

Reflections: an interview with Hilary Jones

Former Dean (2008-2014), Faculty of Health Sciences, Staffordshire University, UK

Q1: What brought you into the academic life?

HJ: Well, I had been working in nursing for a number of years and decided that I would like to get into teaching. I think it's when you get into a profession that you really enjoy working in and would like to pass on your knowledge and skills that you start thinking about teaching and education. And that took me into nurse education, as a tutor, which took me into studying for a degree part time, whilst I was working as a nurse tutor, ultimately, to studying for a Masters, also part-time. And in the mid-nineties all nursing and midwifery education which had been based in colleges, linked to the NHS and linked to hospitals, all of that education moved into universities. So, in 1995 what was then the Shropshire and Staffordshire college of Nursing and Midwifery, which had a headquarters in Telford and premises in Stafford and Shrewsbury moved into Staffordshire University and that was the point at which, I became employed as an academic at that stage as a principal lecturer. So, in many ways I don't actually regard myself as a traditional academic, I think because of that history and that background.

I think it's really important that students are taught by people who have got the experience of practice, I do also think that research and the evidence-base underpinning teaching is critical and that's become much more of a focus in nursing. But also, in all the other professions and - although my background is nursing - one of the things I have really enjoyed about this job is that it's a multi-professional faculty and that there are a whole range of different groups and professions and disciplines within the faculty. I think that's been a really good mix, a challenge at times, but a really good mix as well.

Q2: Did you regret leaving hands-on nursing?

HJ: It was a choice I made, to go into teaching, I, enjoyed being a ward sister, I was a ward sister on a very busy medical admissions ward in Manchester Royal Infirmary and I think you do miss the patient contact, but the student contact replaces that and I think the pace and the pressures are different. So, no I don't regret it, it was a definite choice, but it is quite different and I think, even now I do miss the patient contact in a way.

Q3: From all your achievements what are you most proud of?

HJ: Yeah, I think that's quite a difficult one, perhaps one you should ask other people about, rather than me, but, I think (hesitation), I find this really difficult to answer, I think there are lots of things that have gone on during the period that I've been Dean and we've been restructured a couple of times during that period. One of the things that I'm very committed to is to try to ensure that our staff are dealt with fairly appropriately in that kind of situation, and I'm very committed to that, I'm very pleased to have had a very cohesive, faculty management team during the period that I've been Dean and we've had a really good team effort, I think. I am also quite proud of developing more diversity of provision in the faculty and also about maintaining stability in the faculty when the Mid Staffs crisis was having a significant impact locally. But, also I think ultimately it's about our students and their success and their achievements and it's really great to see them at graduation. I love graduation days that we've had and seeing the students and their families. And I think for many of our students they are the first generation of their family who have been to university for an initial undergraduate qualification. So, I think it's really good to see their success and their pleasure in that.

Q4: What is your vision for the faculty, where would you like to see it, for example, in the next five years?

HJ: I still think the faculty's got great potential for further growth and development. I'd particularly like to see the research centres, and particularly the new ones with a focus on, social work, nursing and midwifery, I'd really like to see growth and development there and that they be a real force for good in the future. I think the whole of the work of the faculty is focused around developing people and around developing practice and about developing services, which are all for the public good, whether that be in Social work, whether that be in coaching and physical activity for young children, whatever that be and I would like see it, have even a stronger reputation, being a real force, a positive force around health and wellbeing. We've waited a long time for refurbishment at Shrewsbury, so, I would really like to come back and see a refurbished building. But I think it is about further growth, partnership with local organisations delivering what employers want and need for their staff and their services. In many ways I would love to see the faculty on one main site, it feels like it's very distributed and I'm not sure that could happen, ultimately it is about what employers would want, but if we had some better technology around video conferencing, Skype, and that kind of thing, I think that would really help. So, I think further growth and development in CPD, and we do need to internationalise our work, much more than we've been able to do so far. So, there's lots of potential still I think and I'm sure Nigel and the whole faculty team will move forward very positively.

Q5: What are you planning now that you're leaving us? Are you going to keep in touch?

HJ: Well, yes I am hoping that I will be able to keep in touch and there may be some small ways in which I can contribute. I'm currently undertaking a coaching course with the Institute of Leadership and Management through Staffordshire University. So, I'm coaching a small number of people in the University and would like to be able to carry on with that in the future. I'm also involved in some writing for publication with Jim Radcliffe and others, which hopefully will come to fruition in the autumn, so again that will be some contact for a little while and then I'm just going to see what emerges. I'm going to take a little time out, a bit of time for rest and relaxation. I think then over the autumn start to think about in what other ways I could contribute here or elsewhere. So, yes, I do hope to keep in touch, I hope people will keep in touch with me as well.

Q6: Are you planning on travelling?

HJ: Yes, I've got a couple of things lined up in the Autumn, and I would like to go back and visit friends in New Zealand early in 2015, and be able to go for perhaps a month, a little bit longer than I felt I could do whilst I've been in the Dean's role, so, yes, but I like being at home as well as being away. There are lots of things that I feel I've put on hold at home that I want to be able to pick up, deal with in the future, so, some plans but, some flexibility still to see what emerges.

Q7: Final question, what are you going to miss the most?

HJ: I think it inevitably has to be the people that I work with, and that I have regular contact with lots of people, both within the University and outside. So, I think it will be the people, as the main thing and I suppose the cut and thrust of life within the University, I will miss as well. I think it's going to be quite a big adjustment, but, I am confident that this is the right decision for me and the faculty at this time and it's been really good to have been

able to give more than twelve months' notice and to have Nigel acting as a Deputy Dean and seeing him get the post as well, I think that's an example of good succession planning, which it would be good to see more of in the University.