

ASPIRE: A BEACON OF INNOVATION

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The ASPIRE project is a collaboration between the University of Northampton and St Andrew's Healthcare. It represents a significant step in addressing the longstanding challenge of nursing shortages in the UK. Initiated in 2016 and initially funded by Health Education East Midlands, ASPIRE is designed to provide a fast-track education programme, allowing health care assistants (HCAs) to progress into the second year of the BSc Nursing course in Mental Health and Learning Disabilities. This initiative not only aims to expand the nursing workforce but also to enhance the capabilities of existing healthcare staff.

The urgency of this project is highlighted by the acute nursing shortages and the increasing complexity of healthcare needs within the UK. Traditional pathways into nursing have often been insufficient in meeting these demands. The programme aligns with the Skills for Care mandate, which seeks to standardise the practice of healthcare support staff through the Level 4 Care Certificate.

A key aspect of ASPIRE is its focus on practical experience and the recognition of prior learning. This approach contrasts with the traditional courses, where students start their studies from year one. A study comparing the experiences of ASPIRE and traditional students revealed that, while traditional students felt more academically prepared, ASPIRE students brought valuable practical insights to their studies.

The programme's impact extends beyond academic preparation. It encourages a sense of belonging and identity among students, which is crucial in nurturing confident and competent health professionals.

The ASPIRE project has evolved, responding to feedback and results from a 3-year research project involving more than 50 students. Notable enhancements include additional education sessions at the university, regular interactions with university staff and students, and increased support for transitioning into the second year of the nursing programme.

Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with many highlighting the programme's role in enabling them to pursue a nursing career that might have otherwise been inaccessible. This sentiment is echoed by the following quotes from students, whose testimonials attest to the transformative impact of ASPIRE on their professional and personal growth:

'I made it my ambition to be accepted onto the programme and fortunately my manager supported me wholeheartedly. The tutors on the course are lovely and the combination of their backing and the work experience I have gained on the wards meant I felt confident joining the nurses at the university in the second year of their degree programme.'

Alice Robinson

'For those, such as me, with dyslexia or who perhaps didn't do so well at school, it offers an alternative route into becoming a qualified mental health nurse. I've gained such a lot of knowledge and been able to use my previous experience too.'

Stephen Medcraft

'ASPIRE is a great way for St Andrew's to develop home-grown nurses and for us to retain them. When I was younger, university wasn't an option, but ASPIRE has enabled me to reach my potential.'

Susan Chipchase

'Fantastic programme without which it is very unlikely I would have been able to return to study and qualify as a registered mental health nurse. Long may it continue.'

Simon Austin

Since its inception, ASPIRE has facilitated the progression of 133 student nurses. It stands as a beacon of innovation in nursing education. It exemplifies how targeted, practical education, combined with an understanding of the challenges faced by health professionals, can lead to substantial improvements in both healthcare delivery and professional development. In the face of healthcare challenges, ASPIRE offers a viable and promising solution to not just meet but exceed the demands of contemporary healthcare.