A team of nursing students has won a prestigious RCNi award for organising a conference aimed at reducing health inequalities affecting people with learning disabilities. The Learning Disability Awareness Network (LDAN) team was crowned winner of the RCNi Andrew Parker Student Nurse award 2016 at a ceremony held at London’s Westminster Park Plaza on May 6.

Judge Paul Jebb, experience of care professional lead at NHS England, says: ‘Caring for people with a learning disability can be challenging, if not a little scary, if the nursing team has never cared for someone with additional needs before.

‘The LDAN delivered education to help other nursing students understand the care needs of people with a learning disability, and gave them tools to use throughout their career to ensure quality care.’

The team, from the University of the West of Scotland and Edinburgh Napier University, and all studying different fields of nursing, set up the conference.
to empower nursing students to reflect on their practice and improve care for their patients with learning disabilities.

Co-team lead Steven Young says: ‘We recognised that people with learning disabilities and their carers can, at times, receive care that does not meet their needs. This group has some of the poorest health in Scotland and we felt passionately that there should be no inequalities in accessing health care.

Disadvantaged
‘We had experienced situations where people with learning disabilities were disadvantaged when accessing mainstream health services,’ he adds.

‘These situations were avoidable. Communication breakdown, diagnostic overshadowing, lack of confidence and a shortage of time were common themes.

‘We saw an opportunity to highlight these issues to first-year students from across Scotland and all fields of practice. As a group, we devised the LDAN.’

The team helped raise awareness of the needs of people with learning disabilities and their families by enabling nursing students to hear about what matters to them. The conference also provided a valuable opportunity for nursing and midwifery students from across the country to network.

Co-team lead Nicola Ozatalay says the group had a clear vision from the beginning. ‘We anticipated that participation in the conference would help the first-year nursing and midwifery students achieve their Nursing and Midwifery Council learning outcomes for alternative fields of practice.

‘We used an approach that was interactive and stimulating for the students. It also encouraged us, as third-year students, to develop our management, organisational and communication skills.’

Working with NHS Education for Scotland, the group started planning the conference – called Building Momentum – around the themes of communication and service-user involvement (see box right). The programme was created by sourcing organisations and experts to share their knowledge and skills.

‘It was not until we started to research the subject that we realised the scale of what we had undertaken,’ says Mr Young. ‘We had invited 150 students from all universities in Scotland and were feeling the pressure.’

FAST FACT
95.3% of respondents felt the organisers had achieved their event aims

Communication
One of the biggest challenges the team faced was finding a communication channel that worked for everyone in the team.

‘Some lived on the west coast, while others were on the east, and we attended different universities – so it was imperative we found a system that was effective and streamlined,’ says Ms Ozatalay.

The team used Facebook to offer each other support and guidance, and Evernote for collecting ideas and storing contacts, meeting minutes and timetables. When necessary, meetings were held via Skype.

ʻWe have relished the opportunity to share this learning with students across Scotlandʻ
Steven Young
Feedback in the form of an online survey showed that 95.3% of respondents felt the organisers had achieved their event aims, and third-year student attendees from each university ran follow-up events for their first-years.

So what are the network’s plans for the future? Ms Ozatalay says the team wanted to ensure the network was sustainable from the start, with representatives from successive cohorts taking on the baton of organising and running events, either nationally or within their own university.

‘At a follow-up presentation, the learning disability leads from ten universities confirmed they were keen to carry the vision forward,’ adds Ms Ozatalay.

‘Stirling University and Robert Gordon University have already incorporated the conference into their new undergraduate nursing curriculum.’

Mr Young adds that calling the event Building Momentum was no accident. ‘Our vision is to roll out this model to each university in the country. We believe that this will ultimately improve health outcomes for people with a learning disability,’ he says.

The team has gained much from this project that will improve their own nursing practice. ‘While developing our organisational and management skills, we have also learned a tremendous amount about learning disabilities and access to health care,’ says Mr Young.

Opportunity

‘We have had an opportunity to reflect on how our own practice can affect person-centred outcomes for vulnerable adults, and have relished the opportunity to share this learning with students across Scotland. ‘Most importantly, our practice surrounding people with learning difficulties is forever changed, and we will now fight to eradicate the barriers they face.’

Elaine Cole is managing editor, Nursing Standard

Top tips: organising a successful conference

**Do**

- **Maintain clear communication** Use social media and email, swap numbers and share files
- **Set clear objectives** Ensure everyone is pulling in the same direction
- **Get to know your colleagues** If you are friendly, it makes the process more enjoyable
- **Set boundaries** Be clear about what you can and cannot do
- **Keep to a budget and nominate a finance manager** Ask large organisations, such as the RCN and Unison, to sponsor you. Sell stall locations to make extra money
- **Organise the basics as early as possible** Set your timetable and arrange your venue so you can envisage what your event will look like
- **Set fortnightly meetings** Whether they are face-to-face or via Skype, ensure you are all kept up to date
- **Look out for each other** If a member of your team is struggling, offer to help
- **Make your event interactive** This will help keep energy levels high and ensure delegates are engaged
- **Aim high** Invite your university dean, MP, managers and specialists. It will help generate interest in your event

- **Keep everyone in the loop** Make sure your lecturers are kept informed of important dates. If you miss classes you may have to catch up
- **Get feedback** This will help you learn and improve for the future

**Don’t**

- **Lose focus** Life can get in the way so make sure you are up to date and can pick up where you left off
- **Have passengers** If someone in your team is not pulling their weight, discuss any issues and offer them the opportunity to pull out if they can’t make the commitment
- **Take a ‘yes’ as a guarantee** People may agree to attend your event then not turn up. Involve your university to get speakers booked officially if possible
- **Be afraid to ask** As a student you are in a privileged position – people expect you to ask questions
- **Take on too much** You will have placements and coursework to complete. Make sure you only give as much time as you can allow
- **Forget to look after yourself** Organising an event is stressful – take time out so you can stay motivated

Don’t lose focus. Life can get in the way so make sure you are up to date and can pick up where you left off. Have passengers. If someone in your team is not pulling their weight, discuss any issues and offer them the opportunity to pull out if they can’t make the commitment. Take a ‘yes’ as a guarantee. People may agree to attend your event then not turn up. Involve your university to get speakers booked officially if possible. Be afraid to ask. As a student you are in a privileged position – people expect you to ask questions. Take on too much. You will have placements and coursework to complete. Make sure you only give as much time as you can allow. Forget to look after yourself. Organising an event is stressful – take time out so you can stay motivated.