Introduction

Student nurses provided 'Dementia Friends' sessions for their peers and university employees in a small student-academic partnership project (StAmP). The aim of this initiative was two-fold: to improve student nurses' and others' understanding of dementia and to aid student employability through extra-curricular activities. The care of people living with dementia is central to nurses' roles, and this is covered in depth later in the nursing curricula. However, student feedback indicated that they needed an introduction to the needs of this client group before their first placement.

The *Dementia Friends* (DF) project was a partnership between the Alzheimer's Society, the academic partners and 12 students. The project involved recruiting students for the Alzheimer's Society's 'Dementia Champions' training (Department of Health 2012, Alzheimer's Society 2013) following which the students could train others as *Dementia Friends*. Students were paid for the time they spent in training, organising and delivering any sessions within the university. The staff partners' role was to support and guide the students.

Caring for people with dementia is core to nursing (Baillie et al 2015), but both student nurses (Honan 2016) and registered nurses feel under-prepared (Jenkins and McKay 2013). While it is important to equip student health care professionals with the skills to support people living with dementia through enhanced healthcare education (Bannerjee et al 2016), the DF initiative offers a socially inclusive, community-based perspective which complements classroom and practice-based learning. Dementia has an impact throughout societies (Alzheimer's Disease International (ADI), 2015) so the DF sessions were open for all members of the university.

Collaborative working between industry, third sector organisations and universities has widely recognised benefits for research, generation of creative and entrepreneurial benefits and student engagement with local communities (O'Connor et al 2011, Jung 2011, Kahu 2013). While the aim of the initiative was to help student nurses prepare for their roles in the care of people living with dementia, the project also offered an opportunity for the 'Dementia Champions' to experience partnership work with a national charity. The purpose of this article is to report on the 'Dementia Champions' student nurses' experiences of the project.

Background

Demographics and dementia

The care of older people with dementia is high on the international agenda (ADI, 2015) and in recent UK government policy (Department of Health (DH), 2012). The Prime Minister's Challenge on Dementia 2020 (2015) has re-emphasised this concern and the focus now includes non-statutory responses to supporting people who have developed dementia through 'compassionate communities' and individuals known as *Dementia Friends*. The *Dementia Friends* session is a brief, structured interactive session, designed and managed by the Alzheimer's Society, with clearly outlined content and activities.

The benefits of student engagement in extra-curricular projects

Undergraduates are encouraged to participate in extra-curriculum activity because of the opportunities to develop skills sought by employers (including communication, team working, and emotional resilience) (Hincliffe and Jolly 2011), to engage with local communities, make friends and

develop a sense of the importance of peer support. Trowler (2010), Thomas (2012) and Gerrard and Billington (2014) emphasise the sense of development, belonging and well-being that students achieve because of extra curricula activities. These activities lead to improved retention and greater student satisfaction with the university experience (Hincliffe and Jolly 2011).

Aims

The case study aimed to explore the experiences of the student nurses, identify factors that impact on collaborative working and make recommendations for future student-academic partnership projects.

Method

This was a small exploratory case study. As the intention was to gain in-depth understanding of students' experiences a qualitative methodology was most suitable. The initial plan was to use focus groups, so as to encourage discussion and develop and explore alternative perspectives, but due to low numbers this approach was adjusted to single and dual interview consultations. All nine dementia champions were invited to participate, three agreed. All were second year students, one was a mental health nursing student, two were adult nursing students. They were interviewed by the authors, both of whom were nurse educators and already known to the students. Both authors were themselves 'Dementia Champions' and familiar with the DF sessions.

Interviews took place in 2016. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. Students were paid for their time on the same basis as that for providing the DF sessions. The students had been dementia champions for 6-9 months.

Data Collection

The aim was to explore students' experiences of participating in the project, including the experiences of those students who had not taken part following their Dementia Champion's training. The invitation letter emphasised the intent to learn about barriers and enablers, so as not to intimidate students who may have felt uncomfortable about admitting to not running sessions.

A semi-structured approach was taken, using the following questions as a guide:

* What were your motivations for applying?

* How did you get on with the Champion's training?

* How did you find the organisation of the *Dementia Friends* sessions?

* What were your experiences of providing the sessions?

* What has been the impact on you of taking part in the initiative (prompt – any difficulties? Any benefits?)

* Would you do anything differently another time?

Analysis

Transcripts from the consultations were transcribed verbatim then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. To minimise mutual bias, each researcher initially read the transcripts independently. Tentative themes were identified individually, before the researchers met to discuss and jointly agree on significant themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was received from the University Ethics Committee. All participants were fully informed and consented to be involved the study. They were aware that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Audiotaped recordings and transcribed materials have been kept securely on a secure University network drive.

Findings

Four themes arose from analysis of the transcripts: 'Commitment to working with people with dementia', 'Difficulties in taking on extra-curricular responsibilities', 'Personal development' and 'Relationships and collaboration'.

 Commitment to working with people with dementia

The students all expressed concerns about the quality of care offered to people living with dementia. They recognised that they needed more preparation on how to work with this client group before their first placements. Placement experiences allowed them to recognise gaps in the knowledge base of qualified nurses, who themselves may have had little specific dementia-related education.

In the following quotes, the students show how their emotional responses to inadequate dementia care knowledge motivated their delivery of sessions:

> *'I realised how much we are lacking in secondary care for people with dementia and I found it very frustrating and I think from that moment I've really had a 'something needs to change' and we need to be changing our practice very much in that sort of environment then from then I've got interested in it'*

> *Student 2*

> *'I wanted to do more for people that have dementia because I didn't know a lot about dementia when I started but I knew that it was a problem because there were a lot of reports and stuff going on and I felt like from a mental health nursing perspective at the point I was within my training we hadn't had anything on it but I'd already been on a dementia placement so I felt that I sort of needed something extra and I thought this would be good for me'*

> *Student 3*

It appears that the students were motivated by compassion for people living with dementia, together with awareness of gaps in their own and others' knowledge base and practice competence. They felt a need to harness these feelings and act.

'Difficulties in taking on extra-curricular responsibilities'

All three students recognised that doing additional work on top of a full-time course added work-life pressures. Time management was an issue for all the students. Scheduling extra activities on top of a taught timetable, further reading and practice placements was challenging. Prioritisation was difficult even for students who were progressing well, but for student 1 this was a more urgent issue. Course completion had to be the priority as failing to do so would mean having to leave the university and not qualifying as a nurse:

> *The only thing that I found difficult is once you fail one thing that's a bad place to be …If I wasn't a trooper sometimes when I've wanted to do things I wouldn't be sitting here, because I failed this, I failed that and I had three things behind…. But hopefully with the bless of God, I will, may be able to complete the course and I would love to do that.*

<div align="center">Student 1</div>

Student 3 saw the issue from a different perspective. It seems they might have prioritised delivering the sessions:

> *'I don't think there was many other barriers really other than having to do a university degree with it. Like if I didn't have to do a university degree with it I probably would have been doing like six session a week or something which would have been good because I have really enjoyed doing them. I think that I would happily continue with it'.*

<div align="center">Student 3</div>

Student 2 noted the time management challenges that would face students who might not have a strong support network and used this empathy to indicate the need for staff to anticipate this issue in recruitment of future students:

> *'I think it would be good to be honest with people who are applying for it. About the time they would need to commit before they actually go on any dementia champion training because I think with all the will in the world I'm fortunate enough to not have a load of backlog but I've still found that I've had to do a lot of scheduling. For me, If I was looking to interview future champions myself I'd be wanting to know how they were going to manage their time because it is something that I've had to, I am very lucky as I have a fantastic support network even with other things that go on in my life'*

<div align="center">Student 2</div>

The students' words reflect the demands of a nursing programme and the perhaps unanticipated extent of the extra commitment they had taken on. Their commitment is clear but it seems that the extra-curricular activity had costs to the students, as well as benefits.

Personal development

Despite the difficulties outlined above the students generally felt positive about their abilities to overcome challenges and achieve their objectives. When asked to discuss the impact of the project the students identified positive outcomes including receiving positive feedback from peers and practice colleagues, while having the extra knowledge and responsibilities led to positive consequences for professional recognition and further influence:

> *'People are becoming quite receptive especially now I am coming towards the end of second year. I've sat and talked to some ward sisters that are quite happy to sit and listen to what I*

have to say so I'm pleased with it to be honest as it's hard not to feel infectious about the subject'.

<div align="center">Student 2</div>

While for the student who was not able to follow up by taking on the role as a dementia champion, the training had a positive effect on her immediate sphere of nursing practice:

'I don't rush myself when I am dealing with them, I see them as a person, I don't see them as dementia, I don't see them as confused, I see them as a normal human being. Once you do that those people looking at you in your eyes see you have trust and they start to think and start to recall what they used to have in their lives.'

<div align="center">Student1</div>

The personal development gains were already visible to the students who had led *Dementia Friends* sessions. They could see how their new skills and confidence was preparing them for the next stages of their careers. Student 3 recognised that these abilities would soon be useful:

'because we are going to jump into practice and within a year we are going to be asked to be mentors so it's giving you sort of some of those skills ready and preparing you for qualified status'

<div align="center">Student 3</div>

Student 2 was also already looking ahead and focusing on career development beyond qualification:

'Every time I think about it I get excited and think, 'Ok there's not currently a role yet to employ me but I will make my own'. So yeah employability wise I am using this to my fullest and I will very much…… I am already carving my future in to dementia care. Since being part of a dementia champion I've been quite active online with twitter and I've formed a really really good network of general practice nurses because I want to go in to general practice but then I'm sat there and thinking I am so good with dementia but I know I want to go in to general practice - how can I do both?'

<div align="center">Student 2</div>

The quotes above seem to indicate that the project focused the students' attention on how they might achieve their long-term objectives. They could review their experiences and see how transferable skills and networking could facilitate their greater influence on dementia care post-qualification.

Relationships and collaboration

The students acknowledged relationships with the academic partners, each other, practice colleagues and the university itself as having an influence over their experiences of the project.

Student 2 recognised how the benefits of developing a professional relationship with Student 3 led to insight that could be useful for interdisciplinary working:

I've found it so so useful to work with [name] who is a mental health nurse both of us were taking over the world and I said you can have a GP desk next to me and we can both be out in the community and we can do X Y and Z together. We've already been working together around multidisciplinary and how you are a mental health nurse and how that links in with

adult nursing and how our two roles are so missing without the other. So it has really given us the opportunity to sit and talk about different things. We have sat and swapped different ideas and talked about our different course content. I've got a better appreciation of what mental health nurses do'

<div align="center">Student 2</div>

Student 3 was appreciative of the opportunity to 'give back', seeming to feel that these contributions cemented his relationship with the university itself:

'I think it's done so much for me as it's made me feel engaged with the university. As opposed to just being a student turning up doing my bit going home and being it from a I'm going to say selfish point of view like coming to Uni to get what I need to go out there and do what I want to do, it's made me feel like I've been able to give something back and have a sort of relationship with the university that's a bit different to just coming in and take and take and take. I feel like I've been able to support people as well which is something that I set out to do it's something that I would like to have done while I am here so I'm really happy and chuffed with being able to have the opportunity to do it'.

<div align="center">Student 3</div>

Relationships seemed to be significant for the students in creating a perception of mutual support that perhaps contributed to ongoing motivation, commitment and positive feelings about their experiences of participating in the project.

Discussion

The most significant finding from this case study was that our participants were motivated by wanting to make a difference to people living with dementia. Their concerns about quality of care echoed those in the literature, for example in the need for a person-centred approach (Brooker and Latham 2016). They were seemingly unaffected by 'courtesy stigma' often associated with work with older people (Ostaszkiewicz, O'Connell and Dunning 2016). Improved nurse well-being is associated with reduced risk of burnout and with higher quality patient care (Fearon and Nicol 2011). The appreciative 'cross-field' relationships they developed perhaps anticipate the mutual support that specialist dementia care nurses need to sustain positive attitudes and for practitioners' long-term retention in the speciality (Chenoweth et al 2014).

None of the participants mentioned payment as driving their commitment to the project (and indeed they did not claim for a large proportion of the hours worked). As the project progressed mutual relationships seemed to become more significant, as did the satisfaction provided by delivering the sessions and the feedback they received. They also seemed to realise that learning and skills could be applied post-qualification and that the 'platform' of expertise (Godat 2013) they were building would empower them to influence others long-term. Those who could commit to delivering sessions seemed to benefit from a boost to self-esteem, perhaps through feeling that others recognised their expertise and through a sense of contributing and thus having improved status, in both University and practice.

The findings agreed with those of previous studies in identifying the benefits of working while studying (Gerrard and Billington 2014, Clegg and Stevenson 2011), despite the difficulties of coping with various responsibilities. Mizarei et al (2012) confirm the importance of BSc Nursing students acquiring time management skills in readiness for their chosen career. Similarly, networking, leadership, communication and presentation skills were developed by undertaking the project but

seem to be predicated on students' pre-existing ability to manage their academic and placement workload. Our students noted these benefits and appreciated the sense of professional recognition they gained from others and seemed able to own for themselves. Teaching others aids students' own learning and builds confidence (Ravanipour et al 2015).

Considerations for future projects

In tentatively applying these conclusions to planning future student-academic collaborations, it seems that emphasis on how the student can contribute to quality of care should be emphasised over the 'soft skills' or financial payments gained. Professional recognition as an 'agent of change' for the client group (in this case people with dementia) seems to be the most significant factor for our students. This has ethical implications as the nature of the StAmP initiative is to recognise the importance of student roles through fair payment. However, it may be that motivation related to the caring nature of nurses' roles is more powerful. Therefore, perhaps alternative or additional value-congruent forms of recognition and reward should be considered.

Further ethical concerns arose from the findings. The students could manage their own time and arrange sessions to fit around placements and their academic timetables. However, all noted the pressure and difficulties of time-management and showed they were weighing up the competing needs and benefits of the project, their academic work and practice placements. There was clearly some synthesis of learning and benefit between the group (the students felt more committed to the University, more confident in practice and gained expertise relevant to both and their future careers) but nevertheless there was a risk, as expressed by student 1, that the project could threaten the priority of qualification. In planning future projects, academic staff could consider the wider implications of extra commitments. There is a judgement to be made about the ethics of discriminating in favour of academically strong students while also ensuring equal opportunities.

Limitations

Our case study was based on a small sample and explored the implications of a local initiative. Further work is needed to establish how our findings will relate to those exploring and evaluating similar or larger projects. While our study is exploratory and limited by the small number of participants, the findings offer some insight into factors that may sustain or impede collaborative extra-curricular activities.

Conclusions

The findings from this small case study indicate that student-academic collaborative projects can achieve benefits similar to those of other partnership working opportunities. However, there are potential downsides which should be considered when planning future initiatives. Student nurses' face demanding workloads and the academic partners should recognise the importance of balancing extra-curricular opportunities with the priority of professional qualification.

Implications for Practice

Our learning from this project includes ideas for future student-academic collaborative projects and for pre-registration nurse education.

Student-academic collaborations

- Students are motivated primarily by their commitment to practice. Initiatives should offer opportunities to develop practice-related skills and to develop social networks that will sustain high quality care post-qualification
- Considerate recruitment and organisation is key. Students should be managing existing commitments before being exposed to additional demands and projects should be timed to avoid clashes with academic deadlines

Pre-registration nursing programmes

- Students feel under-prepared for their roles in caring for people living with dementia, so underpinning knowledge and skills for dementia care should be included from the beginning of nurse education

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