

# Inter-Disciplinary Student Work Placements within a Care Home Setting: Improving Student Employability and Developing Social Connections – A Qualitative Evaluation

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## Abstract

This article reports on the development, implementation and evaluation of a project to develop students' employability skills by involving them in work experience within a care home. The aims of this project were (1) to describe how employability skills developed during the work experience (including knowledge and values relevant to the health and social care sector) and (2) to promote social engagement for residents living within the care home. In this descriptive qualitative study, 12 students from various disciplines across social science courses volunteered to participate following an advert to all students. Alongside three key care home staff, these students participated in two information sessions prior to involving residents in individual and group activities commencing in the following week. Qualitative, semi-structured, written evaluations were collected from the students and care home staff at three time points: immediately after the information sessions, immediately following volunteering sessions and at the end of the project, five months after the project commenced. Evaluations were analysed thematically using the principles of Braun and Clarke (2006) with the identified themes demonstrating students had developed skills, knowledge and understanding in the context of caring for older adults through their planning and implementation of activities, engaging and communicating with the residents, and working alongside care home staff. They reported benefiting from working as a team and commented on their perceived benefits to the residents. Students were able to build transferable skills which they felt would benefit them in future employment. Their participation resulted in a greater understanding of caring for older adults which students stated they can apply both in their working and social lives. The project provided an opportunity for peer education and experience of inter-disciplinary teamwork. The perceived benefits to residents included a positive impact on social engagement, communication and well-being.

**Keywords:** *care homes; employability skills; higher education; inter-disciplinary learning; work experience*

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## Introduction

Work experience during higher education is vital to help build skills relevant to the labour market and has a positive effect on graduates and their future employment, particularly when the work relates to their area of study (Brennan *et al.*, 2002; Barton *et al.*, 2019; Little & Harvey, 2006). The White Paper ‘Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016) highlighted the importance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within the United Kingdom (UK) in offering and supporting students to increase their employability skills noting “a growing mismatch between the skills they [employers] need and the skills that graduates offer” (p. 42), stressing the need to bridge this gap and develop ‘soft skills’ through an array of work experience opportunities.

The definition of soft skills is problematic due to their association with personality traits, suggesting they may be difficult to learn (Karthikeyan & Baskaran, 2011). The term has been criticised for being ill-defined and that education providers should be encouraging students to be “well-rounded, confident, resilient, self-aware and capable of critical thinking” (Norton, 2016, p. 2). Employability ‘skills’ arguably include knowledge, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes, which are key to enabling graduates make successful transitions to the workplace, benefitting themselves, the economy and their communities, as reflected in Great Britain’s Higher Education Academy’s framework of Embedding Employability in Higher Education (Norton, 2016). Other employability or transferable skills include good communication, assertiveness, team working, planning, problem solving, and sensitivity to social and cultural differences, all of which transverse our daily lives and are not profession-specific (Caggiano *et al.*, 2020). Building interpersonal skills and confidence alongside the ability to work with a diverse team have been found to aid future career development (Little & Harvey, 2006).

Supporting work experience is difficult in the current COVID-19 pandemic, which in turn will affect future employment prospects for young people. Over half of employers have recently cancelled work experience opportunities and just under half do not expect to be able to offer it in the next year (Holt-White & Montacute, 2020). This is likely to have a significant impact on the health and social care sector.

### **Older adults and care homes**

The United Kingdom has an estimated population of 66.5 million people, of whom 18.5% are aged 65 and over (Office for National Statistics, 2020). The demand for adult social care is growing rapidly and constrained by funding cuts and difficulties with staff recruitment and retention (Skills for Care, 2020). Research has indicated that undergraduate nursing students do not see working in a care home as an attractive career option but that placements do help to change this view, especially if offered later in their course of study (Neville *et al.*, 2014).

Including opportunities for inter-disciplinary working within this environment can help to prepare students for teamwork and has been found to improve their perceptions of older adults (Seaman *et al.*, 2017). Inter-disciplinary working is defined as “a complex process in which different types of staff work together to share expertise, knowledge and skills to impact on patient care” (Nancarrow *et al.*, 2013, p. 11). Similarly, engaging students in working with older adults in care homes has been found to enhance social connections, with residents reporting they help to bring ‘the outside in’ (Annear *et al.*, 2017).

Kitwood (1997) explained the concept of ‘personhood’ which he proposed was the act of treating another person as a human being, including recognising and respecting them as an individual. He suggested when engaging with people living with dementia, which was the focus of his research, ‘positive person work’ should be employed, including recognising the person as an individual with preferences, negotiating involvement in activities through consultation and decision making, and collaboration with staff. He suggested this work should include play, relaxation, creation and stimulation (activation of the senses), as well as a celebration of achievements. Activities should consider the concept of ‘positive person work’ in order to increase ‘personhood’ and a sense of positive wellbeing.

Delivering activities in care homes has been found to increase quality of life, specifically for people with cognitive decline and dementia (Keating *et al.*, 2018). Activities, explicitly reminiscence activities where

residents are asked to recall and discuss their lives aided by a stimulus, have been shown to be beneficial and aid communication (O'Philbin *et al.*, 2018). Providing a platform for social encounters and activities also helps to build therapeutic relationships (Adams, 2004) and lead to an overall reduction in levels of depression and loneliness, and promote psychological well-being (Chiang *et al.*, 2010; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2015), improve cognition (Asiret & Kapucu, 2016), increase socialisation, and build a sense of identity which promotes positive wellbeing (Haslam *et al.*, 2010).

Activities can be initiated and implemented by a range of care home staff and there is potential for students to support such initiatives. Student placements in residential care settings can help build bridges between staff, students and residents of care homes with meaningful encounters (Annear *et al.*, 2017). Utilising such work experience can offer unique opportunities for the development of employability skills amongst students, specifically interpersonal and communication skills.

### **Background to this project**

In October 2016, the higher education institution (HEI) involved in this project developed a partnership with a local care home which provides residential social care for older adults. An agreement was made to recruit students from across a range of social science undergraduate degree courses who would plan and deliver activities to the residents.

The aims of this project were (1) to describe how employability skills developed during the work experience (including knowledge and values relevant to the health and social care sector) and (2) to promote social engagement for residents living within the care home. It aimed to increase transferable skills such as communication, planning, reflection, adaptability, resilience and working with older adults through providing social activities for residents living within the care home to increase social connections.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

The study utilised a descriptive qualitative design which follows the principles of naturalistic enquiry whereby the researchers are exploring the events as they happen in order to understand the experience (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). This design was chosen in order to explore the truth of the participants' experience of engaging in this project. It allowed for the use of the following sampling technique, data collection method, and data analysis whereby data is organised to provide a descriptive overview (Sandelowski, 2000).

### **Sampling and recruitment of participants**

An advertisement was placed on the HEI's virtual learning environment to all second and third-year students enrolled on health/social care-based undergraduate degrees, which equated to approximately 1,400 students. These courses were considered relevant due to the graduate prospects of working within this sector. Second and third-year students were invited due to having completed at least a year of study which had developed their knowledge base. Expressions of interest were requested along with individual availability to deliver activities within the scheduled timeframe. This was a volunteer opportunity for students (the work experience was not a requirement of their course), and the potential benefits to both residents and themselves were detailed alongside the aims of the project. Initially, 51 students expressed an interest and an application form was circulated, which 16 students returned detailing their motivations for taking part. All were invited to attend information sessions and the 12 students who attended formed the participant base, with the addition of three key members of staff from the care home (two managers and one supervisor). All 15 participants consented to complete the evaluations as part of their engagement in this project. The students were undertaking: BSc (Hons) Psychology ( $n = 8$ ), BSc (Hons) Nursing (Adult) ( $n = 2$ ) and BSc (Hons) Social Work ( $n = 2$ ).

## **Research process**

Students and key care home staff were required to attend two separate information sessions prior to the students meeting the residents. These aimed to facilitate transfer of knowledge and skills regarding caring for older adults and to encourage discussion between the students and care home staff on the topic of social care for care home residents. The local mental health National Health Service (NHS) Trust, the manager of the care home, and HEI staff facilitated different elements of the information sessions which focused on communication styles, understanding dementia and cognitive decline, the physical and psychological effects of aging, safeguarding vulnerable adults, raising concerns, and how to deliver engaging activities. The care home manager provided an induction to the home including introductions to staff members supporting the students, policies and procedures to ensure health and safety and safeguarding, and an overview of day-to-day operation. All students engaged with the Dementia Friends initiative (*Alzheimer's Society, 2017*) to provide a base knowledge of dementia and how their actions might help someone living with dementia.

After attending the information sessions, students planned how they would engage with the care home, creating formal agreements regarding how the project would run, including dates, resources required, and plans for two support sessions with the project leads to discuss progress and any concerns. The students planned activities that were focused around 'positive person work' (*Kitwood, 1997*) and utilised visual, sensory and audio aids to prompt discussion on different topics, including past holidays, jobs, and places they had lived (making use of scratch maps of the world), singing sessions using music from different years, and sensory boxes which used scents to prompt memories. One student had training in hand massage and was able to utilise this skill with residents and others were able to provide manicures for residents wishing to participate. Games were a focus for many of the students as the residents requested these and enjoyed this type of activity which facilitated social interaction. Some students were able to work one-to-one with residents who did not wish to engage in group activities to help promote social connections and prevent them being left out. Towards the end of the project, a coffee morning was arranged at a community village hall where the residents and their families were able to engage in activities and enjoy live entertainment from a musician who regularly attends the care home along with a game of bingo, as a way of celebrating the achievements of the project.

## **Data collection and management**

As the study focused on understanding the experience of the participants, evaluation forms were designed to collect reflective comments using open-ended questions. Questions related to: 1) perceptions of the activities students had completed with the residents and the skills they felt they had developed in order to describe the development of employability skills; and 2) perceptions of how the activity programme had influenced social engagement for residents living in the care home (see [Table 1](#) for questions).

All participants were invited to complete a paper copy of the evaluation form immediately following the two information sessions and immediately following each volunteering session, with an electronic copy being completed at the end of the project (after five months). This approach was used to encourage immediate reflection on their experiences at different times during the project, in an attempt to track how employability skills developed over the course of the project. It also ensured there was no delay between completion of activities and recording of reflections. As this project focused on the experiences of the students, residents were not asked to complete evaluation forms but the students sought their feedback on the activities and reflected on in their responses. The post-information session evaluations were handed back directly to the project leads (RM and RH). The evaluation forms completed after each activity were stored in a confidential folder kept in the care home office and were collected at intervals during the project by RM. The final evaluations were collected via email by the project leads (RM and RH); these were the only evaluations where participants were identifiable. The choice of an electronic format was due to some of the students having returned to their home addresses following the end of their course. However, all identifiable information was removed prior to analysis to maintain anonymity. All paper-based evaluations were anonymous and completed either individually or as a group if participants had completed activities together.

All 15 participants provided feedback on the project following at least one information session or activity. A total of 66 feedback sheets were collected during the project and although feedback sheets were completed without names (except the final email submission) and provided with a number for referencing purposes in this article, it is acknowledged that complete anonymity was not possible due to the project leads' engagement in the project and the need to respond to any potential issues.

**Table 1: Questions from the evaluation forms**

Questions	Time point		
	After information session	After each completed activity	End of the project (considering the process as a whole)
Did the activity today include working with a resident? How did you gain consent from this resident today to complete this activity?		√	√
Did the activity today include working with a residents' family member? How did you gain consent from them today?		√	√
Please describe what did you do today	√	√	√
How did you feel this activity went?			
What was good about the activity	√	√	√
What could have worked better			
How do you think this activity has benefited the resident you are working with?	√	√	√
What skills do you think you have gained from completing this activity?	√	√	√
Have you worked with anyone else on this activity (care home staff, students) and if so, how did you find this?	√	√	√
What evaluative comments did you record from the resident today?		√	√

### **Data analysis**

Data were captured from all evaluation forms and transcribed into an Excel data sheet to form a full data set which was accessible by all authors. Data were not split based on the time period but were analysed as a homogenous group. The data were independently analysed thematically using the six-step approach suggested by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) by two of the authors (RM and RH). This involved each author becoming familiar with the data set by reading and re-reading the evaluation forms (Step 1) and coding the data once a sense of familiarity with the data was developed (Step 2). The codes included specific skills and knowledge that the students had identified they had developed such as communication, empathy and working in challenging situations, the disclosed impacts on themselves such as increased confidence and links to their future carers, and the perceived impact on residents such as enjoyment, change of routine, and creating a positive atmosphere. The codes also included details of how the

participants had experienced working with others such as gaining support and being able to learn from each other. After discussing their individual codes and reaching consensus, the authors arranged the codes into common themes (Step 3) which were based on skill development, development of knowledge, benefit of working with others, and perceived benefits to residents. The authors then reviewed the themes by returning to the original data set to increase credibility of the results by checking the themes were representative of the data across the evaluation forms (Step 4). The authors then met to refine the overarching themes (Step 5) before producing the final results presented below (Step 6).

### ***Ethical considerations***

Ethical approval was sought and granted from the HEI ethics committee (HSC16022017). Careful consideration was given to the safeguarding of all participants in the study and care home staff were pivotal in contributing to this process and providing information on how they would assist with issues of consent and safeguarding of residents.

All students were required to undergo an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check (a mandatory procedure in England and Wales to help employers make safer recruitment decisions and prevent unsuitable people from working with vulnerable people) prior to entering the care home. They were also required to fully and successfully complete the information sessions to ensure they were adequately prepared to engage with the residents.

### ***Gaining consent***

Student and care home staff participants were asked to read a participant information sheet on the study and sign a consent form prior to their involvement. These documents included information on withdrawing from the project, data collection, confidentiality, consent and any perceived risks or benefits of participating.

As residents were not the focus of the research in this study, consent was not required from them for the evaluation of this project. However, it was acknowledged that residents should consent to engaging with the students and the activities they were delivering, as would be expected within a care home environment. After discussing how the care home ordinarily engaged residents in activities, it was agreed that students would use the principles of gaining consent as outlined by [Dewing \(2002; 2007\)](#). This suggests that consent should be an ongoing process gained by asking questions throughout an activity to ensure participants remain comfortable, preventing a single episode of consent and allowing withdrawal from the activities. Therefore, students were required to ask questions of the residents throughout the activities to check they wanted to continue, and this facilitated the students gaining an insight into how the residents were experiencing the activities. Students were also able to consider any relevant and updated information given to them by the care home staff that might affect a resident's ability to participate and discuss this with the assigned supervisor who guided them in any alterations or decisions that needed to be made.

### ***Trustworthiness and authenticity***

Qualitative research should address issues of objectivity, dependability, credibility, transferability and application. This article was produced whilst reviewing these concepts as discussed by [Colorafi and Evans \(2016\)](#). The detailed methods described above and the consideration of bias discussed in the limitations aims to meet the concept of objectivity whilst the consistency in a standardised evaluation form and using a framework for data analysis helps to achieve dependability. The credibility of the study was enhanced by the third author (RK) being external to the project which enabled the results to be checked against the original data set. The transferability of the study has been addressed through the discussion of the sample population and limitations to this whilst the application of the findings are reviewed in the discussion with suggestions for practice and further research.

## **Findings**

Four overarching themes were identified: skill development, knowledge and understanding, working with others and benefits to residents. The first three themes link to the aim of describing the development of employability skills in terms of physical skill development, development of knowledge and increased understanding of working with older people, and the benefits of working with others. The final theme links to the aim of promoting social activities for residents living in the care home.

### ***Skill development***

The data revealed a perceived improvement in the development of emotional and communication skills amongst students. Participants reported personal development of empathy, feeling better equipped to console others and increased patience whilst working with older adults. A key area in the development of communication skills related to resolving challenging situations and improving active listening skills.

It was also important to listen and console residents who were not having the best day or to acknowledge when they did not want to interact. Thus, communication skills were key in the care home environment, especially working with vulnerable residents and this was the perfect chance for improvement (Evaluation 65- Student).

Participants reported on how they had developed confidence in taking control in situations and developed skills in working with others. They reported improvement in their organisational skills and their ability to work with older adults who may have dementia.

I have gained so much from this experience. I am able to take charge in certain situations that before I would've found quite daunting. I also now have the skills to work with elderly people and more so with dementia patients. Doing this type of project makes you learn a lot of patience, and though I was patient beforehand, I have definitely learnt to be more so now. It gives you a lot of insight about their lives and teaches you a lot about what it would be like to work with someone all the time with dementia. In addition, I learnt some more organisational skills from this project as we had to plan something to do with the residents every week which was not always an easy task (Evaluation 59 - Student).

The students' ability to reflect on what they had learnt and how they had put this knowledge into practice, developed over the course of the project demonstrated by their evaluation sheets becoming more detailed towards the end. The supporting comments used in this article tend to be derived from the later evaluations due to this developing reflection skill. However, an analysis of any change in skills over the period of the project is not possible from the data collected although future research could focus on exploring this.

### ***Knowledge and understanding***

Student participants acknowledged their understanding of dementia, including the different types and the effects it can have on the lifestyle of those living with the condition, had improved since being involved in the project.

I have gained an insight into how the residents' lives are affected by dementia and their families' lives. I have learned about the types of things the residents might say and I have learned how to react and deal with these things (Evaluation 58 - Student).

The participants discussed how this knowledge and understanding was gained primarily from the information sessions which provided the ability to reflect on their current knowledge and practice.

The training was absolutely fantastic. Thought-provoking and emotional whilst full of relevant information, figures, facts. I learnt many new ideas and information (Evaluation 66 - Staff).

A number of participants reported their increased knowledge of working with and safeguarding vulnerable adults.

I am better placed now in terms of protecting residents re: safeguarding vulnerable adults and I have a better idea of suitable activities (Evaluation 25 - Student).

Some participants also reported that being involved in the project had aided their future career aspirations by gaining experience of working with older people in a health and social care environment.

This project has really helped me personally as I am hoping to go into occupational therapy so it has given me a taste of what this work will be like as well as relevant experience (Evaluation 62 - Student).

### **Working with others**

The care home staff participants reported enjoying being able to work with students as this made them feel supported in the work they do with the residents. They reported seeing the bonds the students had made with the residents and the impact this had on them.

Residents formed great bonds with the students... Staff felt supported in their care work by having the students experience time within the home and with our residents. Residents felt valued, appreciated and were genuinely interested in both activity and conversation (Evaluation 66 – Staff).

The student participants reported enjoying learning with and from students from other disciplines and the health care staff, gaining support from each other. Working alongside health care staff developed an understanding of working with an inter-disciplinary team and the skills needed for safe practice.

Confidence in the expertise of others and my ability to work alongside others; it was good to have the care staff for support (Evaluation 43 - Student).

One student commented on the benefits of working with the family of a resident which enabled them to learn more about the person and develop their ability to work in a holistic way.

The family were very happy to discuss various highlights of the resident's life which enabled me to gain a holistic view of the resident (Evaluation 56 - Student).

### **Benefits to residents**

One of the aims of the project was to increase social connections among care home residents by providing social activities. The data suggested the delivery of activities was enjoyed by the residents, it enabled them to have fun and it made a change to their routines as well as providing the social connections with other people.

Many residents were happy to see us when we entered it seemed to brighten their day to have some company. I believe that was what was important. To have someone to spend time with them and listen to their stories or offer an ear to listen to their issues. A few residents seemed to feel a bit isolated in the care home, which I think is almost unavoidable, as they do not have the freedom to go or do as they please. Thus, it appeared it was nice for them to see some new friendly faces (Evaluation 65 - Student).

The student participants reported the project had created a positive atmosphere in the home through the increased activity. One student reflected on the positive impact of touch through hand massage and how this eased a physical pain a resident had been experiencing.

I think positive touch and someone to talk to benefited them in that they feel less lonely. One resident mentioned how it [hand massage] was nice because she doesn't use her hands



very often and they can get a bit stiff, another resident mentioned how it was nice to have the room a bit busier and have people to talk to (Evaluation 42 - Student).

The student participants also commented on the increased interaction between themselves and the residents, and between the residents as the project progressed.

I also felt like when we were there they interacted more with each other as well; I noticed this difference from the first week to the last (Evaluation 64 - Student).

Feedback from one student participant identified how the level and amount of communication from residents increased as the project progressed, as well as their ability to recall information which had a noticeable effect on their overall wellbeing.

The resident became clearer in thought and expression as the session progressed. He was definitely able to communicate his thoughts and feelings more competently at the end of our time together and he appeared to be much happier than he was at the start of our session (Evaluation 57 - Student).

The project leads (RM and RH) were able to attend the coffee morning which allowed an insight into the interactions between the students and residents. It was clear that relationships had been formed and the residents engaged in socially enjoyable activities. The residents were very complimentary about the students and they had enjoyed the time they had spent with them. Some of the family members present at the coffee morning explained they felt the project had benefited everyone involved and they were happy to see engagement between the students and their relatives. One family member expressed her thanks about the positive changes she had witnessed in her relative who had been able to recognise her for the first time in a long while.

## **Discussion**

The primary aim of the project was to describe the development of student's employability skills, including knowledge and values relevant to the health and social care sector by offering the opportunity of work experience in a care home. The project aimed to explore if there was an increase in transferable skills such as communication, planning, reflection, adaptability, resilience and of working with older adults, which was the focus of this evaluation. The first three areas of evaluation highlight the development gained in these skills from taking part in this project, increasing skills and qualities such as demonstrating patience. The students reported how they had changed their perceptions and preconceived ideas about older adults, care homes and working within this sector, as found by [Seamen et al. \(2017\)](#). A number of students commented that this is something they would consider as an option for future employment, supporting the findings by [Neville et al. \(2014\)](#) that placements, at the right time in a student's course of study, can help to change perceptions about the environment. Those students who wished to work with older adults in the future described how they had developed invaluable knowledge and experience in this area which will aid them in their future studies and careers. For some, it gave them an insight into working with older adults prior to making any career decisions which will allow them to focus on this group in their professions (i.e., social workers).

Although this area of evaluation focused on skill development relevant for working with older adults in terms of employability, some students identified gaining information which helps them in their everyday lives, such as how to support someone living with dementia in social circumstances like a shopping centre. This helps to build a community that is more aware of dementia and how small actions can help a person living with these conditions, which is one of the aims of the Dementia Friends initiative ([Alzheimer's Society, 2017](#)). The information sessions were invaluable in developing this knowledge and were received well by both the students and the care home management team. They facilitated a deeper understanding of dementia and how people living with this may be feeling, as well as how they communicate and engage with others. These sessions were essential in developing the students' confidence to engage successfully with the project and would be a crucial part of any future projects.

The third area of evaluation demonstrated an important skill of learning how to work with others. The students voiced how they learnt from each other, as they were from different courses, and how this helped them support one another. The students also commented on learning from the care home staff and others involved in the project such as occupational therapists (during the information sessions). They valued this experience and gained a better understanding of the functions of inter-disciplinary teams in the work environment, suggesting this exposure helped them to reflect on this, supporting previous findings ([Little & Harvey, 2006](#); [Seamen \*et al.\*, 2017](#)).

The amount of initial interest in the project from the students was unexpected and this resulted in further consideration of the selection process including the introduction of the application form. On reflection, this was an advantage as it allowed the students to further develop their employability skills by reflecting on why they thought they were suitable, why they wanted to be involved and what relevant skills, knowledge, and experience they possessed. It also ensured the students recruited were committed to the project and this likely helped with the good retention on the project.

The second aim of the project, although arguably the most important, was to promote social engagement to residents living within the care home. This aim was realised with the students completing a wide range of activities with the residents and the positive perceptions of how this was received. The activities enabled students to engage in meaningful contact with residents and this appears, in turn, to have impacted on their well-being, with them enjoying the activities and looking forward to the next visit by students. This supports previous research that student placements in care home environments can have a positive impact on residents particularly in ameliorating loneliness ([Annear \*et al.\*, 2017](#)). However, it was discussed and acknowledged during the development of this project the limitations of short-term placements in care homes with regard to the impact on residents. This resulted in the project not having a finish date to prevent activities coming to an abrupt end and having a celebration event towards the end of the time frame. Even though these steps were taken, careful consideration has to be given to the impact of delivering social engagement activities for short periods and how this could be maintained. The authors worked with the care home in connecting them to the HEI's careers department to explore funding opportunities for recruiting a graduate internship with a focus on co-ordinating activities. This demonstrates the positive impact of the project on both the care home and its residents, and the commitment of the home to continue this type of work. All materials that had been obtained to conduct the activities remained with the care home for their staff to use.

Considering the components of 'positive person work' such as ensuring residents were recognised as individuals, involved in deciding if they wanted to participate, and offering activities that provided opportunities for creation, relaxation and stimulation, appears to have reinforced the notion of 'personhood' and impacted positively on well-being ([Kitwood, 1997](#)). Although no analysis of the perspectives of residents was undertaken, data from the student evaluations suggested changes in levels of willingness to engage and ability of residents to recall information. There was also evidence of improved communication, with students noticing enhancements as the project progressed. This offers some support to the evidence base of the effectiveness of activities for older adults, specifically those that aid in reminiscence with people living with dementia, and how it can help increase engagement and socialisation ([Chiang \*et al.\*, 2010](#)), improve psychological wellbeing ([Gonzalez \*et al.\*, 2015](#)), communication ([O'Philbin \*et al.\*, 2018](#)) and cognitive function ([Asiret & Kapucu, 2016](#)). No harms were identified from the data collected during this study; this may have been due to discussing this as a potential outcome with the care home staff prior to the commencement of the project including how students could raise concerns should they feel this was needed.

### **Limitations**

It is acknowledged that important feedback from the residents themselves is missing from this project and that future studies should incorporate an exploration of residents' perceptions of the benefits of engaging in the activities.

Although paper-based feedback forms provided immediate feedback after participants' interactions, it is acknowledged that richer data would have been obtained through focus groups or semi-structured interviews. This would have allowed for further exploration of participants experiences and should be

considered in future studies. These forms of feedback, however, were not possible during this study due to the timing of the project and students having left the HEI. Additionally, future studies could utilise pre- and post- measures to determine changes in skills, knowledge, values and attitudes to demonstrate the impact of work experience.

The project did not have a fixed end date for all students due to not wanting to suddenly cease activities and risking a sense of loss within the home. Instead, students gradually phased out their involvement in the home. However, once the project was formally completed, a number of the students expressed interest in continuing to visit the home and complete further activities on a voluntary basis which they negotiated with the home directly.

The timing of the project was initially January to May, with the project starting in February after awaiting ethical approval. With hindsight, delivering the project at the beginning of the academic year may have been more suitable as the students did at times struggle to attend the care home due to their workload (assignments and exams). The recruitment of third year students was beneficial as they had a sound theoretical basis, however they did have significant assessment commitments which affected their availability; this would be considered in future.

It is acknowledged that the researchers were members of staff at the university within the same College in which the students were studying which may have affected the evaluative comments gained, potentially with a positive bias. The researchers were responsible for managing the placement element of some of the participant's courses. Similarly, the researchers had developed a relationship with the care home in order to deliver the project which may have introduced bias into the findings in a positive direction. To mitigate this, the third author was not directly involved with the students or care home and was able to provide an external review to the analysis of findings.

## **Conclusion**

The findings suggest that offering work experience placements within a care home environment can both aid in developing transferable and subject specific skills for students which will increase their employability and career pathways, and provide meaningful encounters for residents which develop social connections between generations. In light of COVID-19, education providers need to ensure that rich learning opportunities that are afforded during work experience are not lost and that attempts are made to continue embedding employability to prepare students for the work environment. The impact on residents living in care homes should be the priority of any projects conducted in these settings, including the potential harm that could be caused by short-term placements and steps to ameliorate these should be taken.

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## **Ethical approval**

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