Crossing Boundaries: - the role of development workers in promoting the expert knowledge of service users and carers in social work education

Summary Report

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Introduction

 The involvement of service users/carers in social work education has acquired increasing significance in recent years, the mandate for which is partly provided by the regulatory requirement for such invovlement in all four nations of the UK (Molyneux and Irvine 2004, Ager et al 2005,).   Exactly how HEIs put this mandate into practice varies across the UK, but research suggests that effective involvement must be 'real', avoiding tokenism, and requires appropriate commitment of resources.

This report is a summary of a paper outlining the outcomes of a workshop held in August 2010, funded by the Ian Light Award. Particpants were members of two service use/carer groups supporting social work degree programmes in two nations of the UK (England and Wales).

The workshop was an opportunity to compare the extent to which service users and carers are consulted and have their needs and opinions reflected in the design, delivery, management and evaluation of the social work degree programmes, as required by the respective regulatory bodies, the Care Council for Wales (CCW) (WAG 2005), and the General Social Care Council (GSCC) (DH 2002). The workshop also explored what works best and how this is influenced by programme setting, structure, and mode of delivery, and reflected on the experience of

involvement itself. The workshop concluded that despite differences in how service user/carer involvement is implemented, provision of resources and the avoidance of tokenism are key to achieving effective, meaningful involvement. The role of the development worker emerged as an important feature in successfully facilitating this process.

Aims

The aims of this project were to examine the role of the development worker in promoting the expert knowledge of service users and carers in social work education, linking together two development workers and groups of service user/carers involved in supporting undergraduate social work education. This experience would hopefully enrich our mutual learning, and promote our shared objective of achieving meaningful service user and carer involvement .

This would be achieved through comparison of service user/carer involvement in the two institutions, bearing in mind their respective models and the different nation requirements. This was also an opportunity to consider development of guidelines for development workers and HEI's in terms of involving service users and carers in higher education. Finally, the project would provide mutual support and an opportunity for networking amongst the service user/carer groups and the development workers themselves.

Participants

One of the service user/carer groups involved in the project is based at a traditional university campus with a small co-hort of students on a new B.A. Social Work degree (commenced 2008). The other group is attached to a social work programme delivered via a distance learning model, covering the whole of Wales. This social work programme has been running since 2005. Each programme has an annual intake of about thirty, mainly mature, students.

Each group includes both service users and carers with a range of skills and experience, and from a variety of backgrounds. Participants on the day included two from the Wales group (with one apology) and three from the England group.

The workshop

The day began with tea and coffee, which were available throughout the day. Breaks were built in, and participants were also free to take time out as suited them. Following introductions, the development workers introduced the purpose of the day and the group established ground rules. Although the development workers had identified themes that would 'kick start' discussion, these were deliberately kept very 'loose' in order to allow for other themes that might emerge. The morning session explored current activity by asking what kinds of things service users/carers do in terms of being involved in the social work degree in their respective institutions. An introductory exercise enabled participants to gel very quickly and they were soon comparing ways in which they (and other service user/carer colleagues) were involved in social work education, identifying similarities and differences between the groups. The group from Wales also showed a film they had made, outlining why involvement is important, how they had been involved, and who actually benefits from this. This served as a spur to exchange further ideas around involvement. It was evident that members of each group were very active in the social work programmes.

Following lunch the afternoon session moved on to thinking about how service user/carer involvement is valued by the HEIs, how service user/carers know that their contribution is important, and how the universities could do better in this regard.

Key Findings

There were a number of differences in the requirements of CCW and GSCC for service user and carer involvement in the social work degree programme, resulting in some variation in terms of focus of activity. Moreover, the differences between the two groups in terms of nation, geography, culture, and mode of delivery also resulted in some differences:

Different nations of the UK

Language issues in Wales (Wales has two official languages: Welsh and English)

Different regulatory requirements (Care Council for Wales/General Social Care Council)

Different focus of involvement (Wales group were more involved in management of the degree programme, while the England group were more involved in student selection)

Mode of delivery of SW training and consequent mode of operation of the groups (distance/traditional)

Nevertheless, there were also important similarities in how the groups were involved in the two programmes, such as:

Payment for involvement

Speaking to student groups

Receiving feedback from tutors and/or the university

Involvement in course/module design and critical reading

Less involvement in practice learning

Positive experiences of being valued

Good relationships with university staff

Being listened to

Bringing about change

It is interesting to note that the differences between the groups are expressed in terms of activity alone. The similarities, on the other hand, reported included positive experiences of being involved, suggesting that despite differences in *activity,* it is the underpinning *values* of involvement that determine its success.

A further feature necessary to successful involvement was allocation of appropriate resources, expressed in these two programmes as appropriate payment of participants, and dedicated time in terms of a development worker role in each of the institutions. The former recognises the expert knowledge of service users/carers and its importance to social work education; the latter ensures the sustainability of service user/carer involvement through development of participants and university

staff, and of opportunities for continued and new opportunities for involvement, often acting as a 'bridge' between service users/carers and the institution itself.

Guidelines

The similarities of experience between the two groups in terms of the importance of underpinning values, together with the identified need for appropriate resourcing, meant they were able to agree on advice, or recommendations for social work programmes in the meaningful involvement of service users/carers. Participants in the workshop were asked what advice they would give to an HEI embarking on service user/carer involvement. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the resulting guidelines are clear, yet arresting in their simplicity. They do not focus on the nature of activities in which individuals are involved, but rather reflect the importance of valuing and respecting our fellow human beings and the common sense needed in embarking on any project:

- Find out what other universities are doing
- Don't assume everyone wants to be involved
- Walk don't run
- Anticipate problems
- Be welcoming/friendly
- Treat people as equals – value them
- Ensure durability, sufficient resources – human and financial
- Realise the worth of service user/carers

Reflections

The experience definitely enriched our mutual learning as development workers. Indeed, it was clear that to be meaningful, the involvement of service users and carers and the role of the development worker need to be clearly articulated and planned. The opportunity afforded by the award provided a platform to explore perspectives on the role, alongside service users/carers. Reflecting on the experience provided some interesting insights.

The role of the development worker is a broad one, including advocacy and the promotion of self-advocacy, development of individuals and groups (both professional and non-professional), negotiation, and support, again for individuals and groups. It involves challenging the values and attitudes of individuals, groups, and the HEIs themselves, if tokenism is to be avoided. It is demanding and time-consuming. 'Live' discussion of effective and meaningful involvement prompted reflection on just how important the role is, and was a reminder of the danger of making assumptions about people's skills and knowledge, and of the importance of respecting and valuing their expertise.

Although we had anticipated the benefits of bringing the two groups together, we had assumed the day would be a 'one-off' event. However, participants on the day strongly indicated that this had been a valuable experience, and were enthusiastic to repeat it. This is something we had not anticipated, yet reflecting on the importance of 'relationship' in this work, is an aspect of involvement whose development we would like to explore in the future.

On a more practical level, travel to the venue with a service user who uses a wheelchair was illuminating. The train journey was long, requiring arrival at the station 30 minutes before the train departed on both journeys to allow a ramp to be produced. The allocated position was next to the toilet, and taxi drivers were hesitant about the practicalities of a wheelchair entering their vehicle. This was a real reminder of some of the daily practicalities experienced by service users/carers, and of which we as development workers and professionals in general need to be constantly mindful. Another service user was unable to attend on the day owing to ill-health, despite having made the necessary arrangements for travel and accommodation, and having prepared for the workshop.

We believe people who use services have a right to be involved, but the nature of involvement is that it can be unpredictable and logistically complex at times. At times during the above journey, the inconvenience caused to service users and carers did induce guilt and questions as to whether involvement with the project was worth

putting them to such trouble. In the case of service users/carers who have unpredictable conditions, questions arose as to whether this was perhaps too onerous a task for this person. Exploration of these issues with the service users concerned, however, revealed that they had a different perception of the situation.

In these two cases, the consensus was that the benefits of meeting (or potentially meeting) others in similar roles, as well as demonstrating to students that collaborative work was part of a bigger process in recognising the importance and value of service user/ and carer involvement in social work education, outweighed any, as they saw it, minor inconveniences. This served as a reminder that decisions about involvement do not always lie with us as development workers. While we agree that we have a responsibility to those who work with us, it is their decision to do so – our role in this is to enable and empower, not to make decisions on their behalf.

The opportunity to see how another group has developed service user/carer involvement gave each of us food for thought as to future opportunities for development. For example, since the workshop, the Wales group has developed opportunities for further involving service users/carers in student selection and the England group has investigated opportunities for making a film. In this alone, then, the mutual exchange of information and learning of the two groups has been valuable.

In summary
This experience has indeed been a fruitful one. The shared objective of achieving significant service user/ carer involvement provided a focus for this. Promoting the meaningful involvement of service users/carers is a complex and demanding task, which requires not only that their contribution is valued, but that sufficient resource is allocated to achieving this. These pre-requisites were not undermined in the least by the differences between the two groups, which indeed were important in making involvement meaningful in the respective settings. Involvement does not have to look the same, but it does need to be underpinned by values of avoiding tokenism and

must be appropriately resourced. The outcomes of the workshop demonstrate that in these two institutions at least, the role of the development worker acts as a 'bridge' to making this happen.

References

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