

Building user and carer involvement in social work education

Key messages

- the mandatory involvement of users and carers in social work education is a very exciting and powerful policy development
- valuing the knowledge of users and carers and recognising that this is different from, but equal to, professional and academic knowledge is of critical importance to the success of programmes
- users' and carers' experiences are relevant and should be incorporated across all areas of the curriculum
- user and carer involvement in programme management, student assessment and recruitment activities should be implemented
- it is important that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) recognise the differences between users and carers and make careful preparation in order to manage these differences appropriately
- it is vital that HEIs engage with local user and carer groups as these can provide help with assembling a wider pool of users and carers and can ensure that the activity is truly user and carer led
- users and carers need resources, training and support in order to effectively perform all the tasks required by HEIs
- regulations around payments for participation and the welfare benefit systems remain a barrier.

This At a glance summary looks at the support required to effectively involve users and carers in social work education. It is aimed at both social work educators and service users and carers. The messages contained in the summary come from two pieces of SCIE work:

Report 28: Developing user involvement in social work education

Report 29: Carers as partners in social work education

The reports are quite different in their scale, focus and approach, however many common themes emerge. This briefing is a summary of their key findings.

Mandatory requirement for involvement

All Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering the social work degree are required to '*consult with service users and carers to make sure their needs and opinions are reflected in the design and development of courses*'¹. The GSCC provides small grants to support this activity and further funds are available for HEIs offering post qualifying programmes. The mandatory involvement of users and carers in social work education is an incredibly exciting and progressive policy development. The participation of users and carers has the power to transform the next generation of social workers.

‘Service user involvement is an integral part of the degree programme, and the degree would not happen now without service user involvement’

(service user)

1. General Social Care Council (2002): Accreditation of universities to grant degree in social work. London GSCC, p21



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How are users and carers involved?

Users and carers are involved in four broad areas of activities:

Recruitment and selection of students on to social work programmes

Users and carers are involved by helping to design the interview process and/or in the actual interviews. The practical difficulty of securing participation in all interviews, is cited as a barrier.

Teaching and learning

The most common role for both service users and carers in the classroom is to present their personal stories as case studies or testimonies. However users and carers wish to be involved in a meaningful way in all aspects of teaching and learning rather than being parachuted in to do the 'life story slot'. In some HEIs users' and carers' experiences are seen as relevant across the curriculum. Sometimes user and carer experience is presented in the form of digital recordings such as video. Innovative approaches to participation such as art or drama are also sometimes used as teaching tools.

Assessment of students

Users and carers are involved in assessment processes. There is however a perception at different levels in HEIs that assessment must be carried out by academic staff. This can present a barrier to involvement in this activity.

Involvement in programme management and beyond

In some HEIs users and carers are involved in the design of the programme, usually by sitting on strategic development boards. There are also examples of service users and carers being involved in the recruitment and selection of academic staff.

Accessibility is an equality issue

If HEIs do not ensure that they remove both physical and other barriers to the participation of carers and users in many instances involvement will simply not be possible. For example, early morning starts are not appropriate for users for many impairment related reasons. Carers also may not be able to start early because of their caring responsibilities. Ensuring that information is in accessible formats and that there is equal access to libraries and other facilities is vital. HEIs are advised to seek ways to reimburse participants at the time of outlay, or purchase tickets for travel in advance. HEIs should also establish robust methods of reimbursing the costs of replacement carers.

‘Access is still seen as being flat access for wheelchair users. It is that, but it is a lot more than that’

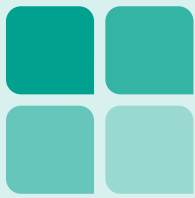
(service user)

Engaging with user and carer groups

It is vital that HEIs engage with local user and carer groups. Local groups can provide help with assembling a wider pool of users and carers. They can ensure that the activity is truly user and carer led. They may also assist with accessing seldom-heard groups and providing help with support, advice and training.

Structuring participation

Locally there is a range of different ways that user and carer involvement in social work education has been structured. In some areas local user and carer groups have contracts with HEIs to provide participation in their programmes. Some HEIs have used GSCC grant funding to directly employ involvement coordinators or employ



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someone in partnership with a local user/carer group. These workers may be based either within a user or carer group, in the HEI or a combination. There are advantages and disadvantages to all these arrangements. The co-coordinator role is a highly complex one requiring the ability to liaise with a wide range of stakeholders. What is clear however is that wherever they are based involvement co-ordinators require dedicated ring fenced time, formal contracts of employment, appropriate support and regular supervision

‘It’s about bridging the gap between theory and practice’
(Carer)

Users and carers working together

Users and carers do have different and sometimes conflicting perspectives. It is a challenge for all stakeholders to find ways of working which maintain the integrity of both perspectives and promote equality between users and carers. Some programmes have incorporated teaching sessions where a user and carer both present and this can allow students to explore these issues in the safety of the classroom. Involvement co-ordinators have a responsibility to ensure balance between users and carers not only purely in the numbers involved but also ensuring equality of opportunity.

‘There are just as many relationships in the world as there are between a carer and a service user’
(Involvement Co-ordinator)

Support and training

Users and carers will need training and support in order to effectively perform all the tasks required by HEIs. In providing such training there is a balance to be struck between ensuring users and carers receive appropriate training and preventing their contributions becoming over professionalised in order that they remain fresh and powerful. For carers and users, telling their personal stories to students can be difficult and distressing. HEIs have a duty of care to facilitate this in a sensitive and supportive manner. For example some HEIs provide an opportunity for debriefing or have developed buddying arrangements.

Paying users and carers for their involvement

It is a well established principle of good practice in participation that users and carers should be paid for their time and have their expenses reimbursed. In some HEI s users and carers are paid as visiting lecturers. Despite some recent changes in the regulations around payments for participation and the welfare benefit systems, these remain a barrier. At a local level enormous time and effort is spent on developing and implementing payments polices. However this is a problem which can only be resolved at national level.

‘We are seeing this as being a partnership, and if it’s a partnership then we must pay people the going rate. Because if we are not, then we are giving the message that this isn’t a partnership; we are not equally valuing you here’
(Involvement Co-ordinator)



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User and carer knowledge

Valuing the knowledge of users and carers and recognising that this is different but equal to professional and academic knowledge is of critical importance to the effectiveness of programmes. If users and carers did not have different perspectives from professionals and academics it would not be necessary to involve them in social work education.

‘Our role in teaching ... challenges perspectives of tutors as well as students’

(service user)

Involving seldom-heard users

It is important that HEIs involve a diverse range of users and carers in their programmes. Specific and proactive strategies may need to be developed to ensure that for example young carers, members of black and minority ethnic groups and care experienced young people are fully involved in programmes.

Funding and resources

User and carer participation in social work education is a relatively new development which requires stable and adequate resourcing. HEIs must ensure that they have dedicated and appropriate resources for this activity. There is also a responsibility at national level to ensure

that this activity is properly funded. User and carer led groups are often very poorly resourced and fragile organisations. There is a need for HEIs to have an understanding of the pressures and difficulties such groups' experience. There may be a need for HEIs to engage in a capacity building approach when working with local groups.

The development of a national forum

There are numerous examples of really good practice in some areas. However overall the national picture is patchy and inconsistent. To find out what approaches work best in what circumstances, there is a need for more evaluations of the impact user and carer involvement has on social work education. Both the reports on service users and carers suggest that a national forum with a strategic overview of the development of user and carer involvement in social work education should be developed.

Further information

Report 28: Developing user involvement in social work education.

This report was produced by Shaping Our Lives National User Network.

Report 29: Carers as partners in social work education.

This is a report of a project carried out by the University of Sussex Department of Social Work, in partnership with the Princess Royal Trust for Carers (PRTC), Crossroads Association and Carers UK.

SCIE's At a glance summaries have been developed to help you understand as quickly and easily as possible the important messages on a particular topic. You can also use them as training resources in teams or with individuals.

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