

## The Growth of a New Mental Health Department

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January 2004 was a difficult time for mental health nursing within the then Institute of Health Care. Already one semester late in starting the new B.Sc. conversion course for general nurses working in mental health care, it had no curriculum, no lecturers, no release mechanism from the practice areas, no clinical supervision and no recognised method of evaluating practice competencies. In short, it did not exist and 33 students were frustrated, waiting for it to start. In addition, both the second year general Nursing diploma and degree student groups were expecting to receive theoretical and practice study units to meet their registration requirements. Martin Ward and Josanne Drago Bason were appointed in different capacities to develop, manage and deliver all of the above, and had just 21 days to begin.

An incomplete hard copy of the original diploma to degree programme was located and with a considerable amount of reconfiguration, negotiation and bargaining, this allowed the “team” to start the first semester. Within weeks, the 33 students had reduced to 18 as they realised the complexity of the course they had enrolled for. By the end of that first semester, this number had further reduced to 11, with 10 of these completing the course. However, the troubles were not over because the University wanted the programme to finish at the same time as every other course, meaning this first course had to be reduced by a whole semester, running for two and a half years instead of three. As the remaining students already held a Diploma in Mental Health Nursing, this was feasible but required a considerable amount of academic dexterity to make it happen. Lessons from the first semester were learnt and with the considerable help of the mental health service managers, the whole programme of studies was re-designed. Robust clinical support measures were introduced to enable students to complete practice-based competencies, including a proper release mechanism to allow them to attend the theoretical elements, which were also practically re-written. Even the number of students and cohorts had to be reconsidered as it became obvious that the mental health services could not support the drain on its human resources that large numbers of students on the programme would cause. The summer of 2004 was a busy time as a new cohort of students was recruited for the next academic year, meaning that the “team” was now working double time.

That first cohort of students completed the course in the required time, by summer 2006. But, at their graduation ceremony it was discovered that they had been awarded nursing degrees, not mental health ones. This was eventually rectified, much to everyone’s relief!

Scroll forward another nine years. The “team”, now consisting of four, is responsible for two undergraduate programmes - the original part-time programme and a newer full-time one, a part-time Master programme in Mental Health Nursing and a full-time dual international Master programme, in collaboration with the University of Southern Indiana USA, in Community Psychiatric Nursing - a programme of studies unique to mental health nursing. The signing of that contract between the two universities in

December 2014, after two and a half years of negotiations, paved the way for one last milestone. After progressing through Faculty Board, University Senate and Council meetings, in February 2015 mental health nursing finally left the nursing department to become a department in its own right - *the Department of Mental Health*. As the name suggests, no longer focusing only on nursing (though for the time being, certainly its main activity), it will concentrate on both short undergraduate courses and postgraduate ones in areas of mental health specialisation, e.g., childhood and adolescence, substance misuse, rehabilitation, early intervention in psychosis, for all staff working in mental health care. As a multi-disciplinary department, it is intended that it will fill a gap in both the University’s provision and the Maltese needs for intensive mental health care support. In effect, it is hoped that it will impact upon the fabric of society and become a key stakeholder in future mental health care developments.

Of course, the development, support and delivery of these courses took a great deal of time and expertise, not least from the “team”, past and present, whose commitment and dedication made it all possible. Many other people have contributed to the growth of this department from its humble beginnings and, undoubtedly, there will be many more in the future. To you, mental health offers a huge thank you. This progression is even more remarkable when considered against the stigma that mental health is faced with generally and from every quarter of society. The exciting thing is that the future holds so many further possibilities. So, while the old saying goes “From little acorns, big oak trees grow”, in the case of mental health within the Faculty of Health Sciences, it should read “Little steps make great journeys.”