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EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION (EDI)

Innovative Pathways: Rethinking Higher Education Through Inclusion and Participation

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Higher education should be a space of opportunity for all, yet for many people, particularly those without formal qualifications, from disadvantaged backgrounds, or balancing work and caring responsibilities, it remains an unreachable goal. At the University of Hull, a pioneering programme is transforming this reality through inclusive and innovative educational practices.

The University Certificate in Health and Social Care is a Level 4, year-long, part-time course specifically designed to widen participation in higher education. What makes this programme exceptional is its removal of traditional barriers: there are no formal entry requirements, and students are not expected to have prior experience in health or social care. Instead, the focus is on potential, motivation, and providing a structured, supportive route into professional degree programmes.

PRIVACY

Delivered through a flexible and accessible format, offered both as a daytime and evening (Alternative Route) course, the programme embraces blended learning, virtual classrooms, and accessible technologies. This allows students to study around work, family life, and other commitments, making learning truly inclusive (Hatfield et al, 2024).

Six core modules provide a strong academic foundation while developing transferable skills in areas like study strategies, numeracy, public health, and dementia care. The teaching team, made up of experienced health and social care professionals, bring real-world insight to the classroom. Additional support is provided through academic coaching, mental health services, and digital learning tools, ensuring that all students, especially those new to higher education feel supported every step of the way.

One of the most innovative aspects is the use of feedback to shape the curriculum (Clouder et al, 2012). Student voices are actively embedded in programme development, which not only improves the learning experience but also fosters a deep sense of belonging, an essential factor in student retention and success (Hatfield et al, 2024).

The programme is also helping to close gaps in regional health and social care staffing. Most graduates continue their studies locally and eventually work in the area, supporting the development of a sustainable, community-based workforce. In doing so, the programme aligns with national goals for a “grow your own” strategy (NHS HEE, 2024; Cosgrave, 2020; Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018), especially in underserved regions.

By welcoming first-generation students, mature learners, and those from underrepresented groups, this initiative is redefining what inclusive higher education can look like. It empowers students not just to access university, but to thrive within it, proving that with the right structure, support, and mindset, higher education can be a space for everyone.

The University of Hull’s university certificate programme demonstrates that widening participation isn’t just about access, it’s about reimagining education itself. In 2022–23, over 150 students successfully completed the university certificate and alternative route programmes, transitioning to further study. The majority of these students went on to apply for higher-level courses with the University of Hull. By embedding equity into every stage of the learning journey, the programme offers a powerful model for institutions nationwide to follow.

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<https://www.hull.ac.uk/faculties/fhs/shsw/university-certificate-in-health-social-care-practice>

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