Service users and carers' involvement in social work education: lessons from an English case study

Implicarea beneficiarilor de servicii sociale si a sustinatorilor lor in pregatirea profesionala a asistentilor sociali: un studiu de caz britanic

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Within the larger context of the search to improve social work practice in Europe, this article presents a case study of a UK innovation in social work education with the potential to radically change social work practice. Following governmental requirements, Anglia Ruskin University has introduced systematic involvement of service users and carers in the training of a new undergraduate degree since September 2003. The conceptual and value base, the structure, staffing, and main activities are outlined; the main achievements and obstacles are highlighted. Mindful of the danger of slipping into tokenistic involvement, the project has included an action research evaluation component exploring the views of all the project's stakeholders thus establishing the project as an evidence-based educational innovation. The findings highlight the value of service users and carers' involvement on the qualifying social work degree, of the action research design of the evaluation, and the steps needed for the cultural change required for such an involvement to become more comprehensive and embedded in the degree.

Keywords: service user and carer involvement; social work education; evaluation; action research

In contextul eforturilor de a imbunatati practica serviciilor sociale in Europa, acest articol prezinta studiul de caz al unei inovatii educationale britanice care ar putea schimba radical practica de asistenta sociala. In urma unor cerinte guvernamentale, din septembrie 2003 Anglia Ruskin University a introdus implicarea sistematica a beneficiarilor serviciilor sociale si a sustinatorilor lor in pregatirea profesionala a noilor asistenti sociali. Pentru a evita o incluziune tokenista, proiectul a inclus o componenta de cercetare-actiune pentru evaluarea opiniilor tuturor participantilor in project asadar bazand aceasta inovatie pe evidenta. Studiul a demonstrat valoarea implicarii beneficiarilor de servicii sociale in pregatirea profesionala a asistentilor sociali, precum si valoarea stilului participativ si democratic al cercetarii. Studiul a clarificat de asemenea pasii ce trebuie facuti pentru a crea schimbarea culturala necesara pentru ca acest tip de contributie sa devina parte integranta a cursului de Asistenta Sociala.

Cuvinte cheie: implicarea beneficiarilor de servicii sociale si a sustinatorilor lor; educatia de asistenta sociala; evaluare; cercetare-actiune

Introduction

The realities currently faced by European societies (globalisation, ethnic diversity, social exclusion, and unlimited exchange of information) impose new challenges for social workers. Within this context social cohesion becomes a focus of political concern. Efforts are being made by international organisations to develop a common professional framework. New approaches to practice and implicitly to education are needed to meet the challenge (Jones and Radulescu 2006).

European social work degrees vary in content and in the balance of theoretical and practical training. The International Federation of Social Workers is developing a European Framework for Quality Assurance of the Social Professions and has identified the involvement of service users and carers in the running and development of social services as a key element in the

social worker role (Jones and Radulescu 2006). Uniquely in Europe, the UK is setting up to achieve this objective by formally requiring universities to ensure the 'formal and systematic' (NISCC 2003, p. 9), 'ongoing…core…and essential' (CCW 2005, p. 5) participation of service users and carers in all aspects of social work education. This covers teaching; selection, admission, and assessment of students; design and evaluation of the degree; and course management (DoH 2002, p. 9). The purpose of the agenda is 'to ensure that newly qualified social workers have a thorough understanding of the standards of practice, processes and outcomes that service users and carers want' (Levin 2004, p. 8), and that they enter practice with a user involvement agenda.

The development of the new UK degree in social work is partly in response to the Bologna process (Confederation of EU Rectors 2000), the EU agreement which seeks convergence of the higher education systems and requires professional undergraduate qualifications to be of at least three years duration.

The new degree was also seen as an opportunity to advance social work education by making it mandatory for the educational institutions to provide service user and carer involvement (SUCI) in the new training programmes (DoH 2002, NISCC 2003, SSSC 2003, CCW 2005), with each university receiving a small annual grant towards the costs from the respective regulatory bodies.[1] Although other countries (e.g. Brazil, Canada, Israel, US) offer examples of user involvement in education (Shor and Sykes 2002), to the best of our knowledge the UK is the only country where this is a mandatory requirement. This makes it important to explore critically the British existing evidence in order to understand the obstacles and opportunities that systematic user involvement within a social work degree may entail.

In this paper we present the Service User and Carer Involvement programme developed at Anglia Ruskin University,[2] a university located in the East of England. At undergraduate level the university provides a three-year social work full time course and a four-year part time course. Our account covers the setting up years of the project, 2003–2005, and discusses the process of developing such an initiative based on an action research evaluation.

Values and conceptual underpinnings of SUCI in social work education

The terminology referring to people benefiting from social care and health services has been controversial at all times, due to the perceived imbalance of power between those who invent it and those who carry the label (Heffernan 2006). *Service user* is a term adapted by social work from social policy in the early 1990s. It since has permeated the UK health and social care policy, research and practice. Yet Heffernan (2006) argues that while the terminology is meant to imply involvement, being invented by professionals (the powerful group) it may in fact work against it (p. 827). Our participants rejected the *service user* label suggesting *consultant* as a term reflecting their role within the project, conferring dignity and status. To avoid confusion, however, in this article we will refer to service users and carers as *consultants* only when discussing their involvement in the project.

Service user involvement in British social work education has taken place unsystematically since the mid-1980s, initiated by individual lecturers (Ramon and Sayce 1993, Beresford 1994, Humphreys 2005, Manthorpe *et al.* 2005). It gained momentum in the 1990s as the user movement in the UK became stronger, alongside the focus on training for anti-discriminatory practice and social inclusion (Levin 2004). Less has happened in terms of carers' involvement, perhaps because the carers' movement is yet to fully develop in the UK. Thus far even less of such involvement takes place in English social services (Carr 2004).

The values underpinning SUCI include respect, equality, genuine partnership, social inclusion and empowerment (Beckett and Maynard 2005). The wish for genuine partnership between the different stakeholders in social work stems from an equality agenda as much as from the realisation that unless such a partnership exists, users and carers will not be sufficiently motivated to pull their full weight into the joint change effort which social work entails.

Social inclusion is an integral part of the equality agenda, and SUCI provides a good example of it in social work education by treating users and carers as givers rather than as only takers. The outcome aimed at is for social work students to 'treat service users as active participants in service delivery rather than as passive recipients' (Levin 2004, p. 9).

Empowerment is mentioned at times both as an underlying value and an objective of user and carer involvement. When not tokenistic, SUCI can enhance empowerment. The introduction of systematic SUCI in social work education is also underpinned by the wish to learn from service user and carer experience in order to improve the performance of social work. This implies that social workers recognise their knowledge and practice limitations and value service users and carers' experiential knowledge as a source of insight (Beresford 2000, Payne 2003). The readiness to learn from experiential knowledge reflects a postmodernist, non-positivistic epistemological approach (Hugman 2003), as opposed to modernistic, positivistic perspectives dominant in medicine, the natural sciences, and government circles.

SUCI is based on the recognition that although social work students engage with service users and carers in their practice placements, the power imbalance within the encounter makes it difficult to share experiential knowledge. When the power differential is reduced and the service users and carers feel respected for what they can offer, they are more able to share their perspective. A favourable background for such sharing is facilitated in our project by treating service users and carers' experience as possessing expert knowledge, and through fair payment.

The postmodernist view of power includes its positive ability to create changes (Foucault 1979, Rees 1991). SUCI is about changing the power imbalance between service users and carers, and workers by recognising the centrality of the former's perspective to social work knowledge. This shift also implies not only less power for social work educators and practitioners in monopolising the knowledge base of social work, but also that the contribution of educators to knowledge has to be re-thought (Maglajlic 2003).

Viewing users and carers as givers, which SUCI promotes, reinforces the strengths approach, developed within North American social work (Saleeby 1992), aimed to move from the deficit model (focused only on the weaknesses of users and carers) to locating strengths, present or potential, and working on developing these further. The strengths approach is linked to the social model of disability, developed largely by service users who were also activists and social scientists in the last 20 years of the twentieth century (Campbell and Oliver 1996). This model proposes that the limitations of any disability lie in the social barriers to the inclusion of people who have specific disabilities. It opposes the prevalent attitude that a person with a disability is disabled first, with all of his/her qualities being conditioned by the disability. This approach calls for people with disability to act collectively as well as individually towards enabling disabled people to lead a fulfilling life as defined by them, and calls for change in professional attitudes and practice accordingly. We lack evidence as to how widely the strengths model is accepted and applied by social workers across different areas of social work practice in the UK and continental Europe.

The Anglia Ruskin (ARU) SUCI project

The new Requirements for Social Work Training (DoH 2002) emphasise 'practice and the practical relevance of theory', requiring the involvement of service users and carers in all parts of the design and delivery of the programme (p. 9). This requirement is open ended, thus giving educators the opportunity to develop their own models of involvement.

The team

At Anglia Ruskin the SUCI project has been developed and run by a team of teaching and research staff and the model of involvement has been informed by individual lecturers' experience and knowledge of relevant literature (e.g. Ramon and Sayce 1993, Beresford 1994). People with current or recent experience of public and voluntary social or health care services were appointed as site[3]-coordinators for the project, responsible for organising the *consultants'* involvement, networking and making the project known. Appointed for eight

hours weekly they were also responsible for organising a site project advisory group (PAG). Within the PAG, representatives of local organisations (some of which were user-led), academic staff, and students met to discuss site relevant issues related to systematic involvement, networking, and the events organised by the project. A steering group composed of academics and the SUCI site-coordinators met once per semester to oversee the project, while a senior ARU lecturer took responsibility for the day-to-day management of the project.

In the first two years the project has involved 18 *consultants*, bringing their experience and expertise from areas such as mental health; physical disability; learning difficulties; services for older people; services supporting parents and young people (Table 1). While a smaller and constant number of consultants would have been an equally valuable model we preferred to create a larger pool of consultants to avoid involvement fatigue and to bring in a variety of viewpoints to benefit the students' learning experience (Levin 2004).

Table 1. SUCI consultants involved in teaching during the first two years of the project.			
Service user group	Cambridge	Chelmsford	Total
Mental health	5	1	6
Learning difficulty	2		2
Physical disability	1	2	3
Carers	2	2	4
Older people	1		1
Parents	1	1	2
Total	12	6	18

The involvement

The involvement of consultants within the modules concentrated around a mix of 'personal testimony', and a 'consultants as co-trainers' model (Manthorpe 2000). The presenters described their direct experience and degree of satisfaction with social workers and social care services within various conceptual contexts (e.g. empowerment, discrimination) and in relation to various social work tasks, as relevant to students' learning objectives.

Apart from direct presence in the classroom the lecturers, in partnership with the *consultants* and the coordinators, have envisaged other involvement styles (Table 2).

As an exploration of the implications of involvement in student evaluation a group of *consultants* was also invited to co-assess with lecturers students' presentations within the Innovations in Health and Social Work module, and in the revision of some modules. The experience was valued positively by the students, *consultants,* and staff, marking an important step forward. A more substantial involvement in marking assignments was however seen as controversial, given the concern that the *consultants* would not be sufficiently qualified to have an involvement in students' summative results. However, examples of other universities in the region involving service users and carers in the students' presentations indicate this to be an appropriate type of service user contribution in assessment, raising the issue of the need for further cultural shift among our lecturers.

Service users and carers were also partially involved in the admission process by suggesting questions included within the admission interview. We have looked at the possibility of having *consultants* as co-interviewers, an innovation which other universities have implemented, but we lacked the financial resources to pay *consultants* for the over 250 interviews we run per year. Authors evaluating the implementation of the GSCC requirements note the variation of what universities were able to achieve in the first years of the initiative (Levin 2004).

A successful type of involvement was and remains the Information Fair. This event offers students and lecturers the opportunity to meet informally with a variety of service users, carers and representatives of local organisations and engage in an informal dialogue.

Table 2. Types of consultant involvement.			
Involvement within classroom	**Involvement outside classroom**	**Media and literature**	**Events**
Types of involvement used at ARU			
Presentation by *consultant*	Contribution to student admission	Books, chapters and articles written by service users and/or carers	Information Fairs
Dividing students into small groups, discussing each with a *consultant*, and reuniting the group for general discussion	Involvement in the evaluation of the course and of the SUCI project		Conference
Panel discussion with up to five consultants	Input on student presentations		
Other possible types of involvement			
Informal conversation in class between the *consultant* and the lecturer followed by discussion time with students	Student visits in the community to meet service users and carers	TV documentaries	
Role play _ exercises on experiencing disability, mental health difficulties, etc with the help of guests from organisations or community groups		Audio tape material	

We have recognised that practice teachers have an essential role in facilitating opportunities for students to engage in service user involvement in practice, thus applying the experiential knowledge received from the *consultants.* While limited resources prevented us from extending SUCI to their workplaces, we nonetheless have begun to raise the practice teachers' awareness about it and identify their support needs for the implementation of such involvement.

The resources

In line with recommended best practice (Levin 2004) all *consultants* were paid for their contributions at guest speaker rate for teaching, and a smaller honorarium and travelling expenses for other types of involvement. As expected with a growing project, the initial GSCC funding has been insufficient and had to be matched by the university. The most needed resource was more paid time for the SUCI coordinators and for the project manager.

The evaluation of the SUCI project

As this was an innovation previously not applied at this scale, and mindful of the danger of unwittingly slipping into a tokenistic mode of involvement, the team has systematically evaluated the project for the first two years. This was identified as best practice by Levin (2004). The evaluation had a one-cycle action research design allowing ongoing implementation of change and the exploration of what works and what does not work in the project (Winter and Munn-Giddings 2001). It involved all the project stakeholders: consultants, PAG members, academic staff, students, and practice teachers. The aim was to ensure that the project is evidence-based, and that it benefits from feedback throughout. The research

had an element of third-person research practice (Ladkin 2004) by adopting a holistic and participative approach to the inquiry. All stakeholders were involved in generating and interpreting knowledge about the project's effectiveness, thus contributing to the changes identified as necessary. This research approach was chosen to reduce the anticipated tension that the required culture change might create by ensuring a participatory process of shared work.

The areas addressed by the evaluation reflect those identified by previous authors (Beresford 1994, Levin 2004), focusing on the actual experience of involvement by all key stakeholders. The research was led by the then SUCI project manager (Professor Ramon) and conducted by an ARU researcher (Roxana Anghel), and has been funded from the Research Assessment Exercise, a UK research funding scheme for higher education.

Published reports on user involvement in social work education and informal discussions with peers indicate that the evaluation of the ARU project is in some respects unique in its systematic and holistic focus on all aspects of the involvement and from all stakeholders. Some UK universities have also collected stakeholder views about the involvement of consultants in social work education (Humphreys 2005, Baldwin and Sadd 2006, Robson and Johns 2006). The 2006 GSCC report mentions involvement in the monitoring and evaluation of the course by consultants operating across 67% of the responding universities (GSCC 2006, p. 24). This referred mainly to evaluating the reactions of the participants to different aspects of the degree with some cases of participation in review meetings.

Research design

The study was conducted in three sites, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods as appropriate to the focus of inquiry and the stakeholder group (see Table 3). Although the questionnaire is not an ideal data collection tool in action research studies (Gray 2004), in this instance it was considered adequate for the purpose of ensuring anonymity, wide distribution, and completion within the time required. The data obtained are largely qualitative as all questionnaires were mainly based on open-ended questions. The data have been analysed thematically and some responses permitted quantification. Each data collection tool looked at group-specific themes as described below and the analysis followed these themes.

Table 3. Research design.			
Stakeholders	**Time frame**	**Sample**	**Method of data collection**
FT Students year 1	2003-04 and 2004-05	167 (71%)	Baseline and end-of-year questionnaires (two years)
FT Students year 2	July 2005	22 (31%)	Focus groups x 7
SUCI consultants	April-May 2005	15 (83%)	Semi-structured phone interviews
PAG members	Sept-Oct 2004	15	Semi-structured phone and face-to-face interviews
BA lecturers	April 2004￼ April 2005	13￼ 11 (58%)	Face-to-face and phone interviews￼ Questionnaires
Practice teachers	2004-05	22	Questionnaires

First year students completed baseline and end of year questionnaires looking at the development of their understanding of user and carer involvement, and their views on the usefulness of this type of training. In the second year students were involved in focus group discussions on the impact of the project on their learning.

The *consultants* were interviewed in the second year on the positives and the negatives associated with acting as educators; their needs and expectations; the meaning that the involvement had for them; their strategies for coping with difficult emotions generated by the experience; and the message that they would like to convey to social work students.

The PAG activity and progress in achieving genuine and systematic involvement was also evaluated by the participants.

The views of the BA social work lecturers on the structure of the project, and its impact on their teaching were collected through interviews in the first year and questionnaires in the second. Given that not all lecturers involved *consultants* up to that point the questionnaire distributed to the BA lecturers had two sections. The first explored the experience of involving *consultants*, its positives and drawbacks. The second explored the views, hopes and worries of the lecturers who did not involve *consultants*. Out of 19 teaching staff, the first section has been completed by 10 respondents and the second by one. While the response to the second section cannot be generalised, it offers some insight as to the reasons for which not all lecturers took up the challenge up to that point.

Given the numbers, location and workload, a questionnaire was again chosen when exploring the views of practice teachers. It focused on their practice related to user involvement within the service placements and on whether their services had specific policies to enable collective user involvement. We were also interested in whether users and their carers were involved in placement planning, student selection, evaluation of student practice and final assessment, as well as in teaching, learning, or supervision.

All stakeholders have been invited to make suggestions for change.

The research has been discussed by the PAG's members regarding the design and the interpretation of the findings. They contributed to the instrument design by suggesting changes in terminology or additional questions, and worked in small groups on possible solutions to the issues raised by the findings. Participation in the interviews provided an opportunity to impact on the programme through feedback on its approach and the content.

Findings

Students

Most social work students considered the involvement of service users and carers on the course as an important part of their training which gave them the opportunity to empathise with the *consultants*, see them as human beings, develop skills and get 'the view from the inside'. The *consultants'* input made teaching 'real' for them, and made them aware of the impact that social work services and professionals have on people's lives. It enabled them to distinguish between the positive and negative aspects of social work, and to understand how theory relates to practice.

> When you are given a case study you are not working with a real person. [The involvement] gives you some of the emotions [...] and that came across a lot more clearly than writings on a piece of paper.

One year into training, second year students felt that they gained a better understanding of the role of the carers, and were helped to see service users and carers as survivors rather than as victims. They also saw the unique value of this opportunity, a view echoed in other universities (Humphreys 2005).

> No lecture could have made that impact on me.

Some also felt that meeting the consultants made an impact at a personal level.

> Made me stop and think.

> Changed my whole way of thinking.

However, some of them reported struggling when the *consultants* presented an exclusively negative feedback about social work, and suggested a more balanced account. This finding mirrors that of other reviews, acknowledging that 'dissatisfaction and even conflict may be an inevitable part of the user participation process' (Carr 2004, p. 19).

Preparation of students and consultants prior to topic-focused involvement, balance of presentation, as well as debriefing was suggested. Follow up group discussions incorporated in the curriculum to revisit and internalise new knowledge were suggested by students as good practice that would increase the effectiveness of the *consultants'* involvement in their education.

Consultants

The *consultants* responded to the call to participate as educators for a number of personal reasons

> …I've got something to give.

> It helps clarify my thoughts about things by talking – a way of looking back analytically to my experience.

> For me it's a privilege…it is a right for a user…it moves away the focus from the professionally defined need.

> I feel I'm doing something for the future.

Overall their feedback refuted initial concerns that their involvement could be perceived as exploitative. Instead they enjoyed working with the students, finding them generally open minded and engaged, and seeing their involvement as a platform for highlighting important issues. However, they criticised the lack of briefing and debriefing, and some reported problems such as perceiving participation as failure (one respondent), fatigue during involvement, and some difficulties related to access and time allocation.

One of the most important issues raised by some *consultants* was the students' reaction to the negative views about social workers that they expressed during their presentations. This made them realise that students need to develop a broad vision of people's difficulties, and suggested that the programme should accommodate honest expression of feelings as 'it is not only about making it friendly – sometimes the users are angry'.

They requested adequate induction focused on the aims, planning, and expectations from their involvement prior to the event. They also highlighted the need for decent attendance, and the mediation of the dialogue between students and *consultants* by the lecturer to minimise tension. They expected the programme to consider their needs, work from a strengths perspective, and avoid causing anxiety.

The *consultants* hoped that the students would retain key messages about the value of 'being human', passionate about the job, empathic, a good listener, open minded, reflective on their role in people's lives, patient, diplomatic and respectful when making decisions as a social worker.

PAG members

The *consultant* PAG members were motivated towards participation mainly by their wish to change the system and the attitudes of social workers towards a more inclusive and empathic practice. PAG members saw their participation as an opportunity to network, develop skills, have a voice and use their expertise. However in their eyes the approach of the SUCI team was not entirely conducive to partnership. PAG members complained in the first year that the project had an intellectualised approach with difficult language and information that was difficult to manage. They felt that they had no clear image of the degree curriculum as a whole. They also felt that the experience of the *consultants* is stretched to fit the modules, which felt tokenistic. A mentorship scheme, and guidelines and support for newcomers were suggested as best practice. Also they recommended the recruitment of a variety of *consultants,* and development of a more informal meeting structure, less prone to be dominated by academic staff. They requested a more central position for the project within the degree. These issues highlight recurrent shortcomings at the beginning of such projects (Beresford 1994, Baldwin and Sadd 2006).

BA lecturers

Overall the feedback from the lecturers who involved *consultants* was positive. Most respondents appeared committed to the philosophy underlying the requirement for service users and carers' involvement and to allocating the necessary resources to this initiative.

> It is about equity, balance, dignity and truthfulness.

One lecturer however preferred not to 'idealise' the development being apprehensive about whether 'sharing the teaching' is the right term to describe the involvement.

The lecturers' views converged with that of the students, seeing the involvement as having clear benefits in bringing teaching 'near to what's real', offering students a more 'human', fresher perspective than the academic one, 'counteracting stereotypes' and introducing students to complexity early. It also offered real-life examples of helpful and unhelpful professional attitudes and behaviours.

The negatives referred to insufficient preparation of students, which resulted in some cases in disrespectful, negative and challenging attitudes especially towards those *consultants* who presented exclusively negative views. Adequate preparation of the *consultants* was also seen as directly linked to the quality of the delivery and its meaningfulness to the students' learning objectives. Lecturers also expressed appreciation of the role of the site-coordinators and the structure of the project, which made it 'workable in practice'.

The feedback from the lecturer who did not involve consultants highlighted the crucial role of the site-coordinators who need to develop close contact and teamwork with the lecturers.

Practice teachers

Most practice teachers (16 out of 22 respondents) found it difficult to implement the new requirements for service user and carer involvement within their services due to lack of specific policy and training. However most gave examples of how service users and carers were already involved in evaluating student's practice (64%) and the final assessment of students' learning (86%), quoting verbal, written, formal and informal methods. The service users' feedback questionnaire was a common tool but was acknowledged as inefficient as few were completed and returned, while some service users were unable to use them. Less involvement was evident in relation to students' teaching, learning and supervision on placement. In some services (36%) though, some opportunities were created through workshops, service user groups, and by being co-observers of the students' professional behaviour.

The practice teachers highlighted the need for a protocol, guidance, and a unified format of student assessment across universities. They suggested that increased support from the university would enhance team cohesiveness and would ensure correspondence between academic teaching and their own professional knowledge. They felt that due to the daily practical concerns of their jobs they do not have an opportunity to update their knowledge about research and other developments in the field and consequently sometimes feel out of tune with the students.

Following the evaluation it became obvious that a closer collaboration with practice teachers is needed, their involvement being essential to ensure that the knowledge accumulated from the *consultants* is successfully transferred into practice. Two meetings were organised resulting in a forum initiated by the practice teachers, as they felt that one of their main difficulties was the lack of support and contact between them. However due to lack of additional funding the university was not able to contribute to the forum.

Information Fairs

The Information Fairs were relatively well attended but the evaluation form was returned only by some (between 30% and 50% of the attendees on each project site). All respondents

appreciated the event as very useful, giving them insight into issues they were otherwise unaware of. These included the stigma associated with accessing social services; the importance of good communication and partnership with service users; and the stigma around mental health, old age, and sensory impairment. Suggestions for improvement of this event referred to increasing the variety of organisations invited. The guests (users, carers and organisation representatives from an average of 11 organisations per site, per event) also enjoyed their dialogue with the students. They found the events useful in enabling to be heard and to network with the other participants.

From the project perspective, the Information Fairs offer opportunities for users and carers to demonstrate their ability to give to the community and to be present as partners for social workers.

Implications of the findings for the SUCI project

The evaluation has had some impact on all aspects of the project: structure, content, procedure, and overall culture of the course. Following each data collection phase the data were interpreted together with the PAG members. This process has generated significant changes in the way the project is run, as described below.

Some of the findings related to the experience of classroom-based involvement, and the interaction between students and *consultants*, suggested the need for an ethical and procedural framework to protect the interests of *consultants* and students. Consequently a Protocol & Ethics document was constructed. This provides guidelines on preparation, involvement on the day, debriefing, and ethical aspects related to access and support to students and *consultants*. It also emphasises the *consultants'* control over the personal information they choose to disclose and over their participation.

The feedback has also resulted in training offered to *consultants* by the site-coordinators. The training focused on gaining confidence, effective presentation skills, dealing with disclosure, and issues related to expectations and students' learning. While this training has not been formally evaluated the informal immediate feedback from participants was positive.

Students felt the need for a variety of examples of social work from a larger diversity of consultants. While this has been tackled with variable results across the two sites (see Table 1) involvement of some user groups, such as children and young people, was difficult to arrange. The gatekeepers of children's services felt that the university is an intimidating environment for children. More financial resources would have allowed creative solutions to this issue, such as creating a DVD with children and young people's views on social work topics, or bringing in a group of them to talk with small groups of students.

The lecturers' feedback has influenced the working style of the site-coordinators. They have intensified their presence and contribution within the academic team meetings, and have initiated one-to-one meetings with lecturers. This has resulted in systematic involvement available in the academic year 2005–2006, including some modules with more than one *consultant* session.

The findings have also impacted on the format of the PAG meetings, which have become more informal, with service users or carers chairing the meetings. Most work was carried out through a small-group discussion model, ensuring equal space and supportive atmosphere for personal contribution. The language of the discussions and of the written materials generated by the course was also altered to increase accessibility.

The requirement for user and carer involvement in social work education has required cultural change among lecturers and at the management level. The first two years of the SUCI project constitute the first steps towards this change, the action research evaluation having the role of pulling out the issues affecting it, which we then acted upon with some degree of success. The presence at management and departmental meetings of the SUCI co-ordinators has generated awareness of the role and importance of this requirement, resulting for instance in additional financial support.

Conclusions

Systematic user and carer involvement in the new British social work degree is a relatively new and radical development, reflecting change in perception about the role and contribution of users and carers to social work knowledge. It is also rooted in the wish to establish genuine partnerships within education and social care, which have the potential to reduce the power imbalance thus far inherent in both.

The first two years of our project have provided a challenging experience marking the beginning of the shift in the local culture of social work education. With some exceptions, by the end of the first two years the project has made a good start in terms of staff members' commitment. It was further enhanced by the readiness of local organisations and user activists to collaborate fully with the project, and by the warm reception *consultants* received from students. Its key successes have been comprehensive involvement in teaching on the BA degree (after the evaluation the project extended also to the MA degree), and a sound participatory project structure. Other areas of no less importance, such as participation in curriculum building, organising involvement for part time students, and more work with practice teachers are awaiting further development.

One of the main obstacles encountered by the project was the limited resources of funding and time. This has impacted especially on work with the practice teachers, on maintaining momentum generally, and in involving some more difficult to reach groups of service users. Some areas of involvement remained insufficiently explored (e.g. involvement in admissions), while other UK universities made more rapid advancement in these areas. However such an endeavour takes time to develop the trust and the appropriate parameters to ensure that the *consultants'* contribution is efficient and valuable for all involved.

The on-going evaluation has been an indispensable tool in enabling us to reflect and learn alongside developing the project. The action research framework has proved an appropriate design for the purpose of the evaluation of the SUCI project. It empowered the participants, enabled change and improvement of the project as it evolved, and fostered immediate action and reflection on its consequences. While most of the stakeholders were not involved in initiating the research, they were included in instrument design, feedback, analysing the findings in small-groups sessions, and in planning further action. Thus the programme has benefited from a development grounded in the views of all those involved. The two-year span of the research was also appropriate as it allowed the collection of data that then informed the systematic planning of the third year of the project. The longitudinal approach offered information on the process of change and on the internal politics dimension inevitably central to all innovation and evaluation (Robson 2002). The findings mirror most of the suggestions in the literature related to best practice in user and carer involvement in social work education (Beresford 1994, Levin 2004).

The evaluation has also demonstrated that the structure of the project, and the PAGs as fora facilitating input from users and carers into its running represent good practice and should be maintained. The usefulness of users and carers' involvement has also been amply demonstrated. Overall the evaluation has proved its trustworthiness through the extent of the change generated through collaboration with the stakeholders (Reason and Bradbury 2001), which assisted the project in meeting its classroom-based objectives.

This has been an example of interventionist responsive evaluation (Gray 2004) concerned with the stakeholders' self-reported first impressions of the process, and with the project's activities and their immediate outcomes. While this has been a useful first step, we need more in-depth and rigorous evaluation of the outcomes, looking both at the content of the consultants' input and the longer range outcomes such as its impact on students' and lecturers' practice.

In conclusion we have learned that the implementation of systematic users and carers' involvement is rewarding in the short term, but demands a considerable commitment over a long period of time.

This approach to users and carers' involvement is a response to the IFSW suggestion for updated approaches to social work practice and education needed to prepare the social workers for the new challenges created by globalisation and a changing society (Jones and Radulescu 2006, p. 414). It is new to social work internationally, and it would be useful for it to be tried out in other countries too (Haug 2005). Our experience shows that it offers a unique resource for training with the potential to transform social work education, but only if a genuine everyday partnership is fostered at every aspect of the training. It will be in social work practice that its ultimate test and value lie.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1.   Each of the four UK countries has a social care regulatory body: the General Social Care Council for England (GSCC), the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, the Scottish Social Services Council, and the Care Council for Wales.
2.   Hereafter referred to as ARU.
3.   The project has been implemented on three sites: the Anglia Ruskin Cambridge and Chelmsford campuses, and the City College Norwich, a partner institution.

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