**Perspectives of experts-by-experience: An exploration of lived experience involvement in social work education**

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**Abstract**

The involvement of service users and carers is mandated in the development and delivery of social work education since 2002. At our university we have a very active group of six Service User and Carer Involvement (SUCI) experts who contribute to all aspects of the undergraduate and post graduate qualifying social work programmes. Six SUCI experts participated in a workshop to explore their lived experience of involvement in social work education. Qualitative data was recorded with permission and later transcribed as the participants discussed their perspectives of involvement in the programmes. Themes were co-created during the workshop and captured on a whiteboard; this was later photographed. Thematic data analysis was also applied to the discussion. Themes co-created in this study were identified as: expertise; motivations; authenticity; diversity; challenging students; enablers and barriers; and areas for improvement. The SUCI experts noted their sense of cohesion and team support as a group which was essential to their positive experiences of involvement; and identified their motivations for involvement which encourages them to challenge students to improve their practice. Moving forward we are committed to exploring how we can ensure effective involvement by developing co-production and ensuring the effective and creative involvement of the group.

**Key words:**

Service user involvement, social work education, lived experience, service user participation, experts-by-experience

**Introduction**

Service user and carer involvement in social work education is central to the effective development of the future social care workforce. Each subsequent social work regulator, since 2002, (Department of Health, 2002; General Social Care Council, 2012; Health and Care Professions Council, 2014; The College of Social Work, 2014) has mandated the participation of people with lived experience in social work education. Current guidance is now expressed in the standards of Social Work England (SWE), the social work regulator. SWE (2020a) states: ‘Social work courses must be governed, resourced and managed using effective and transparent processes in collaboration with employers and people with lived experience of social work. There must be processes to monitor and manage the quality and delivery of courses.’ More specifically, guidance (SWE, 2020b) states that social work programmes must ‘Ensure that the views of employers, practitioners and people with lived experience of social work are incorporated into the design, ongoing development and review of the curriculum’.

The importance of incorporating the voice of people with lived experiences is essential in the development and delivery of all aspects of social work. Service users’ contributions are fundamental to the development of social work theory and practice (Videmsek, 2017); and the validity of their knowledge is of increasing relevance to social work as we acknowledge their expertise(Fox, 2016). Recent developments to services in the UK incorporating personalisation and co-production have provided an important catalyst for moves towards empowering people in the adult social care sector (Hatton, 2017) Increasingly, service users are involved in mental health research, (Pinfold et al., 2015), and have a long history of participating, designing and influencing services (Rose et al., 1998). The experiences and perspectives of people with lived experience is of growing importance in all health and social care contexts (Fox, 2016; Goldberg et al., 2020; Mazanderani, et al., 2020).

At our University, SUCI[[1]](#footnote-1) (service user / carer involvement) experts have contributed effectively to the social work programmes since 2002 (Anghel & Ramon, 2009; Anghel, et al., 2010). I was involved as the group coordinator from 2006-2014 and now as academic lead since 2019. The group identified that they wanted to evaluate their success and enable other universities to learn from their experiences. This article provides an account of SUCI members’ views about their involvement in social work education. Perspectives of contributing to the programmes were captured within a workshop and themes about their experiences of involvement were co-created together. These themes are presented in this paper and their significance is contextualised in the wider literature.

**Background**

When I became SUCI academic lead, in conversation with members, we decided to write an article that celebrated their work through the voice of their lived experiences of involvement. However, following a systematic literature review, Robinson & Webber (2013) concluded that evaluations of the usefulness of user involvement in social work education are often process-led rather than outcomes-led; leading them to consider that their effectiveness is thus not clearly defined. Despite this assertion, other researchers (Rhodes, 2012; Unwin et al., 2018) acknowledge the value of such a process-led approach. For example, Unwin et al. (2018, p. 386) noted that questions about the validity of process-led studies ‘perhaps misses the point about the importance of the humanising effects of such exposure and the importance of underlying attitudes and perceptions gained while on higher education qualifying courses’. They emphasise the need for future practitioners to hear the user perspective in health and social care education because it enables them to acknowledge people with lived experience as individuals ‘worthy of respect and dignity’, and such involvement ‘is a pro-active way of trying to develop different cultures of care in future generations of professionals’ (Unwin et al., p.386). It is thus important to understand the process of involvement as well as the outcomes that are achieved; and yet few studies (Unwin et al., 2018) have focused on the perspective of involvement from people with lived experiences.

Furthermore, Noorani et al. (2019) have highlighted the value of ‘expert knowledge’. They note that experts-by-experience (EbEs) can acquire *deep experiential knowledge* from long-term participation in and contribution to mutual aid support groups. Members may draw on the long-term collective knowledge of the group and become experts-*of-*experience as they represent the shared memories and knowledge of a diverse group of people with a shared health need. Mazanderani, et al. (2020:280) build on this research and note that this deep experiential knowledge allows experts-of-experience to contribute to the development of evidence-based practice. They state that this research ‘highlights the need for increased scholarly attention to be given to emergent practices, technologies, and expertise aimed at turning experience into knowledge and evidence – what we have called expertise of experience; for example, the growing contingent of healthcare researchers and policy professionals (some more, some less professionalised)’. In this article, I therefore focus on this gap in the research and present an account of research which considers the experiences of SUCI experts from their perspective.

This article is written in the first person as a sole author; however, co-authorship was available to any SUCI member who both wanted to be acknowledged in the publication and who contributed to the research process. Despite this, SUCI experts were advised in the ethical process of the possibility that comments could be attributed to them if they co-authored the paper. The members prized the confidential nature of their involvement and their privacy; thus, they preferred to be acknowledged as part of the wider expert group. The importance of understanding this dual identity is explored by Goldberg et al. (2020) who illuminate the experiences of one author, who is a mental health practitioner who also became a hospital inpatient. This paper discusses the need to manage both personal and professional boundaries for this practitioner and to understand her needs for confidentiality about her health condition in her working and professional environment; thus, similarly, the SUCI experts wanted to preserve their anonymity and the confidentiality of their social care experiences. Additionally, I have experience of using mental health services (Fox, 2016) which influence my own understanding and relationship to this research and impacts on my sense of respect for SUCI.

**Evaluating SUCI involvement in social work education**

SWE (2020b) emphasise that people with lived experience should participate across the whole spectrum of the design and delivery of social work education. Guidance specifies the need for their contribution to: admissions and selection of students, developing teaching approaches and materials, planning and developing the course, teaching and learning activities, feedback and assessment, and to quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation. In order to effectively involve people with lived experience in social work education, SWE (2020b) recommends a focus on *co-production* utilising a framework developed by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE, 2015), which notes that involvement should be founded on principles of: equality, diversity, accessibility, and reciprocity.

Despite this mandate, involvement practice across social work programmes is diverse and utilises different models of practice (Hughes, 2017). In order to evaluate the levels of service user participation across Higher Education (HE) courses, I drew on work developed by Tew et al (2004) who defined the ‘Ladder of Involvement’, drawing on the work of Arnstein (1969). Although Tew et al.’s model was designed in 2004, it remains useful in analysing the extent of user participation in HE programmes. This framework evaluates the extent to which users and carers are involved across the course and the tasks they undertake. It considers policies on payment and reward; training and supervision opportunities for involvement experts; and to what extent people with lived experience are involved in decision-making and in shaping and influencing the course, more widely. The framework is divided into five levels, summarised below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| LEVEL 1 | NO INVOLVEMENT | Involvement is non-existent. |
| LEVEL 2 | LIMITED INVOLVEMENT | Involvement is at the consultative level, when service users and carers are invited to contribute to and shape the programme, but there is no systematic involvement. |
| LEVEL 3 | GROWING INVOLVEMENT | Service users are involved in some course elements and involvement is increasing across the course |
| LEVEL 4 | COLLABORATION | Service users are involved in more elements of the course, and contribute to making some decisions, but have limited participation in making key decisions about the course |
| LEVEL 5 | PARTNERSHIP | Service users are involved in all aspects of course development and delivery and are involved systematically in making strategic decisions about course implementation |

We have assessed that involvement is located between Level 3 and Level 4 at our university (‘growing involvement’) with some aspects situated at Level 2. SUCI experts are involved in all aspects of the social work programme: admissions processes, programme development and teaching, and assessment. Six experts contribute to the core programme, and ten further experts participate on a more ad hoc basis. Representation is diverse, including people with both experiences of service use and of being carers, and of using adult and children’s services, people from different disability backgrounds and from diverse heritages. Expertise and background of those involved in the workshop are described in the methodology.

***Types of involvement***

Six SUCI experts contribute in a dynamic way to the preparation for practice module, a skills-based module delivered across both undergraduate and post graduate qualifying programmes. The first session in this module is always led by SUCI as a question and answer panel, enabling students to ask questions about experiences of using social care. In another session, one member delivers Equality and Diversity Training, a session which I attended and found most engaging and challenging. Later in the course, the rest of the core group are involved in formative feedback and assessment on students’ final preparation for practice assessment, as they practise role play with the students. Student feedback always rates this session highly, but this data is not highlighted in this study, because the focus of this research is on the perspectives of the SUCI group. Across the social work programmes, SUCI members are supported by an administrator who works full-time both supporting the group and administering the preparation for practice module.

In this paper we reflect on the perspectives of the SUCI experts about their involvement in the social work courses. This perspective is important as it moves power from academics and practitioners to service users and carers by listening to the experiences of people with lived experiences (Videmsek, 2017). We focus on recounting the *process* of involvement in social work education from the frame of the *voice of experience*; a significant perspective as is highlighted by Unwin et al. (2018) because it enables social workers to connect their practice with the reality of service user experience. This is a voice often less heard in social work education when compared to the academic or student viewpoint; and is central for social workers to hear as they begin to build effective relationships with service users. Moreover, Mazanderani et al (2020) highlight the contribution that experts-*of*-experience can make to the development of evidence-based practice, underlining the significance of their voice in generating theory for practice.

Questions we consider are based on the local experience of one involvement group, but the study has relevance and applicability to other social work programmes because this research reveals the experiences of service user involvement experts from their perspective. The questions explored in this article include:

1. What motivates the group to work as SUCI?
2. How, from their perspective, does their involvement support the learning of social work students?
3. What are the enablers and challenges to effective involvement?

**Methodology**

An interpretative paradigm was adopted in this study. In this tradition, researchers emphasise understanding people’s experiences in context and reject the notion that all knowledge can be understood by rational, technical means (Flick, 2018). When researchers from the interpretative tradition (Flick, 2018) try to understand the experiences of other people, they not only recognise that the knowledge of the research participants is contextualised to the research setting, but also acknowledge that their analysis of the results is informed by their own beliefs and context. This caveat is particularly important because we captured qualitative data using a group workshop to explore the views of the involvement experts. Qualitative researchers reject the existence of objective knowledge and cannot claim, as positivists do, that the discovery of knowledge accurately represents reality (Flick, 2018). Thus, we acknowledge that although this data may not be universalisable, it may help other researchers to learn from our experiences as qualitative research can represent an *intersubjective* perception of reality.

Six members attended a workshop to capture their views on working as involvement experts. This approach was discussed and agreed together. The participants are involved in teaching the preparation for practice module and other activities, such as admissions interviewing and teaching on other modules.

 ***Ethical approval***

We acquired ethical approval to undertake the workshop with the members through the University Faculty Research Ethics Approval Committee (Application ESC-SREP-19-006). Permission was received from the Head of School to undertake the research. SUCI were given participant information sheets and signed participant consent forms to give their informed consent to take part in the workshop. They kept one consent form and I retained one for my records. We had permission to record and transcribe the data. It became clear, that although consent had been gained to record the data during the workshop, members became uncomfortable being recorded. Reassurance was given about how the data would be used and that private data would not be shared; the participants were satisfied with this reassurance.

***Research Methods***

Questions that were intended for use in the workshop were commented on and adapted following consultation with a SUCI expert not attending the workshop. Core members were invited to take part in a writing and discussion workshop; six attended. They were paid for their time and reimbursed travel expenses.

Discussion in the workshop was undertaken around five questions.

1. What are your experiences of using, or caring for people, who use services?
2. What motivates you to work as SUCI?
3. How, from your perspective, does your involvement support the learning of social work students?
	1. How does it benefit students?
	2. How does it benefit you?
4. What supports effective involvement from your perspective?
5. What are the challenges for effective involvement from your perspective?

In the workshop, I initially asked members to write down briefly how they responded to each question, and then planned to ask them to discuss the questions in small groups of two or three people to feed back the answers. As the workshop proceeded, it became clear that the written process was less effective, so I quickly adapted the format by asking participants to discuss their answers verbally and take notes to feed back. The section of feedback was recorded with the permission and then transcribed.

I facilitated the discussion by taking notes on a whiteboard about what the group felt and then agreed how to capture the ideas. The whiteboard was photographed to enable us to preserve the ideas that emanated from the discussion. The feedback sections were recorded to enable us to capture exactly what groups said. Private discussions were not recorded. The transcript was then circulated to allow participants to remove or clarify anything from the transcript that was unclear. Two comments were received from the group asking for verbatim quotes with ‘ummhhs’ to be removed from the transcript, and additional grammatical marks such as commas and full stops to be added to aid sense-making; thus, I complied with this request without compromising the data.

I used thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to inductively develop key themes from our reflections. This is conducive to an interpretative research paradigm in which there is a move from ‘a move from data towards theory’ (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992, p. 101). Braun & Clarke (2006: 87) highlight that thematic analysis involves a six-phase process which includes familiarisation with the data, followed by a process of searching for and defining themes, which are then confirmed through further iterative analysis of the data. They (2006: 83) acknowledge that thematic analysis is often flexible, encompassing an approach that can be both ‘inductive’ and ‘data-driven’. The themes were generated inductively and were structured around the ideas which had been agreed and clarified on the whiteboard.

**Sample**

The participants were invited to write their own biographies for inclusion in the paper to convey the breadth of their experience and knowledge. It was important to capture their story to understand their commitment to involvement and their expertise. Descriptions were edited, agreed with experts, and are included below. Support to generate the biographies was offered by the coordinator. All experts have been involved for at least five years and contribute to all aspects of involvement.

M01 is White-British; was a social worker for 10 years and in his mid-50s experienced a stroke. After three years of recovery, he joined the start-up of the local Volunteer Centre, setting up a mentoring programme supporting individuals with mental health and learning disabilities into voluntary work. M01 was a founding member of SUCI nearly 20 years ago.

M02 is White-Irish; has experience of self-supporting while using social care services. In his professional life, M02 has experience of running and developing services and being part of Multi-Disciplinary Teams and panels, as well as being active in patient and public involvement. M02 was Chief Executive Officer of a local disability organisation, which led the development and delivery of the Individual Budgets pilot programme in the local area.

M03 is of BME heritage and a care experienced person. M03 has been involved in both children in care councils and in participation projects. M03 has undertaken public speaking, leading training sessions and policy development in both the House of Commons and the Lords.

M04 is of BME heritage and had experience of foster care as he grew up. He experienced twenty years of psychiatric treatment during which time he was influential in developing support services such as inclusive theatre, the arts and music, education, and youth services in inner London. M04 is a working musician, and enjoys song-writing and art. He cares for his older father.

F01 is British-Welsh and is a former Treasurer for a parent carer forum, and a former Vice Chair of governors in a special school. F01 is a current member of a safeguarding adults and children's board. She is the sole carer for her parent and adult son with Autism who live a distance away.

F02 is White-British and was a young carer for her mother with mental health needs and from that experience has worked and volunteered in different mental health roles supporting people in the community and working within multi-disciplinary teams. F02 is also now an adult carer.

JD is of White-British heritage and works both as the part-time SUCI administrator and of the preparation to practice module. She supports many experts in their teaching and assessment activities, arranging transport, parking, and payment, alongside actively reminding the wider social work team of the needs of the EbEs, supporting any concern they may raise.

JF, the first author, is of White-British heritage and is a Senior Lecturer and the academic lead for involvement. JF also has experience of using mental health services, and these experiences are at the centre of her research and teaching. JF was formerly group administrator from 2005 – 2012.

**The Findings and their significance**

This section presents both a report of the findings and a discussion of their significance in the wider research context. The analytical framework offered by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) allows one to move iteratively between the data from this research and the literature; thus, enabling one to connect the themes from this study with the wider evidence base. Themes co-created in this study were identified as: expertise; motivations; authenticity; diversity; challenging students; enablers and barriers; and areas for improvement.

***Expertise***

The core group had experiences of using social work services both as adults and children; moreover all attendants had a dual perspective of being both service user experts and of doing paid work to either implement service improvement, or working as a professional. Expertise and skills of the members meant that they were not just experts in their own condition, but they were highly skilled and able trainers with a multitude of experiences. This was evident in the workshop discussion:

*JD: Then, just in terms of M03 specifically, it’s gone beyond SUCI, so his involvement with students has gone into diversity and equality training specifically, which is being beyond SUCI involvement.*

*JF: So it’s building confidence.*

*M04: No it’s building expertise*

*JD: No I think you all bring more than first-hand experience to this, because you all bring now is the experience of having done this for many years. You know this course better than they do. A lot of the advice that you give them, is from the perspective of knowing …*

*JF: Individual empowerment.*

*M03: It is that, it comes from that, but JD is trying to say…*

*JF: You get more, you do more…*

*M04: It goes beyond the SUCI role. …*

*JD: Because you’re picking up the knowledge of being here year on year. You know what to do. So yes you’ve brought your SUCI perspective, but you go beyond the SUCI.*

Group members have developed expertise ‘beyond the SUCI role’, becoming involved in many different activities. Such process is reflected in the study undertaken by Hacking, et al. (2009) who highlighted the empowerment of service users through involvement in an art project. They reported how service users experienced a sense of achievement and power as *artists*; just as the experts achieve an identity beyond that of being SUCI. However, moving beyond this sense of achievement and empowerment, the participants had become experts in the course, and had not just experienced a sense of empowerment. Similarly, this highlights the collective nature of the wisdom owned and developed by EbEs (Noorani et al., 2019); a process which reflects the learning in the group at our university as they support each other.

To develop this further, Hatton (2017) draws comparisons between Freire’s (1970, 1998) notion of *conscientisation* and the involvement of people with lived experience in social work education. Conscientisation is a process in which learning can produce knowledge and liberation. In this case, involvement is important in developing agency and empowerment. In relating the ideas of liberating educational processes (Freire, 1970, 1998) to the field of service user involvement in social work education, such an experience of conscientisation is often replicated for service users as they become involved in service change (Fox, 2016). It is indeed replicated in this group as the group become experts-*of*-experience (Noorani et al., 2019).

***Motivations***

The SUCI were motivated to participate as involvement experts for many reasons: to have a voice, to make a difference, and to improve social work practice because of experiences of lack of empathy and poor communication from social workers when they had been receivers of social care. Both positive and negative experiences motivated them to become agents for change. F01 describes why she became involved in wanting to improve social work provision:

*F01: … To help prevent, if possible, your own circumstances being repeated so that others … learn by your mistakes. Because you’ve lived it and also you know that you entered to try to make a difference. and you know you are helping it to be put right and actually help influence and hopefully educate to finally break it.*

F01 had experienced receipt of social work services and found that by contributing to the training of social workers, she was able to develop a more *holistic view* of the social work profession. She was seeing students initially as learners, and then as they became qualified social workers:

*F01: And I would just like to add, I know this is relevant to me but the value we are seeing, the quality, because we are only seeing social work from one side of the fence whether it’s competent or incompetency, when you see students’ learning you see what they’re coming from and it’s nice to see that side of the fence as well. … So you’re getting a holistic view as you get closer to it.*

Fox (2011) similarly reflects on how she was empowered by describing her own journey of recovery and hoped that these accounts would positively influence service improvement in mental health. This is echoed in the experiences of many user involvement experts as they seek to change practice (Goldberg et al., 2020; Mazanderani et al., 2020).

M04 had different reasons for undertaking involvement work; he reported that he experiences a therapeutic effect from sharing his encounters with services to social work students. Being an expert enables him to feel recognised and to redress some of the distress he has experienced. More widely he feels that processes of involvement validate the relevance of his experiences:

*M04: And to mention, for me there’s an off-shoot, a therapeutic aspect of it which I didn’t fully anticipate, and to be finally recognised by people when in the field, or entering into the field that my situation, my issues are valid in hindsight. … It’s kind of reparative for me, because … finally social workers are recognising that I should have been treated with more consideration maybe.*

Additionally, he had good experiences of social workers which influenced how he wanted to develop this positive practice in students.

*M04: … I had one professional who was actually very good and kind of changed everything because he saw my individuality and responded to that.*

These different experiences motivated the group to become involvement experts and influenced their desire to see changing practice in social work students.

***Authenticity: the expertise of SUCI***

This article acknowledges the expertise of the group, recognising them as building skills beyond ‘just’ their experiences of service use; but this sections highlights the difficulties that EbEs experience in having their knowledge valued. F01 identified the importance that she placed on being ‘*recognised as of equal value’* (to professionals)– this identity was key to her feelings of self-esteem, and her experiences of conscientisation. She stated that it was important to mix with professionals as equals, removing the ‘*us and them divide’*.

*F01: What we’ve also said is it’s important to be recognised as of equal value … I wanted to add to that, this is both professionals and academics, as one appreciates their input they too must appreciate that we are the expert in what we do as well. … Yes, because I know it’s not happened here, but I’ve been with carers when I’ve been asked ‘Are you a professional or a member of the public’. No, I’ve said ‘No I’m like you but I’m an unpaid professional’.*

The quotation above reveals how F01 noted that professionals are paid for their input, whilst she, as a carer, was not always paid for her involvement. This highlights the unfairness of some forms of representation and the importance of valuing service user and carer experts appropriately for their time. This element is discussed later in the paper.

The experts have consolidated their knowledge and have become aware of both good and bad social work practice; they note that respect from social workers for their expertise as service users and carers, and transparent and clear communication with timely responses to their queries are all important factors in developing effective relationships with social care professionals. This understanding enables them to increase their awareness as they became involved in challenging poor practice, thus developing best practice in social work students.

However, the value of *experiential knowledge* (Noorani et al., 2019) is often met with confusion, with conflicting perspectives about its validity; Baldwin & Sadd (2006) explored in their study whether involvement experts can be ‘too expert’ to offer authentic experiences of service use. Baldwin & Sadd (2006, p. 357) identify in their evaluation of service user involvement in social work that some students did not always respond well to service user involvement in education. On the one hand the students stated that user involvement delivery was too personal, and they dismissed user experiences as anecdotal, and on the other hand, students stated that involvement experts were professional service users. In response, service users in Baldwin & Sadd’s study were unsure of how to respond because they felt they had ‘an inordinate responsibility to do things better’ (p.357) but were unsure of how. This discussion highlights that service user involvement experts are sometimes seen as unrepresentative of the wider service user population, because they have become too competent and skilled and are identified as being ‘professional’ (Fox, 2011, 2016). However, this identity was valued by SUCI experts and enhanced the learning experiences of students on the social work programmes.

***Diversity***

This section highlights the need to utilise different models of service user involvement in social work education. As described in the sample, the group comprised of four men and two women, who come from diverse ethnic backgrounds and have a variety of experiences as service user and carer experts. In our study, the group note that the tight knit sense of a family is important to their success and key to their trust and fellowship with each other. Participants expressed that the mutuality and the shared knowledge and experience they have as a group enables them to learn from each other and makes them a more cohesive team, as they expressed below. They believe that a small number of contributors to their group enables them to support each other more effectively, rather than being in a larger group with people they do not know:

*F02: We’ve also learnt from each other. So I feel like the students learn. We also learn from each other’s experiences. And I think we, as a team, I think we empower each other.*

*M04: Yes, as we’ve got more cohesion I really feel the peer support much more.*

*F01: And friendships much more. I suppose we’ve all got a common goal and theme.*

*F02: We want to improve and make a difference….*

*M02: And shared values. Maybe we all have different backgrounds and different experiences, part of the value base and part of the process anyway.*

This underlines the importance of valuing an established and knowledgeable group of individuals, who grow their expertise through their experience (Noorani et al., 2019). However, adding to this debate, Brown and Young (2008) highlight the need to utilise a diversity of service users’ and carers’ experiences in social work education. Brown & Young (2008) believe that a reduced number of contributors raises issues of duplication, burn-out and capacity (p.87). They further note (p.87) that the benefits of a larger pool of service users and carers are that more people with lived experience will have the opportunity to increase their skills and confidence, while students will gain a wider understanding of what it means to be at the receiving end of services; thus, removing the difficulties of designating service users as inauthentic or professional users of services (Baldwin & Sadd, 2006).

In our study, and beyond, the need both to present a diversity of perspectives to students (Hughes, 2017) and for involvement experts to establish a group identity (Noorani et al., 2019), are key elements to be considered when recruiting EbEs to contribute to social work education. This suggests that different models of user involvement in social work education can be useful, and that a small group can be very effective in supporting student learning, as well as a larger, more diverse group of EbEs.

***Challenging students***

The group have developed an expertise in the tasks that they do and play an integral part in the preparation to practice module assessment; this section describes how they challenge student learning in both a theoretical and practical sense. SUCI role-play a scenario with each individual student and feedback to them about: their relationship-building and communication skills, and how the members feel at the receiving end of the interview. This forms the preparation for the assessment where students undertake a group interview of an actor who role plays a service user. They become quite challenging, role playing distressed, anxious, and sometimes angry service users, ensuring that this is an authentic experience for the student, which can help them to improve their practice. F01 describes how experts seek not just to play ‘grateful’ clients, but take on the role of difficult service users, she commented:

*F01: So I found that by giving them a real world experience, you are going to have difficult service users, you are going to have ones who might break down, have real problems, that’s what they are going to experience in the real world. So don’t pussy foot about, I suppose, … let them have a chance to learn in a controlled way, I don’t know how you feel about that, but for me being so nice like thank you very much for coming into my house and saying hello to me, you know you’re not going to do that.*

Moreover, M04 noted that involvement challenges unconscious and theoretical stereotypes and possible prejudices and discrimination related to societal oppression, disablism and racism. This was important to challenge unconscious bias in student practice:

*M04: I can’t speak for anybody else, but this is specific for what I feel round SUCI, it challenges unconscious and theoretical stereotypes and possible prejudices, and I always feel that that is one of my missions.*

Hughes (2017) considers that service user involvement has an impact on subsequent practice when the student engages with the service user. This learning is further reinforced if the student experiences double loop learning (Kolb, 1984) for example, when going on to encounter a similar experience or scenario in their practice. Rehearsing their roles with an expert, who is playing a challenging service user, can prepare and reinforce student learning and preparation for practice; thus highlighting the contribution SUCI can make to practice learning.

***Enablers and barriers to effective involvement***

Valuing SUCI for their skills and legitimising their experiences by facilitating their involvement is important. Reward and recognition of their involvement is an important enabler for effective participation. The group felt rewarded personally through the engagement of the students and through the sense of mutuality with other members, as they felt a sense of peer support. Furthermore, experts valued the importance of being paid appropriately, which reflected their roles and their skills as professional trainers, a point highlighted by Rhodes (2012). This recognises the status, skills. and competency of the SUCI, valuing and acknowledging what they achieve; although for some, payment was important, but not the sole driver for their involvement. M02 sums these ideas up by saying:

*M02: I think of benefit to me, it about imparting knowledge to students which is very powerful and rewarding as an individual, and I think in particular the high levels of engagement from them, but in addition, the peer support learning and sharing within the SUCI, especially within the current cohort, there’s established respect and shared values, and also, not least importantly, I think the recognition and award through remuneration. It’s still an important reward and recognition system which adds value to process and through our input. It’s not a driver for us but it’s important.*

The processes of support are also central to effective involvement. Effective facilitation and the personal values of the administrator (JD) are directly key to the effectiveness of involvement and indirectly enable the quality of input to student education. The experts valued the administrator, whose support, they believed, went beyond just doing a ‘job’, but was implemented in a way which modelled effective social work relationships between the receiver and provider of services.

*M02: And finally in terms of process and about things being done correctly, and I said because JD, because JD organises everything so well, and at the last minute, Not that she arranges things at the last minute, but because of the way things work together last minute, she does really well, she brings us together and supports us and makes sure everything is done to make it easy for us to be part of the process.*

Her sense of validation and support is key to their involvement as she provides a conduit between the university management and the group.

*M04: But it’s where validation has been lacking on a number of occasions, from very senior staff, it’s always been from JD that I’ve got it back. A validation, otherwise I would have walked away on numerous occasions.*

*M02: Whereas my perspective is very simplistic, there is a difference between when someone is just doing a job…*

*M04: Vocation isn’t it.*

They considered that it is important for all stakeholders to value knowledge from different perspectives equally to ensure effective participation; when this did not happen, it was a challenge to effective involvement. The members emphasised that it is important for academics to prepare the class to ensure that involvement is well supported. SUCI noted that some of the challenges to involvement included lecturers’ own stereotypes and the sometimes lack of preparation that students experienced when experts were invited into their class. F01 had experiences of challenge when being involved in a teaching session when she felt that she was not supported by the lecturer.

*F01: I had to go in and do a presentation in a class, and I had an awful experience with one of the students, who was actually very controversial and challenging to me, I had no support from the lecturer. If I had been a new SUCI member, I would have gone to pieces, but because I had done it in the past, I was able to give this student as much as he gave, basically but it didn’t stop me feeling shaky and uncomfortable because I had no support …*

Rhodes (2012) believes that there must be effective training and preparation for service users, lecturers, and students to enable effective involvement; where this is lacking it can lead to poor experiences for both service users and students. This section highlights some the organisational enablers and barriers to involvement, highlighting the importance of a systems approach to effect participation.

***Areas for improvement***

The SUCI identified that change should be implemented to provide improved support to contributors to the programme. We are tackling ongoing issues with payment processes – a difficulty of perennial concern to many service users as they navigate university payroll services. A further challenge to operational effectiveness in the processes of involvement was the lack of consistency in practice: academics and practitioners sometimes facilitate admissions days’ interviews in different ways. Members felt that a clear format and a consistent framework should be applied in all circumstances. This was stated by M04:

*M04: I think there is quite a lot of disarray because we need something to work to, some plumb line some kind of remit that is agreed by all of us until we can actually change the remit collaboratively, but in the meantime, one time something will occur and I said is that the done thing here?*

Furthermore, to underline the successful operational development of involvement, SUCI suggested that there needs to be a code of conduct for involving them in teaching and assessment. There is already a code of conduct that describes what the university expects from SUCI, equally, they believed, there should also be a code of what experts can expect from involvement as well. One member had felt he had experienced oppressive treatment because of his gender and race. Concurring with the need for a code of conduct, M04 noted

*M04: You have to involve something like a code of conduct. … A code of conduct that to have something that actually included … you will not be discriminated against prejudged based on your gender, race, religion, belief, and so forth, and it would have to be something that practitioners, SUCI and academics were all in line with, if you know we were all going to be working together…*

M02 highlighted the potential for SUCI to be developed as an accredited programme; he noted that such an approach would enable increased recognition of the expertise of the group and the programme, and furthermore provide the group with the status they deserved. This process is currently being investigated and will be negotiated with the group.

**Conclusion**

In this article we have considered the requirements for service user involvement in social work education and reflected on the current provision in our university. We located SUCI at our university between level 3 and 4 through applying Tew et al. (2004)’s model. We have undertaken a qualitative study with the six core experts to discuss their involvement in social work education, addressing what motivated them to become involved, what the benefits of participation are, and the enablers and barriers to effective involvement. We considered the importance of the *process* of involvement (Unwin et al., 2018) from the *perspective* of people with lived experience of using services; a gap highlighted in the literature (Hughes, 2017; Mazandarani et al., 2020).

The group explored their role as being beyond solely SUCI and recognised the expertise they experienced as a group, and the sense of mutuality and support each shared with the other; and how JD, the administrator, provided effective and caring support. This sense of unique cohesion and support is key to their effective involvement and strengthens their impact on students. We noted that they want to co-produce more of the social work programme and identified what needs to change to improve provision and move forward.

We need to plan our next steps and can accordingly use a framework developed by Stevens & Tanner (2006, p. 361-2) as they describe how they reviewed service user involvement on their course. They identified the need for the rationale for involvement; a clear description of the principles and values that govern effective involvement; a clarification of the plans and strategies for the coming academic year; and longer-term directions. In utilising this model, we acknowledge that it is essential to incorporate the views of SUCI into the future (rational). Diversity and equality training will be delivered at a staff away day by one of the experts and we have begun to look at a code of conduct that underpins the university guidelines for involvement (principles and values). We are also tackling ongoing issues with payment processes as they navigate university payroll services. We are exploring how we can support SUCI to contribute to teaching online next year with the institution of social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic and are already involving them in online admissions processes (the coming academic year). We have underlined the necessity for research and evaluation, (Rhodes, 2012) as central to our plans in order to critically examine the impact and benefit of involvement for both people with lived experience and for student learning and subsequent professional practice (longer term directions). However, most aptly, M02 expresses that the future vision for involvement practice should comprise of co-production; he sums this up eloquently:

*M02: And it’s about co-production, I know I have been banging on about that, a lot of people don’t get it. There’s a big difference between involvement and co-production. Co-production is a spectrum, it’s that full involvement from conception through to development and delivery and review process, that whole cycle 360 degrees, that whole cycle*

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1. SUCI is the name that the group has traditionally called itself; therefore, the term, SUCI experts (Service user and carer involvement experts), is used in this article in keeping with the identity of the university group of EbEs (experts-by-experience). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)