

Sue Alexander MSc MSc CSci FIBMS MIBiol CBiol MIHM MCQI  
Principal Biomedical Scientist & Pathology Services Manager  
The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust

Awarded MSc (distinction) in Biomedical Science via on-line programme July 2008.

I did this more or less by accident! Around 20 years ago I did a formal taught MSc at the University of Surrey in Medical Microbiology and then carried on studying via short courses and CPD. However on arrival in my current job 5 years ago I discovered that I needed to develop a quality management system for Pathology and do it quickly as a CPA assessment was only a few months away for one department.

I saw the Greenwich Quality Management module advertised, signed on for the trial cohort with my colleague who agreed to be named as Quality Manager and thought it was brilliant. All the course work was completely applicable, went straight into use and is still there forming the core of our QMS now. A while later I felt that I needed to improve my knowledge of Point of Care Testing and related governance and so signed up for that module. That was tough for a non-Biochemist but I did well and again it proved very useful.

At that point I realised I might as well do the other 2 modules needed to make up the required 4 and so chose Healthcare Associated Infection and finally Breast Cancer Diagnosis. As a Microbiologist and member of the Hospital Infection Control Committee the former was useful to update my knowledge and working in a cancer hospital the latter was particularly applicable. It also gave me the source of inspiration for my research project. This was based around better testing for HER-2 expression in breast cancer with a view to speeding up diagnostic turnaround times and ensuring that the most appropriate use is made of herceptin. This was the hardest aspect as I don't work in a lab based setting anymore so time was a problem and keeping the continuity going was a real issue.

I found that the on-line modules suited my learning style as they are structured against a set timetable with linked activities. Having weekly on-line chat sessions means that students keep in touch after their initial induction meeting and discuss the topics together and synchronously. By structuring the modules formally students are less likely to fall behind. Tutors always marked work very quickly and were happy to give feedback. The variety of activities and testing mechanisms was good although it is unnerving doing timed activities on-line with the little clock counting down in the corner of the screen.

The administration of the courses is excellent and it is easy to get help.

I have encouraged a number of my staff to take modules and it is becoming a popular study route as there is flexibility and good choice. Some of the staff are now enrolled or planning to enrol on full programmes.

In fact, I liked the programme so much that I designed a module which was worked up and I co-authored it. It is already proving popular and I have suggested another. I totally recommend this style of learning and the topics covered whether as one-off specific items or to form a whole programme.

23<sup>rd</sup> July 2008