PARTICIPATION OF SERVICE USERS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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SUMMARY

The aim of the research was to gain insight into the way in which teachers asses the volume, quality and purpose of user involvement in the educational process. The sample consisted of eight teachers, directors or participants of professional courses of lectures (Theoretical Foundations of Social Work, Social Work with an Individual, Social Work with the Family, Social Work with a Group, Social Work in the Community, Social Work with the People with Disability, Social Work and Problems of Young People, Social Gerontology) at the Department of Social Work of the Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb, with whom semi-structured interviews were conducted.

The results revealed that the teachers are either insufficiently informed or they consider that the level of involvement of users is not satisfactory. However, some of them think that there are positive changes and that the users are more included in different forms of the education process. There are also concerns that such forms of direct involvement of users can lead to their misuse and manipulation, i.e. that the users' place is not at the faculty, except with the aim of better illustration of examples from practice. According to teachers, the students react positively to the involvement of users in the teaching process and it is, therefore, important to create the prerequisites (accessibility, respect of professional ethical standards, planning of

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involvement in the curriculum etc.). One of the recommendations for better user involvement in future curricula included the issues of planning of the user participation and achievement of mutual benefits, creation of a counselling centre at the faculty aimed at student education, formalization of cooperation with the users participating in the education process as well as the increase of hours of field placements.

As a student, I can say that I always remember better the things I have learned from the users through field placements or during lectures. Theoretical knowledge becomes clearer and more acceptable when it is explained by the users from their perspective and supported by examples. The level of rights within the social welfare system expressed in the regulations by a percentage is very abstract to us students, but when the user tells us what amount of money he receives and what he can buy monthly with that money or how he divides it, it all becomes real for us. Later, when we learn or answer the exams questions we have a clearer picture what the theory means (Skokandić, 2009)[3].

THE PURPOSE OF INVOLVING USERS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN SOCIAL WORK

The *Social Welfare Act* (Official Gazette 73/97) in the Article 10 defines the service users as singles or families who do not have sufficient financial resources for fulfilling their basic needs and they are not able to do so by their work or revenues. Furthermore, the service users are the individuals with physical or mental disability; ill individuals, individuals with psychological illnesses; victims of violence; children who are or should be under family or legal protection; elderly, impaired and other individuals who due to permanent of temporary health problems cannot fulfil their basic needs and other individuals in distress related to family relations, addiction to alcohol, drugs or other narcotics or due to other forms of socially inacceptable behaviour or other causes.

The *Social Work Dictionary* (1999.) published by American National Association for Social Workers applies the term »client« instead of the term »user« and its definition includes, besides individuals and families, groups and communities who need or receive professional help from the field of social welfare. In the current social work literature, both terms are problematized since they define too narrowly the roles of a relationship in social work, limiting it to »the individual who needs something« and »the individuals who should give it to him«. Čačinovič Vogrinčič et al. (2007.) suggest the terms »interlocutor« or »co-passenger«

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[3] *The research presented in this paper is a part of the project Service Users as Experience Experts in Social Work Education and Research (for details see the foreword to this issue of the Annual of Social Work), in the framework of which the co-author S. Skokandić completed a diploma paper User involvement in the education process of social work students from the teacher perspective at the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Law, University of Zagreb in February 2009.*

which better reflect the concept of co-creation of help and the cooperative relation in the context of modern social work. Having in mind these limitations, we will use the term »user« due to the fact that it is widely used, accepted and comprehensible.

Although we will not elaborate on the involvement of service users in social work research and practice, but focus on their participation in the education process of social work students, certain current positions of authors in the field of social work on the purpose of user involvement in the decision-making process in social work in general will be presented.

The Client Speaks is the first text in the field of social work which deals with the perspective of service users and it was published in 1970. (in Beresford, 2005.). Although during the 1980s, a growing interest of user involvement and consideration of user perspective was present, the mentioned text is considered to be a turning point in the choice of focus and interest in social work theory and research, especially as far case studies are concerned. In the last twenty years, the field of social welfare in general has become a space for discussions in which the end users become important participants in negotiations and the decision-making process.

The concrete results of these negotiations include the organization and the reorganization of social welfare services which become more adapted to the user needs. For example, a traditional and more or less paternal pattern of provision of a specific service to the user in which a decision is made by an administrative and professional body composed of physicians, social workers and lawyers is replaced by a possibility of direct payment of a certain amount of money to which the user is entitled, and he independently decides on the type of service, the institution or the agency and the person who will provide it for him (for example different programmes of independent living for persons with disabilities or chronic disease or the so called Direct Payment [4] and similar).

The basic motive is not only involving the users in the creation of services and decision-making in the field, but also to remove the obstacles between them and the existing resources within the community so the service can be tailored for the individual user as much as possible (Leadbetter, 2004.). On the basis of examples of good practice of user involvement in the creation of ways and contents of service provision (Beresford, 2005.; Cree and Davis, 2007.), certain principles of more efficient involvement were defined, as for example the user involvement from the early phases of a service provision project; adequate financing of users and coverage of the cost of their participation not assuming that their

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[4] *The Direct Payment represents a payment of cash to individuals who need a certain social welfare service, and include the persons with disability older than 16 or persons with parental responsibility for children with developmental disorders and the carers older than 16, depending on which services they offer. The purpose of this measure is to enable greater flexibility in the provision of services to individuals in a way that they themselves make a decision on the care they will receive, so they can have a greater possibility of choice and control over their lives (for more information, see http://www.dh.gov.uk, in Cree and Davis, 2007., p. 125).*

participation is for free; enabling the involvement of vulnerable users and those who are difficult to be accessed (for example, the homeless, HIV positive users and similar) as well as the representatives of various groups of users; involvement of independently organized user groups.

Very little research has been conducted to date on what the social service users consider to be quality social work and on their expectations from the social worker. According to Cree and Davis (2007.), the results reveal a high level of correlation between the users' answers, regardless of the nature of difficulty due to which they contact the social worker and regardless of place and time. Trying to gain an inside perspective on quality social work as seen by service users, the authors of the paper conducted a series of interviews with users from various fields of social work. The results of the research suggest that the users describe quality social work in the following way: accessible (in terms of time, space but the language as well); focused on establishing and maintaining the relationship which besides the professional component contains the personal one as well (in the sense of interest of the social worker for the user as a person); focused on the user and his uniqueness (and not on the problem, the service or the scheme of a helping process in which he would eventually fit); supportive, in a way that the support provided by social workers is not only practical but emotional as well, holistic in terms of relation and harmonization with other systems of help (health care, housing policy, social policy, education etc.); ready to maintain the balance between the individual right of users and the risks of the measures or user protection which are or are not undertaken and to problematize on the issue with the user; based on the knowledge and empirical evidence; directed toward the future of the user with the possibility of long-term accessibility of the service to the user, when needed (opposite to the tendency of making rushed and short-term decisions).

Other research findings also support this perception of social work, stating that the users prefer to cooperate with social workers who perceive a "person", and not just a "case", show warmth, are informal and compassionate, do not create a feeling of guilt in users; do not leave an impression of overload; know how to listen; do not finish the user's sentences and take seriously the difficulties faced by the user and do not belittle them (Ford and Jones, 1987.; Miley, O'Melia and DuBois; 1995.; Hastings, 2000.).

Based on the features mentioned above, it is possible to recognize the presence of certain actual concepts in social work which apparently play an important role in the perception of social work and social workers by service users. It seems that the users have been familiar with the idea of a cooperative relationship for quite some time, described by Čačinović Vogrinčić et al. (2007.) as a relationship enabling and facilitating the helping process because it preserves the conversation in a way that the help is being researched and co-created, whereby the focus is on positive changes and potential of the individual. According to these authors, a cooperative relation takes place through conversations which enable people with different histories, experience and competencies to meet and create

the solution in a cooperative manner, whereby the user acquires a valuable experience of respect and personal dignity.

Furthermore, it seems that from the perspective of experience (although not of theory) users feel close to the concept of the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1997., in Čačinovič Vogrinčič et al., 2007.), which directs the social worker toward respecting and discovering the user's resources, and to the concept of ethics of participation (Hoffman, 1994.), whereby the professional – social worker abandons the idea of himself as the one »knowing the truth« about the user's problem and of having the power to resolve it. In the ethics of participation no one has the final word; it is an ongoing conversation between the social worker and the user in the process of collaborative creation of problem solutions. The users mention this issue when underlying the need for personal involvement of the social worker, for a supportive approach focused on the user, the relationship and the user's future.

This approach was based on the conviction that the services will become better and the help more efficient if the users are enabled to participate in their creation and provision and if in that way they become cooperative creators of a public good which they respect. Therefore we can express the purpose of user involvement in the field of social work (practice, theory, education, research) as a conviction which has its source in the history of creation of civilization and its democratic ideals which originate from the times of Ancient Greece. In that sense, according to Beresford (2005.), the term »reinvention of the wheel« is a good description of the dynamics of the users' involvement process in this field.

THE CONTINUUM OF USER INVOLVEMENT

In the research studies conducted in the 1980s (mostly Anglo-Saxon ones) in the field of social work and other supporting disciplines, courses and materials for training of teacher-users were developed. One of the examples of good practice is certainly the experience of the British association *Shaping our lives*. It is a civil association led by users, who organized the first state seminar in 1998. with users as coordinators on the topic of user involvement in social work education and practice. According to the association, the students accepted the issue of user involvement in their education process very well. The data also revealed that the total involvement in this context would mean that the users participate at all the levels of the education process of social workers, from the entrance procedure to evaluation of student performance (Beresford et all, 2006). The international experience and attitudes of universities toward these issues differ greatly and in that sense we can speak about the continuum of user involvement rather than about the fulfilled outcome or a constant (Croft and Beresford, 2004.; Lowes and Hullat, 2005.).

In order to include the users and the community in general in considerations and collaborative decision-making process in the field of social work and social policy as an integral part of a community life, one should possess basic information and knowledge on

these issues (Videmšek, 2008.). It can be achieved by informing and counselling of the local inhabitants, in accessible formal and informal ways (for example advertising in local media, local forums, through communication with local education institutions). However, since there are different levels of involvement as well as different levels of control and initiative possessed by included individuals, the process is very complex and time-consuming.

The Figure 1 represents levels of user involvement in the social work teaching process. The model is adapted according to the so called »ladder of participation« (Hart, 1992., in Steel, 2005.). The original model relates to the participation of users in the research and it is conceived as the ladder the lowest level of which includes manipulative inclusion of users and the highest one the initiative and management of the research done by users themselves. With this model, Hart illustrates a progressive and complex nature of involvement of vulnerable groups of users, stating children as participants of the research. In order to present this process in the context of user involvement in the teaching process in social work, we have used a metaphor of stairs, rather than the ladder, due to nonlinearity, complexity and progressiveness of this process in which the participants are faced with numerous obstacles, where certain phases seem almost like stagnation or, in the best case, as a long »waiting period« on one of the steps.

Figure 1.
Levels of user involvement in the social work teaching process (adjusted from Hart, 1992)
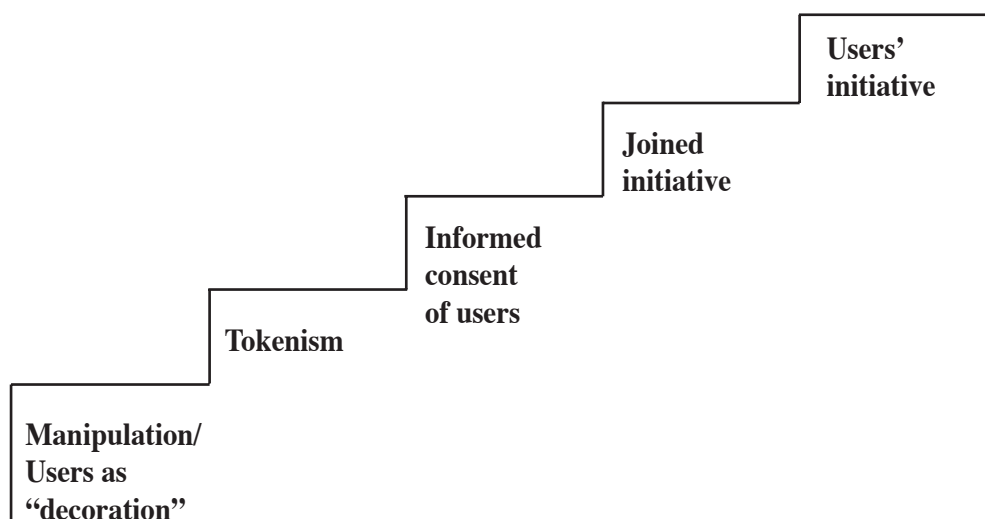
The level of user involvement in the teaching process extends from the so called manipulative level, where the users are not informed and do not have an understanding on the purpose and the course of what is going on in the teaching process. It is possible

that the course director or the organizer asks them about their opinion but they in the first place do or say what the course director expects them to, without the comprehension on what influence their experience could have to the process itself or to further changes or decisions related to this issue. In this sense we can symbolically say that the users represent a sort of »decoration« in the classroom and that they are not expected to really participate but to just »play their part«.

The next level can be defined as the level of the so called tokenist[5] involvement where the users are expected to express their opinion on a certain subject in the classroom, chosen by the teacher, i.e. the course director. The user, however, has very little influence on the modality and the methods in which it will be done or, for example, to what extent he can be personal and critical in expressing certain experience as well as what can be the consequences of such behaviour.

The users' informed consent includes several sub-levels: from the level where the users are asked to participate in a teaching unit, in the creation and planning of which they had not previously participated, but they understand its purpose and objective and they are informed on who makes the decisions; their opinions are considered to be important arguments; to the level where the course director develops a certain idea but in a way that the users participate in all the phases of planning and implementation and they are also active decision makers.

 The next step in the involvement process relates to the level of common initiative of users and the teacher, whereby the users propose certain ideas/projects which they wish to implement in the classroom, and teachers are invited to a joint cooperative decision making and realization process. The highest level of involvement relates to initiation and implementation of ideas and projects in the teaching process by users themselves, whereby the teachers are invited to participate but they are not in charge of implementation of these ideas.

We can affirm that the user involvement in the teaching process at the Department of Social Work attains neither the level of common initiative nor the level of user initiative, except in occasional isolated cases, which cannot be said to represent a general practice of involvement. The authors' estimate is that the Department of Social Work in general can be recognized at the level of users' informed consent, although during the last several years the initiatives of user associations and individual users in the role of external collaborators became more frequent and follow modern trends of social work education.

However, certain teachers sometimes do not have the capacity to accept these initiatives and open a dialogue on these issues, explaining that the programme is not flexible, that there are no hours available, that they are overloaded etc. This was one of the main motives for organizing this research, in order to gain insight into the challenges of user involvement

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[5] *Tokenism refers to limited activities in the politics or in real life in order to enable the marginalized groups a more equal approach to rights and possibilities of the majority population (author's note).*

in the social work teaching process from the perspective of the teachers at the Department of Social Work themselves.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND PROBLEMS

The objective of the research was to gain insight into the teacher assessment of the volume, quality and purpose of user involvement in the social work teaching process, as well as on the possibilities of enhancement of the level of user involvement. The following problems were formulated:

1. Reveal how the teachers asses the current involvement of service users in the social work teaching process in general
2. Reveal how the teachers asses the involvement of service users in the teaching process of particular courses within the social work study programme
3. Reveal which prerequisites of the user involvement in the education process of social work students teachers consider to be important
4. Reveal which obstacles for the user involvement in the education process of social work students teachers consider to be important
5. Gain insight into the students' opinion on the user involvement in the education process, from teachers' perspective
6. Gain insight into the vision and recommendation of teachers related to the user involvement in the teaching process

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The sample consisted of eight teachers at the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Law in Zagreb, directors or participants[6] of (professional) courses within which field placements are organized during the study programme (Theoretical Foundations of Social Work, Social Work with an Individual, Social Work with the Family, Social Work with a Group, Social Work in the Community, Social Work with the Persons with Disability, Social Work and Problems of Young People, Social Gerontology), with whom semi-structured interviews were

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[6] *Certain teachers who are also coordinators of professional courses have participated in creation and implementation of the international project Service Users as Experience Experts in Social Work Education and Research which has been financed by IASSW from January 2008. As this research is a part of the mentioned project, when the course coordinator was also a project team member, he/she could not participate in the research since he/she had participated in its creation and implementation. Therefore, one of the other teachers of the same course was interviewed.*

conducted. Therefore, in that sense we can say that the sample was selected on the basis of the course status (basic professional courses) and of its connexion with student field placements. The total of five female and three male teachers participated in the research. Each teacher received a letter of request to participate in the research on user involvement in the social work teaching process. All eight teachers accepted to participate.

Each interview was conducted individually in the premises of the Department of Social Work. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcriptions were made and prepared for processing, with minimal linguistic changes. Each interview lasted about twenty minutes.

DATA PROCESSING

In this section, we will present the data processing procedure. The gathered data were processed by means of qualitative analysis and based on the results a model of relations between the categories was formed. We will use the second research question »How and to what extent are the users involved in the teaching process within your course?« to present the data processing by means of open coding procedure according to Mesec (1998). We performed the following steps with the aim of organizing the gathered data:

1. Paraphrasing of recorded answers which relate to user involvement in the teaching practice of individual courses
2. Underlining the answers which relate to the question in consideration
3. Writing down of underlined participants' statements
4. Coding of extracted statements with regard to the user involvement in the teaching practice of individual courses
5. Assigning notions to the empirical data and grouping of notions into categories
6. Analysis of meanings and summarizing
7. Creation of the model of relationships between the categories

The procedure of assigning notions to empirical data was preceded by paraphrasing of all recorded answers related to user involvement in teaching procedure of individual courses (Step 1), underlining answers to the questions (Step 2) and writing down of underlined participants' statements (Step 3). The procedure of obtaining categories from participants' answers to all other questions is presented in the Appendix.

The procedure of editing empirical data and forming of categories was performed by two independent researchers. The obtained categories were then compared and discussed and then harmonized in order for the final categories to be a result of the consensus of both researchers. The Table 1 shows an example of editing of notions according to the level of abstraction and defining of first- and second-order notions (Steps 4 and 5).

Table 1.

Excerpt of editing of notions according to the level of abstraction: participants' answers to the question: »How and to what extent are the users involved in the teaching process within your course?«

Levels of abstraction		
Statements of user involvement in the teaching process of the individual course (coding units)	**First-order notions summarization**	**Second-order notions – categories**
The users are not involved in the teaching process. **(1)**, **(4)** The involvement of users is the exercise level which should not be a part of academic courses. **(1)** Due to the amount of content and the structure of the study programme there is neither space nor chances to include the users. **(4)** The elderly are very rarely included in the teaching process. **(2)** They do not come to participate in classes because it would mean stigmatization since they are juvenile offenders. **(7)**	Exclusion of service users from the teaching process due to various reasons	Exclusion of service users from the teaching process
The students meet clients during their field placements. **(4)** The users are involved in various ways the field placement is a part of the course itself. **(5)** The students are involved in field placements in different counselling centres. **(5)** Within field placements there is a possibility to work directly with the users and their families in social care centres and institutions for children and young people with behaviour disorders. **(7)** The highest level of involvement of users is during field placements. **(8)** The service users are involved either in field exercises or it is combined with classroom teaching. **(3)** Those who are interested can be involved in prevention programmes. **(5)** The users are not involved in lectures and exercises ...but they are to a great extent involved in the practical part of the teaching. **(6)** The users are involved, but not directly. **(7)** They are involved twice in the semester when we go to a visit. **(7)** The students have a chance to hear at least two users talking about their experience, organizing of associations, about their activities. **(8)**	Users participate in field exercises, lectures, field placements, programmes	Modalities and forms of user participation in the teaching process
The elderly tend to be involved and integrated in the teaching process within the course in social gerontology. **(2)** Organized meetings at Sljeme for the students and the elderly. **(2)** There is the intention for individuals with impairments to be involved as much as possible. **(3)** When we work on a certain type of impairment we invite the users...they also come forward from associations. **(3)** The users are found through social workers who are open for students...and sometimes the users from associations contact us. **(3)** The contact is created by going to visit the institutions. **(7)** The elderly almost never report alone to participate in the teaching process. **(2)**	Teachers try to involve the users in the teaching process as much as possible The users are contacted through social workers, associations, they report individually	Tendency of increasing user involvement Means of contacting the users

Step 6. Analysis of meanings and summarization

The opinion of research participants, who are course directors or who teach the course, on the user involvement in the teaching process of professional courses revealed various experiences: from the exclusion of users from the teaching process due to different obstacles such as danger of stigmatization, programme overload, users' age or teacher beliefs on uselessness of user participation, to different levels of involvement and forms of teaching process in which the users participate. The results suggest that there is a tendency of increase of the level of involvement, especially in some user groups, for example elderly people and persons with disability. Some teachers perceive user involvement only as their participation in field placements, although other forms of teaching in which the users are included (exercises, lectures) are present as well. As far as contacting the users to get involved in the teaching process is concerned, the »recruitment« takes place through social workers who are considered to be »open for students«, through institutions or through users' initiative. In other words, we can conclude that within the same education institution the teacher's opinions, experience and their perception of possibilities of users' involvement in the teaching process are very heterogeneous.

RESULTS

We will present the results of the qualitative analysis of gathered empirical data in relation to the following research questions:
1. User involvement in the teaching process with social work students in general
2. User involvement in the teaching process within individual courses
3. Prerequisites for user involvement in the teaching process
4. Obstacles to user involvement in the teaching process
5. Students' opinion on the user involvement in the teaching process
6. Vision of user involvement in the teaching process and recommendations for the future.

Overview of the categories in relation to the research questions:
1. **User involvement in the teaching process in the field of social work**
   - Non-informedness of teachers on the user involvement at the faculty level
   - Insufficient user involvement
   - Positive changes with the view of user involvement
   - Ethical aspects of user involvement

2. **User involvement in the teaching process within individual courses**
   - Exclusion of users from the teaching process
   - Modalities and forms of user participation in the teaching process

- Tendency of increasing user involvement
- Means of contacting the users

3. Prerequisites for user involvement in the teaching process

- Prerequisites for involvement related to users
- Prerequisites for involvement related to the faculty
- Prerequisites for involvement related to teachers

4. Obstacles to user involvement in the teaching process

- Financial obstacles to user involvement
- Motivational obstacles
- Obstacles related to space
- Obstacles related to time
- Legal and ethical obstacles

5. Students' opinion on the user involvement in the teaching process
- Support to the user involvement
- Positive influence of users on students
- Connecting the theory and practice
- Change in attitudes

6. Vision of user involvement in the teaching process and recommendations for the future
- Non-inclusion of users, except as illustration of examples
- Planning of user involvement and recognizing the benefits
- Cooperation through a counselling centre at the faculty
- Formalized cooperation
- Increase in the number of hours and quality of field placements
- Research on the users' vision

Based on the categories formed by means of open-coding, a schematic model of relationships between the categories was formed.

Figure 2.
Model of relationships between the categories

USER INVOLVEMENT IN THE
SOCIAL WORK TEACHING
PROCESS FROM THE TEACHER
PERSPECTIVE

At the faculty in general
Non-informedness of teachers on the
user involvement at the faculty level

Insufficient user involvement

Positive changes with the view of
users' involvement

Ethical aspects of user involvement

Within individual courses
Exclusion of users from the
teaching process

The increased involvement of users

Different ways of "recruitment" of
users as participants in the teaching
process

The users are involved in different
forms of the teaching process

PREREQUISITES AND
OBSTACLES

Prerequisites for involvement
Users – have a direct experience of
receiving services, are motivated,
interested, and informed about the
objectives and the mission of the
study programme

Teachers - respect ethical principles,
have the required skills of integrating
the user perspective in the teaching
process

Faculty – adapted premises,
curriculum and teaching plan for
inclusion of users

**Obstacles to
involvement**
Financial

Related to space

Related to time

Motivational

Legal and ethical

VISIONS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

Students' opinions
Support to the involvement of
users

Positive influence of users on
students

Connecting the theory and
practice

Change in students' attitude
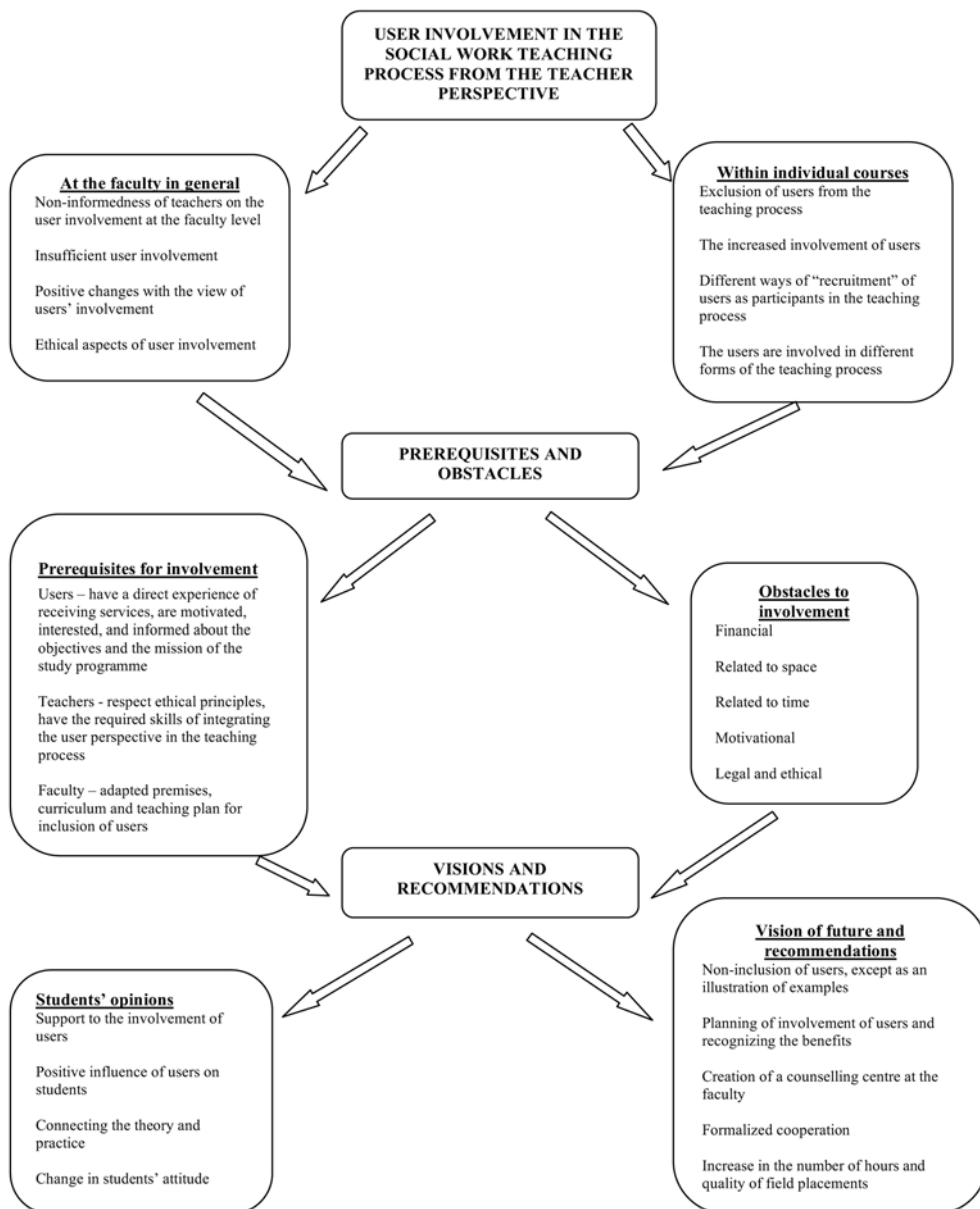
**Vision of future and
recommendations**
Non-inclusion of users, except as an
illustration of examples

Planning of involvement of users and
recognizing the benefits

Creation of a counselling centre at the
faculty

Formalized cooperation

Increase in the number of hours and
quality of field placements

The research result suggest the existence of different, even opposite, opinions on whether the users should be included in the teaching process in the field of social work or

not. Additionally, they reveal the differences in modality and forms of user involvement in teaching of individual courses.

The teachers state that they are not informed enough about the level of user involvement in the teaching process at the faculty and that they do not have enough insight into the modalities in which their colleagues include the users. Some say that the user involvement is low in the proportion and in quality. Others consider that there are positive changes toward the higher level of involvement of users and as examples state the fields of social work with the individual and social work with persons with disability. One participant notes that the abuse of users can also take place (…There are situations when the users are abused, for example, in the framework of the Bologna process the courses where reduced. There were courses in the duration of an academic year, and the field placements also took place during the whole year. Now we had to reduce the course to one semester and certain forms of field placements require the creation of a good communication between the student and the user. It is a process with its phases and when the process is developed, according to that, it actually needs to be interrupted which is unprofessional, lacks quality and it represents the abuse of users. … (5)).

Teachers state different reasons for non-inclusion of users in their courses: from the fact that the programme is overloaded (…due to the quantity of material I have to teach and due to the structure of the study programme itself … there is not much space or chances for user involvement. (4)), participants' age (2) or danger of stigmatization (7) to the conviction that the users' place is not at the academic level of teaching (Involvement of a person with experience, in other words the client, is actually a level of exercise. It practically does not have the place in academic teaching. (1)).

Some teachers (2 and 3) underline the tendencies of greater user involvement, especially as far as users with disabilities or elderly users are concerned. There are different ways of contacting the users in order for them to be included in teaching: with the help of social workers considered to be »open for students«, through institutions or the initiative of users themselves or their associations. The teaching forms in which the users participate are also various: exercises, lectures (He includes the users in field placements or in classroom work. (3)), presentation of personal examples (The students have a chance to hear at least two users talking about their experience, organizing of associations, about their activities. (8)), but the majority of statements relates to user involvement through field placements which is not unusual since field placements are organized within seven out of eight courses included in this research (The highest level of user involvement is in field placements. (8); or They are involved a great deal in practical part of the course. (6)) (as we have mentioned earlier, formal field placements are not organized within the course Theoretical Foundations of Social Work, although the students in the framework of this course visit different institutions of the social welfare system)**.**

The teachers state the following prerequisites for the user involvement in the teaching process: ethical principles, users' motivation for participation as well as accessibility of the faculty premises (For example, we have elderly individuals in wheelchairs which have difficulties in accessing our building due to construction barriers, so something needs to be done in this sense at the faculty. (2)). The teachers underline the importance of user direct experience in the social welfare system («…they really are service users, i.e. social workers' clients.» (4)). They also mention that it is important to adapt the curriculum to enable user participation (…planning of appropriate time and space, … and adapting the structure of teaching, reformulate the curriculum in a way that it integrates the user perspective. (4)) and that the users need to be informed on the education programme (…the user needs to know what the purpose of this relationship is, what are the objectives, roles… (5); … they have to have a lot of knowledge, above all about the curriculum, in what way the classes are organized, what our idea is, what our aims are in the education of social workers. (8)). They also include the need for the faculty to be open and the teachers to be competent for user involvement (…we should talk about our skills, knowledge and capacities for the work with this population, and there is really a need to do so. (7); … as a faculty we should be more open in the sense of our general mission, where we are going, what type of teaching we would like to organize, to give space to the users. (8)).

One of the teachers considers that the user involvement is not an academic method and he states it as an obstacle (…I think that academic knowledge and acquiring of academic experience should be attained by academic methods and techniques… so, if you bring this person in front of students there is no place for anyone else in the education process. (1)). Some teachers underline that until a year ago there had been a lack of motivation for user involvement and that there are obstacles related to finance, space and time as well as legal and ethical norms (…to what extent is it acceptable to expose them to the public… (5); … they wanted to bring the users so they can talk about their experience… they shouldn't have done it, they even shouldn't have shown video films recorded during the direct group work with the users because it is something from the domain of juvenile rights protection … (6); …I think that this population could be stigmatized in that way. (7)).

The teachers consider that the students support user involvement due to the positive effect it could have on both their professional and personal development and the fact that the theory and practice could be connected in a better way. (If a user came to the lectures, the lectures would be more interesting, concrete closer to reality than this theoretical part offered in most classical lectures. (6)). According to the opinion of certain teachers, this would lead to changes in certain attitudes (…it would remove certain obstacles and prejudice that they had… (8)).

As far as the vision of the future is concerned, one of the teachers states that he does not support user involvement, except for the purpose of illustrating an example from the theory (…The university, actually, has a role of generalization of the environment and of

generalization of experience from the environment, and its role is not to treat individual cases. I am not against organizing it sometimes at the level of illustration but everyone should be clear that it is an illustration. (1)). Other teachers emphasize the importance of planning the user participation and recognizing mutual benefits. One teacher proposes the creation of a counselling centre at the faculty (It would be very good, especially for some courses, if we had our own professional practice laboratories, our own counselling centre. As long as we do not have our own quality professional practice laboratory and institutions connected to the study programme, so we can continually work there, students mentored by employed professionals, assistant professors, coordinators of field placements, I think that we will not be able to organize field placements and attain a level of quality as it should be. (5)). The same participant underlines the need for an increase in the number of hours of field placements.

The teachers agree on the fact that a formalized cooperation between the users and the faculty is needed, as well as an appropriate status of service users participating in teaching (…they should have a secure, legalized, clear status…(8)). They also mention a formal cooperation of the faculty and other social welfare institutions. Furthermore, a need to discover the opinions and wishes of the users regarding their participation in teaching is emphasized (… it is important to ask the users what they want, how they see it and what their contribution would be. …we should ask our users how they perceive the education of social workers, how they can participate, if they wish to participate. (8)).

DISCUSSION

The research results suggest that the teachers themselves support the concept of user involvement in the teaching process. They see many obstacles to that idea but also mutual benefits for both students and service users. Out of eight participants, only one teacher is clearly opposed to the user involvement in the teaching process with the following explanation: …I have a feeling that the pressure to include users in the teaching process is just a marketing trick which should conceal a true nature of certain movements in the postmodern social growing apart from its users. Namely, postmodern social work puts a greater focus on individualization of the helping process. This results in forgetting that a social problem exists as a social category and not as an individual category so there is no more need for dealing with social problems at the level of the society… (1).

According to its definition (Sewpaul and Jones, 2005.), the social work promotes social change, problem-solving in interpersonal relations as well as empowerment and liberalisation of people with the aim of enhancing their well-being. Therefore, global objectives of social work as a profession are indisputable, and one of them certainly is solving of social problems at the level of the society (Payne, 2005.). We consider, however, that the individualized approach to the provision of services in social work does not exist at the expense

of attainment of other objectives. Lorenz (2004.) supports the same position mentioning the dialectics of local and global, i.e. social and individual as one of the basic features of social work. In dealing with very specific themes which are only at the first sight limited to local and global ones, social work deals at the same time with the most universal aspects of social justice and human rights. The possibility that the service user, in the role of experience expert, teaches the student about his direct experience of the use of services and his perspective on the help provided and needed cannot, or at least should not, according to the author, represent just a »marketing trick«. There is no documented experience on the benefits of the user involvement in different aspects of social work and other supporting disciplines from the perspective of the user except some research organized by Croatian authors (Koller-Trbović and Žižak, 2008.; Koller-Trbović and Žižak, 2006.; Koller-Trbović and Žižak, 2005.; Sladović Franz, Kregar Orešković and Vejmelka, 2007.; Ajduković, Sladović Franz and Kregar, 2005.a; Ajduković, Sladović Franz and Kregar, 2005.b).

We can also refer to experience of good practice (for example in Great Britain) suggesting mutual benefits for all the participating parties (Beresford, 2005.; Cree and Davis, 2007.; Beresford et al., 2006.; Lowes and Hullat, 2005.). If they do not correspond to a traditional comprehension of the notion of the academic discourse, we consider that this notion should then be changed in order to create space for a new, inclusive tradition.

There are various modalities of user involvement in the teaching practice and we suppose that they are related to the vision of individual teachers and the nature of courses. The users are included in giving lectures, they participate in exercises, they organize field placements together with students, they participate in different meetings and projects, students visit them in their homes or social care institutions or they meet them in different civil society associations.

The prerequisites that should be fulfilled in order for the users to participate in the teaching process can be divided in several categories: those related to the users (direct experience in receiving services, motivation, voluntariness, interest and informedness on the objectives and the mission of the study programme (They have to have a lot of knowledge, above all about the curriculum, in what way the classes are organized, what our idea is, what our aims are in education of social workers. (8)); those related to the teachers, their skills, ethics, capabilities to include the user perspective in the teaching process (…we should talk about our skills, knowledge and capacities for the work with this population, and there is really a need to do so. (7)) and those related to the faculty in the sense of accessibility of the building and the premises, planning of the time and space for user involvement and the changes to the curriculum in this sense (… as a faculty we should be more open in the sense of our general mission, where we are going, what type of teaching we would like to organize, to give space to the users. (8)). They are in accordance with difficulties and obstacles of user involvement defined by Lowes and Hullat (2005.).

It seems important to mention here the ethics of participation which is "added" to the professional social work ethics and represents one of the key theoretical concepts of involvement. Although the teachers have included this concept among the prerequisites of involvement (…it is important to ask the users what they want, how they see it and what their contribution would be …we should ask our users how they perceive the education of social workers, how they can participate, if they wish to participate. (8)), it has not been explicitly stated as one of the key values in social work or social action (Hoffman, 1994.; Čačinovič Vogrinčič et al., 2007.).

Lynn Hoffman (1994.) clearly warns that the professional relinquishes the power which does not belong to him – the power of owing the truth and the solution. The power of professionals is supplemented by a delicate common search. The social workers are expected to endure the uncertainty of search (instead of typified solutions from the perspective of the professional) and to be ready to be personally involved as professionals, interlocutors and co-creators in the research of the solution and the user's story which is being created. Some teachers underline that the users are invited to participate in the teaching process only to talk about their experience and that the experience is the only thing the users need in order to participate in the teaching process. Others consider that they need to be given the possibility to chose subjects on their own, to create the way in which they will present them, how to work with students and to feel more free, so that they are not just guest lecturers but equal partners who create a segment of teaching…. they should be provided with adequate working conditions such as small groups, some project plans, they could be co-mentors for diploma papers, coordinate some small groups of students interested in certain area, provide their expertise. In other words, they can be included in both research and creation, together with the teacher. (8).

If we try to categorize these answers into one of the mentioned levels of involvement, we can see that, according to teachers' statements, almost all levels are included: from the level of manipulation and tokenism, where their presence in the teaching process serves to "adorn" the general impression of the faculty in the community, to the informed involvement, joint initiative and an intent to create a partnership, where the initiatives from the users and their associations are being accepted and respected. However, it is important to underline that there are changes from the exclusion and tokenist inclusion toward a greater involvement. The teachers show effort and a desire to include users in a more qualified and efficient manner. The fact that it is important to adapt the curriculum in order to include the user participation as well as the necessity of investments for the preparation and information of users on the education programme, changes and organization of the faculty has also been recognized.

As one of the problems related to the involvement, the teachers mention obstacles related to finance, space and time. They suggest that the number of hours is not adapted to the quantity of teaching material which does not leave enough time for quality user

involvement, the space is not adapted and that the users' work is not remunerated. There-fore, they plead for a clear, legal and equal status of the users. As far as these obstacles are concerned, we can comment on one of the important changes brought by the Bologna process. The key novelty is that the student, and not the teacher, is placed in the focus of the teaching process, so a paradigmatic change toward the user perspective is noticeable at the level of academic change as well. In other words, what the user needs and receives and the competencies he can acquire are of primary concern in the teaching process and not the content that the teacher intended to teach. The teacher comment that the number of hours is not sufficient in order to teach what they want to teach can, therefore, mean that the adaptation of the programme, i.e. individual courses, in accordance with the Bologna principles was not successful or that there is a great resistance to the focus change from the teacher to the student.

It is interesting that no one of the participants recognizes the preparedness, i.e. non-preparedness, of users to participate in the teaching process as an obstacle. Speaking on prerequisites of user involvement, some teachers consider that the users need to possess knowledge on the content and the mission of the teaching process, but they do not mention whose responsibility it is to prepare and teach users how to participate in the process. Lowes and Hullat (2005.) recognize the importance of preparing the user for teaching as one of the key prerequisites of their quality and efficient involvement and they consider that the role of the education institution in the teaching process of which the users are to be involved is to plan and implement such preparations, which will be harmonized with expectations and needs of individual users but also with expected outcomes of individual teaching units.

As far as difficulties related to space and construction are concerned, we can say that the adaptation of the access to the building as well as its interior proceeds very slowly, with numerous administrative obstacles which are even more complex due to the fact that the building is considered cultural monument. However, this cannot justify the fact that no positive change has been done toward necessary accessibility and equal status of the persons with disability to get involved in the everyday life of the community. The need for the participation of users to be remunerated, as any participation of a professional would be, as well as the need for payment of transport and other fees related to teaching is rec-ognized as a frequent obstacle in some international experiences of user involvement as well (Lowes and Hullat, 2005.). However, the experience from the practice showed that at the Department of Social Work it is possible to obtain a permission to hire users as guest lecturers, which has been implemented in the last two years within one of the courses. We can assume that the teachers are not informed about the possibility to register the user as any other guest lecturer by following a usual procedure at the beginning of the semester or that the majority of teachers have not even tried to open this possibility since there is not legal or statutory provision which would oppose to that.

The teachers agree that the students support user involvement and that this practice has an important influence on their professional and personal growth and development. Some teachers have described the experience based on which it was clear that the students, after initial disapproval, have recognized the importance of user participation in their education (...at the end of the year they leave competent and they have the need to say: 'My user said this and that, I learned it in that way...', one can see that they have acquired a lot, that they have a feeling and awareness of growth in a professional sense, that the experience has built them as people, because as people they remove some obstacles and prejudice… (8); or I could state many examples where the students were very surprised how much they can learn from an eight-month old baby, which seemed unbelievable at first. There were students who came yelling at me, and told me I was doing stupid things, that what kind of field placement was that and that what they could learn from an eight-month old baby. At the end of the placement they were the loudest and they said that they learned very much and that they could not believe how they can't leave the baby. (5)).

As far as the vision of the future of user involvement is concerned, all participants, except one teacher who is opposed to user involvement except for example purposes, perceive the importance of user involvement in the teaching process. The importance of remunerating user participation, defining of their status as equal participants in teaching and the necessity of planning the user participation and adapting the curriculum were underlined as well. These results are in line with the experience of Anglo-Saxon countries which consider the issue of remunerating and covering of user participation fees one of the important prerequisites for empowerment of the partnership (Lewis and Hullat, 2005.; Beresford, 2005.). It also seems important to mention the need for the increase in the number of hours of field placements noted by the majority of teachers.

A suggestion related to the creation of a counselling centre at the faculty i.e. professional practice laboratory for students (So we can continually work there, students mentored by employed professionals, assistant professors, coordinators of field placements, I think that we will not be able to organize field placements and attain a level of quality as it should be. ... Then we would know from the beginning until the end what the student needs to go through, each year he would enter deeper in the issue, he would be able to work more, use new techniques that he acquired, methods. (5)). Such a suggestion needs to be previously problematized from the perspective of counselling skills teaching methodology, compare it with the experience of other faculties where counselling skills are being taught and especially analyzed from the ethical perspective in cooperation with all groups of users for which it will be intended.

The importance of respecting the users' vision of their participation in the teaching process has also been recognized, which represents a qualitative shift form the perception of the user's role as an "executor of the ordered task" toward a partner understanding and equality of participants in the teaching process: ...it is important to ask the users what they

want, how they see it and what their contribution would be. What seems very important is that we should ask our users how they perceive the education of social workers, how they can participate, if they wish to participate. (8).

It seems that this comment reflects well the core of the inclusion of the user perspective and a step forward from the current way of thinking where the users are expected to be well informed on the details of the teaching process, i.e. in the way that the academic community sees the content and the process of teaching, but the teachers are not expected to have insight into the users' perception of the study programme and the mission of social work in general. Such a change of the perspective is important also due to verification of ethical aspects of user involvement, since some teachers sometimes a priori reject the idea of user involvement in the teaching process »in the name of ethics«. We do not know if for individual users certain aspects of involvement in the teaching process would be unethical, as stated by some participants, since this paper deals with the teacher perspective. In any case, future research should focus on the aspects which the users perceive as unethical and in what way this is correlated with teacher assumptions.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research have shown that there is a wish, but also a need, for user involvement in the teaching process with social work students. The majority of participants in the research includes the users in teaching and sees a change in quality and quantity of their involvement, so there are ideas and visions on promoting this cooperation and mutual benefits of participants.

The results are in line with experience described by other authors. Beresford (2005.) and Cree and Davis (2007.) point out that the benefits from user involvement for users themselves and their associations were related to decrease of exclusion of users from the decision-making process, higher level of self-representation and self-presentation experience and skills and they supported greater accessibility to services and generally gave their contribution to the development of social work as well as healthcare and welfare systems.

The findings of this research are in correlation with the experience of user involvement in the teaching process related to the analysis of efficiency and obstacles. The article *Advocacy in action with staff and students from the University of Nottingham* (2006.) also revealed that it is important to include the users in all the aspects of learning and teaching, which is much wider then only talking about user's personal examples. In order for the involvement to be efficient, it needs to be based on formal structures of participation and it should result in positive outcomes for the users, which means that they are not included just to be heard but also in order for them to have a chance to listen. In relation to that issue, it is important to implement evaluations controlled by users, which are now an exception (Beresford, 2005.). In order to gain credible data on the meaning of the notion »positive outcomes«

and what processes and contents are considered to be helpful, it is important to monitor and evaluate the involvement of all participants of the teaching process. These findings and experience should be further deepened by qualitative research. Since for now there is no research or literature in this area in Croatia, the results of this research can help in planning future research related to this topic.

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APPENDIX:
Assigning notions to empirical data and grouping related notions to categories

Table 2.
Assessment of user involvement in the teaching process

Levels of abstraction		
Statements on the assessment of user involvement in the teaching process	**Notions**	**Categories**
He is not informed enough on the level of user involvement in the teaching process at the faculty. **(1)** They do not know well the ways in which their colleagues include the users. **(4)**	The teachers are not informed on the user involvement at the faculty	Non-informedness of teachers on the user involvement at the faculty level
User involvement is bad and at a low level. **(2), (6)** They could be included more. **(5)** The courses and contents where the participants are directly included in the teaching are rare, especially in the theoretical part, while in the practical part they are more included. **(6)**	Insufficient direct involvement of users in theoretical teaching as far as quantity and quality are concerned	Insufficient involvement of users
Social Work with an Individual and Social Work with the Persons with Disability are the courses where the users participate. **(3), (7)** Within certain courses users are included quite well and in way of increasing quality. **(8)** We can't say that the users are involved in the creation of the curriculum, but more and more people invite users in the classroom and give them space to say from their own perspective how they see social work, their problems and their need for social work. **(8)**	Specificities of user involvement in the teaching process, which is gaining in its quality	Positive changes with the view of user involvement
It can happen that the users are abused because only the issue of the curriculum is analyzed, only the fulfilment of requirements of time and not the user's welfare. **(6)**	Possibilities of abuse of the users	Ethical aspects of user involvement

Table 3.

Prerequisites for user involvement in the teaching process

Levels of abstraction		
I **Statements on the prerequisites for user involvement in the teaching process**	II **Notions**	III **Categories**
Voluntary participation of users, that they are physically well, users' good will. **(2)** Prerequisites related to the users are that they are social workers' clients, spotted at the filed by the social welfare centre or non-governmental organizations. **(4)** They have shown interest in being included in the teaching process. **(4)** They are motivated to work on their own problems or on themselves. **(5)** They need to know that this relationship is limited in time, what the purpose of the relationship is, what the objectives and roles are. **(5)** The user's informedness on the curriculum, in what way the classes are organized, what our idea is, what our aims are in education of social workers. **(8)** Experience knowledge as precious for the students. **(3)**, **(6)**	The users need to have a direct experience of receiving services, they need to be motivated, interested and informed on the objectives and the mission of the study programme	Prerequisites for involvement related to users
Removal of construction obstacles at the faculty. **(2)** The building is inaccessible. **(3)**, **(8)** Planning the required time and space. **(4)** That a part of the teaching takes place in the field. **(4)** Adapt the structure of teaching; reformulate the curriculum as to integrate the user perspective in it. **(4)** The faculty should establish a better network of cooperation with professionals from practice. **(6)** The faculty should be more open in the sense of our general mission, where we are going, what type of teaching we would like to organize, to give space to the users to get involved and create the teaching process. **(8)**	The faculty needs to adapt the building, the curriculum and the teaching plan to include the users	Prerequisites for involvement related to the faculty
The required knowledge, skills and capacities of teachers in the work with juvenile offenders and to transfer those to students. **(7)** The importance of communication skills of teachers and students. **(7)** Ethical principles. **(2)** The readiness to recognize the quality in the form of work which includes direct user involvement. **(6)**	The teachers should respect ethical standards, have the necessary skills of integration of the user perspective in the teaching process	Prerequisites for involvement related to teachers

Table 4.
Obstacles to user involvement in the teaching process

Levels of abstraction		
I **Statements on the obstacles to inclusion of users in the teaching process**	II **Notions**	III **Categories**
The faculty does not have financial resources to stimulate the inclusion of users. **(2)**, **(3)**	Lack of financial resources	Financial obstacles to user involvement
Until a year ago there had been a lack of motivation for inclusion of service users. **(5)** If a service user is brought in front of the students, he should come for himself...and there is no space for anyone else in the education process. **(1)**	Lack of motivation	Motivational obstacles
Physical obstacles. **(3)**, **(8)** A great number of students. **(8)** The space does not allow for a greater number of users from the outside. **(4)**	The building is not accessible and there is lack of space	Obstacles related to space
Not enough hours for the quantity of the content that needs to be lectured. **(4)**, **(6)**	The teaching material and number of hours are not harmonized	Obstacles related to time
The question is to what extent they can be exposed to the public, to a larger number of people and what they can offer. **(5)** ...because they are juveniles placed in educational homes and institutes and not even the video recordings of group work can be shown because the rights and interest of juveniles need to be protected. **(6)** That population (juvenile delinquents) would be stigmatized. **(7)**	Protection of users right, danger of stigmatization	Legal and ethical obstacles

Table 5.
Students' opinion on the user involvement in the teaching process – teachers' perspective

Levels of abstraction		
I **Statements on the opinion of students on user involvement in the teaching process**	**II** **Notions**	**III** **Categories**
Students would be favourable. **(1)** Students accept and cooperate. **(3), (4)** Students like guests. **(8)**	A positive attitude of students toward inclusion of users	Support to the user involvement
The students are more open for questions when the users come than when the experts for individual fields come. **(3)** They react positively and take it positively. **(5)**	User involvement is encouraging for students	Positive influence of users on students
The lectures were more interesting, concrete, closer to reality from the theoretical part offered by a lecture. **(5)**	The involvement of users reduces the gap between the theory and practice	Connecting the theory and practice
It would remove certain obstacles and prejudice, they would learn a lot. **(8)** They would support and accept because in that way they get a real picture and contact with the user, the ageism is reduced, as well as discrimination of the elderly and prejudice. **(2)**	User involvement enables influence on the students' attitudes	Change in attitudes

Table 6.
Vision of the future and obstacles

Levels of abstraction		
I **Statements on the vision of the future of user involvement in the teaching process**	**II** **Notions**	**III** **Categories**
The users can be included only for the purpose of illustration, with a clear message that it is just the illustration of an example. **(1)**	User involvement only for the purpose of illustrating the examples	Non-inclusion of users, except for illustration examples
The user involvement should be planned so the students can have a direct contact with the users. **(2)**,**(4)** Find a way for the users to be included either through going to the field or for the users to come at the faculty. **(3)** The teaching units in which the users will participate should be adapted so both students and users benefit from that. **(4)** A closer form of cooperation with social workers in the field. **(4)** Expand the network of cooperation with professionals from the practice. **(6)** They could be co-mentors for diploma papers or coordinate some small groups of interested students. **(8)**	Finding the ways of participating and gaining benefits, planning of inclusion	Planning of user involvement and recognizing the benefits
The necessity of own professional practice laboratory, counselling centres, cooperation of institutions with the faculty. **(5)**	Creation of counselling centres and cooperation through a counselling centre at the faculty	Cooperation through a counselling centre at the faculty
Two institutions should sign an agreement which defines the roles, who does what and in what way to participate, which are the responsibilities and the tasks. **(5)** The users should have an equal, legalized and clear status and this work should be remunerated. **(8)**		Formalized cooperation
The users should be included through field placements which should be more extensive. **(7)** They should be provided with adequate working conditions in small groups. **(8)**		Increase in the number of hours and quality of field placements
It is important to ask the users what they want, how they see the education of social workers, if they wish to participate. **(8)**		Research on the users' vision