

Report of validation event to consider a MSc in Nutritional Therapy held at the Northern College of Acupuncture (NCA) on 17th December 2007

Panel of Assessors:

Professor Nigel Palastanga (Chair)
Cardiff University

Dr Celia Bell
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Middlesex University

Dr John Fish (Moderator designate)
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Ms Rhiannon Harris
Centre for Nutrition & Dietetics
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC)

Ms Felicity Moir
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In attendance:

Ms Helen Peel
Senior Validation Officer
University of Wales

Ms Ffion Morgan
University of Wales

1. Background

The Northern College of Acupuncture (NCA) was established in 1988 and is a registered charity. The College received validation of its MSc in Acupuncture by the University of Wales in 1995 followed by subsequent validation of an MSc in Chinese Herbalism in 2003. The University of Wales conducted a successful Quinquennial Review at the NCA in March 2004.

The NCA wished to add a further MSc to its portfolio in the area of nutrition. Discussions had been held during the previous year with the Validation Unit and Moderator and the final documentation was provided in accordance with University of Wales guidelines and circulated to all panel members prior to the event.

2. The Proposal and Rationale

The proposal presented for validation was for a 3 year part-time MSc programme in nutritional therapy. The first two years would comprise the taught part of the MSc and the dissertation would be completed in Year 3. The maximum time limit for completion of the entire programme would be five years. The proposed exit qualifications were a Postgraduate Certificate in Nutrition Studies at the end of Year 1 (30 credits at level 6 and 30 credits at level 7) and a Postgraduate Diploma in Nutritional Therapy at the end of Year 2 (30 credits at level 6 and 90 credits at level 7). Students would not receive an additional NCA internal award.

The NCA intended the programme to start in January 2008, with a minimum intake of 10 and maximum intake of 20. Entry requirements would be a first degree in a complementary medicine or health science discipline or have a minimum of two years relevant experience, leading to degree-equivalent learning. All students would be required to meet the matriculation requirements of the University of Wales.

Nutritional therapy is currently unregulated as a profession in the UK but the Nutritional Therapy Council (NTC) was established at the end of 2006 in order to put the regulation process in motion and to establish nationwide education and training standards for the profession. Their current training criteria have been based on existing National Occupational Standards (NOS) for nutrition. The NCA programme had been carefully designed to meet both the NOS standards and the current NTC criteria.

3. Programme Structure, Content and Assessment

On the whole, the Validation Panel was very impressed with the content and structure of the course, which they felt would provide students with a very good opportunity for learning and developing research into nutritional therapy.

A key issue which had been under discussion within the College prior to the validation event as well as discussed during the validation meetings was the title of the programme. The NCA Management had decided just prior to the validation that they wished the title MSc in Clinical Nutrition to be considered by the panel. There was detailed discussion regarding the current status of the various nutrition bodies and the term 'therapy' but after careful consideration the Panel felt that the title of MSc in Nutritional Therapy far better reflected both the content and the applicants who would be likely to join the programme.

The Panel did have some concerns regarding the potential lack of basic science knowledge of some applicants and agreed it was vital that the entry requirements be clarified and for the course team have the opportunity to identify possible deficiencies and develop strategies for how they could be remedied. The Panel felt that dealing with such a diverse group of students could be challenging for the staff. The Panel heard that the majority of students would come from a clinical background but that they would consider those who didn't and might be able to negotiate for them to take one of the relevant modules from the acupuncture programme.

The Panel was keen to hear how communication skills would be developed within the programme and heard that there was a strong clinical element within the programme set in the nutritional context and that communication would be a key element. Personal Development Portfolios (PDPs) would be used, for which students would receive support. The Panel was very pleased to hear that working with other professions was a rich feature of the programme as this had not been made apparent in the documentation. The Course Leader planned to develop outreach work with local GP surgeries and schools and there would also be the different clinics on the NCA site. It was hoped that this inter-professional working would feed through to the research.

The Panel was interested to hear what the NCA expected of students when asking them to "make a diagnosis", as given the wide variety of student backgrounds, this could mean something quite different to all of them. Following discussion, it became clear that students were required to complete specific forms which would direct them in what they needed to do and the NCA team accepted that the word "assessment" might be more appropriate than "diagnosis". The Panel also noted the use of the term 'naturopathic nutrition' and were unsure what this might mean in this context and how it differs from other aspects of nutrition and lifestyle taught in the programme; the staff also seemed unclear, so it was suggested that the use of this term also be reviewed.

In terms of assessment, the Panel felt it was very interesting and was well thought out although there was slight uncertainty regarding the use of summative and formative assessments and their contribution (if there was any) towards the module mark. It was agreed that the Course Team could usefully review the assessment pattern to ensure that the assessment strategy was being followed. The Panel was pleased to hear that staff had begun to write the assessment criteria for the first assessments.

The Panel noted that there was a very robust process for managing the dissertation, which was applauded. The process would however need to be modified slightly in order to permit all students who had successfully passed Part 1 of the programme to proceed to the dissertation. The Detailed Project Outline was an excellent initiative but should not form an additional assessment hurdle for students. The Panel felt that research could be made much more explicit throughout the document.

The Panel discussed the reading lists with the staff and discussed how they would reconcile the use of both 'popular culture' books alongside 'academic' books with students, and how a critical approach would be cultivated. The Panel requested that all reading lists in the module descriptors follow the standard referencing system adopted by the NCA.

The Panel felt it was very important that students be expected to complete the entire MSc programme rather than the Postgraduate Diploma only. It was felt that the college and staff attitude would be crucial in achieving this goal.

4. Staffing and Resources

A. Staffing

The Panel was very pleased to have the opportunity to meet with four members of the small (and recently appointed) staff team. The Panel felt that the CVs were strong and demonstrated a good range of expertise. The NCA would have a similar arrangement for staff for this programme as for its other programmes; all staff would be practitioners and therefore part-time. During the first year of the programme, the Course Leader would sit in on all sessions in order to maintain an overview and support the new staff group. Regular staff meetings had already been held and there was regular e-mail and telephone communication.

The Panel recognised that it was difficult for the staff to comment on the detail of the programme, as they had only been recently recruited (although they had worked alongside the Course Leader whilst revising the module descriptors for the final version of the validation submission). It would be expected that by the end of the first cycle, the staff team would have a stronger sense of ownership of the programme and be able to reflect the ethos of the college.

The Panel was already aware of the strong staff development policy in place at the NCA and pleased to hear that this would be extended to the nutrition staff group. All staff would be required to undertake the teacher training course and invited to attend the regular staff development events during the year and expected to attend the annual conference. It would be expected that staff would assume the role of academics as well as teachers and would be involved in research. Research collaborations were already in place with York University and Biocare.

B. Physical Resources

The Panel heard that the NCA had set aside £3,000 in order to establish the nutrition library. This would ensure that all recommended reading would be available for students in the library. Online journals would also be purchased and recommendations would be made to the University of Wales online library. Students would be expected to purchase the key texts, which would be in the region of £120 in total. Staff were currently looking into dietary analysis programmes/software and would be looking to purchase at least one although would like to expose students to a range if possible.

The nutrition clinic was being developed and necessary handbooks were being purchased.

5. Students

The Panel was very pleased to be able to meet with students who were registered on the MSc in Acupuncture. All students confirmed that the college was run well and professionally and that they enjoyed their studies. They praised the small library and the librarian but reported they had experienced some problems with accessing the online library. The Panel asked the students about the support available to them and heard that all students had regional tutors, who they met four or five times during the year. All students confirmed that they received their marked assessments back in good time and that the feedback was comprehensive. If they had an academic related problem or query they tended to contact the relevant lecturer but it was often unclear who they should contact at the College for other queries. They completed feedback questionnaires at the end of each module and year, received the results and saw that follow up action had been taken.

6. Quality Assurance Matters and Procedural Matters

The Panel was extremely impressed with the Quality Assurance processes detailed in the document, which fully complied with University of Wales requirements.

7. Final Recommendation

The Panel wished to commend the Course Team for the well written, comprehensive documentation which was of a very high standard.

After having held detailed discussions with staff and students, and careful evaluation of the submission documents, the Panel of Assessors agreed that they would be recommending approval of the MSc in Nutritional Therapy to the Validation Board subject to meeting the following conditions, for which a response should be submitted by **14 January 2008**:

- (i) Clarify entry requirements and eligibility for admission to the programme, with particular reference to basic sciences;
- (ii) Review use of term 'diagnosis' in learning outcomes and assessment guidelines;
- (iii) Review assessment strategy and pattern, including weightings for formative assessments. Produce specific assessment criteria linked to learning outcomes for all assessments in Year 1;
- (iv) Revise process and timetable for the Dissertation element, with particular reference to how the Detailed Project Outline fits into the process and within University of Wales regulations.

Recommendations

- (i) Continue development of staff in additional academic skills, eg. personal tutoring, assignment setting, marking, etc.
- (ii) Strengthen role of personal tutor, especially relating to PDP.
- (iii) Make inter-professional work (IPW) more explicit in the documentation.
- (iv) Reconsider need for inclusion of term 'naturopathic nutrition'.

The Chair thanked NCA for their hospitality throughout the visit.

HJP
01/08