

## Western Daily Press 'Opinion' Article

Sometimes in life, you get a chance to be part of something that makes a difference. Protecting our children is one of these important things that we all do in some measure or another. We all know from the stories in the press about the tragedies that occur. We often forget the tens of thousands of people who work with children up and down the country, day in day out, whose vigilance and care protect children from harm. I'm talking about the wider children's workforce, such as nursery workers, residential care workers, social work assistants, classroom assistants, foster carers, and many many more. Many of them don't get much opportunity in their working life to gain university qualifications and develop their skills to the top of their ability. So the recent initiative by Bath Spa University that I was privileged to be part of, created brand new qualifications for this group of workers. They can study a range of subjects connected with child protection, in a modular way, over a number of years if they wish, and be awarded a certificate of education in Integrated Child Protection Studies, going on to a foundation degree if they wish.

This is one of these rare and wonderful opportunities in life, where everything comes together at once. The cost is borne by employers (who fund the training) and the university, not the individual. Employers who sign up for this have to let their employees find time to take the training courses, although it is an excellent bonus for recruitment and retention of staff. The university gets its funding from the Higher Education Funding Council, as part of what is called a Continuing Professional Development programme. The good thing about all of this is that it is attractive on so many fronts. Firstly, it improves the quality of education and skills in the workforce. Secondly, it gives people who would not normally have the chance, an opportunity for a university qualification. Thirdly, all students can continue in full time employment whilst doing this. Fourthly (and perhaps most importantly), it improves the protection of vulnerable children in the community. The certificate is made up of six modules, the first of which is the basic child protection training that they all have to do anyway. Then, students can select from a range of others, including safeguarding disabled children, exploitation of children on the internet, neglect, child development, child behaviour, and many more.

Recently I went with the Dean of Education from Bath Spa University to a meeting with Tim Loughton, the Minister for Children and Families at the Department of Education, Tessa Munt, MP for Wells ( a member of the Education Select committee) and civil servants, where we outlined the history and development of this initiative, and the reasons we felt it was an important addition to the University's curriculum. Our work was broadly welcomed by the department and we hope to keep them closely informed in future. The University has now run two conferences on the subject, and Tim Loughton indicated his willingness to speak at a Spring conference next year.

Some of the employers who have already signed up for this work include local authorities, charities, and private sector providers. We're very keen to involve as many people as possible whilst funding streams last, so would welcome contact from bodies who provide child care to take this development forward. It's not often that something comes together like this. We've all heard the criticisms levelled over the years at the statutory agencies when things go wrong and children suffer. People forget that the vast

majority of the children's workforce are the eyes and ears of safeguarding children from abuse. They play a vital part as well as the social workers, police officers, teachers and health professionals who are always the subject of scrutiny. This scheme is aimed at those with daily contact with children and those who see the subtle changes in the child that may be at risk, so it is crucial that they get the best opportunity for education and professional development that we can offer. They are the unsung heroes and heroines behind the scenes. On any one day in England 30,000 children are considered at risk by the authorities and are subject to child protection plans. The workers that this initiative is aimed at are crucial in the whole process of alerting the authorities and monitoring those at risk.

So, making a difference can also involve improving our own educational qualifications, as well as being better informed on issues surrounding child abuse. I'm very pleased to be part of this, and if people want to find out more information, please contact the School of Education at Bath Spa University [d.parsons@bathspa.ac.uk](mailto:d.parsons@bathspa.ac.uk) or [info@dnivenassociates.co.uk](mailto:info@dnivenassociates.co.uk)

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