The Meaningful Involvement of Service Users and Carers in Advanced-Level Post-Qualifying Social Work Education: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The Social Work Reform Board is undertaking an ambitious programme of reform in the UK. This includes enhancing the professional status of social work and reforming social work education. The nature and purpose of service user and carer involvement at all levels of social work education need to be considered alongside this. However, the nature of meaningful involvement of service users and carers in advanced post-qualifying education has not been clearly articulated. A qualitative study was conducted that involved twenty-nine stakeholders—service users, carers, social workers, lecturers and managers—to help understand what constitutes meaningful involvement at this level of education. We found four predominant models (consultation, partnership, political...
and user control) that have different implications for how service users and carers may be engaged in advanced post-qualifying social work education. Further research is required to understand the effect of these different models on outcomes for social workers and the service users and carers they work with.

Keywords: Service users, carers, involvement, post-qualifying social work education, advanced practice, qualitative methods

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Introduction

The principle of involving service users and carers in the design, delivery and evaluation of services is firmly embedded in social work and social care (Braye, 2000). It is a key feature of social work education in the UK at pre-qualifying (Department of Health, 2002) and post-qualifying (PQ) levels (General Social Care Council, 2005). However, as service user and carer involvement in social work education has developed and become more widely accepted, there has been an ongoing parallel concern that the involvement should be meaningful. There are unresolved debates in social work about what we actually understand by the phrase meaningful involvement of service users and carers. This paper exposes some of the arguments at the core of this debate by focusing on advanced PQ social work education, where the difference in outcomes from different models of service user and carer involvement may be more pronounced than in other social work contexts.

Arnstein’s (1969) ‘ladder of involvement’, which extended from ‘manipulation’ and ‘therapy’ on the bottom rungs to ‘delegated power’ and ‘citizen control’ on the top rungs, has provided a theoretical framework to inform the development of service user and carer involvement in social work and beyond. Similar ladders have been developed for mental health training in higher education, which has ‘partnership’ at its apex (Tew et al., 2004), and service user research, which has ‘control’ at the top of its ladder (Sweeney and Morgan, 2009), for example. These models imply that there is a linear progression towards meaningful involvement, but involvement can be meaningful at lower levels. Service user and carer contributions to social work research or education can exert powerful influences in the absence of full partnerships or user control (Fleischman, 2010).

Meaningful involvement of service users and carers in social care services can result in both intrinsic benefits from participation and extrinsic benefits to services and other service users (Doel et al., 2007). Meaningful user involvement within mental health services, for example, may require a culture change for it to make a difference to the way in which services are delivered (Tait and Lester, 2005). However, there is evidence to suggest that services
led by, or fully involving, consumers are equally as effective as traditional services (Simpson and House, 2002; Doughty and Tse, 2011). Also, user-led research is having an impact in mental health services. For example, a systematic review of consumer perspectives on electroconvulsive therapy (Rose et al., 2003) has influenced clinical guidelines (National Institute for Clinical Excellence, 2003).

Models of involvement in social work education focus primarily on either process or outcomes (Robinson and Webber, under review). The largest body of social work literature focuses on how the process of involvement must be meaningful, such as building relationships based on trust and addressing power imbalances (e.g. Gupta and Blewett, 2008). Alternatively, after Beresford (2005), ‘meaningful involvement is defined as evidence of change or improvements’ (Fitzhenry, 2008, p. 18) or specifically promoting change in services so that they become tailored to meet the individual needs of the people who use them (Tyler, 2006). In a similar vein, its opposite, tokenistic involvement, has been defined as a lack of positive outcomes (Beresford and Croft, 2001) or the insincere fulfilling of policy priorities (Molyneaux and Irvine, 2004).

Outcomes-based definitions of meaningful involvement have limited support from the social work education evidence base, due to a paucity of outcomes-focused research (Robinson and Webber, under review). In their review of models and effectiveness of service user and carer involvement in social work education, the authors found that service users, carers, social workers and lecturers largely reported positive experiences. However, there was no evidence as to whether service user and carer involvement had changed the practice of social workers or provided tangible benefits for the well-being and quality of life of service users and carers who receive social work services (Robinson and Webber, under review). Similarly, a review of service user and carer involvement in healthcare professional education found that, while both students and service users benefited from their involvement, there was limited evidence of involvement leading to changes in clinical practice or significantly benefiting patients (Morgan and Jones, 2009). However, there are individual studies that provide evidence of positive outcomes. For example, mental health consumer-led teaching of pharmacy undergraduate students in Australia led to a significant reduction in students’ mental health stigma that was sustained a year later (O’Reilly et al., 2010) and structured dialogue with consumers of mental health services in the USA improved social work students’ attitudes towards people with mental health problems (Scheyett and Kim, 2004).

Social work has developed a substantial body of knowledge about user and carer involvement, which is often cited by other professional groups as they develop their involvement strategies (e.g. Gutteridge and Dobbins, 2010). All social work PQ programmes, as in qualifying programmes (Department of Health, 2002), are required to involve service users and carers in the selection of new students; teaching and assessment
of students; curriculum planning and development; and programme management and evaluation (General Social Care Council, 2005). However, what constitutes the meaningful involvement of service users and carers in advanced PQ programmes has not been articulated (Robinson and Webber, under review). The fact that students usually have at least three years’ social work experience suggests that aspects of the involvement strategy will need to be different from that in qualifying social work education. Although there is guidance about the involvement of service users and carers in social work education (e.g. Skills for Care, 2007; Branfield, 2009), there is nothing specific to the advanced level of the PQ framework (General Social Care Council, 2005).

It is important to be clear about the objectives for involving service users and carers in advanced social work education and to find robust ways of evaluating the involvement to find out whether it meets those objectives. Advanced social work education is important, as practitioners at this level can make a valuable contribution to the evidence base for social work (Slack and Webber, 2008; Furminger and Webber, 2009; Dutt and Webber, 2010; Kingsford and Webber, 2010; Bookle and Webber, 2011). Also, a new professional capabilities framework (Social Work Reform Board, 2010) will promote the opportunity to study towards a Master’s Level PQ award to help retain experienced practitioners in front line social work practice. With the Social Work Reform Board working towards the transformation of social work agencies into learning organisations, it is likely that the numbers of social workers undertaking advanced PQ education at Master’s Level will increase.

This paper explores debates about the meaningful involvement of service users and carers in advanced PQ social work education. It presents a qualitative study of stakeholders who articulate their views on this topic that contributes towards on-going discussion in this field.

**Method**

The study was co-produced by a service user researcher and a social work researcher using a collaborative model of research (Sweeney and Morgan, 2009). The two researchers co-designed the study and both contributed equally to the ethics application. The service user researcher collected the data from participants and adapted the interview schedule as an iterative process throughout the study. She also led on the data analysis with the social work researcher working collaboratively to review emerging themes. The researchers co-authored both papers. The researchers acknowledged the potential for a power imbalance given that the social work researcher was the principal investigator of the study and line manager for the service user researcher. However, both researchers felt
that, in practice, this was not an issue. The service user researcher was central to the development and conduct of the study.

The study used a qualitative methodology, obtaining data from twenty-nine stakeholders in PQ social work education: service users and carers; social workers studying advanced PQ programmes; their employers or managers; and PQ programme leaders or lecturers. A qualitative methodology was chosen to enable participants to explore the research question in depth through a combination of semi-structured interviews, a focus group and a self-complete questionnaire.

A purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) was used to obtain multiple diverse perspectives on the meaningful involvement of users and carers in advanced social work education. Recruitment of study participants ceased when no new perspectives on our research question emerged. Although the sample size was partially constrained by the limited resources available for this study, and it cannot be claimed to be representative of all stakeholders in PQ social work education, it did reveal the existence of diverse perspectives on this topic.

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone or face to face with social work academics from six universities to explore their understanding of meaningful involvement. They were asked what they thought the purpose of involvement was and what they understood meaningful involvement to be at the advanced level. They were asked whether they were following a particular model or method of involvement. Advanced PQ programmes in universities with no other PQ or qualifying social work programmes were selected in addition to those with other social work programmes. This was to enable us to understand synergies or dissonances between approaches used in different levels of social work education and whether universities that specialise in advanced-level programmes take a different approach. Face-to-face or telephone semi-structured interviews were conducted with four mental health service users and carers who were involved in advanced PQ programmes, from two of the universities sampled above. These interviews asked about the level and nature of their involvement and the extent to which they felt it was meaningful for the social workers undertaking the programmes, and for them.

A focus group discussion was conducted with ten social workers in the second year of a part-time advanced PQ programme. The discussion focused on their experience of user and carer involvement in their programme, what they considered meaningful involvement to be and how their programme could be enhanced by improved involvement. Additionally, six social workers in the first year of the same course completed a brief self-complete questionnaire. This asked them to describe what they understood by meaningful user and carer involvement and what they were expecting to experience on their programme. All responses were kept anonymous.
Finally, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with employers and managers from local authorities supporting practitioners to attend an advanced PQ programme. They were asked to discuss their expectations of involvement in advanced PQ programmes and their ideas about what constitutes appropriate and meaningful involvement of service users and carers in them.

The interviews (both telephone and face to face) and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), conducted as both an inductive and a deductive process. Analysis was structured according to the interview domains and the pre-defined domains of user and carer involvement (selection and recruitment, teaching, assessment, curriculum development and programme management (General Social Care Council, 2005)). A detailed reading and re-reading of the transcripts to identify initial themes within the broad domains of interest was refined through comparisons of text subsumed under each thematic category. Further questioning of the data and comparison of the categories by the researchers enabled them to develop more abstract thematic categories. The analysis was largely conducted by the service user researcher, though the social work researcher was involved in the development of initial themes and in the application of thematic categories to selected parts of the data to enhance reliability. QSR International’s NVivo 8 qualitative data-analysis software was used to assist tasks of coding, retrieving and comparing data.

As this was a small qualitative study, it was important to ensure that respondents remained anonymous and could not be identified by their data. Examples that might allow individuals to be identified were not used in the final report and all identifying features were removed from participants’ data. All participants provided full informed consent to be involved and the study was approved by a university research ethics committee.

**Results**

Over three-fifths of the sample was female and almost two-fifths were from an ethnic minority group (Table 1). Almost three-fifths of the sample was aged over forty. Although a small sample of twenty-nine is not representative of all stakeholders of advanced PQ programmes in the UK, our sample is typical of the demographic profile of people involved in or studying these programmes.

The sample generated a total of 71,510 words of text for analysis and a summary of our findings is presented here.

**Purpose of service user and carer involvement**

The sample expressed diverse perspectives about the purpose of involving service users and carers in social work education. There were distinct
differences in emphasis between some who argued that its primary purpose is to enrich the curriculum and improve outcomes for practitioners and service users and others who described its main purpose as being to empower the service users involved and alter the power dynamic between service users and service providers. These different emphases underpinned different models of involvement that emerged in the course of this study.

Nine participants highlighted the importance of capturing service user knowledge and perspectives to enrich the curriculum and add value to programmes:

I think the overall purpose of it is that education and training is enriched by service user and carer participation and... it seems to provide something extra than just professionals training professionals (Programme leader/lecturer).

An intended consequence of this curriculum enhancement is to improve social work practice and outcomes for service users and carers (more generally, not of those specifically involved in PQ programmes). Participants in the study argued that it helps practitioners to be more sensitive to service user needs and to relate to them as fellow human beings. It facilitates practitioners’ reflective practice so that they are able to provide a better service to the people they are working with.

The alternative perspective was that the primary purpose of service user and carer involvement is to facilitate the personal development of the service users and carers involved and to challenge the power imbalance between professionals and service users. This perspective emphasises the core social work value of empowering service users and carers and has a political dimension:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder group</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service users and carers</td>
<td>4 (13.8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social workers undertaking advanced-level PQ programmes</td>
<td>16 (55.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PQ programme leaders and lecturers</td>
<td>7 (24.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers and managers</td>
<td>2 (6.9)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18 (62.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11 (37.9)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
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<td>White British</td>
<td>18 (62.1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other white</td>
<td>2 (6.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8 (27.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1 (3.4)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Under 40 years old</td>
<td>12 (41.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 40 years old</td>
<td>17 (58.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29 (100)</td>
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It puts service users and carers in more of a position of authority and power and legitimacy in what they're saying... It reverses that power dynamic in some sense (Programme leader/lecturer).

This participant suggested we should work towards service users and carers directing social work education to ensure that it is fully compatible with their needs. However, some social workers studying an advanced PQ programme expressed ambivalence about this perspective. One suggested that service users are already in a position of power through their ability to make a complaint that may affect a social worker’s registration to which practitioners have little redress. Another had a prior negative experience of service user and carer involvement on a social work qualifying programme. S/he argued that service user and carer involvement in advanced PQ education disempowers social workers and devalues programmes.

### Making it meaningful

The General Social Care Council (2005) requirement that social work PQ programmes fully involve service users and carers has set a minimum standard. However, there have been associated concerns about whether having a requirement can, in itself, lead to tokenism. Study participants argued that service users and carers should be involved because of their strengths and what they could bring to the programme rather than just using someone in order to tick a box:

... at the moment I'm currently marking one of the AMHP [Approved Mental Health Professional] portfolios, and very clearly a service user has worked alongside that professional throughout and has then given quite a considerable amount of written feedback giving their views of that professional... It's actually really significant (Social worker on advanced PQ programme).

However, participants also provided examples of poor practice where service users and carers with little knowledge or understanding of social work were asked to participate in training or contribute to programme management committees.

Many participants felt that achieving meaningful involvement requires the consistent, long-term involvement of service users and carers. One PQ programme leader talked about the value of having a user consultant as a member of the programme team; another described having two or three people involved over a long period. Long-term involvement enabled them to gain respect as co-workers in the university department and a full understanding of the programme that enhanced the quality of their contribution.

Long-term involvement of individual service users and carers in programmes allows them to make a rich and meaningful contribution to all aspects of the programme from the design of modules, through recruiting
students, teaching and assessment, to reviewing and evaluation of the programme. Participants from all stakeholder groups argued that this ideally requires embedding service users and carers in university social work departments as lecturers:

...you still come across this student resistance to it... ‘We’re very experienced, why have you got this person coming in?’... Whereas if it’s much more embedded into the full teaching programme, and they’re seen as part of the teaching team... then that might get rid of that resistance (Programme leader/lecturer).

Participants argued that service users and carers should be treated as the equals of lecturers, with the same pay (pro rata), access to the same library facilities and personal or professional development opportunities, and with their opinions being treated with equal respect. However, lecturers also cautioned against having just a few involved so that there could be a diversity of perspectives—a theme frequently echoed by students:

...it has to be collective. You can’t just make it individual, choose one service user to give a view for all the other service users, because it will only be their own view and their own opinion (Social worker on advanced PQ programme).

Sufficient preparation by lecturers, and the service users and carers involved, was viewed by many participants as crucial to making their involvement meaningful. Six participants mentioned the importance of being clear about the specific purpose of involvement. This was felt to be particularly important for advanced PQ programmes in which there may be an increased risk of service users and carers not adding to practitioners’ knowledge if they are not fully briefed about what was expected of them. Having clarity about the role of service users and carers on programme committees was also emphasised.

Participants were clear that involvement must be meaningful for both the practitioners and the service users and carers. Individuals taking time to contribute to advanced PQ programmes need to get something out of the experience for themselves and their contributions need to enrich the curriculum beyond what it might be like without them. To help ensure this occurs, training and on-going support of service users and carers who contribute to programmes are required. Others mentioned that it was important for programmes to provide: flexibility to accommodate fluctuating mental health needs or family needs; the opportunity for service users and carers to reflect on the best ways of sharing their experiences in order to promote practitioners’ learning; and emotional support when required.

Finally, associated with the empowerment perspective described earlier, one PQ programme leader likened meaningful service user and carer involvement to other social movements for race or gender equality. S/he argued that it became meaningful when it resulted in the wider social and political
development of the individual service users and carers involved, who were otherwise disempowered:

We hope that they get some boost of confidence, and perhaps sense of self-efficacy through it, which couldn’t but help but influence their character and personality outside of this arena (Programme leader/lecturer).

Meaningful involvement in advanced PQ education and training

Participants had diverse views about whether involvement of service users and carers in advanced PQ programmes was different from involvement at other levels or in qualifying training. Most argued that it was different at this level of training. For example, if a service user or carer was invited to ‘tell their story’, they would need to be able to reflect on and draw out elements that were particularly relevant to the advanced training programme. Lecturers commented that experienced practitioners studying advanced PQ programmes have different training needs from students on qualifying programmes:

If we’re working from the assumption that practitioners have years of experience when they come on to this, they will be very familiar with the needs of the people that they are working with. Any involvement in the educational experience at that level, has… got to give them something which they have not already gained through their practice (Programme leader/lecturer).

There were different ideas, though, about how service users and carers could add value to advanced PQ programmes. For example, one social worker studying an advanced PQ programme said that s/he would have expected service users and carers to support a social model of mental health, but s/he was disappointed when this turned out not to be the case. Some lecturers described their work with user-led voluntary sector groups who helped to develop modules and worked with programmes on an on-going basis. These partnerships enriched highly specific curricula in a way that may not be possible on a qualifying programme in which there are considerable constraints on what needs to be taught.

Participants also discussed difficulties in meaningfully involving service users and carers in advanced leadership and management or practice education PQ programmes. Managers who are not in routine contact with service users or carers may view the practitioners they supervise as their ‘service users’. Similarly, practice educators may view trainee social workers as their ‘service users’. The users of social work services and their carers are one step removed from these senior and experienced social workers and therefore their contribution to their advanced PQ training would need to be different. Some solutions to this dilemma included approaching people leading large service user organisations to discuss
leadership and management issues; asking service users with experience of student social workers to comment on their practice; or asking service users with prior training as an advocate or a social worker to contribute from an informed perspective.

Some participants, though, suggested that there were no differences between involving service users and carers in advanced PQ education and other forms of social work education:

It’s the principles that are key here. The same principles apply and if you have an advanced level course, for example, there’s no reason why users and carers can’t control a module of that course (Programme leader/lecturer).

One of the service user/carer participants in the study agreed with this perspective, but added:

It depends on the academic level of the course . . . if it’s a high academic level, it’s a question of how much understanding the service users and carers will need of what the social workers are being expected to do (Service user/carer).

To ensure that appropriate people were involved, many advanced PQ programmes, particularly those in universities with no other qualifying or post-qualifying social work programmes, actively selected people according to their skills, training or experience. Examples of selection activities included writing a job description for service users and carers who were going to be involved on a programme; providing a training session for people interested in becoming involved to help identify the right person for the right role; matching people with roles that they felt able to perform; and using a staff/service user/carers committee to select people for different involvement sessions. However, some participants found a tension between this approach and a desire to give all service users and carers the opportunity to participate. Some participants raised the question of whether a service user who has extensive professional skills ceases to be a service user. Others disagreed with having a selection process, although described informal selection or self-selection processes facilitated by information or training sessions.

All participants had opinions about, or experiences of, service user and carer involvement in teaching on advanced PQ programmes or being involved in curriculum developments. One lecturer discussed a PQ service user group that developed a series of short films for use in teaching. Other participants described good examples of user and carer involvement on Approved Social Worker (ASW)/AMHP training:

Excellent service user/lecturer on my ASW course at [name of university]. So descriptive of the fear for her when being assessed under the Act that the whole student body was in tears. I’ll never forget that when assessing a person a little empathy and kindness goes a very long way (Social worker on advanced PQ programme).
AMHP training programmes also provided good examples of involving service users and carers in the selection process. One employer/manager described a recruitment panel consisting of a service user or carer, a representative of the higher education provider and a senior AMHP practitioner. The service user/carer had the same decision-making power as other members. However, many programme leaders commented that this model was less feasible for many advanced PQ programmes that have small intakes and conduct individual interviews over an extended period of time as people apply. One service user even felt that it was inappropriate to be involved in interviewing, as s/he considered this to be the responsibility of the programme team.

Many participants felt that involving service users and carers in marking assignments was also problematic. Although a number of examples were offered of service users and carers being involved in practice assessment panels or providing feedback to practitioners, many participants argued that the central responsibility for assessment lay with core university staff who were cognisant of the relevant academic standards. One participant felt that the only way service users and carers could be genuinely involved in the assessment of students on advanced PQ programmes is if they were employed as lecturers within the university department. Few participants were able to provide good examples of service user and carer involvement on advanced-level PQ programme management boards.

Involvement models

A range of different models or philosophies of involvement emerged from participants’ data. In the study, participants frequently referred to more than one model, suggesting that many providers were drawing on a range of models or philosophies, rather than adopting one exclusively. While some participants described a model or models they were following, others did not see themselves as following a particular model, and felt that involvement on their course was developing more pragmatically. All, however, described the methodology they were using. The models have been summarised into four groups.

1. Consultation

In the consultation model, advanced PQ programmes seek to benefit from the skills, experience or knowledge of service users and carers to, for example, guide the development of a module, or to give feedback on an assessment task. This model respects service user and carer expertise and their unique contribution. However, the power in the relationship resides mainly with the programme leaders, though it may be shared with users
or carers if employed as consultants within the university. This model could involve consultation with a broader range of service users or carers through the use of a panel or focus group who might be consulted on specific issues at specific points. This model was mentioned particularly in relation to curriculum development.

2. Partnership

The partnership model emphasises the service user and carer contribution to a programme as being equal to that of other contributors. There is equality of pay, status and authority with other members of the programme team. Service users and carers perform as the equals of lecturers with their opinions respected in full. They may be service user consultants or lecturers themselves. Power and decision making are shared between programme leaders, lecturers, service users and carers, who may be involved in all aspects of the programme. Partnership working is most likely to develop through a long-term relationship, such as with individuals in a group or individual service user consultants/lecturers. As in the consultation model, their expertise is respected but there is a greater sense of equality and working as colleagues.

3. Political

This model was often espoused by the participants who felt that empowerment of the service users and carers involved was the primary purpose of involvement. Programme leaders may seek to model radical social work within a programme in the way in which they involve service users and carers, such as by building a community of service users and carers and by seeking to contribute to wider political change. The importance of equal access to involvement by all service users and carers is emphasised in this model; those involved need to be representative of the wider service user/carer community. A democratic way of working is an intrinsic aspect of this model that seeks to empower a large number of diverse service users and carers to participate. As such, it focuses on the needs, personal development and political emancipation of service users and carers who, in general, are regarded as having been disempowered by, for example, receiving social work services.

4. User control

Closely linked to the political model is the user control model, which emphasises the importance of power residing with service users and
carers. This refers to Arnstein’s (1969) ‘ladder of involvement’, which places service users or carers as passive recipients of professional help at the bottom of the ladder, service users or carers who are consulted in the design or delivery of services or programmes in the middle of the ladder (although the ladder presents consultation as a form of tokenism) and service users or carers with overall control at the top of the ladder. Participants in our study acknowledged that service users or carers may not be in a position to be in control of programmes, but some participants felt that it should be the aspiration and aim of PQ providers to ensure that this happens. In our sample, the model was described by lecturers rather than by service users or carers.

Involvement methodologies

Participants described a range of methodologies. Some participants used more than one methodology, according to the situation and what they were trying to achieve. Methodologies included contacting voluntary organisations to ask whether they could recommend individuals who would have the appropriate expertise to contribute to an advanced-level course; building up a long-term relationship with a voluntary or service user organisation so that they could provide regular input into a course; directly employing individual service user consultants; and developing a group of service users and carers who could contribute to the course. In one example of building up such a group, the content of the involvement work flowed from the interests and skills of the individuals in the group, rather than individuals being selected to meet specific learning needs of practitioners on the advanced-level programme.

Discussion

Study limitations

This was a modest qualitative study of stakeholder views about the meaningful involvement of service users and carers in advanced PQ education. The sample is not representative of all stakeholders, but is typical of those involved in advanced-level PQ programmes. We did not have the resources to recruit from varied user groups and were only able to include managers/employers from local authorities who funded social workers on advanced PQ programmes. A greater diversity of perspectives may have been achievable with additional resources. However, this study does provide an insight into the challenges of making the involvement of service users and carers in advanced PQ programmes truly meaningful.
Key findings

Most participants supported the idea of service user involvement in advanced PQ education, but there were apparent differences between participants about what they thought was the main purpose of service user and carer involvement, and how this should be carried out.

We identified four models of involvement from the participants’ data. These can be placed on a spectrum of opinion that spans from the primary purpose of involvement being to add value to students’ learning (‘added value’), to it being to empower the service users and carers involved (‘empowerment’). Taken as two of a number of purposes of involvement, rather than the primary purpose, these positions are not mutually exclusive and many participants expressed them both. However, they present quite different challenges for advanced PQ programmes.

Universities whose primary purpose in involving service users and carers in advanced PQ programmes is to add value to those programmes aim to provide learning opportunities unavailable from traditional staff members that are valued by students as helpful to their future practice. Members of this school of thought are likely to argue that service user and carer involvement at the advanced level is different and perhaps more complex than at lower levels. They are more likely to favour careful selection of service users and carers to meet the specific needs of the advanced-level group and the learning objectives of a particular session. They prefer the long-term, consistent involvement of a relatively small group of service users and carers through all stages of the programme following either a consultation or a partnership model. A service user or carer with substantial teaching expertise is likely to be valued as a ‘user consultant’ within these models.

Universities whose primary purpose in involving service users and carers is to seek to empower the service users and carers involved in the advanced PQ programmes, aim to challenge the traditional power imbalance between social worker and service user or carer. They stress the importance of equal access to involvement by all service users and carers, and do not usually favour selection of service users or carers on the basis of specific skills. Larger numbers of service users and carers are likely to be involved, reflecting a larger number of experiences and with a more democratic style of leadership. They may argue that, if sufficient resources were invested in involvement activities, and sufficient training was available to service users and carers, there is no reason why any service user or carer should not be able to make a valuable contribution to an advanced PQ programme. In general, they do not think there are significant differences between involvement at the advanced level and at lower levels. Members of this school of thought are more likely to follow a political model of involvement and effort is made to strive towards a model of user control of advanced PQ programmes. A service user or carer with substantial teaching expertise is
likely to be described as a ‘professional user’ within these models. This term is likely to have negative connotations.

In general, much of the literature on user and carer involvement in social work education at all levels gravitates towards the ‘empowerment’ end of the spectrum rather than the ‘added value’ end (Robinson and Webber, under review). This is possibly related to the fact that the majority of the literature refers to qualifying programmes. Models at the ‘added value’ end of the spectrum need to be clearly articulated so that they can be evaluated in terms of their outcomes for both students and the service users and carers involved. The lack of evaluative research, which is especially apparent in PQ social work education (Ogilvie-Whyte, 2006; Brown et al., 2008), makes it difficult to ascertain whether the ‘empowerment’ or ‘added value’ ends of the spectrum produce involvement that is meaningful for service users or carers involved or students’ learning.

What arises from this study, though, is that the meaningful involvement of service users and carers has not yet been achieved in all aspects of advanced social work education. Although many participants provided examples of good practice, involvement methodologies were either pragmatic or ideologically driven. For example, there were clear differences between those who selected service users and carers because of their specific skills and experience and those who were opposed to selection on egalitarian grounds. There were no participants who provided an example of full involvement in all aspects of advanced social work education.

The Social Work Reform Board is undertaking an ambitious programme of reform in the UK. This includes enhancing the professional status of social work and reforming social work education. The nature and purpose of service user and carer involvement in all forms of social work qualifying and PQ education need to be considered alongside this. This study found that meaningful involvement in advanced PQ social work education can be conceptualised in different ways, with potentially different outcomes.

Making the involvement of service users and carers in advanced social work education meaningful is more complex than is suggested by a linear model such as Arnstein’s (1969) ‘ladder of involvement’. While some argue that it is sufficient to empower service users and carers to be involved, the outcomes of involvement strategies for the practitioners and the service users they work with, or services they manage, cannot be ignored. Social work may benefit considerably by focusing more on devising evaluation methodologies that can produce high-quality evidence about service user and carer involvement. This is currently sadly lacking (Robinson and Webber, under review). Without this evidence, we can only surmise the extent to which involvement in advanced social work education is meaningful.
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References


