



**Angelina Holman,** 29, from Exeter, made her ambition a reality when she graduated with a first class honours degree in dental hygiene and therapy.

**‘The more you put in,  
the more you get out’**

**W**hen I left school I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I had reasonable GCSE grades so I went on to do A-levels at a local college, but without a clear goal in mind I didn't have the motivation to complete them. With no real focus as to what I wanted to do instead, I saw a trainee dental nurse position advertised. I applied and was very happy to be offered the job.

Working as a dental nurse appealed to me because I had always loved visiting the dentist as a child and had memories of everyone in the practice being friendly and happy.

I discovered that dental nursing involved a lot of juggling, with many things to think about at once – always being prepared for every eventuality and keeping a calm exterior whatever might be going on behind the scenes. I also found that dental nursing is what you make it: the more you put in, the more you get out.

I worked in two different practices as a dental nurse. Both practices offered different experiences and I learned a lot from both. I have returned to both practices since qualifying as a hygienist and enjoy my time at both – surprisingly it isn't strange at all and everyone has been very supportive.

I had always wanted to train as a hygienist/therapist since opening my Levison's dental nursing textbook and reading all of the career options listed at the front. However, it took me a bit longer than I imagined getting there just because I was enjoying working as a dental nurse.

Eventually I decided I wanted to get more involved which is when I undertook the Certificate in Oral Health Education. After completing the certificate I decided I really wanted to study to become a hygienist and a therapist.

I had started to redo my A-levels at an evening class but this was proving to be a slow process. I then discovered that the University of Portsmouth ran a Foundation in Science and

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Dental Therapy course which was specifically designed for dental nurses with experience who wanted to gain entry onto the degree course at the university. Only eight places were available and entry was by interview. All eight of us who were chosen were really keen and determined to become dental hygienists/therapists.

The foundation course was part-time and took place one day a week for six months. During this time I continued to work and the practice kindly allowed me time off to attend. It was hard work because I worked full-time and travelled up to Portsmouth every Wednesday night, arriving late at night to stay in a hotel then returning to Exeter on Thursday night then to go back to work on the Friday.

The course helped prepare us for the degree and there were a number of final assessments that we had to pass in order to gain entry onto the degree programme. We had fantastic tutors who really prepared us for the level of work we would need to become accustomed to.

Once I started the degree course, which was full-time, I had to move to Portsmouth. I lived with good friends that I had made on the foundation course throughout the three years.

Although the foundation course had prepared us well, there were quite a few essays to write and I was surprised at how out of practice I was, despite having continued in education at evening classes and completing the Certificate in Oral Health Education – which was also a lot of hard work.

There was a good balance of theory and practical work on the degree course right from the start, although initially all of the practical work was carried out on phantom heads, of

course. The amount of clinical time spent treating patients increased as we progressed through the course which helped prepare us for life in the real world. We also had a number of placement opportunities which gave us experience of working in different environments.

All eight of us on the foundation course were from similar backgrounds as it was specifically designed for dental nurses with experience and enthusiasm but not necessarily formal academic qualifications. As a result we bonded very quickly. When we started the degree course, however, there was a much more diverse mixture of backgrounds among the students.

I graduated with a first class BSc honours degree in Dental Hygiene and Dental Therapy this year. I was so pleased to have passed and so proud of everyone in our class. I couldn't have done it without the support of my fellow students, family, friends and former colleagues

and of course all the staff at the university.

*Editor's note: As well as completing her degree with flying colours, Angelina received the Dame Margaret Seward prize as the most outstanding student and the Shield for top marks in her final clinical exam, which will remain on display at the Dental Academy, University of Portsmouth.*

Winning the Dame Margaret Seward prize was a huge honour and completely unexpected. I was definitely in shock. It was lovely to meet Dame Margaret; we had a nice conversation on the day and have spoken since as kindly she has been putting in a few good words for me to help me find work!

Since qualifying I have gradually been filling up my working week. It has definitely been more difficult to find work than I thought it would be, but I am very lucky to have had an enormous amount of help and support from colleagues I have worked with in the past.

I am enjoying having more free time since graduating and am gradually catching up with all the people that I didn't get to see very often while I was away studying. I am looking forward to getting back into my old hobbies as well and discovering some new ones!

I would absolutely recommend the path that I took to other ambitious dental nurses. I met a lovely group of people and made new friends. We had very knowledgeable, approachable and supportive tutors and all of the staff worked so hard to get us to where we are now. I think it's a shame that more colleges don't offer the foundation course as I think it offers a fantastic opportunity for dental nurses like me.



Dentist Margaret Seward with Angelina