

## **Lifelong learning in radiography**

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## The value of education in career development.

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Times are challenging for us all post COVID, and there is little time and resource in departments and many staff feel demotivated in their roles<sup>1</sup>. However, education can play a key part in motivating staff, providing opportunities for career development, promotion, and opportunities<sup>2</sup>. It is not without its barriers, but Sheila Hassan the Stereotactic Radiosurgery (SRS) Lead from Guys and St Thomas' has shown how education and learning can inform a successful career. Having recently completed the MSc Advanced Clinical Practice Radiotherapy and Oncology programme at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) at the age of 65, Sheila chats to the programme lead and advancing practice lead for AHP from SHU Melanie Clarkson.

**MC:** Sheila, thank you so much for taking the time to speak to me and sharing your journey with the wider community in this article. **Can you provide a bit of an introduction about your career?**

**SH:** Thanks Mel. So, I qualified back in 1978, via the Diploma route and practiced for two years at University College Hospital, London. I gave up my career to raise my family for 19 years, before deciding to return to practice, returning to Guys and St Thomas'. I was put on a training program for three months on a temporary contract and on an assistant level pay packet. With the idea that I would be successfully recruited as an entry grade radiographer if competent and if I wasn't and needed more support in retraining, I would be given a little longer time. I was successful straight away and then I got promoted quickly into a senior two grade (as it was then). It was around this time that I started my involvement with Society of Radiographers and became a union representative. This was also about the same time Agenda for Change came in, and I was the only Therapeutic Radiography union rep across the whole country involved as an early implementer site, which catapulted me into the forefront where I had to do presentations, all sorts of national meetings. I also had to speak at Trafalgar Square at a rally in front of about 2000 people, which was terrifying. By that time, I had also joined the London Regional Committee, which was encouraged by my then line manager, which then moved me into being the Chair of that committee and then on to become the President of the Society of Radiographers, and which was awesome experience.

**MC:** You really got involved in the wider aspects of the service which provided you with some great opportunities.

**SH:** It really did, I continued my career obviously at Guys and St Thomas where I did various rotations across the radiotherapy department and I'm currently the stereotactic radiosurgery lead radiographer there.

**MC:** So obviously we found each other through you becoming a student at Sheffield Hallam University, on the MSc Advanced Clinical Practice Radiotherapy and Oncology programme. I remember our first conversation as you were concerned about your age and your lack of university education within Radiotherapy. **What does formal education mean to you and why was it important?**

**SH:** Well, obviously I started off with the diploma the DCR and then I spent 19 years away. I did do some more training in other things, so I worked as a special needs assistant and I did a City and Guilds certificate in learning support, and it was that, really, that reignited my desire to learn again and to find out things more about what's going on. As my children, got a little bit older, it gave me a bit of head space. When I returned to radiotherapy, I made a commitment to myself that I would learn something new every day, and I'd only make a mistake once, because I had to rapidly learn during that three-month period, I went out and bought books and textbooks again and started reading. From there I continued attending conferences and other opportunities. So, I've attended conferences every year and the Annual Radiotherapy Conference in particular which I find inspirational. I have to say I think there's not a lot of opportunities sometimes at work to develop and it's at these conferences that make you realize you're doing a good job and that the workplace you're working in is doing well compared to others. Sometimes you hear presentations of something that you actually implemented several years before, and it gives you a real boost. I always came away from those conferences with an eagerness and desire to do more and reassurance that we were doing a good job at.

**MC:** I guess that shows the importance as well of, publishing our work and implementation, education allow us to learn these new things and implement them into our departments. But quite often we are not very good at disseminating that work and showing what we've been doing in practice.

**SH:** There is an awful lot we do every day in our own workplaces. It's good to hear and read about things people have got the opportunity to do, you know, radiotherapy is rapidly fast-moving profession and there's always training going on. So yes, I think education and educational institutions are very important.

**MC:** As you mention that education and learning can come from a variety of opportunities not just formal education.

**SH:** As I mentioned the Annual Radiotherapy Conference is one conference where you can showcase what you're doing every day, it's not a high-level academic conference and when I do PDRs for my junior colleagues, I always encourage them to attend the radiotherapy conference because I think it's a really good starting place. When I got into the UK Council, it was mandatory that we attended what is now UKIO and in those days it was mainly a diagnostic conference. The first time I went I thought this is ridiculous, making a therapeutic radiography go to a diagnostic conference. We got sent along to these presentations that we had to then watch, to my horror and do a report on. One of the ones I got sent along to was imaging brain tumours, I thought this was ridiculous however it's been such an important part of my learning to have gone to that because, I didn't know that many years later I'd be doing the SRS work. Understanding and needing to understand imaging in that field of practice and that lecture, because I wrote it up, stayed in my mind and my memory and has made such a big difference in what I'm doing now. No learning is a waste of time.

**MC:** I absolutely agree, such a good motto to have. You have to take every opportunity that is on offer to you.

**SH:** I think well that's also very important. I didn't set out to be where I am today. I certainly didn't set out to be the President. It came my way, and I was just there at the right place at the right time, saying yes and taking those opportunities and embracing them because it's not just about turning up to a Council meeting or, you know, just sitting on a committee because everyone can join a committee at the Society of Radiographers. They're always looking for people to be involved in their

special interest groups, which are excellent ways of learning more and meeting colleagues in the same sphere of learning. You have to be brave enough to say yes, but unless you start speaking up and participating, you don't get the full breadth of learning and you don't experience what what's out there really.

**MC:** So, we've talked about formal education and there's a little bit of the informal education you've mentioned, and the importance of CPD. **How does all that experience that you've mentioned there about going to conferences and such like prepare you for further formal study like postgraduate modules or an MSc?**

**SH:** Oh absolutely. I think as you know I started my MSc. I didn't have a degree, so I've never been to university, so that was a little bit daunting at first. I knew some of the tutors at SHU, I knew other tutors at other universities that encouraged me. I've heard presentations and I'd read up on the articles that people have produced from the programme and that starts to give you the foundation of what's required. So, the leap from where I was to where I got to was nowhere near as great as it could have been because I'd already been reading articles and professional and academic articles, which was the style that you have to write when you're doing an MSc.

**MC:** So obviously some people might think that your unique in your views around education from where you've developed and where you've come from. **What keeps you motivated in terms of your career development and your passion for, radiography and radiotherapy?**

**SH:** I don't think I am unique. I think there's plenty of people out there, but I think unfortunately in their career journeys they can often get disillusioned. I met someone at my own workplace Christmas party, a band 5 radiographer, who's full of enthusiasm, and I'm encouraging them to come along and see me and speak with me to help them on to the next stage. I think a lot of people are just at a bit loss of what to do next and finding the right people to go to. I think because I was involved with the Society of Radiographers, I was meeting people from the academic area of research and education because I actually was interested in what I was doing, I wasn't satisfied with just turning up to work and doing my job, I wanted more. I wanted to read up. I wanted to understand and when I came into this job, I knew I'd never even heard of stereotactic radiosurgery, I couldn't have got the job unless I'd done some background research. So, I think you know when you're looking at career development, you need to be thinking about, what do I need to read so that I'm successful at interview. The Society of Radiographers offers fantastic resources on their career development section of the website, they're invaluable and also speaking to people, you have got to speak to people and discuss where you're going to go. So, hopefully you have a reasonable line manager, during your PDR who can direct you to resources, but you also have other colleagues and other hospital sites that are doing things and they've done things and it's talking to them and finding out how they're doing things. To stay motivated in your job, you just can't turn up and just do it. It's demoralizing doing that because it's hard work, especially when you're on the Linac every day, you are stuck in a bunker and lose who you are, you need something else to motivate you to turn up and as I said previously, going to the Annual Radiotherapy Conference always motivated me, and my job always did and still does. You know, I came back from UKIO 2023, and you know, the first thing I did was go to my manager and explain some of the stuff we heard and your presentation on enhanced practice and we played it recently again at work and to start a discussion about enhanced practice in our department. So, it's also bringing back the learning that you get and the presentations even if you're not in a position in your department where you can speak up, somebody, somewhere will listen to what you're saying. These days, you know, I didn't have this luxury in my day, but these days there's an R&D department where the leads are always keen to listen to you and hear your ideas. There are often secondments in those sort departments, and I think that's great. You know, I took up

secondment in Agenda for Change in job evaluation and I'm still the trust expert in that, but it meant I also met other people outside radiotherapy who were doing all sorts of things and it just starts to sort of get your thinking about what you can do.

**MC:** I guess if you have got that one person who is motivated it snowballs, motivation is infectious and other people start to get motivated as well. However, that is tricky in the current post COVID world, everybody is really tired and demoralized. So, we need to ignite that motivation around education and training across the four pillars of practice as well, don't we?

**SH:** We do, and I think UKIO is doing a great job. You know, I've just signed up for my UKIO for this year and its £135 I couldn't believe it, £135 for three days if your department can't fund you, that's not so bad you can find a cheap hotel, you know, Premier Inn or whatever, sometimes you just have to put a little bit of resource in to get something out of it. What you get out of it, in the end is huge rewards, because if you know when it's time for promotion interviews departments are oversubscribed with people wanting promotion, you've got to do something to stand out, and the only way these days you're going to stand out and get promoted is if you've got something extra on your CV. Something extra that you can bring into your conversation in the interview that you've done or that you're interested in, because that's what people are looking for. They're not looking for somebody, just turns up to work. They're looking for somebody who's done a little bit extra.

**MC:** We mentioned previously about you starting your MSc, so **why did you think it was important and we haven't mentioned age so far, but why did you think it was important to start your MSc at 62 years old and why did you particularly pick the modules you did?**

**SH:** Initially it was my line manager and having got into this job she presented me with the opportunity to look at some modules. Many in my department have completed the Expert Practice for Extended Roles module at SHU. I hadn't done any University trained programs in radiotherapy at all because mine was a DCR based at a hospital, so that made me cautious and my age was something that I was a bit cautious about because if I was about to embark on something if I was to make the decision to do the full MSc I would be getting quite old by the time I finished and you know I would have been about 62 when I started. You don't know, although I was in very good health you just don't know I was very cautious and I didn't want commit to the whole MSc, So I decided I'd do module by module just to see how it went, but I have to say that after the first module I got the bug and I loved every bit of the module and what I particularly liked was it endorsed my own practice. I think your work colleagues aren't very good at telling you, you're doing a good job, and you know I got very good marks, and it endorsed the work. It also made me have to do one to one sessions with the consultant I was working with because he had to sign my work off and so we got to know each other better which you know you can't fault that at all. So as a result, I got more involved in the service and what the service was about, but if I think about it, it was the external validation that particularly was a benefit of that module. By the end of that module, I wanted to do more and then at some point I decided, well I might as well just do the whole thing and be done with it.

**MC:** So, we just mentioned there about the expert practice module which other modules did you complete and how did you find they enhanced your role within the department.

**SH:** As I said previously, nothing is wasted and some of the modules somewhat surprised me, I did the advanced specialist practice module which I found quite hard, there's a lot of reflection, I'm quite good at reflection. I'm a local preacher in my Methodist Church, so I'd done that course as well, so I gained some other skills. So, skills outside work automatically bringing things in as well, but the one I struggled with most was the Evidencing Your CPD. The first idea I had, it didn't work out very well

and I was on the verge of actually giving up and then I had another idea. I'd gone to an NLP Neural Linguistic Programming conference because I'm also involved in NLP work. So now they're additional skill that I've picked up along the way, and that conference I went on purpose to find skills to help support my work as a line manager, I felt that I needed some better skills and particularly resilience. From that, my next piece was to work with the trainers to produce a bespoke training program for my own workplace, and all our managers went to it. It was a three-day program and my manager thought it was a fantastic idea, we went ahead and did that, which was great. It was really quite gratifying that having struggled with that module, that's the module that they I got asked if they could share that with other future students as an exemplar, so it was interesting that the hardest module I found was actually probably the one that came out the best. But again, I learned so much from that, I learned so much all the time. You just must unlock all these unexpected bonuses all the way through, and I certainly do my job better because of it. There's no question about that.

**MC:** And so, thinking about that then **how have you been applying your learning to your practice?**

**SH:** I think it gives you more confidence, you've got obviously a certificate behind you, so the MSc status does carry some weight and within the team again obviously the consultant team was supporting me through that and we're aware what I was doing. So again, I think that gave me more respect within the team and I think just a lot of the reflection and thinking things through managing a service that helped as well. One of the modules I had to do was about a service improvement, I think it was the advanced specialist practice module, that gives you a structure on how to project, manage and how to produce something when you're moving things forward, you've got you've got a better understanding of the structures and what what's required before you start going on these processes.

**MC:** So, you'd say that probably the service that you deliver now with improved from when you first started your MSc.

**SH:** Oh, absolutely when I started I had very little project management skills and things like that, and I think it's just understanding structures and processes better and I'm having the confidence to speak up more.

**MC:** So, the final question is around what would your advice be to others in a similar position? But I guess I just want to make that a bit of a twofold question. **What would you say to a newly qualified graduate now, and what would you say to somebody in your position is at the same thing, or is it something a little bit different?**

**SH:** For the newly qualified, I think there's lots of enthusiasm. They have just done their dissertation, you know, and they're coming to a department, and they find nothing much going on for the band 5 radiographer. Hopefully this will change over time. So, I think it's about, you know, keep going you need to find somebody in the department for newly qualified who can mentor them, and I'm not talk about the formal mentoring you get. You know when you first come into a new job where you got somebody assigned to you and that sort of thing, it's finding someone that is a bit more experienced that you can talk to and who's not your line manager because then there's no threat of anything.

**MC:** I guess like a critical friend, role model someone you look up to.

**SH:** That's right, someone who has done the journey before you? Who can encourage? And as I say, no learning is a waste of time. Also importance of writing it up afterwards, you've got other skills that you can offer other people, I think one of the things that came through my MSc in particular was some of the stuff that the younger students found hard I found a lot easier and that was because I'd

already developed good time management skills, good planning skills my preacher training came in really handy because I structure a sermon. So I think in many ways, although a lot of people these days get their MSc straight away after qualifying you should be doing something later on as well because you change, you learn and it's not just about what you learnt in your workplace, it's also what you experience in life generally that you haven't done when you're younger and that shapes you and really helps support a successful career.

For anyone interested in learning more about the MSc Advanced Clinical Practice Radiotherapy and Oncology or other post graduate modules and programmes at Sheffield Hallam University, please contact Melanie Clarkson [m.clarkson@shu.a.cuk](mailto:m.clarkson@shu.a.cuk) or for programme enquires visit [https://www.shu.ac.uk/courses/radiotherapy-and-oncology?page=0&perPage=10&query=&yearOfEntry=2024%2F25&coursetype\[0\]=7d244b45e39b4ca2bd0356632ae26bc8](https://www.shu.ac.uk/courses/radiotherapy-and-oncology?page=0&perPage=10&query=&yearOfEntry=2024%2F25&coursetype[0]=7d244b45e39b4ca2bd0356632ae26bc8) or for modular study visit <https://www.shu.ac.uk/study-here/options/health-and-social-care/short-courses-and-modules>

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