

An opportunity to meet professionals who live thousands of miles apart and in different cultures but who share a near-devotion to quality management. Here, Kate Daniell talks to three strategic quality management students about their experiences.

Those who work in laboratories know attention to detail is everything and, in extreme cases, can mean the difference between life and death. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, to find laboratory-based scientists at every level and across every discipline turning to quality management education, particularly if they hope to gain promotion to senior roles.

Quality management in pathology has increasingly drawn attention from inside and outside the world of laboratory medicine. Experts in quality management at the University of Portsmouth's Business School who teach the MSc Strategic Quality Management course are seeing a steady stream of applicants from hospital and private medical laboratories.

Andrea Foley is a senior lecturer in operations and systems management at Portsmouth, and she is course leader. "There are big changes taking place in laboratories concerning quality standards, with external accreditation and quality management very much in the forefront of people's minds. We regularly receive applications from laboratory scientists with responsibility for quality, and here at Portsmouth we have always recruited folk from the medical field," she said. Medical laboratories are now required to make the transition from accreditation to Clinical Pathology Accreditation (CPA) standards to those of ISO 15189. Understanding the big picture about quality management and the role it plays at the strategic level in achieving excellence will add value to ISO 15189. The distance-learning option on the Portsmouth course means that students from all around the world, from small villages to major cities, can and do study online.

WEDZERAI MAKAYA: ZIMBABWE

Wedzerai Makaya is from Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city. She is the quality manager at Zimbabwe's Central Veterinary Laboratory, where she has worked in laboratory diagnostics for 12 years.

Wedzerai said: "I had undertaken several short courses on quality systems but was motivated to undertake the MSc in Strategic Quality Management to gain more knowledge on good business practices to improve my decision-making capabilities and understand strategic management. I heard about the Portsmouth course from a colleague and I opted to enrol because it's possible to study online. As a mother of five and married, I did not want to leave my family to go away to study. The online option also provides flexibility as you can devise your own study

timetable that accommodates work and family.

"The course gave me an opportunity to learn more about business systems, especially the certification standards. Having a discussion forum makes online study highly interactive and helps students seek advice both from colleagues and tutors. The course revealed to me the progression of quality systems, from quality management system to total quality management, and, ultimately, business excellence. I became aware of the Chartered Quality Institute (CQI) while studying at Portsmouth and am planning on becoming a member on completion of my studies.

"I have already implemented some of what I have learned. This year, the laboratory will participate in Zimbabwe's Quality Awards because of the benefits of participating in quality awards that I learned during my studies. I have been doing part-time consultancy but I'm now more confident to move to full-time consultancy, mostly due to a greater understanding of the increased scope of management system standards.

"The most difficult part of the study is the need for reliable internet connectivity and the need to balance time across study, work



University of Portsmouth Business School.

Wedzerai Makaya (left), from Zimbabwe, is quality manager at the country's Central Veterinary Laboratory. Gift Sibanda (right), from St Helena, is a microbiologist and quality manager on the island.

and family. Students also need to have good ICT skills to access and manage study material quickly."

GIFT SIBANDA: ST HELENA

St Helena is Britain's smallest territory and one of the most isolated settlements anywhere in the world. Lying in the South Atlantic, the island has a population of a just over 4000. Although it does have internet, the bandwidth for the entire territory is less than that of most households in the UK. Here, like everywhere else, quality management is of huge importance.

Gift Sibanda is a microbiologist and quality manager on the island. He said: "My major objective in signing up for the distance-learning course at Portsmouth was to one day be able to take up a higher-level role, such as quality director, and it means I will be eligible to apply for associate and practitioner membership of the CQI or other equivalent organisations. My other objective is to set up a consultancy company to assist people in setting up quality management systems within their organisations.

"I really wanted to increase my knowledge beyond ISO 17025 accreditation and ISO 9001 certification and expand my professional horizons. The Portsmouth course was more affordable than other similar courses, and the fact that you could do it over a shorter but manageable timescale than the more usual three-year course duration I'd seen elsewhere was an attractive option.

"The aspects I am enjoying most include access to online resources such as research, academic and professional material (eg CQI and ISO websites). Learning new concepts such as total quality management as well as other quality systems has also been very helpful. The things I have learned have already proved useful and I have been able to apply some of my learning to my day-to-day work. Two of my assignments were based on my work and, as a result, my work processes have improved significantly."

SANDIP KOONER: LONDON

Sandip Kooner is a biomedical scientist working in cytology at South West London Pathology, based at St George's Hospital. She is soon to start studying for her MSc in Strategic Quality Management at Portsmouth and she chose the course partly because it offers a lot of flexibility.

Sandip said: "It's important that I can keep up to date in the laboratory so to have the option of distance learning was one of the major selling points. I was also especially impressed at how much difference the Portsmouth course made to the careers of some Hewlett Packard employees and the positive impact they were able to make to the company."

She was motivated to sign up for the course after becoming more involved in undertaking audits and other quality management work as a result of a recent merger of laboratories. She felt it was important to have a firm grasp of what good quality management involved and thinks the course will help her project manage the systems which help ensure the smooth running of the department, including the best ways of disseminating information at management and departmental meetings.

"I've recently been selected to represent my department at staff engagement meetings where I liaise with work colleagues and feedback any issues they have about the work environment. The goal is to ensure that staff morale is kept high post-merger. Among other things, this course will help me to understand how to communicate concerns appropriately between my colleagues and senior management."

She said that since the mergers of laboratories in south-west London, the need for exceptional quality management systems within pathology had never been more important.

"I work as part of a team trying to ensure quality controls are upheld," she said. "Together, we take part in external quality assessment (EQA) and implement quality

improvements. Since I joined St George's Hospital, cytology has tripled in size and this has impacted my workload. I have been working with the quality manager to maintain and put into practice systems to ensure the service we provide is of the highest quality.

"As well as undertaking my laboratory duties, I also review protocols, test document management systems, report incidents and carry out clinical audits, highlighting non-compliance issues and implementing quality improvements. I also take part in twice-yearly external quality assessments.

"In order to fulfil my role as deputy to the quality manager, it is important that I gain a deeper understanding of quality tools and techniques so I am able to provide a first-class service. I also need to understand the role of the quality manager within a large and complex modern organisation in order to progress to management."

Sandip begins studying via distance learning this year and is under no illusions that combining full-time work with studying at MSc level will be anything other than challenging at times. "As committed as I am to my career and improving and maintaining successful quality management systems, I'm aware it can be daunting to study on a distance-learning course while working full-time," she said. "When I began my career in the NHS I studied for a diploma in cervical screening while working full-time and I found then that I was good at working under pressure and to strict deadlines. I know it is also important to maintain some balance, too, so I run and do yoga in my spare time, which helps a lot."

Kate Daniell (kate.daniell@port.ac.uk) is senior press and PR officer at the University of Portsmouth. To find out more about the MSc Strategic Quality Management course at Portsmouth Business School, visit www.port.ac.uk/sqmdl for the distance learning course or, for the on-campus course, visit www.port.ac.uk/sqm