expected to develop an action plan to take into the work environment and share with managers. This was designed to encourage the transfer of learning into practice.

**PREPARATION OF ONLINE MODERATORS**

Given that the programme is highly dependent on the support of online moderators, it is essential that moderators are trained and supported. In 2007-08 the Marie Curie online learning developments team designed and started delivering an inhouse training programme for moderators. Participants in this fully online programme were required to undertake two to three hours of study per week for eight weeks.

**PARTICIPANT PROFILE**

Nurses who registered for the first wave of the communication skills programme were recruited from across the Marie Curie Cancer Care workforce. Participants included registered nurses and healthcare assistants from the Marie Curie nursing and hospice services.

A total of 30 staff participated in the first two pilots. Of the three staff who withdrew, two cited personal reasons and one had intermittent IT problems.

The prerequisites for enrolling on the programme included:
- A minimum of six months’ employment with Marie Curie; this was to ensure a level of experience to refer and relate to practice;
- Access to a computer and basic computer skills;
- Flexibility to commit up to two hours per week to complete weekly activities and participate in discussion forums.

It was agreed initially that the optimum group size for this pilot was between 12 and 15. This ensured that an appropriate number of nurses were able to share their thoughts and insights online, accommodating the potential for attrition due to personal or technical reasons.

The recruitment process involved nursing and hospice service managers across the organisation, as they were best placed to identify and nominate members of nursing staff who met the selection criteria and were willing to take part in the pilot.

**EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAMME**

The evaluation methods used were:
- Online self assessment questionnaire of confidence before and after the course;
- Online post course candidate evaluation;
- Online post course moderator evaluation.

**Assessing confidence before and after the course**

The self assessment questionnaire before the start of the course required participants to reflect on their confidence in relation to managing the assessment process. This questionnaire was a modification of the questionnaire devised by Wilkinson et al (2008, 2003) to assess nurses’ confidence as part of Marie Curie’s advanced communication skills training.

Nurses were asked to score their level of confidence in seven aspects of the patient/carer assessment process on a scale from one to 10 (with one being least confident and 10 being very confident). This activity had to be completed during the first week of the programme. The participants were asked to complete the same questionnaire at the end of the six week course.

Comparison was then made between the group average before and after the course (Fig 1). Although no statistical analysis has been conducted on these scores, it was evident that the participants’ confidence increased in all areas. The increase in confidence was greatest in two aspects:
- Explaining the assessment process to the patient/carer: an increase from 6.1 to 8.47;
- Summarising the assessment interview and discussing an action plan with the patient/carer: an increase from 6.35 to 8.5.

**Course evaluation – the learners’ perspective**

At the end of the course participants were asked to complete a series of questions online, based on an internally developed semi structured questionnaire. Overall, 57% of participants evaluated the course as excellent; 43% rated the course as good. In relation to online discussion with other learners, 60% strongly agreed and 37% agreed that this had helped them to develop new insights about this topic. Interestingly, 100% of the participants stated they would take part in online learning again.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer an exhaustive review of nurses’ evaluation comments, but the following quotes highlight some benefits of this approach:
- “Reading other nurses’ views and experiences in the online discussions is helpful. The course makes you reflect on your own practice, highlighting things you maybe didn’t think about before.”
- “Communicating with colleagues around the country and getting views from different perspectives [was very useful].”
- “I am much more aware of my