USER INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: MACEDONIAN PERSPECTIVE

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SUMMARY

Involving service users and carers in the education and training of social workers is higher on the policy and practice agenda in the developed countries than ever before. Higher education institutions that run these programmes are required to involve service users and carers as stakeholders in all parts of the design and delivery of the programmes. The experiences in the domain of user involvement in social work education in the countries of transition, such as Macedonia, are however lagging behing. This article discusses the modalities, principles and benefits of user involvement in social work education, based on the Anglo-Saxon experiences, and makes a reference to their applicability within the Macedonian context whereever relevant.

It focuses initially on the modalities in which user involvement may take place: teaching and learning, practice assignments, curricula development, students' assessments, planning management and evaluation of courses etc. Further, it briefly explores core principles, as well as issues related to participation planning and payment, bearing in mind that actively promoting and sustaining participation of service users in social work education is a process which takes time to develop effectively. Benefits of involvement for education

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staff, service users and students are also elaborated. Barriers to service user involvement in social work education on the part of professionals, universities, service user organisations and some prevailing ways on how to improve it are further discussed. Finally, the article emphasizes the future requirements for making service user involvement work, such as enhancing service user networking and knowledge base, and points out how university, governments and service user organizations could contribute to this development.

INTRODUCTION: WHY INVOLVE SERVICE USERS AND CARERS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION?

In social work education, more than in any other area, there are common aims between the individuals providing services, the teaching staff, the service users and the students. We should use these common aims to develop the courses together.
Service user (Branfield, 2007.)

Involving service users and carers in the education and training of social workers is higher on the policy and practice agenda in the developed world than ever before. Higher education institutions that run these programmes in Anglo-Saxon countries are increasingly required by their governments to involve service users and carers as stakeholders in all parts of the design and delivery of the programmes. There are several driving forces behind these trends. Namely, so far, service users have not been systematically involved in social work theorizing and education. However, disabled peoples's movements, mental health service users/survivors and other service users have developed their own knowledges based on direct experience and they have generated their own conceptual frameworks and bodies of theory. There are fundamental problems in social work seeking to interpret service user knowledges. This requires direct involvement of service users and their organizations in social

work theorizing, in addition to social work education. There are strong practical, philosophical and political arguments for involving the knowledges and theories of service users and their organizations in the process of social work theory-building. This requires an inclusive approach and the need for service users to have support and opportunities to develop their own prior and separate discussions about social work theory (Beresford, 2000.: 489). The tendency is obvious. The user involvement in the Anglo-Saxon countries has reached the stage in which user's and carer's contribution is not only limited to education, but it has started to move beyond along with the intensification of discussions on their contributions to developing social work theory as well.

Unlike the Anglo-Saxon countries, the developments in this domain in the countries of transition, such as Macedonia, seriously lag behind. The difficult process of transition and the leftovers of the previous communist educational system can be certainly hold responsible. After Macedonia gained its independence in 1991., a series of reforms in different aspect of societal life were carried out, focusing predominantly on mitigating the effects of the economic transformation in the country. The reforms in the domain of education, supported by the belatedly prepared Strategy for Development of the Education for the period 2005.-2015., have been largely concentrated on modernisation and structural changes of the educational systems at all levels. However, the issue of user involvement in education in general and social work education in particular, has not yet entered the agenda. Consequently, the Macedonian experiences in this domain are scarce and sporadic, while discussions, debates and related literature in the domain is lacking. For that reason, the following analysis will focus primarily on Anglo-Saxon experiences and will make a relevant reference as to the applicability of those experiences in the Macedonian educational context. The aim is not only to present the experiences, but also use the existing knowledge on the barriers and benefits faced in these countries during implementation of user involvement programmes. This will be of particular importance for drawing lessons and conclusions on possible directions and issues that should be taken into account during development of the user involvement practices in Macedonia.

MODALITIES OF USER INVOLVEMENT

If you learn to drive a car, you are taught by someone who can drive; if you need to speak French, you are taught by someone who speaks French, but at the moment if you need to know about disabled people's lives, you are taught by someone who wrote a book about it.
Disabled service user (Branfield, 2007.)

The analysis of the literature in the domain of user involvement in social work education in general and modalities of involvement in particular, is predominantly associated to the Anglo-Saxon authors Bransfield, Beresford, Boath and Levin. Their extensive writings on the

issue are less theoretical, but rather practical, as they are derived from the implementation experiences of concrete university-based user involvement programmes. The insight into these programmes shows that modalities in which user involvement may take place are diverse.

Branfield's 2007. Report »User Involvement in Social Work Education« provides service users' views on service user involvement in social work education. Published by the National user Network of Great Britain »Shaping our Lives«, it is part of a larger initiative, developed by the Social Care Institute for Excellence to develop a strategy to support the participation of service users in social work education. The report brings together the findings of four regional consultation days that »Shaping Our Lives« had commissioned from four regional service user networks and organizations. Within this Report, Branfield (2007.:7) refers to varying degrees of service users involvement with local universities:

- recruitment
- the design of the degree
- delivering training
- membership of a steering group or user forum for the degree course
- teaching as part of subprogrammes named "Citizens As Trainers"
- practice teaching – having social work students on placements in the service user organisation
- evaluation of students

Boath, Buckley and Buererell (2006.: 23) presents the spectrum of involvement emphasised within a »*User Involvement in Social Work Education Programme*« implemented at the Staffordshire University in Great Britain, that encompasses:

- Teaching and learning
- Recruiting and selecting students
- Curriculum and module design and planning
- Assessing students
- Role play
- Evaluating courses and quality assurance
- Programme management
- Providing placements
- Practice learning.

Levin (2004.: 8) refers to the assigned roles in programme design and delivery of service users and high education institutions set within the »*National Requirements for Social Work Training*« in Great Britain. Their roles are in:

- student selection
- design of the degree
- teaching and learning provision
- preparation for practice learning

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- provision of placements
- learning agreements
- assessment of students
- quality assurance.

In the further text, several key areas of involvement will be elaborated and issues to be considered in practice emphasized. The attention will be concentrated on five of the above modalities most commonly and widely applied in the Anglo-Saxon countries, which are at the same time relevant for the Macedonian educational setting as well. For each of the modalities, issues to be considered by countries like Macedonia to ensure effective outcomes, will be outlined.

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN UNIVERSITIES

Service users and carers could be involved in a wide range of teaching opportunities in the classroom. A range of involvement in teaching can arise from the development of service user and carer network links. Service user share of experiences related to social problems in classrooms is indispensable. The benefits of such an inclusion have been proven in Macedonian education of social workers as well, although the extent, frequency and organisation of such involvement practices are still insufficient. In addition, service users and carers can successfully contribute to materials and to the evaluation of course materials, a modality that has not been practiced in the education of social workers in Macedonia so far.

In terms of this involvement modality, clear information about the purpose of any involvement is essential for service users and carers, and for students. Preparation and training of service users and carers is important for a successful outcome, especially in role play exercises. Practical and ethical issues about involving service users and carers need to be addressed in role play work (Grover, 2004.)

- service user has 2 roles, that of role play participant and observer
- giving and receiving feedback is a skill that needs to be taught
- role play may engage difficult feelings on the part of the service user which may persist, which justifies the proper preparation of service users before their actual involvement
- feedback from service users and carers is one source of feedback alongside that of other students and lecturers in role play work.

PRACTICE LEARNING

Service users and carers could be involved in giving feedback in all practice learning opportunities and also contribute to the assessment of students' practice. Within the obligatory field placement anticipated in the curricula, students of social work in Macedonia have

an opportunity for practice learning in various social institutions. However, the assessement of their practice and achievements there is usually formal and carried out most often by professionals employed within these institutions, than actual service users or even less carers. Where such feedback is obtained, it is predominantly about the quality of relationships between service user and student and is overwhelmingly positive.

In this respect, issues to be considered for effective outcomes are (HC, 2008.):

- A requirement for service user and carer feedback in all practice learning opportunities should be clearly indicated in university documentation for practice learning.
- Social work practitioners and social work organisations should also model service user and carer involvement in their work.
- Preparation of service users and carers should be available within organisations and supported by universities. This may include a leaflet in plain language on social work training, briefings offered in giving constructive feedback, joint work with service users and carers in devising specific questions for feedback.
- Preparation of students (before practice learning opportunities begin) should include teaching about the giving and receiving of feedback, looking at different methods of gathering feedback, and consideration of how feedback is part of reflective practice.
- Support for practice teachers as regards service users and carers should be available in the form of written guidance from universities, regular group meetings with university staff, dissemination of tools for gathering feedback.
- Careful planning is needed in gathering feedback from service users and carers over the course of the practice learning opportunity so that: 1) it can inform students' practice and 2) there is sufficient time to incorporate it into the final report by both student and practice teacher - both in terms of students' learning and in terms of assessment by practice teachers.
- Practice panels should monitor placement final reports with reference to the incorporation of service user and carer feedback into student learning and the assessment process.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Service users and carers could be involved in the assessment of students both in practice learning and in institution based learning. However, as emphasized previously, feedback from service users and carers is most commonly drawn on in the assessment of students during practice learning opportunities, rather than in classroom settings.

In terms of the involvement of service users and carers in student assessment particular attention should be paid to the following:

- Any such involvement requires clear regulation at the university level.
- A 'toolkit' of methods to elicit more detailed constructive feedback and specify contributions of service users and carers in students' assessment, is also essential.

- Students may see feedback from service users and carers as an assessment tool of practice teachers and therefore do not often refer to it in terms of their own learning. Teaching in this area should emphasize the contribution of service user and carer feedback (alongside other sources) in reflective practice.
- 'Readiness to practice' is another area where service users and carers can contribute to the assessment of students, alongside others in the assessment process.

DECISION MAKING

Service users and carers could also be involved in the planning, management and evaluation of courses, based on involvement methods developed by service user and carers groups themselves for which there is a joint consensus with the relevant university. This is a modality in which Macedonia is completely inexperienced. Involvement of service users in decision-making doesn't take place not even in the weakest sub-modality of involvement for the purposes of selection of student social workers during their entry exams. Consequently, it seems that the development of this modality compared to the previous ones would be a most challenging task. Notes of consideration within this field of involvement relate to the following (Trivedi and Wykes, 2002):

- Timely and organised promotion of the benefits of such involvement should be widely promoted among staff prior to its practical implementation.
- Any such programme should instigate methods of building up a long term alliance between staff and service user and carer consultants.
- Service user and carer groups should take a lead role in determining how they can best represent their interests at management level.
- Service user and carer involvement should have real influence on decisions rather than being tokenistic.
- Representation is enhanced by the existence of service user and carer groups of influence within institutions.
- Methods to ensure accessibility at university meetings to service users and carers must be considered.
- Service users and carers should be involved in the selection of student social workers.
- Creative ways of enabling service users and carers to be involved should be identified. For example in jointly establishing selection criteria, being involved in shortlisting, being involved in interviewing processes.

SERVICES USERS AND CARERS TRAINING AND CONFERENCES

Important element of every user involvement programme is the provision of **training to both service users and staff, as well as utilisation of service users' experiences for the**

non-formal forms of education. In terms of this involvement modality, Macedonian experiences are considerable. This was in particular enabled after 1998. when a National Centre for Training in Social Development was established within the Institute for Social Work and Social Policy in Skopje. Being the first institution that provides continuing education in social work to both professionals and services users it greatly contributed to establishing the links between the social work educators, practitioners and service users. However, the numerous training events organised since then, have been focusing predominantly on relevant topics in social work and social policy in general, and were not designed as such to target user or carer involvement issues in social work education specifically.

Hence, what is again lacking in Macedonia is a specialised **training for service users and carers alone** that would enable and capacitate them with the required skills to participate in the social work education in the country. Such a training could focus on: principles of teaching and learning, presentation skills, confidence building, jargon busting, university procedures, giving and receiving feedback, skills on attending meetings. In addition to the specialised training for service users and carers alone, **joint training for staff and service users and carers** is also essential. The aim of the joint training is to determine the knowledge, skills and competencies required by service users, carers and educators to facilitate meaningful service user and carer involvement in education. Such a joint training could focus on: »....paying service users/carers, engaging, facilitating and sustaining involvement, websites and references, analysis of user led materials, developing and sharing networks, links resources and literature, 'representativeness', identifying barriers to involvement and overcoming them, disability and diversity awareness, group dynamics, literacy awareness« (Boath, Buckley and Burrell 2006.: 21). Herein, it should be emphasised that both types of training should be organised prior to the practical implementation of any concrete service user involvement programme, to provide for the higher quality of their contributions.

Running **a conference with service user presenters is** another usefull example of user involvement in social work education. Using service users as presenters at training events and conferences organised in Macedonia is increasingly recognised, although examples of such involvement are a handful. For this to take place in a more organised manner, the following should be considered (Boath, Buckley and Burrell 2006.: 16):

- Establish initial contact with potential service user presenters and agree upon contents to be contributed at the conference.
- Discuss options for modalities in which their participation at a conference may take place.
- Agree preferred format: Which of the techniques, such as power point presentations, questions and answers, panel, round table, informal discussion will be used by the user presenters?
- Practice presentations and assist users in developing presentation skills.

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- Engage a supportive team to be at hand to presenters for the preparatory phase prior and during the conference.
- Provide for a good chair of the conference who will be able to skilfully guide and acknowledge service user contribution to the conference

PRINCIPLES OF INVOLVEMENT

The participation of service users and carers should be based on agreed values and principles of involvement. Such involvement should go beyond tokenism[2] in developing working relationships. Each university should work with service users and carers to develop a written set of values, principles and practices. »Seeing change from consultation«, a key motivation for service user and carers being involved in social work education, can be measured and evaluated. It should be made clear what is open to negotiation and what is not. In addition, service users and carers determine the pace and scope of their involvement and should be respected as »key partners« alongside educators, practitioners, employers and students. They should be offered support and training opportunities to promote their involvement in social work education while information is available to them in accessible formats (Ager et al., 2005.: 3).

Levin (2004.) emphasizes four principles of best practice involvement that are of crucial importance for a successful development of user involvement in social work education programmes. The following principles should serve as a guidelines for Macedonia and any other country that is yet to bring in and gain experiences in this domain:

1) Involvement should be planned and structured: it must be based on a true partnership between academics and service users and other stakeholders. It needs to be a key part of the overall planning of a course and curriculum.

2) Involvement should be based on work with organisations that are controlled and run by service users: user involvement is too often based on the participation of an individual or individuals…. Working through organisations provides the basis for broader involvement that is facilitated by people who are better placed to represent a range of service users' perspectives. Another issue to consider when contacting organisations is that service users stress the importance of users' concerns being distinct from those of carers.

3) Fees and expenses: the expertise of service users involved in training should be fully recognised. The payment of fees is a mean of recognising the value and importance of users' contributions and as supporting the parity of users' input with that of paid staff. Rates of payment should reflect the skills and experiences of people involved and should be comparable to those paid to other consultants.

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[2] *Tokenism refers to a policy or practice of limited inclusion of members of an excluded group, usually creating a false appearance of inclusive practices, intentional or not.*

4) Access to training: good practice also needs to address making all education and training opportunities accessible to all service users as both students and teachers/trainers. Having social work students who are service users should not be seen or used as a means of service user involvement. Their presence should be seen as a bonus and they should not be exploited or relied upon (for achieving involvement) (Levin, 2004: 12).

PARTICIPATION PLANNING AND PAYMENT

Participation of service users in social work education may contribute to the personal and/or professional development of service users and carers. Universities should understand that actively promoting and sustaining participation of service users in social work education is a process which takes time to develop effectively. Effective participation requires (Ager et al., 2005.: 4):
- Sufficient time for all aspects of involving service users and carers. It is vital to take time to build relationships, maintain contact, to plan, prepare, deliver and evaluate work.
- Building local networks including a wide range of service users and carers is crucial. Universities should review existing links and plan where and how involvement needs to be developed.
- Building new systems and structures *and* changing systems and structures within universities is needed to empower and enable service users and carers to participate in a meaningful way.
- Changes and absences of service users and carers should also be planned for, in order that work can be sustained.
- University staff acting as 'champions/leaders' for service user and carer involvement is crucial in achieving progress

In addition to participation planning for effective involvement, service users and carers should be offered appropriate **payment** for their involvement in all aspects of social work education. Service users and carers have diverse views on receiving payment, and these views must be considered. In this respect (Ager et al., 2005.: 8):
- Each university should develop its own policy and procedures concerning payments to service users and carers. Service users and carers should be provided with a straightforward and speedy way to have expenses reimbursed and fees paid.
- Payments may include fees for attending meetings, teaching, consultancy, developing course materials; travelling expenses (this should include public transport, taxi fares and car mileage); allowances for childcare, personal assistance and replacement carer costs, and other costs (e.g. telephone, stationery, photocopying).
- Universities should ensure that their payment arrangements comply with benefits and tax regulations

BENEFITS OF INVOLVEMENT

Social workers just pay lip service to the social model. They know all the words but they haven't got a clue what it really is. Hopefully, with our involvement, they might actually get to know what the social model is, and actually start to work with it. Take it from theory into making it into reality.
Service user (Branfield, Beresford and Levin, 2007.)

The benefits of involving service users in social work education are innumerable. In terms of students, it broadens students' perspectives. They learn what it is like to be on the receiving end. They learn that service users are often kept in the dark, that they do not understand the jargon. They can learn from service users from day one and understand that social workers are agents of social control rather than beneficial intermediaries between users and services. Through service users, false assumptions – where things are being based on false perspectives and where there is not evidence to support a particular view - can be pointed out. In addition, user involvement can challenge the medical model in social work education. When a university brings in a group of people with learning difficulties to do a presentation, just about who they are and what they do, the people in the class just can not fully see people with learning difficulties as people until they see this. So if that is incorporated in social work courses it would help students see people as people and not just as social problems.

Boath, Buckley and Burrell (2006.) enlist benefits for key stakeholders: staff, service users and carers and students, based on evaluation of a User Involvement Programme carried out at Staffordshire University, United Kingdom, as follows:

Table 1.

Benefits and stakeholders' opinions on user and carer involvement practices (Boath, Buckley and Burell, 2006.)

	Benefits	Stakeholders' opinions
What's in it for staff?	• Job satisfaction • Professional development • Injects new life into jaded courses • Efficiency • Keeps non-practitioners in touch with clinical issues • Constructive challenge to their value base • Learn new skills & knowledge • Personal support • More open about own experiences as service users/carers	*'It has brought a new dimension to my own teaching, greatly enhanced the students' learning experience and I myself have learnt more from working with user and carer trainers than I can easily express… It makes it feel more like it is not just them and us, and that we are trying to work together.'* *(Teacher)*

Table 1. continue.

What's in it for service users and carers?	• Give something back • Tell their story • Bring about change in professional practice & quality of services • Better relationships with health & social care professionals • Therapeutic benefits e.g. self esteem, confidence, assertiveness • Develop transferable skills • A measure of professionalism • Mutual support, social network and encouragement • Step towards employment / qualification	*"My involvement with the service users group is rather selfish; I can now have an input into the way services are provided and the type of services that really benefit me. I have become a stakeholder."* *(Service User)*
What's in it for students?	• Experience of 'real' people & real life • Puts theory into practice • Develop communication & consultation skills • More open about own experiences as service users/ carers • Gets students in touch with clinical issues • Constructive challenge to the student's own value base • Enrich student learning • Shaping the attitudes and capabilities of students • Instilling the value base of mutual respect and partnership • Challenge existing professional beliefs and attitudes	*'It is good to have the challenge that the users' perspective puts on the theoretical knowledge that you gain. It does make you think differently. It challenges what you have learned.'* *(Student)*

BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL AND MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT

BARRIERS TO SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The design, planning and implementation of service users involvement in social work education programmes proves to be a challenging task. Being only recently promoted even in the developed world, universities in Anglo-Saxon countries referred to previously in the text that have actually faced this challenge point out many obstacles and barriers in its realization. The barriers to be elaborated below are results of the evaluation practices on implemented user involvement programmes, as emphasised by stakeholders themselves.

They could be taken into consideration by those high education institutions that are yet to enter this process. Among the most frequently identified barriers, most of which are quite similar if not equivalent to the existing ones in Macedonia, are the following (Branfield, Beresford and Levin 2007.: 4-5).

Academics do not attach high enough value to service users' knowledge:

- Some people with experience of teaching social workers may be systematically involved and value the structured arrangement. But more commonly, service users are asked to contribute occasional sessions (for ex. on disability awareness and discrimination), often at short notice.
- Lecturers are not confident that service user trainers could teach their students. They often seem to rate knowledge from books more highly than knowledge from experts with experience.

The culture in universities needs to change:

- The culture in universities is not very conducive to new ways of working.
- When the university as a whole does not embrace a culture of service user involvement, participation and diversity, its staff may be slow to move from tick box, superficial involvement to active, meaningful involvement.
- University systems and structures are inflexible and can prevent involvement.
- Some staff put up professional barriers. Their knowledge and approaches are not always up to date. They may restrict involvement to the service users they find least challenging.

Access requirements are not fully met:

- Service users' access requirements are all too often unmet. Access is understood only in terms of, for example, flat access for wheelchair users. Physical barriers such as heavy fire doors, entrance systems or inappropriate seating are not recognised as barriers. The practical, attitudinal and organisational barriers that service users experience on a daily basis are underestimated. Better access is fundamental to the promotion of participation.
- The disablist attitudes of some students and staff are a prohibitive barrier. Some students are disrespectful in service users' sessions.

Service user organisations lack capacity and infrastructure:

- Many service user organisations do not have the capacity or the infrastructure to be effectively and meaningfully involved in the social work degree, even though they want to take part. Some are very small and some do not know about all the opportunities for involvement in the degree. Most lack secure ongoing funding.

- The commonest barrier by far is that many service user organisations are led by funding rather than their own agenda and priorities.
- Service user organisations are fully stretched. Without adequate human resources and time, they cannot properly develop sound inputs for the degree.
- The time frames of service user organisations and social work courses, including student placements, may not fit neatly.

Lack of training and support for service user trainers and their organizations:

- Training for service user trainers is a major area for expansion. Most people want training so that they can make the best possible contribution to students' learning experiences. They need opportunities for developing training and related skills so that they can be articulate and confident in their contact with staff and students. They also need training, resources and time to develop the content and quality of what they offer collectively.
- Some people want training and support to gain a recognised qualification and accreditation for their contributions. Others want to gain more experience or have opportunities for increasing their professional skills. Service user organizations want to develop and deliver training for themselves and others.
- Service users also need more preparation time, briefing, support and constructive feedback.

Payment policies, practices and the benefits system discourage involvement:

- Service users and their organizations often experience difficulties in securing payment for their contributions to social work education. Policies and procedures can be inflexible and are inconsistent across universities.
- Individuals and organizations should be properly paid for their time, knowledge and expertise, in accordance with the principles of good practice in participation. All expenses, support, access and travel costs should be met.
- Service user trainers should have easy access to sound advice and support about payment and benefits issues.
- The benefits system is the biggest barrier to involvement, including involvement in the social work degree. The system can be inflexible and inconsistent in the way it operates. This discourages people from accepting invitations to participate in training social workers because they are worried about negative effects on their benefits.
- Government should take responsibility for tackling the benefits issues so that the full range of service user groups can participate. More flexibility is required so that people can gain the experiences and skills to become employable.
- Universities must have money from the top to meet the costs of the involvement in the degree that government requires.

BARRIERS IN THE WAY OF ENHANCING SERVICE USER NETWORKING AND KNOWLEDGE BASE

As continuously emphasized previously in this article, there has been an increasing emphasis in recent years on user involvement. Lately, however, user involvement has come in for increasing questioning. Service providers and researchers have begun to ask what evidence there is that it improves services. Service users and their organizations have raised the issue of what they are actually able to achieve by their involvement and questioned the usefulness of getting involved.

Since service user movements began to emerge in the 1970s. Today, service users have highlighted two activities as crucial for taking forward participation. These are, first, people being able to get together to work collectively for change and to support each other (*service user networking*); and, second, making their voices heard and developing and making known their experience, views and ideas (*service user knowledge*).

BARRIERS IN THE WAY OF SERVICE USER NETWORKING

It is of high importance and beneficial to service users being able to network with each other, both as individuals and in user-controlled organizations, in terms of both improving their quality of life and sustaining a more effective voice and presence to make a difference. Service user organizations and individual service users can be and often are isolated, with little knowledge of or contact with other service user organizations, locally, regionally or nationally. Service users identify a range of obstacles in the way of networking as individual service users. These include (Branfield and Beresford, 2006.: 16-25).:

- problems of mobility in rural areas
- the fragility of user-controlled organizations
- the effort of being actively involved.
  For service user organizations, problems undermining networking include:
- Inadequate and insecure funding and resources. Service user organizations generally do not have secure or reliable funding. Because of this many service user organizations are liable to become funding led rather than led by their own concerns, priorities and principles, which can undermine their independence.
- Lack of adequate and secure funding which can be divisive as service user controlled organizations are placed under perverse pressure to compete with each other for the same inadequate funding.
- The unequal position of service user organizations in competition with big charitable organizations.
- Inadequate resources leaving user-controlled organizations dependent on a small core of activists.

- Limited organizational profile.
- Lack of resources to ensure full and equal access for all service users.
- Lack of local user-controlled organizations generally and for particular user groups, for example people living with HIV/AIDS, disabled parents, etc. There are major gaps in the types of user-controlled organizations that exist in most areas.
- A strong perception among some service users that, in practice, not all organizations which claim to be user controlled are actually controlled by service users

BARRIERS IN THE WAY OF SERVICE USER KNOWLEDGE

Increasing political and policy interest in »evidence«- or »knowledge«- based policy and practice has highlighted issues relating to knowledge and different knowledge sources, including service users' experiential knowledge. Service users readily understand the idea of service user knowledge. They see themselves as having a particular role to play in the production of knowledge for social care, both because of the experiential nature of their knowledge and through seeing themselves as »experts in their own experience«. Generally individual service users and service user organizations feel that they have difficulties impacting on social care policy and provision effectively. They identify a series of barriers in the way of their knowledge having the role and influence they want it to have. These include:

- **The devaluing of service user knowledge.** Service users feel that their knowledge is generally not valued or taken seriously by professionals and services. Trying to make an impact with their knowledge is also frequently a disempowering experience. This also means that social care frequently denies itself a key source of information and evidence on which to base its actions and decisions.
- **Problems of access and tokenism.** Service organizations frequently do not understand access issues and do not make it possible for service users with a wide range of access needs to contribute on equal terms. They tend to interpret »access« in its narrowest sense. At the same time they often do not seem to be genuinely interested in what service users tell them and do not treat their knowledge with the same respect they give to professional knowledge.
- **The culture of social care organizations.** Service users generally feel that these organizations are not open to service user knowledge. They are reluctant and slow to change.
- **Resource issues.** Limited resources restrict service users' capacity to develop and share their knowledge. Also, if their views are not consistent with what services want to hear, their funding may be put at risk. This is seen as an increasing problem (Branfield and Beresford, 2006: 31-39).

MAKING USER INVOLVEMENT EFFICIENT AND MEANINGFULL

To be person-centred you need to ask the individuals concerned…based on individual need

Involvement expert (Boath, Buckley and Burrell, 2006.)

The experiences of user involvement in social work education programmes elaborated in this article, point out that despite the existing barriers, service users show a high degree of responsibility and commitment to the courses and students. They are positive about participating as equal partners in all aspects of the design and delivery of social work education. They also have clear ideas about what universities, government and service user organisations could do to increase the effectiveness of involvement, backing them up with specific, practical suggestions. Macedonia as a country facing a challenge of upgrading user involvement in social work education should also gain insight into such available programme evaluation results. In this process, questions to be raised and considered to provide for higher participation rate and effectiveness are (Branfield and Beresford, 2007.):

What universities could do?

1. Address issues of equality.
2. Address issues of access, in its widest definition.
3. Develop stronger links with their local community.
4. Employ more service users on their staff.
5. Enroll more service user students.
6. Train staff and service users.

What government could do?

1. Allocate secure funding to service user organizations.
2. Review welfare benefits in relation to service user involvement.
3. Enforce positive representation of service users in the media.
4. Promote social work and social workers in a more positive light.

What service user organizations could do?

1. Network more widely with other service user organizations and publicize themselves better.
2. Develop their own training, support and mentoring for service user trainers.
3. Coordinate service user involvement and training in social work education through a national user-controlled organization.

What could be done at national level?

1. A national network of service user organizations in social work education should be developed:
    - The network would establish for the first time a national forum for service users in social work education. It would give service users a stronger voice in national and local developments.
    - The network would provide opportunities to share experiences and develop the participation agenda. Members would be a resource for each other and for everyone else in the field.
2. The national grouping should give priority to engaging more diverse groups of service users and carers in qualifying training, which is of particular importance for a multiethnic country like Macedonia. This includes people from different ethnic groups and smaller service user groups that are not widely and routinely included. Stronger organisations would then act as a resource for smaller, less experienced groups.
3. National user-controlled organizations should develop this initiative. They should take the lead in building their sector's capacity to train social workers. They need direct funding for this purpose. In Macedonia, the financial sustainability should be addressed as a priority, as most of the non-governmental organisations are heavily dependent on project-related financial support predominantly provided by foreign foundations. This funding should be separate from the funding that universities also need to sustain participation and meet the degree requirements. Currently, no financial resources at university level are set aside for user involvement purposes. A national steering committee with strong local inputs could also be set up to develop the arrangements and work programme. The processes must be values-based, transparent and ensure accountability.
4. More training and support for service user trainers should be developed with service user organizations.
5. Government should address the benefits issues relating to public participation.

The importance of networking for effective user involvement is largely elaborated within the existing literature. Evaluation results of the existing programmes in Aglo-Saxon countries repeatedly emphasize that most service users thought that networking was a key route to strengthening service user knowledge and increasing its credibility and visibility, both in services and policy and among service users and service user organizations. Service users see a properly resourced national database of service user organizations owned and controlled by service users as helpful here (Branfield and Beresford, 2006: 16). This aspect is of particular importance for Macedonia as service users and carers are weakly organized, with the exception of disabled users organizations. Development of a national user network which offers support, information exchange, improved communication, contacts, advice on good practice and a national voice would certainly have an important contribution to advancing the situation in this domain.

Finally, in all the capacity-building activities, countries like Macedonia must keep a sharp focus on the main purpose of involving service users and carers. This is to ensure that the new generation of social workers understands the outcomes from social care that people want and the standards of practice they expect, and that social workers are skilled and confident in working with service users and carers towards achieving them.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION – PRESENT STATE RECAP AND WAYS FORWARD FOR MACEDONIA

Service user involvement in social work education in Macedonia is only recently introduced concept within the academic discussions, yet to gain wider and more substantial acceptance in practice. In a narrow form it is present within the teaching and learning component of social work education. Still, even then, the involvement of service users is not a result of organised or strategic institutional efforts, but rather of individual teacher's initiatives. The fact that service user involvement is neighter required as obligatory, nor it is regulated within the relevant educational legislation, contributes to this present situation. Herein, it should be emphasised that, having in mind the Macedonian context, any attempt to promote the concept without the elements of its compulsory application, legislative regulation and secured funding, would be probably beforehand doomed to failure. The final outcome would again be the sporadic and isolated user involvement cases that are insufficient to ensure wider acceptance and acknowledgement of the importance and usefulness of users and carers involvement in social work education.

Involving service users and carers in social work education in a country like Macedonia is an ambitious agenda in which the type of knowledge that service users and carers can impart must be identified as a strong lever for improving both social care and education. Herein, it should be recognised that the benefits of involvement are two-fold. On one hand, it would help service users and carers to achieve more control, choice and better quality in their everyday lives, and in existing services, and on the other, it would contribute to achieving higher quality education. In the latter case, the purpose of the agenda is also 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. Thus, from the very start of their professional career, they would treat service users and carers as active participants in service delivery, rather than as passive recipients. From this point of view, a radical transformation of the Macedonian education system that currently values more the theoretical knowledge rather than the practical, is required.

Last, but not least, it becomes increasingly clear that successful networking and the development, sharing and mainstreaming of service user knowledge are closely interrelated and that the two are inextricably involved with meaningful user involvement. For this to have a more powerful contribution, first, strengthening service user networking at individual and organisational levels is required and, second, simultaneous promotion of effective user involvement by service users and educational institutions. In this respect also, it seems that the

conditions in Macedonia are not sufficiently matured. Most categories of users and carers are still poorly organised (with the exception of disabled users) and thus their power to execute influence is still very weak. Conversely, high education institutions are still closed and reluctant to using, valuing and relying on outside expertise for teaching and student learning purposes, so it seems that this would probably be the first but the toughest wall to be broken down.

In the overall process of development of service user involvement in social work education in Macedonia, the experiences of the developed countries, as the Anglo-Saxon ones elaborated in this text, should be utilised, but only after careful analysis and adjustment of the modalities of involvement to the Macedonian educational milieu, instead of simple replication.

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