

**The Open Training College**

**HONOURS BACHELOR OF ARTS  
IN APPLIED SOCIAL STUDIES (DISABILITY)**

**DEVELOPMENT OF PROGRAMME  
&  
PILOT YEAR  
2004 – 2006**

**EVALUATION REPORT**

February 2007

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**The Open Training College acknowledges the contribution of all those who contributed to this development. Thank you to the ERHA for the necessary funding and the advisory board for its guidance and support. A particular thank you to the first pilot group of students whose commitment and hard work ensured that this programme was successful in its pilot run.**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is a summative report which tracks the development (including the accreditation process), delivery and evaluation of the pilot run of the Open Training College's Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree in Applied Social Studies (Disability). This development was funded by the Eastern Region Health Authority under the *Action Plan for People Management*. The funding was secured by The Open training College (St Michael's House), in collaboration with a number of other disability agencies in September 2003 to develop training at degree level for staff working in services for people with disabilities.

The need and rationale for the development of this programme is detailed in this document but in brief was based on the expert knowledge and experience of the Open Training College in relation to the disability sector, requests from students and agencies and key changes in policy and legislation relating to the social care area. Following a lengthy consultation process, with graduates, service providers, and an advisory board, the Open Training College designed and developed an Honours Degree Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Studies (Disability) at level 8 of the National Framework of Qualifications. The course was designed to broaden the range and scope of knowledge, skill and competence of course participants, facilitating employment in a range and diversity of locations within which members of the social care profession could exercise their professional roles. The five modules designed to provide this were on the topics of Leadership, Management, Social Policy, Equality and Research.

This document describes in detail the development of the Honours degree programme, and the validation process that was required in order to get the programme accredited. Following this is a chronological description of events once programme approval was secured. The document provides a full account of the entry procedures employed and the delivery of the programme to the first cohort of students, which consisted of 20 students. The pilot year of the programme was thoroughly evaluated both internally by students and staff, and externally by an independent consultant. Findings from these evaluations indicated that the Honours degree was a success for a number of reasons. The use of the Supported Open Learning Model facilitated mature learners to get an Honours degree without interrupting their work or family life significantly. The programme met with student expectations and provided them with what they wanted. The programme was considered to be valuable to students and their organisations and the sector generally and in financial terms the programme has moved to a self funding position.

The project overall was deemed to be successful in that the key objectives and deliverables outlined in the original submission to the ERHA were all achieved in full.

## 1. BACKGROUND

This document is a summative report which tracks the development (including the validation process), delivery and evaluation of the pilot run of the Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree in Applied Social Studies (Disability). The Open Training College developed this Honours degree programme in accordance with the requirements of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), funded by the Eastern Region Health Authority, under the *Action Plan for People Management (APPM)*.

In September 2003 The Open Training College, under the auspices of St Michael's House, was notified that it had been successful in securing funding under the ERHA's *Action Plan for People Management* fund. This funding was secured to facilitate the Open Training College to develop accredited training at degree level for staff working in services within the ERHA area. In supporting The Open Training College's proposal the ERHA was recognising the professional need on the ground in the disability sector, for professional staff to delivery quality services. This need echoed those needs identified as the priority themes of the APPM 2004; in particular Theme 1: Managing People Effectively; Theme 2: Improve the Quality of working Life; Theme 3: Devising & Implementing Best Practice Employment Policies & procedures; Theme 4: Developing the Partnership Approach Further; Theme5: Investing in Training Development and Education; Theme 7: developing Performance Management. This initiative clearly supported those needs by developing a course which facilitates staff to combine the theory which is essential for effective frontline practice with management skills and practical hands-on field practice.

The need for this training was identified from a number of sources: informal enquiries from students and agencies; review of College courses; and the professionalisation of the social care area. The recommendation from the Report from the Joint Committee on Social Care Professionals, 2003, stated *'that the minimum standard for accreditation as a social care professional be equivalent to HETAC/DIT (now Level) and should, within 5 years be at degree level'*.

In addition to this recommendation there was a growing awareness nationally, evidenced in the Draft National Standards for Disability Services, National Disability Authority, (2003) that policies and procedures needed to be put in place that would ensure standards of care and education across the disability sector. Correspondingly graduates of the College were expressing interest in furthering their education beyond ordinary degree level. The need to provide relevant education and training that allows graduates to become eligible to progress onto senior management positions is essential if they turn, are to be in a position to influence policy development and professional standards offered to service users in disability services in the future. These influences and a response to them were congruent with the priority themes of the APPM.

A network application of which St Michael's House was the lead agency, submitted the proposal to the ERHA. The other agencies in the consortium, all providers of services to people with disabilities, were KARE, Cheeverstown House, Prosper Fingal, Enable Ireland, Stewarts Hospital, St Patrick's College Carlow, and the South Western Area Health Board. In addition to supporting the proposal, representatives of

the consortia agencies were invited to be part of an advisory board, along with other relevant stakeholders (such as graduates of the Ordinary Degree and service users). The brief of the advisory board was to advise on the proposed content of the degree programme and other related matters.

The degree programme was developed as an Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree (Level 8 of The National Qualifications Framework). It was designed as an add-on to The Open Training College's already existing Bachelor of Arts Degree (Ordinary) (Level 7: Programme Title: Applied Social Studies (Disability)). Although the Honours Degree was to be the only specialist programme of its kind in the disability sector, the course content would reflect elements included in comparable degree courses offered in other Irish Colleges.

### **Proposal Objectives**

The submission to the ERHA (the 2004 APPM application) proposed 'the development of an Honours degree programme in Applied Social Studies (National Qualifications Framework Level 8)'. There were 4 objectives outlined as follows:

**Objective 1** Complete the development of 5 modules of open learning materials

**Objective 2** Achieve accreditation at honours degree level (Level 8)

**Objective 3** Commence delivering the programme to eligible staff

**Objective 4** Complete an evaluation of the project development

Update reports addressing each of these 4 headings were submitted to the ERHA periodically on request over the duration of the project. With the completion of the pilot year and conferring of the first cohort of students each of these objectives has now been met in full. Each of the 4 objectives are addressed under the relevant sections within this document.

## 2. THE OPEN TRAINING COLLEGE

The Open Training College has been in existence since 1992. Its mission statement is *'The Open Training College is committed to offering staff in the disability and health related sector learning opportunities which are accredited, accessible and embody best practice'*. It achieves this by creating opportunities for staff working in the disability sector nationally, to avail of lifelong learning options by offering courses that are accessible while employed, designed in modular format with content that can be applied within their everyday working life. With 10 years experience of course development and delivery in the Supported Open Learning model the College felt it was strategically well placed to develop an add-on specialist degree programme in its ability to take students from all over Ireland.

All courses run by the Open Training College use the Supported Open Learning Model (please see below).

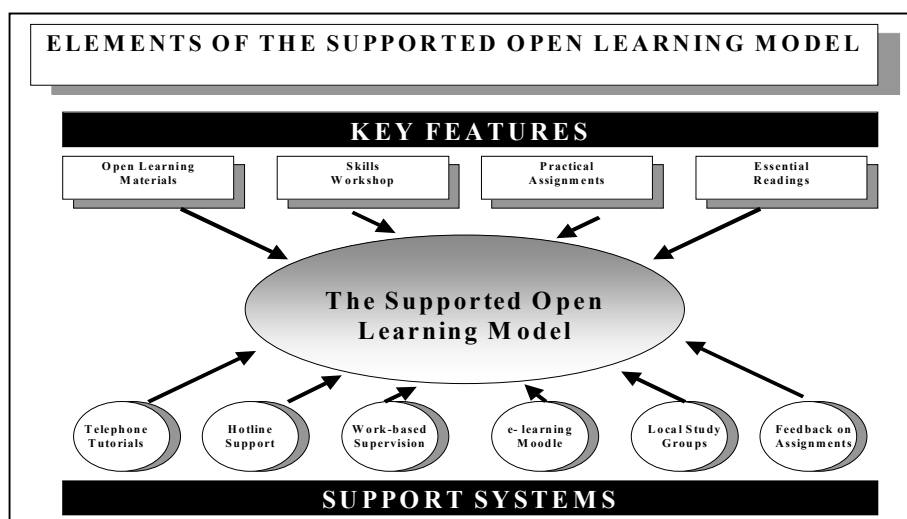


Figure 1: The Supported Employment Open Learning Model

The continuing success of the College is an acknowledgement of the effectiveness of the model. The Supported Open Learning Model facilitates an adult-friendly modular approach, very low drop out rates (less than 7%), cost effectiveness for employers, minimal disruption in service to clients and generally supports mature staff to avail of lifelong learning opportunities. The Supported Open Learning Model was employed on the newly developed Honours degree programme.

### 3. THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

As part the Open Training College's HETAC approved Quality Assurance Procedures there is a 15-stage development process employed for the identification and development of new programmes. It is a process grounded in a philosophy of consultation and partnership. The graphic below identifies the stages in the development process and the key stages of the process as they applied to the development of the Honours degree programme are explained in this document.

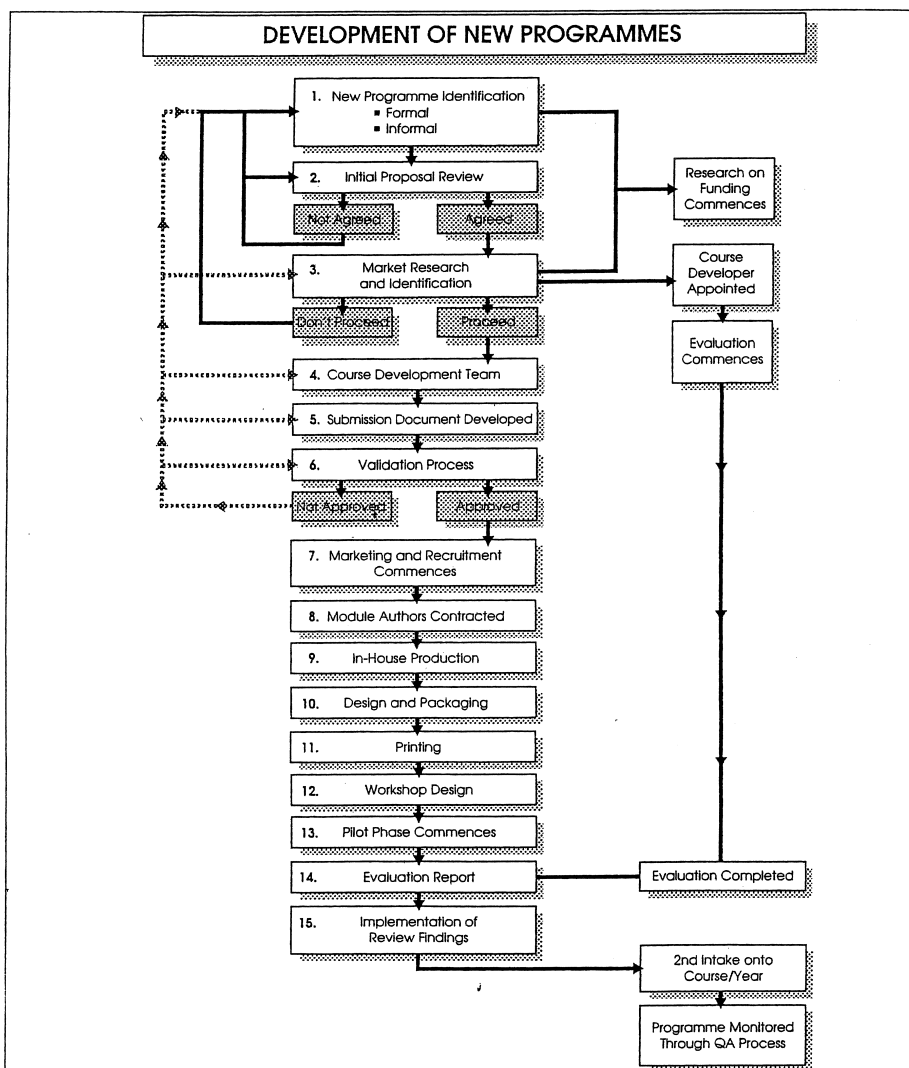


Figure 2: The Development of New Programmes

#### Rationale for programme development

The decision to develop this add-on programme was influenced by a number of key issues including the move to the professionalisation of the social care sector, the on-going review of current college courses by the College team and on-going feedback

and queries from graduates and agencies. In addition, the rationalisation for the development was strongly supported by a significant number of changes in social care disability service provision and in higher education, as highlighted by a number of key documents and reports published in the years just prior to the submission. The key documents that supported this initiative were:

- (1) Report of the Joint Committee on Social Care Professionals. HSEA (2003)
- (2) Action Plan for People Management. ERHA (2002)
- (3) National Framework of Qualifications. NQAI (2003)
- (4) Draft National Standards for Disability Services. NDA (2003)
- (5) Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, (1996) and the subsequent Toward Equal Citizenship Progress Report (1999). Department of Equality and Law Reform.

In reviewing those documents and their implications for sectoral and national changes the disability sector was coming to the realisation that the up-skilling of staff was crucial to delivering high quality services. Statistics at that time indicated that 58% of staff working in the learning disability sector were not professionally qualified (McElwee, 2000). The recommendation from the *Report of the Joint Committee on Social Care Professionals* (2003) 'that the minimum standard for accreditation as a social care professional be equivalent to HETAC/DIT Diploma (now level 7) and should, within 5 years, be at degree level', further supported the need for staff working in the area of intellectual disability to have access to degree level qualifications.

### **Research**

College staff regularly had informal enquiries from students through tutorials regarding the College developing higher-level programmes. More formal research by the Open Training College also indicated that there was strong interest in the provision of this Honours degree programme. A survey (Costello and Melinn 2004) carried out with (then) current students and graduates indicated a strong interest in undertaking an add-on degree programme. A second survey (Costello and Melinn 2003) carried out with employers in the sector, indicated a steady commitment to both the Ordinary degree programme and the new add-on programme for the next three years.

### **Course content development**

Course content was developed with input from a number of stakeholders. The two surveys (above) also ascertained from employers, current students and graduates what they thought should be included in the content of an honours degree programme. The views of staff were gathered over a period of weeks. Following the successful submission of the proposal to the ERHA (the proposal objectives are detailed on page 2) an advisory board was established to further guide the development of the content of the programme.

This advisory board was made up of graduates, representatives from disability agencies, representatives from other third level institutions and Open Training College staff. Input into content development from people with disabilities, representative bodies for people with disabilities, and funding bodies were facilitated through individual meetings and discussions. The advisory board met on three occasions and

were guided through the course content development process by the course developers.

Once the advisory group were familiar with the background information to the project, the profile of the potential course participants, the guidelines from the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), and the role and remit of the advisory group, the work on course content began. The advisory group members were asked to brainstorm what they thought should be included in an Honours degree programme bearing the information they had been given in mind.

The findings from this session were amalgamated with the views from the other stakeholder groups yielding course content under the headings of skill, knowledge and attitude. The role of the advisory group at this point was to review, confirm, advise and direct on the content as gleaned from all stakeholder groups. The result, following extensive discussion and debate was that the 5 main module content areas were decided and 2 areas were excluded. The 2 areas not included were Information Technology skills and Disability studies as these were considered to be skills and knowledge that students would have attained prior to joining a programme of study at Level 8.

As the Open Training College is a distance learning College all courses are taught in a modular format. Hence once course content had been agreed a number of programme design decisions had to be made; decisions such as module size, module duration, running order, assessment methodologies. These decisions were made by the course developers in collaboration with the College Director and were guided by previous experiences of course delivery and the views and comments of stakeholders involved in the programme development.

Once these design decisions were made the content then needed to be formatted into learning outcomes as directed by the NQAI. The identification of potential authors who are topic experts in the area of disability began. Potential authors were contacted and contracted to write materials for the programme. However course content could not be finalised until programme validation had been achieved. Following validation (described in the next section) the 5 modules developed were as follows:

MODULE	TITLE
1	Introduction to Qualitative Research
2	Essential Social Care Management Skills
3	Disability and Social Policy in Ireland
4	Disability in the Context of Social Equality and Inclusion
5	Essential Social Care Leadership Skills

## 4. THE VALIDATION PROCESS

Accreditation for any new course involves a rigorous process. The development and accreditation of the Honours degree programme was methodical, thorough and time consuming, involving input from a number of Open Training College staff, along with the course developers and College Director.

### Developing the Submission Document

In accordance with HETAC guidelines under section 25 for the process for validation of new programmes, the Open Training College was required to develop a submission document to secure validation. This document which took several months to collate, was lead by the course developer but required input from a number of staff members. The document had to detail all aspects of the proposed programme. Following is a list of the content that was required and provided;

#### (1) Provider profile:

Information regarding The Open Training College as provider of the programme.

#### (2) Programme details:

Information on the programme such as duration, level on framework, location, entry requirements.

The rationale for programme development:

- What will be provided
- The ability of the Open Training College to provide it
- National need and sectoral support for the programme
- Market research and evidence of student demand
- Continuing demand for the degree programme
- The development process – Consultation in action
- Employment potential for graduates
- Post programme progression for graduates

Programme objectives and outcomes:

- Programme learning outcomes

Related programmes of the provider

Proposed programme schedule

Facilities and services (which includes library holdings)

Information and communication technology

Learner support services (which details the supported open learning model)

Programme delivery (which details contact hours)

Transfer arrangements

#### (3) Academic Details:

Lecturing expertise available for the programme (including CV's) of all staff

#### (4) Syllabus Detail:

Course outline (detailing progression and development of course themes)

Assessment (methods and percentage allocation of assessments)

Subject / module syllabus

## **(5) Learner protection provision**

### **The Validation and Accreditation Visit**

Seven copies of the document were submitted to HETAC who then drew a panel of assessors together to review the programme. The panel consisted of a balance of academics, policy advisors and practitioners, namely:

Joe Cox	Programme Validation	HETAC
Damian Courtney	Co-ordinator of Business & Humanities	Cork Institute Of Technology
John McAleer	Former Head of Department (retired)	University of Ulster
Mary Meaney	Senior Policy & Public Affairs Advisor	National Disability Authority
Bill Griffin	Area Manager	Galway Association
Josephine Flaherty	Advocacy Trainer/Supporter	Brothers of Charity

This panel visited the College on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2004, met with College staff and module authors and had the opportunity to question and discuss all aspects of the document. Following this meeting the panel convened and then met with the College Director and Course developers to give their decision.

The programme was granted approval with 5 conditions. The next section of the report is structured around the conditions as outlined by the approval panel. Each condition as stated by the Panel is outlined, followed by the strategies that have been implemented to address the conditions.

## 5. PROGRAMME APPROVAL

### (1) Supervision of Students in the Workplace

*'A programme of training shall occur for all staff involved in the supervision of students in the workplace and a policy of visitation by the staff of the College to the workplace of students shall be designed.'*

To support supervisors in their role The Open Training College provides the following for all programmes:

#### **A supervisors training programme**

Each Course Director writes to supervisors: (1) to thank them for their involvement (2) to outline the students workload for the year, (3) and to seek their availability for, and views on, the types of supports that would be useful for supervisors (ie supervisors network, E-support and supervisors meeting.)

#### **A supervisor's resource pack**

All supervisors receive a supervisors pack which includes information on (1) the supervisors role, (2) frequently asked questions and (3) contact names and addresses.

#### **On-site visits**

The College has a policy (outlined in the student handbook) to undertake site-visits to agencies periodically and always in cases where difficulties have arisen on the ground.

### (2) Assessment

*'The percentage allocation to the elements of assessment shall be considered again after the first cohort of students complete the programme and that changes, if any, are reported to HETAC.'*

An evaluation of the assessment element of the modules and the percentage allocations was carried out after the students had fully completed their studies. Four separate stakeholder groups took part in this evaluation and no changes/modifications were required.: (1) **students** gave feedback on their experience of the assessment of the programme, (2) **staff** involved in the delivery and assessment of the programme took part in a meeting to collate their views, (3) the views and recommendations of **external examiners** were recorded, and (4) the **Programme Board** for the Honours reviewed the evaluation feedback and made a recommendation to Academic Council to continue the assessment as it was.

### (3) Research Module

*'The title of the module 'Research Methodology and Application,' shall be reconsidered and its syllabus revised to more clearly indicate its content.'*

The title of the module is now 'An Introduction to Qualitative Research.'

The five units are: Unit 1: Contrasting Qualitative and Quantitative Research

- Unit 2: Data Collection Methods in Qualitative Research
- Unit 3: Analysing Qualitative Data
- Unit 4: Reviewing The Literature
- Unit 5: Planning & Implementing Your Research

The assessment for the module consists of two elements:

- (1) The student is required to undertake a small qualitative research project on an agreed topic.
- (2) The student is required to undertake a critical review of two qualitative research articles relating to a disability issue.

#### **(4) Ordinary Degree Programmatic Review**

*'In the forthcoming Peer Review of the programmes in the College, consideration shall be given to the content of the existing Ordinary Degree in order to provide the Learner with a more coherent learning experience, in the event of her/his participation in a four year programme of study.'*

The programmatic review for the Ordinary Degree Programme is scheduled for 2008. The overall coherence between the 2 programmes will be examined as part of this process.

#### **(5) Assignments**

*'Assignments proposed in individual modules should involve the learners in a wider span of topics than presently indicated.'*

All assignments and examination questions set on the five modules of the Honours Degree are all broader than originally planned. They are also less prescriptive thus allowing the student greater scope in terms of what they learn about, and how they structure and present it.

In compliance with the validation process the College provided a 6 month update to HETAC on the 30/01/06 on the implementation of the 5 conditions. Other reports were supplied to the Eastern Region Health Authority and HETAC as required (dates included were December 2003, February 2004, December 2004 and February 2005).

## **6. ENTRY TO THE PROGRAMME**

Following programme approval marketing of the programme began. Entry procedures and requirements, which were detailed in all marketing materials were as follows:

### **Entry procedures**

Entry was by application form sent directly to the Open Training College. All applicants had to

- Work in a social care service setting (and remain working in this sector for the duration of the programme).
- Have their organisations support to undertake the course in order to be able to apply their learning in their place of work.
- Attend an applicants information day where they receive course information, have the opportunity to ask questions and meet with a tutor.

Depending on the applicant's previous course of study and the level of qualification they held the following entry criteria also applied:

### **Holders of The National Diploma/Ordinary Degree in Applied Social Studies (Disability) from the Open Training College**

Graduates with a distinction or merit had direct access to the honours programme.

Graduates with a pass were required to have a minimum of 1 years practitionership in a social care environment since completing their studies, in order to access the honours programme. They demonstrated their development by describing their progress on an academic, professional or personal level in a paper and an interview.

### **National Diploma/Ordinary Degree in Applied Social Studies from an Institute of Technology**

Graduates of the above were required to undertake a bridging programme which addressed key areas\* and core information essential to working in the area of disability.

### **Degrees in Cognate Discipline Areas from any IT or University**

Graduates of the above were required to undertake a bridging programme which addressed key areas\* and core information essential to working in the area of disability.

\*The key area involved in the bridging work was models of service delivery. Applicants had to demonstrate their understanding of the differences between the Social and Medical Model of service delivery and achieve a grade of 50% on the bridging work in order to access the Honours programme.

## 7. COURSE DELIVERY

Delivery of the Honours degree programme used the key features and support systems of the Supported Open Learning Model.

### **Open learning Materials:**

All students were supplied with a hard copy of each 30,000 word module which was housed in a folder. Additional readings were supplied in the back of each module but students were required to read around, outside of these, on the topic.

### **Workshops:**

Each of the 5 modules of the honours degree programme had a 2-day workshop attached. The module author or another presenter worked with the students on the topic of the module and related issues.

### **Tutorials:**

As with all courses run by the Open Training College students of the honours degree were assigned a tutor who they could ring once ever 2 weeks to discuss aspects of their studies. In addition to this students, if they wished, could also get support from their tutor and their fellow students through a virtual learning environment called Moodle.

### **Assessment & Results:**

Each module in the Honours degree programme was assessed by assignment or exam. Once assignments were submitted to the College they were assessed and students received their result and detailed feedback within four weeks. Student results are included here in summary.

<b>Award</b>	
4	1st Class Honours
2	2nd Class Honours Grade1
10	2nd Class Honours Grade2
2	Pass
2	Deferred (are continuing their studies with the 2 <sup>nd</sup> cohort)

### **Completion Rates**

A pilot cohort of 25 students interviewed, enrolled and commenced their studies in April 2005.

25	students enrolled
5	deferred within the first month due to personal reasons (4 of these 5 have re-enrolled in the second intake onto the Honours programme)
20	students pursued their studies
18	students were successfully presented to externs (September 2006) and were conferred on the 4 <sup>th</sup> November 2006
2	students deferred their studies (and have re-enrolled in the second intake onto the Honours programme)

Overall this indicates that 96% of the original cohort have successfully completed or are in the process of completing the Honours Degree.

## 8. INTERNAL EVALUATION

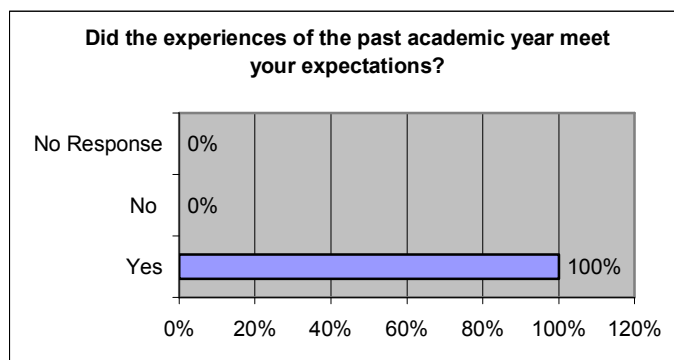
The 4<sup>th</sup> objective in the project proposal to the ERHA stated that an evaluation of the project would be undertaken. The programme was evaluated both internally and externally.

### INTERNAL EVALUATION

In accordance with the Open Training College's Quality assurance procedures, following each workshop all students were asked to complete an evaluation form on the content and delivery of the workshop. This feedback informed the delivery of the following workshops. As students completed the study and assessment of each module they were asked to complete an evaluation form on the module. And finally at the end of their studies all students were asked to complete an end of year evaluation. The findings from all of these evaluations are summarised in the 2005/2006 *Quality Assurance Report for the Honours Degree* programme and is available on request. An overview of the key findings follows.

There were eighteen students in the BDDHI group. Eight students completed the end of year evaluation forms.

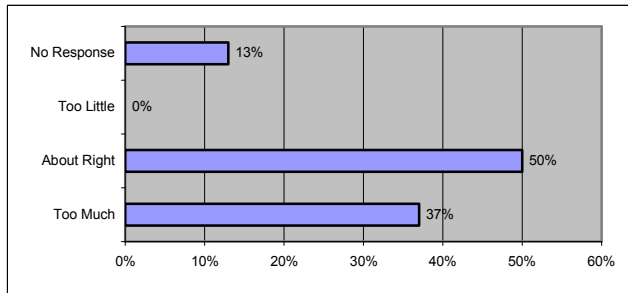
#### **Question: Did your experience of the past academic year meet your expectations?'**



#### Samples of students' responses

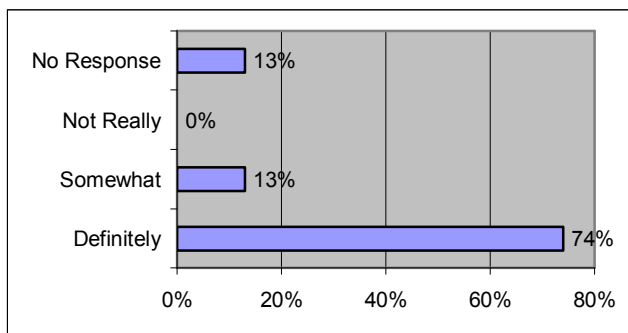
*"It developed my understanding in management and leadership skills.  
I knew with it being an Honours Degree it would be harder, but interesting.  
Surpassed expectation, broad area covered in 5 modules. All had a specific  
slant on managing and leading disability services.  
I found the last year challenging, difficult at times but the learning was worth  
it".*

**Question: What was your experience of the workload this year?**

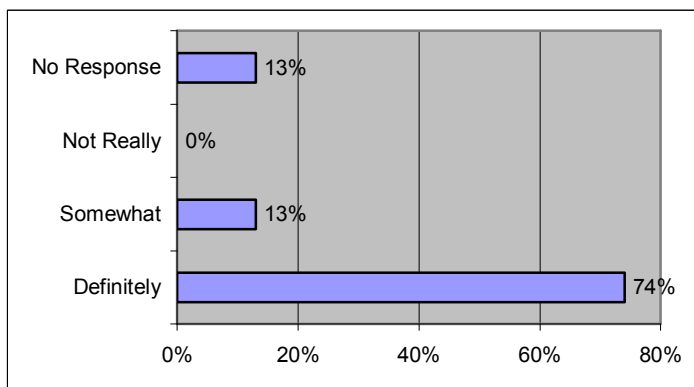


**Question: Overall, did the workshops meet stated aims in relation to:**

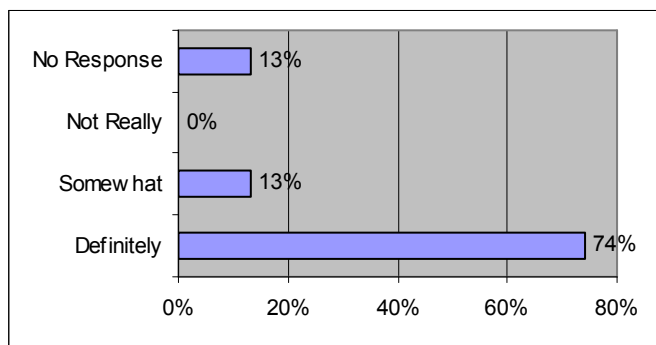
**Knowledge?**



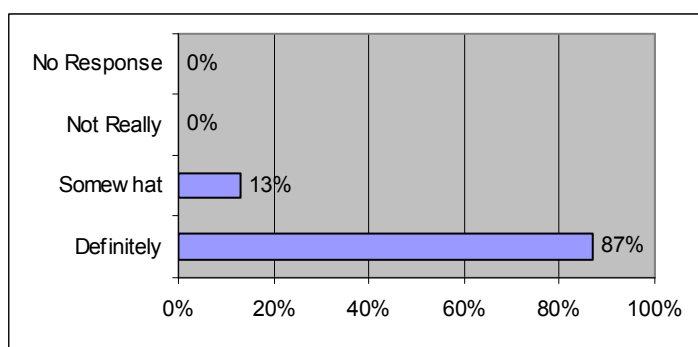
**Skills?**



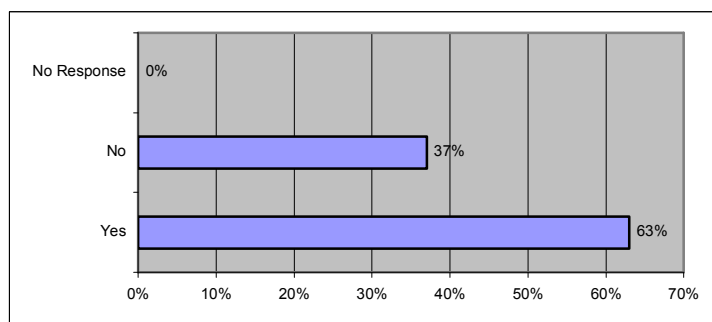
## Attitudes?



**Question: Were students happy with the assessment methodology (e.g. assignments and examinations) used by the College?**



**Question: Did meetings with your supervisor/mentor take place?**



## Student Ratings of the Following Aspects of the College

(1: poor. 5: excellent)

	1	2	3	4	5	No Response
General day-to-day contact	0%	0%	13%	13%	74%	0%
Speed of responses to enquiries	0%	0%	0%	37%	63%	0%
Thoroughness of responses to queries	0%	0%	0%	25%	75%	0%
Approachability and friendliness	0%	0%	0%	13%	87%	0%
Written communications	0%	0%	13%	13%	74%	0%
Telephone communications	0%	0%	0%	25%	75%	0%
Library supports	0%	0%	25%	25%	13%	37%
IT supports	13%	13%	13%	13%	24%	24%
Management of fees	0%	0%	0%	25%	75%	0%
Value for money	0%	0%	25%	25%	50%	0%
Overall Overall satisfaction with the service received	0%	0%	13%	0%	87%	0%

### Final Comments and Suggestions Included:

*Thanks to you all*

*Even though this was a tough year, getting married, moving house and studying for a degree, I am delighted that I completed the year and am very thankful for the support I got along the way.*

*Many thanks for all your support throughout the year.*

*Great support from tutors as always.*

*A telephone link person for each year maybe useful as I often felt I was a nuisance if I needed to call a tutor outside of arranged times.*

*Thank you for an extremely beneficial, challenging but rewarding year.*

### **External Examiners, Programme And Academic Boards**

In line with the College's Quality Assurance procedures the above information was presented to the Programme board for the Honours degree and to the Academic Board for the College, once the external examiners had visited and reviewed students' work. Overall comments from the external examiners were brief because they had a lot of familiarity with the Ordinary degree programme and they had received the modules of the Honours programme prior to their visit. Both examiners commented on that they could clearly see the follow through from the Ordinary degree to the Honours. The main discussion point was in relation to the scheduling and assessment of the Research module. The pilot group suggested that the research module be the first module delivered and the externs suggested that it could become a dissertation. Through discussion with the Programme board and the Academic Council the decision of the Council was that College should continue to use its current approach to the research projects for a number of reasons as well as the fact that many colleges are now moving away from the traditional research dissertation format.

## 9. EXTERNAL EVALUATION

In the interest of getting an objective perspective on the project an evaluator was appointed. Dr Niall McElwee of SocSci (Social Scientific Consultancy) carried out an evaluation with the students at various points throughout their studies. The full report is available from the College on request.

### Key Findings

- The participant learners share many of the same opinions around the values of the programme they are studying. They articulated a sense of connectedness in relationship with the programme facilitators and, in particular, with the core staff of the OTC.
- The Director, staff and participant learners have articulated a strong attachment to this programme. For example, the participant learners expressed a belief that the Degree level qualification is important to both their personal and professional development and the development of the field. The staff, in informal conversations, expressed similar sentiments. In fact, all the participant learners interviewed were strong supporters of the Degree programme.
- Some reservations, or concerns, arose around the use of e-learning technologies with participants noting that it was difficult to maintain interest in such a mode of learning.
- There is seen to be effective communication between all College staff and the participant learners.
- The participant learners appear to be representative of those mature persons working in the field and have considerable experience both individually and collectively.
- Participant Learners discussed the ability to receive academic support from "staff and students who have been through it (i.e. working in the field)". This is very significant.
- Participant learners articulated a strong tie to the academic programme and the College as an entity. This was mainly around perceived accessibility of staff and the positive interaction that is on-going.
- The overall structure and direction of the programme is seen to be appropriate. What makes this more salient is the fact that many of the participant learners share characteristic with 'mature' students in the other third level colleges.
- The participant learners were willing, able and even eager to share their experiences of studying the programme. This is positive in terms of peer instruction.
- There was a sense of expectation articulated around the value of completing this programme.
- The development of a sense of renewed/continuing personal scholarly identity was obvious, i.e. the participant learners were aware that each of them was progressing up a ladder of education and training.
- A number of challenges presented themselves including, for example, trying to balance part-time study with full-time demanding jobs, with balancing family life with study, with a sense of being alone at times in the scholarly process and being frustrated with project deadlines and feedback on assignments.

- A number of participant learners reported that the Degree programme was low on their agency's list of priorities in terms of projecting spend and some participants had to fund the programme themselves.
- Some common themes emerged from the interviews. Participant learners reported that the marketing of the College and the Degree needs to be moved to the forefront of the College's efforts.

### **Recommendations**

- The programme should continue to be offered as the evidence suggests that it is considered valuable to students, their agencies and, indeed, the sector in general.
- The college might rethink its marketing approach and spend vis-a-vis this particular programme. The current participant learners involved in the programme can help to promote the College in their various work locations and should be actively targeted for this.
- The references and reading materials for the courses need to be more specifically focused on social care practice in a *wider* context. Doing so will help to bring a greater sense of identification with, and in, the field. Some foundational references inserted into course materials from the wider social care context might prove stimulating for students (e.g. Redl & Wineman, 1952; Trieshman *et al.* 1969; Maier, 1979).
- The e-learning option needs to have a more clearly defined vision and mission statements, commonly agreed upon and articulated values, and strategies for striving to reach this vision. Perhaps it would be useful to bring back a group of participant learners to engage in a focus group with a topic schedule around how to use this medium effectively. Prospective participant learners should be interviewed about their commitment to the e-learning concept. It will then be essential that the concept be part of a structured supervisory meeting with College staff. I would suggest that this meeting takes place once an academic term.
- Further informal/formal assessment of the Degree Programme should be conducted via focus groups. The feedback gained from these sessions will give the OTC detailed insight into current thinking amongst the participant learners.

### **Concluding Commentary from Dr Niall McElwee**

“Promotional material for the programme suggests that *“The course has been designed and written to facilitate learners to develop the skills, knowledge and competencies to become leaders and visionaries in shaping the future development of high quality rights-driven services for people with disability”*. Overall, the participant learners have articulated that the programme is relevant, useful and interesting. They ‘feel good’ about undertaking the programme. The College staff continually support their learning and are sensitively attuned to their particular needs as adult learners. The fact that students are given assignments in good time means there is not as much “pressure” in this regard on participant learners as is the case in some other College programmes with less well developed programme deliverables.

Earlier in this review, I referred to the College Mission Statement (*“The Open Training College is committed to offering staff in the disability sector, learning opportunities*

*that are accessible, accredited and embody best practice*"). As we all know, formal Mission Statements do not always reflect the actuality of day-to-day within programmes but this does not appear to be the case in this instance where quality auditing remains central to on-going work. In fact, the Open Training is futurist in its approach and delivery which is to be commended.

It may be an exaggeration to claim that all Degree holders will naturally become visionaries and leaders in the field, but certainly I have interviewed some participant learners who have changed in their frame of thinking and intend to contribute to the development of the field in new and exciting ways. Finally, the promotional material also states that "On completion of this course students will hold a qualification which is unsurpassed in the excellence of its materials, approach and philosophy". A review of the programme to date indicates that these aspirations have, largely, been met. This must surely be seen as success."

## 10.CONCLUSION

In conclusion, The Open Training College endeavoured and was successful in developing an Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree in Applied Social Studies (Disability) that conformed to the requirements arising from the original submission approval for funding, accrediting bodies and stakeholders. The programme development can be considered a success on a number of levels:

The four objectives of the proposal were met in full.

**Objective 1** 5 modules of open learning materials were designed and developed through the College's philosophy of inclusion of and collaboration with stakeholders.

**Objective 2** Course accreditation at Honours degree level (Level 8) was achieved with HETAC. All HETAC recommendations were met or are in the process of being met.

**Objective 3** The programme was delivered to eligible staff with the pilot run 2005 –2006. All consortium members were invited to have eligible staff participate in the pilot run and any organisation in a position to do so did. 18 of the pilot group of students were conferred on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 2006.

**Objective 4** The project development was evaluated both (1) internally; through the Open Training College's Quality Assurance systems and (2) externally; through contracting an external evaluator.

This degree programme can also be considered a success due its unique nature:

- It is the only social care degree programme in the country at level 8 of the National Qualifications Framework which specifically focuses on disability.
- The use of the Supported Open Learning Model offers access to participants regardless of their geographic location or work locations.
- The students of The Open Training College are all staff that work in services for people with disabilities.
- Once developed the course moved to a position of self-funding with student fees covering the running costs of the programme.

The internal and external evaluation endorsed the programme in full and key recommendations and improvements were incorporated into the next run of the programme.

The programme enrolled a second cohort of 20 in October 2006 - this group are due to complete in July 2007. Marketing and recruitment of the next intake is underway at time of writing.