility of having some actual day classes if geographical confines allowed.

In line with this discussion, one of these students reported that they were not able to read all of the 'extremely rich amount of papers' provided online.

Course structure and material was seen to be initially difficult to find (on StudyNet) for one student, with another finding the connection to the VPN slow and erratic.

Feedback after the final assignment was deemed lacking compared to that received after the mid-term assignment. The need for a 'native speaker' to grade level 7 submitted materials was requested.

The most important feature to keep in the programme (**Q7**) was the material (50%), specifically the content of Module one (25%), which was seen to be 'really valuable' because it is believed to be 'strongly influenced' by the 'lived experience'. The inspiring and supportive nature of the tutors was also perceived to be important, as was their ability to deliver excellent communication (50%).

All students reported that they appreciated and enjoyed the course (**Q8**), with half stating they had appreciated everything the course covered and delivered. The sharing of knowledge, expertise and experiences was a key element for one student. Models of recovery and making links between this and other relevant topics was of particular interest for some students (25%), as were the topics of 'rediscovering one's self-identity', 'stigma', 'employment', 'resilience', 'empowerment' and the 'strengths' model; which got specific mention. The activity on 'identity' was seen by one student to bring about an 'ah ah' moment, and to have directly influenced their working practice; this was believed by them to be the 'measure of a truly successful activity'. The use of videos and video lectures were reported by some (25%) to enable greater understanding and were 'particularly useful in that they explained a lot of material in an engaging way'.

Thirty-eight percent of students reported that there had been no topics, activities, discussions students they had not appreciated, enjoyed, or understood (**Q9**). As a contrast to this, all the other students reported that the academic perspective / research terminology used in the second [Research] module was

difficult to follow and understand; with some stating they struggled with the material, or had to re-read it a number of times to understand. One student made reference to activities taking a 'varied amount of time' which made it 'difficult to estimate how much time to set aside' to complete; of particular note for two students was the amount of time it took to produce their posters. One student felt excluded at times because they believed there were 'assumptions that people taking the course are members of staff'.



Figure 2: **Q10** Overall how would you rate the quality of the programme so far?

When asked what they would say to someone thinking of taking the programme (**Q11**) all students were positive about others undertaking this programme. Commenting that 'you'll learn a lot', that the course is 'awesome', and that others should 'go for it' and join as soon as possible and must 'absolutely do it', it was viewed to be a 'very good program' that deals with 'current issues'. It was seen to be a 'great course' that gave 'opportunity to learn', 'be confident in your knowledge' and consider how such knowledge 'is being implemented in working practice'; as one student put it, it was a 'great program' that 'should be in every country' and 'compulsory for every service provider... across the globe'. Balancing these views were the comments from half the students who also realised that taking on a Master's degree would be a 'challenge', that others should be 'cautious of personal balance', and that given the workload prospective students should be mindful of the 'sacrifice' to study alongside work.

Of those who gave final feedback to staff and tutors (**Q12**), one student reported that in places it had felt like a pilot programme with some sections working better than others, with another stating there had been some problems with the online learning approach. This student also, however, wanted to offer a 'heartfelt thank you' to those who designed and delivered the course stating that it is 'interesting, innovative and relevant'. Other positive comments were as follows:

'Love this program... will be sad to finish. Staff are awesome, program so very rewarding!'

'Thank you especially Audrey for the continuous support.'

Student Interview Data Overview (participants N=2)

All students were contacted to take part in a follow-up 10-15 minute interview that would further explore, in more depth, the questions outlined in the survey. Initially six students made contact expressing the wish

to be interviewed, with two interviews actually taking place. The comments given support widely the detail gathered by the survey.

Topics discussed by students addressed their expectations of the programme as a whole, and the content more specifically; access to StudyNet and module materials; the support from and connectivity with tutors, and the value of student support networks; finally one student discussed the monetary value of the course, and another the aspect of work/study balance, and flexibility.

Programme & Content Expectations

Both students discussed wanting to step in to education at the Masters Level. One valued the 'formal understanding' academic knowledge of recovery would bring to their working practice, and the reassurance that studying at this level would also be relevant to them personally given their role and career development. For them the content, and ability to use the library and relevant materials available on the programme's StudyNet site were very useful. The second also valued the ability to develop their career at this point in live, but felt that enrolling on a Master's Level programme might be the biggest challenge they had so far faced. Initially feeling that they had come in to higher education 'a bit blind', the support of their line manager to enrol had been significant. The key expectation for this student was to learn about, and understand the recovery model, feel confident speaking about it, and bring this knowledge in to their working practice on a daily basis; expectations they believed had been, and were being met. The specific content of the first module was reported to be both 'fantastic' and 'enlightening', with the second module, culminating in the writing of a research proposal, seen to be directly relevant to gaining an understanding of recovery in mental health from the carer's perspective.

A challenge for this student, and others they purported to have spoken with regarding this, was in undertaking the workload for each one-week unit; with each unit reported to take a particular amount of time to cover they expressed the realisation that for them it 'would take me a lot longer'. In line with others to whom they had spoken, it was believed that the level of unit content might be 'unrealistic' for a part-time course. For them this was felt to be 'a bit overwhelming', and perceived as a 'barrier' to their contributing in the online discussions connected to some units.

Work Flexibility and Studying Time

Notwithstanding the comment regarding workload above, the flexibility to study on a distance learning programme at whatever time suited them was however, stated to be a key asset of this programme; particularly for the student questioning the workload.

Staff Support for Students

Students were asked to share their experiences of connecting with and being supported by tutors. For one student having the ability to contact tutors for support was only relevant at assignment hand-in times. A 'shaky moment' for them came while trying to gain advice regarding referencing in the last few days before a Monday hand-in deadline. Realising they would not be able to contact tutors over the weekend, it was suggested that hand-in deadlines during office hours on Fridays would be better if last-minute issues needed to be discussed via email or possibly via phone. The other student, because of working schedules, found it difficult to make phone appointments during certain times, particularly if tutors were part-time

staff members working days/hours that clashed with their own schedule. For them, the ability to hold email conversations was 'fine', 'useful', and 'helpful'; but with past experience of full-time study, not having the ability for face-to-face meetings and contact, meant their seemed to be 'something missing on the distance, online' study format. Realising that online study might well be 'the way forward' in education, this student discussed the ability to try, for example, Skype tutorials – which had been conducted by one of the programme's tutors – but still believed 'a little bit of face-to-face support' perhaps once or twice per year or term would 'really help' as 'putting a face to people' helped. This student also expressed the wish to be able to have support from a personal tutor throughout the course; not only to discuss the programme of study but also to address where the programme might lead to with regards to future academic and work career paths.

Student Connections

Seen to be the 'biggest disappointment' with the course for one student, who made comparison to large full-time courses, interaction with other students on the programme was perceived lacking. This student expressed the wish to be able to have discipline-related discussions with others to gain perspective of differing theatres of practice across Europe and wider. The second student, also wanting greater contact with others, discussed the possibility of arranging regular group meetings to support and stimulate learning; whether as conference telephone calls or group skype meetings, or perhaps locality-based if there was a grouping of students within a specific geographical area.

Internet, IT & Content Delivery

The breadth and level of support material, such as articles, referenced or available via StudyNet was praised and discussed as relevant to working practices as well as to inform the programme. What both students 'struggled' with, however, was in trying to access StudyNet via the off-campus VPN system. StudyNet was reported to be 'quite unresponsive at times' by one, who further reported that the link would regularly 'drop-out' while they were trying to access Athens, via StudyNet, to download articles.

Fees & Value for money

Alongside discussions of student loans and the ability to pay for higher education courses, of relevance for one student was the realisation that the second year of the course may not be funded. This in itself was not perceived as an issue for them – perhaps for others – given that the programme offered exits points along the way to gain a PGCert or PGDip, but of concern was that the final significant piece of work would be to write a research proposal while 'not actually doing the research'; this raise question as to the 'value of a Masters' degree.

Staff Interview Data Overview (participants N=3)

All staff delivering the programme were contacted to take part in a 20-30 minute interview that explored the programme content and its delivery. Initially five staff expressed the wish to be interview; however, due to timing and scheduling constraints three staff were interviewed.

Content

The content of the first four modules was believed to be relevant to, and to have achieved the need to deliver the programme. The first two modules that had been delivered at that point – given the date at which the interviews were undertaken – were reported that have offer students the understanding and knowledge required. The first (recovery) module was reportedly ‘absolutely at the right level’ for a Master’s programme of study, although it was perceived to have possibly been aimed at the baseline of a Master’s level degree given the educational demographic of the current student cohort. Through feedback given to staff from students, the second (research) module was perceived by students to be ‘a bit heavy going’ and to have possibly incorporated too much material. Particular mention of the Leadership module being in some ways weaker than it should be was also outlined by one staff member, although no specific detail was given.

Delivering the programme via learning units was seem to be a structural strength, but even with the units having been reduced from twelve to eight per module during initial creation of the programme, staff considered the possibility that the scheduling of eight units might need to be revisited to best deliver the material needed given that assignments had been scheduled at the midpoint of the year.

The ‘quality’ of the learning units was praised by all staff, with the affirmation that the activities linked to units should be ‘practice-focused’ being outlined, particularly given the wish to make pertinent links between theory and practice. This was believed to have been done successfully during the first (recovery) module and ‘very well actually’ during the second (research) module; a module which was perceived by two staff members to be a more difficult module to deliver within the context of the programme and given the target student population. In line with this sentiment, taking it – the relevance of the programme – ‘right back in to practice’ was a key element to keep within the content, direction and delivery of the programme for one staff member, as having a ‘direct impact’ on students being able to find relevance between theory and practice such, for them, be the key objective by which the success of the programme should be measured.

Staff Support for Students

Being a distance learning online programme student support was believed important by all staff. With some of the team not having significantly taught online before, face-to-face contact with students if geographically possible, was preferred; and had been undertaken at times. ‘Lots of email work’ and a ‘heavy workload’ supporting students was reported to have been undertaken by staff members, particularly in the evenings and at weekends given that these were the times when students ‘generally worked’ through the materials and learning units. Realisation of the high level of student support needed and given across the first two modules, possibly in part due to the requirement of this particular student group, provoked one staff member to consider the necessity of introducing designated programme, module and personal tutor roles, to contemplate tutorial groups for smaller numbers of students lead by discernible tutors, and to put in place evenings and weekend support, outside of ‘normal’ working hours, that would be at hand during the times students would be engaged in study.

Student Connections

Realising that students work in differing ways, with some ‘quietly getting on’ and others feeling they might want more face-to-face contact, in line with the comments regarding tutors above, another staff member

considered the introduction of introductory tutorials with small student groups, possibly via Skype and/or Adobe Connect, at the beginning of the programme to enable students to introduce themselves to each other. The viability of StudyNet to host 'discussion' groups, which are at present linked to learning units for modules, to enable students to network, was also reported to be in some ways insufficient as it offered only a platform to post a few hundred words and then respond to other's postings; and was as such not a vehicle for discussion 'because there is no synchronicity' to enable multi-user chat. Obliging students to make connections was also seen to be problematic as the sharing of student emails and other contact details would have to be universally agreed or subsequently left to individuals to forge those links.

Internet, IT & Content Delivery

Uniformly gathering materials for each module, learning unit or session as a fully enclosed element in designated areas of the programme's StudyNet site was reported to have been a successful undertaking, to be well organised and very presentable. The application of delivery via StudyNet was, however, questioned given staff knowledge of the difficulties of using this platform; particularly the layout and accessibility of embedded areas such as the 'Teaching Resources' pages. Staff reported that hyperlinks to videos, articles, and PowerPoints were stable and consistently functioning, although some had been made aware by students that accessing material via the VPN function was problematic in some circumstances.

All staff purported that in some ways trying to replicate the 'classroom on line' was a challenge because delivery could not be 'sociable and chatty, and informal and discursive'. The cultural or working practice differences between students across differing continents was perceived as informing in what format material should be delivered; with the subsequent need for a mixture of pdf, PowerPoint, video presentations of lectures and practical examples of working practices, to be utilised to counterbalance against these differences. All staff called for more video and interactive elements to be embedded as learning materials; with the second (research) module being outlined as a successful application of the inclusion of video. One staff member stated that inevitably there was a need to explore 'the sort of learning that we are going to deliver, the sort of learning that is needed, and how we put aside what we think people want and actually do what people need'.

Programme Structure

The international knowledge, expertise, team-working practices of the partnership was perceived to be a key strength of the programme by all. As was the ability for such an internationally developed and delivered programme to be relevant to a global student consumer base. The programme was seen to offer a complete compendium of rich and relevant subject matter and materials, which would be pertinent 'to students from many disciplines'. The format used to produce and deliver the programme was also believed to be truly innovative and the programme itself a highly commercial product that could be exported, as a whole degree or with each module being a standalone entity. One challenge that was discussed, for just such a programme, would be the need to verify the overlap, intersections and connections between and betwixt differing modules to produce and deliver a holistic entity as it developed.

Appendix A

Details of the background of the independent evaluator

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Bachelor of Science 'Psychology and Applied Social Studies'

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Academic Tutor for the Research Doctoral programme for Health Practitioners (DHRes); Core member DHRes programme development and delivery team.

Module leader DHRes Research Proposal Development CLA; additional teaching DHRes SPECR CLA, Advanced Qualitative Methods CLA; DHRes, CRIPACC, School of Health and Social Work, and University GTR programme – NVivo software tutor. Doctoral supervisor.

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Module leader CM5703; Joint Module leader CM5706; additional teaching CM5707, CM3601, CM5601 & MB5531. Departmental Ethics Committee reviewer. Masters supervisor.