

JULY 2011

SCIE report 42

REVIEW JULY 2014

# **‘We are more than our story’: service user and carer participation in social work education**



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First published in Great Britain in July 2011  
by the Social Care Institute for Excellence

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**‘We are more than our story’:  
service user and carer  
participation in  
social work education**

June Sadd

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## Foreword

The idea for a statement about the importance of service user and carer involvement in social work education was originally raised by the Education Working Group of the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB). This report was commissioned by SCIE and developed by service users and carers to provide evidence for the strong assertion of the importance and value of sustaining and improving such involvement in the selection, teaching and assessment of student social workers, and in the design and evaluation of social work qualifying programmes. These benefits have been resoundingly endorsed by student focus groups commenting on the SWRB One Year On proposals. The statement will be referenced in the final proposals for social work education reforms and contribute to guidance on best practice to be held by The College of Social Work.

**Hilary Tompsett and Julia Hassall, Co-chairs of the Education Working Group**

## Introduction

This report draws on the views of service users and carers from the Social Work Education Participation (SWEP) website steering group and members of the General Social Care Council (GSCC) Visitors group who inspect social work programmes with GSCC inspectors. Members of both groups attended a focus group meeting on 28 January 2011. The groups were facilitated by June Sadd and Kay Malko who have extensive experience of involvement in social work programmes. The focus groups were jointly funded by SCIE and GSCC.

## Key messages

- Service user and carer involvement in social work education is widely perceived to enhance teaching and learning and to have a wide range of benefits.
- No other profession can claim to have made such a systematic effort to ensure participation in all aspects of professional education.
- There are some excellent examples of good practice but overall implementation is patchy and under resourced.
- As the social work education landscape changes, service user and carer involvement is under threat. It is vital to ensure that resources and support continue.
- There is an urgent need to fund evaluative research into the outcomes of user and carer involvement in social work education.

## Policy background

Before 2003, the Diploma in Social Work was the recognised qualification for social workers and service users were involved informally in different aspects of programmes run by higher education institutions (HEIs), with each individual HEI deciding their own individual approach.

In 2003, what was then called the 'new' degree became the social work qualification. The new approach was based on completion of a three year qualifying programme or a two year programme at masters level.

'Just as service users and carers have a say in the way their services are delivered I want to see them more actively engaged in the training of social workers too. Our requirements stipulate that service users and carers should be actively engaged in the development, design and delivery of the degree qualification. We need to ensure that service users and carers are properly reimbursed for their involvement in the degree.'

(Health Minister Jacqui Smith, Social Work Steps Forward National Conference, 12 May 12th 2003)

There was also a new approach to service user and carer involvement. The new national guidelines for the social work degree (Requirements for Social Work Training, Department of Health, 2002) made service user and carer involvement mandatory in all areas of the programme.

These guidelines meant that involvement became subject to the same scrutiny as the other requirements which have to meet the GSCC's approval and re-approval processes for degree programmes. The importance of involvement was heightened through this lever as it became a 'must do' for approval or re-approval of a course.

This was supported by funding allocated by the Department of Health (DH) to the HEIs to support the involvement of service users. While this funding has been valuable it has never been sufficient for HEIs to involve service users effectively in all aspects of their social work degree programmes. Some HEIs added to the funding as involvement developed and have achieved more, but others have not. This funding was initially for one year with the expectation that the HEIs would allocate money for involvement in subsequent years. However the grant for service user and carer involvement continues to this day although the level of funding has only marginally increased from when it was first introduced. In 2003 the requirement was to involve service users, although this has now changed to include carers.

## Requirements from the Department of Health 2002

### Entry requirements

All providers must ensure that representatives of stakeholders, particularly service users and employers, are involved in the selection process.

### Teaching, learning and assessment requirements

All providers must ensure that all students undergo assessed preparation for direct practice to ensure their safety to undertake practice learning in a service delivery setting. This preparation must include the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the experience of service users.

A grid was displayed in this DH document which shows that the only two groups of stakeholders required to be involved in all aspects of the Degree were the HEIs and service users.

### Roles of stakeholders in programme design and delivery

Roles								
Stakeholders	Student selection	Assessment of students	Provision of placement	Design of degree	Teaching and learning provision	Learning Agreement	Quality Assurance	Preparation for practice learning
Employers	√	-	√	√	√	-	√	√
HEIS	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Students	-	-	-	√	√	√	√	-
Service users	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Practice assessors	√	√	-	√	√	√	√	√
External Examiners	-	√	-	√	-	√	√	√
GSCC	-	-	-	√	-	-	√	-

Some HEIs incorporated this grid into the Hub and Spoke Model devised by the author (see below).

## The current position

In 2010, the Social Work Task Force made a range of recommendations for the improvement of social work and the social work profession in England. The Social Work Reform Board is implementing these now. The changes being made to social work education and training include a Professional Capabilities Framework for social work students pre-qualifying, and ongoing training and professional development of qualified social workers throughout their career.

The participation opportunities for service users and carers are enhanced and implicit in these changes. However, there are threats to participation as there will no longer be a formal requirement for their involvement when the GSCC – the current regulatory body – ceases to exist in 2012 and there is the possible loss of resources to support involvement.

It is hoped that the Health Professions Council will recognise the value of service user and carer participation and that they will maintain some form of requirement for service user and carer involvement in social work education within their 'light touch' approach to regulation.

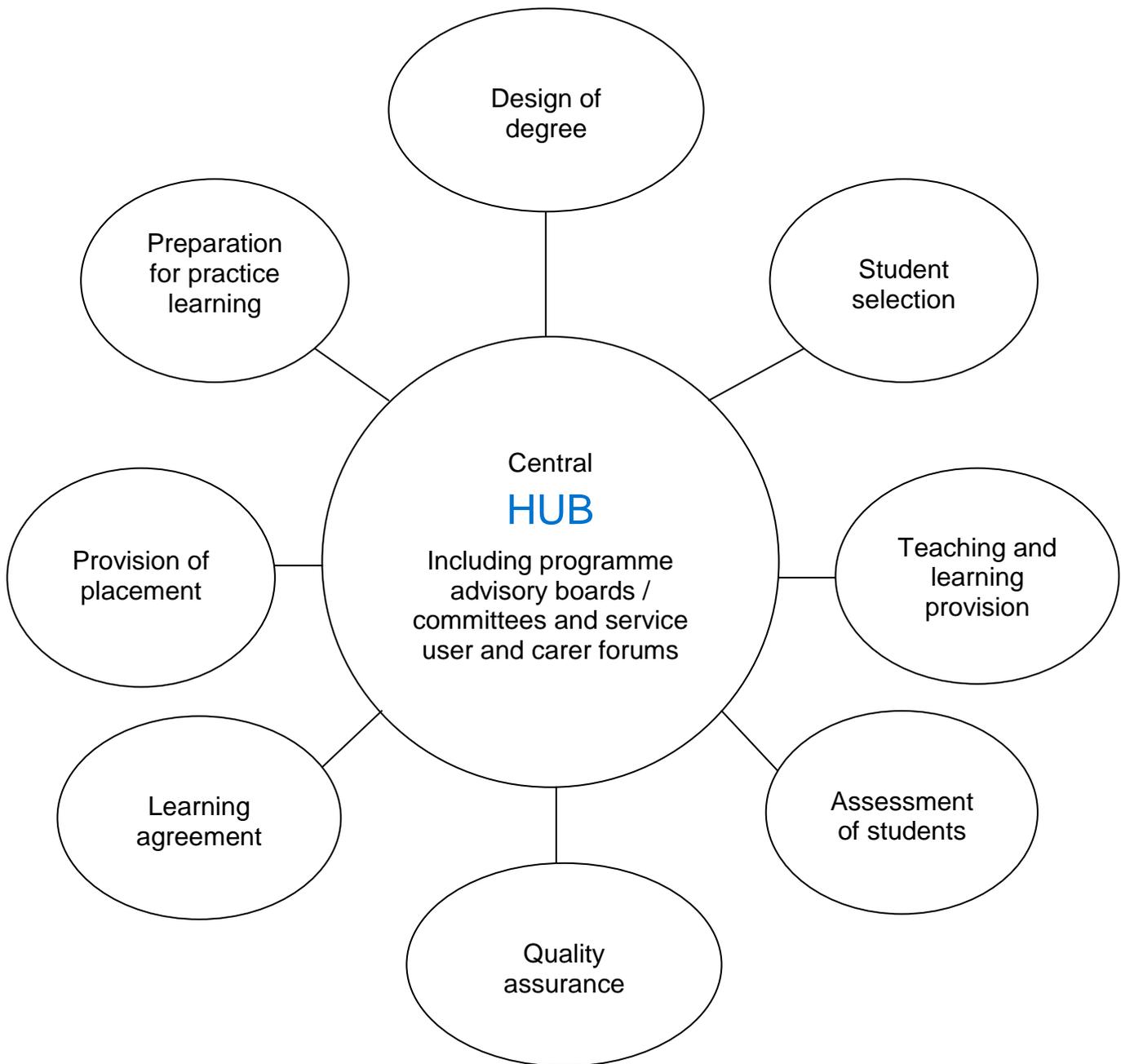
The future of the DH funding for involvement is unclear. There are plans for it to be reviewed and there is an expectation that this will be a task for the College of Social Work when it is properly in place. There are concerns that if the grant is no longer available, participation will wither as HEIs are unlikely to fund it from within their own resources. Service users and carers believe the grant is insufficient now and are very concerned about the future.

## How service users and carers are involved social work education

Service users and carers are participating to a greater or lesser degree in all the areas of social work education shown in the diagram below. The diagram is based on a hub and spoke model for service user and carer involvement that incorporates the eight areas of involvement defined. (*Requirements for Social Work Training*, Department of Health, 2002).

**Hub and Spoke Model for service user and carer involvement  
incorporating the eight areas of involvement defined**

*(Requirements for social work training, Department of Health 2002)*



The most developed areas of participation are:

- interviewing and selection
- teaching and learning provision
- assessment of students
- preparation for practice learning

The least developed areas of participation are:

- design of the Programme
- placement settings
- learning agreements
- quality assurance

## Student selection

Service user and carer participation in interviewing and selection can be through interviews with individual applicants and/or through observing group interview discussions. Participation in interviews with individual applicants is often done as a member of a panel with an academic and/or social care practitioner or provider.

## Teaching and learning provision

Participation by service users and carers in teaching varies.

Giving details of personal experiences or stories/case studies remains the focus for much involvement, as indicated by this example:

'... Last time we used personal stories as a way of encouraging students to consider their own identities as service users and potential service providers and the session went really well – excellent feedback'.

At other times, teaching opportunities are used to discuss models and theoretical perspectives such as the social model, empowerment and inclusion. However, both approaches can be usefully combined with stories used to illustrate the social policy context.

The personalisation agenda is a good example of an area in which the expertise of service users and carers comes into its own. They also bring a valuable perspective to the area of safeguarding when discussing with students the risks and rights debate, and choice and control.

There was particular discussion about the role of personal stories in teaching. The group was concerned that while such personal stories do have a place in conveying the lived experience of service users and carers, involvement should go beyond this. Videos were seen as a tool to be used with, not instead of, the direct involvement of service users and carers.

## Assessment of students

Service users and carers assess and moderate students' portfolios through the initial assessment of fitness to practice, and through assessing individual and group presentations.

## Preparation for practice learning

Some service users and carers assess students' readiness and fitness to practice before they go into placement settings. Some are involved in the readiness to practice module, delivering presentations to students and assessing students' preparation for practice presentations; there has also been involvement in the development of an online resource to prepare students for practice.

'I have talked to students about emotion and social work as part of preparation for practice – i.e. how to look after themselves and not project their own problems onto service users and clients.'

## Provision of placement and learning agreement

Service user and carer involvement in placement settings is being developed but it is still at a very early stage.

There are a few placement settings where the users of that service are getting involved in the learning agreement and reviews of the students and in the teaching, assessment and, occasionally, supervision. However, redressing the power balance will take time to develop beyond the usual mechanistic approach of getting feedback, usually after an observation.

The focus group argued that placements in third sector and service user organisations were particularly beneficial. Focus group participants who had been involved in placements believed students having the opportunity to work in the voluntary sector found it invaluable for linking up theory with practice, and particularly to experience the Social Model in practice.

## Design of degree and quality assurance

Service users and carers contribute to the design and quality assurance of courses through a continuous quality cycle process. They are involved in a variety of ways, for example through advisory groups to course management, participating in programme advisory boards and committees, curriculum planning, attending internal review meetings, participating in the GSCC re-approval processes, and designing group interviewing processes.

Portfolio moderation also contributes to the quality assurance aspect of the programmes/courses.

'I have been involved with EDU – education development unit – when the course was up for redesign/evaluation, along with employers etc.'

## The benefits of service user and carer involvement in social work education

Participation in social work education recognises that service users and carers are experts in their field.

The group also identified the following specific benefits of participation as:

- giving future social workers a sense of empathy and understanding of how it is to be in receipt of their services
- promoting an understanding of the power social workers have in their relationships with service users and carers
- helping to equalise the power imbalance between service users and carers, future service providers and educators
- increasing confidence and skill levels for future service providers (for example respect, listening, understanding), which may also enhance future career prospects
- promoting involvement in a wider society
- providing personal benefits to health and wellbeing of the service users and carers involved
- moving service users away from the role of victim – 'We are more than our story'
- offering opportunities to identify current issues and gaps in existing social care provision.

With involvement in teaching being a key area of participation, the group discussed the benefits this brings to social work education. Overall it was seen as bringing theory to life – enabling students to see 'how we really are' and that differences between those who use services and those who do not may be minimal; for many students it is their first interaction with service users and carers, particularly those who use mental health services.

Other specific benefits identified were:

- learning partnership working
- experiencing, in practice, the values and skills that will underpin their work
- gaining learning from diverse perspectives
- better preparation for practice
- empowering them to 'open up' about personal and professional concerns in a safe setting - for both students and service users and carers
- recognising connections with service users - 'We are all service users and carers' and gaining peer support from involvement
- greater awareness of stigma

## 'We are more than our story'

- seeing that people can move beyond their use of services helps students understand resilience and recovery seeing the importance of challenging accepted views
- having the opportunity to value people giving their time to their education
- identifying current issues and gaps in existing social work provision
- moving the service user away from the role of 'victim'.

Many of the above point to the benefits for service users and carers but the group also identified several specific benefits for carers, recognising that service users and carers do not always have the same goals:

- empowering carers in finding their voice and it being heard
- providing a model of good practice through supportive involvement
- providing a channel for views and sometimes anger to generate improvement in services
- teaching students respect for carers and their roles.

The group also noted that many practising social workers are involved in social work courses and gain benefits from working with service users and carers in this context through opportunities to:

- reflect upon their current practice
- identify gaps in services
- consider what makes a good social worker
- quality assure services.

Academics teaching social work courses also benefit from service user and carer involvement in terms of:

- keeping them up to date with practice and highlighting where they need to update their knowledge and value base – when teaching a full curriculum there is little time available to consider values, and personalisation was given as an example of a practice area that is not well understood in HEIs.
- service users and carers bring knowledge and skills to courses that support academics, particularly around challenging misconceptions and stereotypes.

Employers also have a role in social work education (such as participating in course advisory boards and ensuring Post Registration Training and Learning). The focus group noted that employers in all sectors should recognise the value of service user and carer involvement and this would bring benefits to their training/education activities and to their services more broadly. Service user and carer involvement will ensure services are appropriately targeted, and the appropriate use made of resources.

The group felt that looking across social work practitioners, academics and employers, there are wide variations in the quality of their work and that this needs to be addressed through education and training that is supported by service user and carer involvement.

To ensure that service user and carer involvement is happening effectively and the maximum benefits are obtained by all, the group said policy makers need to support research to formally evaluate involvement and develop a model for best practice. This

formal evidence could support the more informal feedback, and it is needed to show that service user and carer involvement in the social work degree improves social work practice and outcomes for service users and carers.

## What the research literature tells us

In common with the research literature on participation in social care more broadly, the majority of work on service user and carer involvement in social work education is case studies and process descriptions. There is little evaluative work that looks at outcomes.

The most up-to-date literature review is Robinson and Webber B.J.S.W. (2011 in press) 'Models and effectiveness of service user and carer involvement in social work education: A literature review'. This review argues:

'There is widespread support amongst service users, carers, students and lecturers for involvement initiatives but little empirical evidence that it improves outcomes for students. Also, no studies evaluated its effect on social work practice or on outcomes for future service users and carers. Research is urgently required on the effect of service user and carer involvement on these outcomes....'

The lack of empirical evidence does not mean that participation is not impacting on outcomes. Emerging evidence does indicate that it is possible to measure the effect of learning on future practice. (Burgess, H. and J. Carpenter, eds. 2010). If, for example, students are reporting that the input of service users and carers into teaching was the most memorable part of their course it is likely that this is affecting their practice.

SCIE's most recent reports on participation in social work education argued that whilst there are many examples of good practice in some areas, overall the national picture is patchy and inconsistent. The reports call for a national forum which takes a strategic overview of the development of service user and carer involvement in social work education.

## Conclusions

Where participation is robust, it is due to allocation of sufficient funding, which can only happen at present when the Department of Health grant is 'topped up' with in-house resources by the HEI running the courses.

These resources then need to be used for both participation and for training and support. In some programmes, resources provide a co-ordinator or an administrator to support the process of involvement and to support service users and carers, for example in their access requirements.

Resources are also used to reimburse service users and carers for their time and for their transport and support costs. A training video for service users and carers was given as one example of the use of this funding. Funding has also been used to produce lasting resources such as case studies and films about service users' and

'We are more than our story'

carers' issues. Whilst these are of great usefulness, service users and carers emphasise they are to be used in addition to, and never to replace, face-to-face direct contact in teaching and providing learning.

Looking at the qualifying stage of social work education, the views of all stakeholders on participation are overwhelmingly positive. Where resources are being used effectively, service user and carer involvement is seen as contributing to the students' learning in all the proposed Capabilities. However involvement has particular impact in those Capabilities relating to values and ethics, diversity, rights and justice, social and economic wellbeing, and the development of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice in intervention and skills. Service user and carer involvement is also seen as useful for addressing power imbalances. However, there is an urgent need for evaluative research of the outcomes of service user and carer involvement to reinforce the anecdotal evidence.

Finally the benefit to service users and carers who participate in social work education must not be minimised. The benefits are seen in terms of growth and the development of esteem, confidence and self-empowerment.

'I can give something back.'

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