



## University of Dundee

### 'Inspiring Conversations'

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## **‘Inspiring Conversations’: a comparative analysis of the involvement of Experts By Experience in Italian and Scottish Social Work Education**

### **Abstract**

The involvement of service users and carers, Experts by Experience (EBE), in social work education at the Catholic University of Milan, Italy and the University of Dundee, Scotland, is rooted and connected epistemologically and pedagogically. Differences emerge in how these roots are manifest in the models of EBE involvement adopted in the two universities. This paper explores these similarities and differences through discussion of the different models of EBE involvement in use at the two European universities, and thus provides a comparative European insight into approaches, experiences and impact of EBE involvement in social work education. The authors contextualize the pedagogy and core values underpinning EBE involvement and introduce the concept of ‘inspiring conversations’. The comparative analysis is centred on five areas of EBE involvement in social work education: Context and Types of involvement; Recruitment of EBE; Roles and Responsibilities of EBE; Resource Implications; and Impact and Outcomes of involvement. The paper calls for a focus on *Coherence*, *Prudence* and *Sustainability* as a foundation for other universities to enhance their social work programmes through cultivating EBE involvement to co-create knowledge to inform future innovative practice.

**Keywords:** comparative research; experiential learning; Experts by Experience; Italy and Scotland; service user involvement; social work education.

### **Introduction**

For many years the Catholic University of Milan (Italy) and the University of Dundee (Scotland) have included Experts by Experience (EBE) in qualifying social work programmes. In both contexts, service users and informal carers, as EBE, along with lecturers have worked collaboratively in the education and learning experiences of future social workers. The Italian “Relational Model” is rooted in relational social work (Donati, 2011; Folgheraiter, 2004) as is the Scottish model, which is also framed by an “Outcomes Focused Model” (Levy, et al., 2016a), that facilitates for students’ learning from time spent with EBE, to impact on practice. At the Catholic University of Milan, the involvement of EBE has been driven by the personal initiative of academics, whilst this holds true for the University of Dundee, in the Scottish context the inclusion of EBE in social work education has been a mandatory requirement for all Scottish universities providing social work education for over 15 years. This reflects an established commitment at government level to valuing and integrating user perspectives into social work education.

The practice of EBE involvement at both universities is grounded in social justice and the fundamental value placed on service users and carers’ everyday experiences contributing to the knowledge and skills of social work students. Service users and carers are Experts By Experience (EBE), experts through living lives that have included additional social challenges leading to social work involvement. We use the term service user and carer to be inclusive of students with lived experience and make space for the students to share and integrate personal experiential knowledge into their learning (Weerman and Abma, 2018).

Historically, the genesis of user involvement is located in the UK. As Duffy et al., (2017:126) note, ‘what was a peculiarly UK initiative is now an international one’, with a growing international evidence base (Hughes, 2017; Morin and Lambert, 2017; Levy et al., 2016a; Tanner, et al., 2015; Cabiati and Raineri, 2016; Kristiansen and Heule, 2016; Robinson and Webber, 2013). This paper offers an original contribution to this literature by contributing to filling a lacuna on comparative perspectives on the involvement of EBE in social work education. The comparative discussion talks to the essence and the core values of user involvement in social work education that remain central even when different models are applied internationally.

This comparative European insight into approaches, experiences and impact of EBE involvement in social work education in Italy and Scotland was designed to explore similarities and variations in practice. In addition, it aims to inspire other universities to develop opportunities for collaborative learning with EBE in social work education. The authors close the paper with a focus on *Coherence*, *Prudence* and *Sustainability* as the building blocks for future development and embedding of EBE involvement in social work education.

### ***Inspiring Conversations***

When discussing the experience of Experts by Experience (EBE) involvement in social work education, the authors were stimulated by the expression '*inspiring conversations*'. The expression refers to the 'open effect' generated by the participation of EBE in social work education. In both countries when students met with EBE their conversations covered a range of topics that could be challenging, empowering, motivating and stimulating, but ultimately '*inspiring*'. Encounters with EBE inspired students to revisit their present role as a social work student, as well as to think about their future role as a practitioner, to reflect on their personal motivation and to confirm and attest their interest in the promotion of human oriented practices (Beresford, 2013; Irvine et al. 2015; Corrigan and Penn, 2015).

The involvement of EBE in social work education is enriching for students as well as for the EBE and academics (Levy et al., 2020; Irvine, et al., 2015; Morgan and Jones, 2009; Brown and Young, 2008). For EBE, involvement has inspired them to positively revisit their experience as service users or carers (Driessens et al. 2016); to learn new skills and to have a valued role (Warren and Boxall, 2009); to be heard (Warren 2007); make friends, identify with other users and build self-confidence (Brown and Young, 2008; Matka et al., 2010); as well as have the opportunity to critically revisit their personal story (Green and Wilks, 2009). Findings from a Scandinavian study (Schön, 2016), based on a questionnaire, show that users' main reasons for involvement were to contribute to social work education through sharing their lived experiences, to help improve services and to obtain respect for their own personal knowledge and experience. Research by Natland (2015) conducted in Norway, reveals similar findings with benefits for EBEs participating in social work education including the opportunity to do something for themselves; to experience a non-hierarchical relationship; and space to tell their personal story and feel valued.

The collaboration with EBE has created opportunities for academics to develop innovative approaches for re-shaping social work education in effective and concrete ways (Cabiati, 2017). At a personal level, the authors have been inspired to revisit their own personal commitment to social work education, confirming what Driessens et al., (2016) have highlighted, that collaboration with EBE can be a source of motivation for academics. Furthermore, engagement with EBE for both students and academics, can 'minimize othering as "us" and "them", counter the idea of the social worker as expert, contribute to more egalitarian relationships and enable us to truly be *for the Other*' (Sewpaul and Henrickson, 2019:10). Conversations with EBE in social work education are '*inspiring*' on multiple levels, as such the involvement of EBE should be re-imagined as one of collaboration with social work academics and students, who co-produce meaningful outcomes (Warren, 2007; Beresford, 2013; Morin and Lambert, 2017).

### **Epistemological and Pedagogical Roots**

The involvement of EBE at the two universities is premised on collaborative learning between students and EBE, and theoretically framed by relational social work (Folgheraiter, 2004; Cabiati, 2017); ethics of care (Tronto, 1993); social pedagogy (Levy et al., 2020) and active citizenship for social change (Askheim, et al., 2017; Heule, et al., 2017; Levy et al., 2020). Epistemologically, both universities place value on experiential knowledge and learning (Kolb, 1984), knowledge derived from a variety of different standpoints (Beresford, 2013; Beresford, and Boxall, 2012), as well working with humility and respect for others as 'a human duty' and quality of a progressive teacher (Freire, 1998:39).

These epistemological and pedagogical roots inspired the Italian "Relational Model" (Folgheraiter, 2004) and the Scottish "Outcomes Focused Model" (Levy et al, 2016a) and led to the authors developing and using the following six key principles to inform user involvement in social work education, research and practice:

1. Human support to manage life challenges arises from a reciprocal relationship between social workers and people in need;
2. Conscientisation and education are conduits to enable people to become 'more fully human in the world in which they exist' (Nyirenda, 1995);
3. "Experiential competences" and "technical/methodological competences" are complementary and not antagonist;
4. *Experts by Experience* are people from whom to learn for the promotion of anti-oppressive social work education, research and practice;

5. Social workers must be self-aware, sensitive, and equipped with a strong sense of ethical and moral practice;
6. The role of education in achieving social change includes functions of advocacy.

EBE involvement can support academics in realizing, with consistency, the above principles, maintaining a coherence between “what is taught”, “how it’s taught”, “why it’s taught” and “from whom/towards whom it’s taught”.

### Comparative Analysis of EBE Involvement in Social Work Education in Italy and Scotland

This paper is based on comparative analysis between two models of EBE involvement in social work education used at the Catholic University of Milan, Italy and the University of Dundee, Scotland. The authors used each university as a case study and applied a comparative case study approach to analyze and synthesize the similarities and differences across the two case studies, alongside understanding the role of context in achieving intended outcomes (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017). The comparative analysis was at an institutional and not a national level. Each university is unique in its practices, and whilst not representative of an individual country, the situational context is integral to the outcomes.

Drawing on the international literature on the topic of EBE involvement in social work education and through discussions between the authors based at the two European universities the five areas listed below were identified for comparative analysis: 1) context and types of EBE involvement; 2) recruitment of EBE; 3) roles and responsibilities; 4) resource implications; and 5) impact and outcomes of EBE involvement in social work education.

A comparative table (Table 1) was developed and populated by each author, highlighting the key elements that characterized the Italian and the Scottish model, as the basis for further discussion and development of the narrative for this paper.

The study conforms to internationally accepted ethical guidelines, with ethical approval having been received from each of the universities ethics committees.

**Table 1: EBE Involvement in Social Work Education in Italy and Scotland**

	<b>Relational Model: Italy</b>	<b>Outcomes Focused Model: Scotland</b>
<b>1.Context and Types of EBE Involvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No Government incentives or requirements.</li> <li>• Dependent on personal initiatives of social work academics/teams.</li> </ul> <p><i>Full Day Meetings</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Year 1 undergraduates (Module: <i>Social Work Orientation</i>).</li> <li>• Students and EBE spend 8 hours together in one full day.</li> <li>• Individual work (1 x EBE with 1 x student) and group work with EBE, students and academic</li> <li>• Meetings campus based.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scottish Government mandatory requirement for EBE involvement in social work education.</li> <li>• Dependent on individual social work academics/teams.</li> </ul> <p><i>Caring within Integrated Services Module</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core module: Yr 1 postgraduates.</li> <li>• Students and EBE spend a minimum 15 hours together over 6 weeks.</li> <li>• Group work: approx. 6 students and 1-2 EBE, work on group presentation.</li> <li>• Meetings campus based.</li> </ul>
<b>2.Recruitment of EBE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-help and mutual aid groups (EBE must have been a member of group for least one year).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carers and Users (CU) group, School of Education and Social Work, University of Dundee. Members join the CU group through local and national networks.</li> </ul>
<b>3.Roles and Responsibilities of EBE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting students in starting an open conversation with an unknown person without professional pressures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EBE to be themselves and enable students into their world to support the development of key social work skills:</li> <li>• listening and communication</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing life experiences in a space of respect and confidentiality</li> <li>• Teaching students how to learn from peoples' life expertise</li> <li>• Inspiring students to reflect on their relational and communication skills</li> <li>• Stimulating students to reflect on their personal motivation to become a social worker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• relationships and trust,</li> <li>• self-awareness,</li> <li>• co-producing outcomes.</li> <li>• Being open and receptive to students' curiosity and interest in their lives.</li> <li>• Sharing experiences of social work policy and practice.</li> <li>• Mentoring, inspiring and guiding students and academics.</li> </ul>
4. <b>Resource Implications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Departmental core programme funding.</li> <li>• No payment of EBE.</li> <li>• Resources cover lunch and refreshment during <i>Full Day</i> meetings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Departmental core programme funding.</li> <li>• EBE are paid for their time and travel expenses.</li> <li>• Lunch is provided before the group presentations.</li> </ul>
5. <b>Impact and Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application to social work principles and practices.</li> <li>• Impact on students' stigma and prejudices of service users and carers.</li> <li>• Inspiration for academics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application to social work principles and practices.</li> <li>• Developing relationship-based practice, co-production and the valuing of other knowledges.</li> <li>• Challenging and contesting perceptions of service users and carers.</li> <li>• Empowering for EBE and inspiring for academics.</li> </ul>

### 1. **Context and Types of EBE Involvement in Social Work Education**

In the Italian case study, the involvement of EBE in social work education has been driven by the personal initiative of academics. Involvement is not regulated by official directives and there is no support for collaborative learning programmes provided by the Italian Government. Inspired by international developments and relational social work (Folgheraiter, 2004; 2017), EBE have been a key component on the undergraduate and postgraduate social work degree programmes for ten years. The experience of the Catholic University of Milan is an Italian example of EBE involvement in social work education, however, as collaborative learning experiences in Italian social work education are rare, this case study is not representative of the country.

In this paper, the focus is on *Full Day* meetings between students and EBE, which is the first of many experiences students have with EBE on their academic path. *Full Day* meetings with EBE are part of a core module, *Social Work Orientation Workshop* for first year undergraduate students (Cabiati, 2016). The *Full Day* programme is divided into two parts. In the morning, each student is randomly matched with an EBE. The student and EBE then share a two-hour face-to-face conversation. It is made clear to all the participants that this conversation is not a professional assessment or a research interview, but a simple conversation aimed at getting to know one another and exchanging life experiences. Following the two-hour conversations all participants eat lunch together in the university canteen. After lunch, two-hour group meetings occur with a mixture of students, EBE and academics. In the initial years of the module the group meetings were facilitated by academics, EBE now take on this role. In the group meetings, all participants are asked to express their thoughts and feelings about the *Full Day* experience. After the experience, the *Full Day* meetings are revisited in social work methodological courses and elaborated on with the support of academics to enable students to fully embed the sense of EBE involvement in their learning and future practice.

In the Scottish context, the Scottish Government's *Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2003) led to the involvement of EBE becoming a mandatory requirement on all qualifying social work programmes in Scotland, with similar developments in the rest of the UK (Department of Health,

2002). The mandatory requirement for EBE involvement is a unique feature of social work education in the UK; a tangible acknowledgement of the value placed on the experiences and knowledge of EBE, and the transformative potential of this to students' learning. Whilst the role of government in driving EBE involvement in Scottish social work education cannot be overlooked; the mandatory requirement does not prescribe the approach, type nor the extent of involvement. This has enabled each university to develop their own approach, with the University of Dundee pioneering innovative approaches and prioritizing EBE involvement across its undergraduate and postgraduate social work programmes including, influencing and involvement in numerous modules using creative approaches from role play to collaborative project work; assessment; programme development; student recruitment; research and, the Chair of the Social Work Programme Board.

For the purposes of this paper, EBE involvement is focused on a core first year module that has been on the MSc Social Work programme, *Caring within Integrated Services (Caring module)* since 2005. The *Caring* module was introduced into the MSc Social Work programme in 2005. Over 15 years the module has evolved and responded to changing policy, practice and research on user involvement. In addition, the module leader has worked collaboratively with EBE to respond to module feedback, and enacted suggested module enhancements. These changes have retained the essence of the module, which has been to offer students the opportunity to spend time with service users and/or carers, to learn from and with them about their day to day lives, their experiences of using social services and ways to develop meaningful and trusting relationships as a foundation for relational, person centred practice. The module enables students to work in small groups with one or two EBE. Each group meets on campus for 2.5 hours each week over a period of 6 weeks. The weekly meetings culminate in assessed group presentations.

The Italian and Scottish modules are examples of meaningful engagement with EBE that have been inspiring social work students for over ten years. More than a decade ago the academics leading these initiatives had little evidence to inform their practice, a lacuna that this comparative study contributes to addressing.

As Warren (2007) and Baldwin and Sadd (2006) have observed elsewhere, modules and programmes reflect the salience of academics driving, influencing and shaping EBE involvement at an institutional level.

## **2. Recruitment of EBE for Involvement in Social Work Education**

EBE are recruited through a variety of ways including, the use of open calls, networks with social workers and social work organisations, self-help groups, voluntary organisations, and through events in the community (McLaughlin et al., 2018; Warren, 2007). In both the Italian and Scottish examples, recruitment is made through local and national groups, networks and communities.

In the Italian experience, EBE are recruited through self-help and mutual-aid groups and non-profit organisations, the so-called "umbrella organisations" that gather a number of self-help and mutual-aid groups to address similar social problems. The recruitment through self-help and mutual-aid organizations takes into account both the range of benefits arising from working in groups and the type of interactions that occur in such groups. Self-help and mutual-aid groups are framed from a strengths-based approach (Saleebey, 1996) promoting psychological insight and social skills (Steinberg, 2010).

Over the ten years of EBE being involved in the *Full Day* meetings the number of EBE has increased significantly from twenty to around one hundred each year. The EBE come from groups located in Milan, Brescia, Como, Varese and small towns around the region of Lombardy. Along with an increase in the number of EBE, the range of user groups involved has also expanded over time. Initially EBE were drawn from self and mutual aid groups for alcohol problems, this now includes eight user groups: mental health; drug addiction; alcohol addiction; eating disorders; disability; difficult partner divorce; parents of children in child protection and gambling addiction.

In Scotland, the *Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2003) introduced the mandatory requirement for EBE involvement in social work education, which in turn led to the formation of the Carers and Users (CU) group at the University of Dundee. Members of the CU group are keen to work with students, to volunteer their time and share their experiences and knowledge, with the aim to transform future social work practice. All the EBE involved in the *Caring* module are drawn from the CU group. The group is small, averaging around ten members, with an academic liaison/support.

The CU group comprises EBE who are service users and/or informal carers, drawn from Dundee and the surrounding regions (Tayside, Fife, Angus and Perthshire). CU group members have largely been drawn from three main user groups: disability (physical and/or learning disabilities), mental health and informal (family) carers which is typical of similar groups aligned with professional programmes (Ward et al., 2016; Corrigan and Penn, 2015). A key challenge in user involvement in social work education, as in social work research, is reaching and involving more marginalized groups including, people with HIV, homelessness and asylum seekers (Allegri et al., 2020; Healy, 2001; Panciroli and Corradini, 2019). In the Scottish case study, academics draw on their networks to enable students to spend time with a wide range of user groups; although it is only the CU group that has a voice at programme level.

EBE involvement is rooted in sharing experiences to develop narratives and points of view enhanced by different perspectives, and avoiding or limiting the risk of presenting anecdotal, unrepresentative or too personal stories (Baldwin and Sadd, 2006). However, questions around recruitment are not unproblematic and cannot be separated from ethical debates about EBE involvement in social work education. The model used to frame involvement impacts on the extent to which the voices of EBE are perceived as 'inspiring' and heard, or silenced, othered or trivialized; and their experiential knowledge valued or deemed inferior to academic knowledge (McLaughlin et al., 2018). Prudence is called for to prevent EBE involvement reproducing oppressive power dynamics, and increasing social inequalities, for example by justifying and promoting hegemonic agendas (Carey, 2009; Levitas, 2005).

### **3. Roles and Responsibilities of EBE in Social Work Education**

In both Milan and Dundee, EBE participation is voluntary, and EBE do not have a contract with either University. The roles and responsibilities of EBE is not to substitute academics in specific tasks, but to offer additional experiential expertise and knowledge with their contribution to student learning being significant in terms of value and importance. When talking about responsibilities, those of the academics should not be overlooked, to mirror good practice of working with EBE in preparation for students moving into practice (Trevithick, 2009; East and Chambers, 2007; Oliver et al., 2017; Farrow, 2014).

In the Italian case study, the following list of roles and responsibilities emerged from evaluating the *inspiring* conversations between EBE and students during *Full Day* meetings. This list highlights how EBE involvement contributes to students' and academics' learning:

1. Supporting students in starting an open conversation with an unknown person without professional pressures or interviews.
2. Sharing life experiences in a space of respect and confidentiality.
3. Teaching students how to learn from peoples' life expertise.
4. Inspiring students to reflect on their relational and communication skills.
5. Stimulating students to reflect on their personal motivation to become a social worker.
6. Giving students advice on their role as a future social work professional.
7. Inspiring academics in reflecting on their personal commitment to their teaching.

The above list is equally applicable to the Scottish context, where the *Caring Module* enables students and EBE to work together to co-produce a joint presentation. Working in groups of approximately six students and one or two EBE, each member of the group brings their own unique narrative, life history, expectations and challenges. Together the group are tasked with identifying a key social care issue that they want to address. Collaboratively the diverse perspectives and experiences of the group are blended into an assessed presentation which takes place in front of the other students, EBE and academic staff. Through the group work with EBE the students are able to contest and challenge prevailing perceptions and stereotypes of service users and the consequences of exclusion (Askheim, et al., 2017; Heule, et al., 2017; Driessens et al., 2016).

The roles and responsibilities of EBE in the Scottish case study are, in brief, to be themselves; to enable students into their world to support the development of key social work skills: of listening and communication; relationships and trust; developing self-awareness; and co-producing outcomes that will

have meaning and impact in the lives of service users and social work practice. This is achieved through EBE being:

1. Open and receptive to students' curiosity and interest in their lives.
2. Sharing their experiences of social work policy and practice.
3. Mentoring, inspiring and guiding students and academics.

This pedagogy requires both prudence and coherence, to co-create with EBE a space for students to see, value and integrate different forms of knowledge into their learning and practice.

#### **4. Resource Implications of EBE Involvement in Social Work Education**

In parallel to the growing recognition of the contribution EBE can make to students' learning, is the need for, but largely overlooked, discussion on the organizational conditions and sustainability of activities. Previous work contributes to this debate, with Agnew and Duffy (2010) and Warren (2007) arguing that university systems and structures are commonly inflexible and may not be conducive to new ways of working, and academics may not yet be confident or comfortable working with EBE as partners.

Payment of EBE for their time varies between Milan and Dundee, as it does elsewhere. In the Italian example, EBE do not receive any payment for their participation in the *Full Day* meeting. In contrast, at the Scottish university, EBE are paid for their time (a set rate per half day), as happens elsewhere (McLaughlin et al., 2018; Driessens et al., 2016).

At both universities the involvement of EBE is supported by departmental resources. The Italian university hosts the activities and pays for the lunch during *Full Day* meetings. In Scotland, funding is required to pay EBE for their time, travel expenses, and refreshments (tea/coffee and lunch before the group presentations). The latter supports a sense of belonging and inclusion in the life of the university. Following the introduction of the Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2003), the Scottish Government provided financial support to Scottish universities delivering social work qualifying programmes to facilitate for the involvement of EBE in social work education. The Scottish Government funding only lasted a few years, consequently universities have had to resource EBE participation from the core programme budget. Facilitating for a range of EBE involvement in social work education is fundamental to ensuring students are exposed to rich, experiential and deep learning opportunities. In both the universities, decisions on involvement are shaped and framed, and sometimes curtailed, by an organizational model that can limit the ambitions and sustainability of involving EBE. Whilst the resource implications of EBE involvement should not be excluded from discussions on involvement, they should not be allowed to dictate and determine involvement.

#### **5. Impact and Outcomes of EBE Involvement in Social Work Education**

Finally, we turn to the impact of EBE involvement on students learning and social work practice. This is an area that is under-researched (Robinson and Webber, 2013), but necessary (Anghel and Ramon, 2009), and has been addressed in different ways by the two institutions presented in this paper. At the Italian university, over the last six years research activities, based on the *Full Day* meetings, have included text analysis, survey, and focus groups. These evaluations aimed to explore the impact of the Full Day meetings on social work students; to better understand the content that is exchanged between EBE and students during conversations; and to collect information about how to develop and enhance the learning experience. Three main outcomes emerged from the study findings (Cabiati and Raineri, 2016): (1) involvement with service users challenges students' stigma and improves students' attitudes towards people with particular conditions or experiences, (MacSporran, 2015; Morin and Lambert, 2017); (2) students experienced a progression in their understanding of their role and involvement with service users: they started the dialogue with EBE in order to understand their life stories but after a short time they shared their personal life experiences, leaving the role of 'listener' and discovering the commonalities between themselves and the EBE and they experimented with peer to peer conversations; (3) *Full Day* meetings with EBE have a strong emotional impact: students showed enthusiasm about EBE involvement, but the activity was not without challenges and was emotionally demanding. For some, there was "emotional shock", meaning that the depth of



emotional impact was unexpected, difficult and challenging. Previous authors have talked about 'light bulb moments' to describe the significance and depth of emotional impact on the students (Hughes, 2017). In Scotland, the *Caring* module has been framed around an "Outcomes Focused" model (Levy, et al., 2016a, 2020), and exploring the impact of the involvement of EBE beyond students' learning to include impact on practice and the lives of service users (Robinson and Webber, 2013). The "Outcomes Focused" model provides a framework for applying knowledge acquired through student involvement with EBE back into practice to highlight the importance of working from a relational and person-centred perspective. This has been achieved through analysing reflections from students and EBE on their experience of the module. Feedback from EBE is evidencing empowerment for social change at the personal level (Levy, et al., 2020; Askheim, et al., 2017; Hatton, 2017; Heule, et al., 2017); that participation is leading to EBE growing as individuals and building confidence in social situations. In the words of one of the EBE involved in the module, 'it made me feel good because the group didn't see my disability, they saw me as a person' (Levy, et al., 2020). Students have highlighted how the module has developed their understanding of relationship-based practice, valuing service users' knowledge and challenging perceptions of service users. Findings reports (Levy et al., 2014, 2016b) have been shared at local and national level. In both universities, involvement of EBE has supported academics in reflecting on the coherence and efficacy of their programmes and in remodelling the internal consistency towards the core mission of their work: educating social workers to better support people in coping with life challenges.

## Conclusion

This comparative overview of the involvement of EBE in social work education in Italy and Scotland has highlighted areas of difference and commonality manifest in the two European universities; with commonality coalescing and being visible in the salience and essence of students learning from and with EBE. The differences and challenges that characterized the two contexts, coupled with the ways that each university has successfully embedded EBE involvement, should inspire other universities to develop and enhance EBE involvement in their social work programmes. The paper, building on existing literature on user involvement, offers a unique contribution through a comparative lens. This comparative analysis has presented ways of integrating EBE involvement in social work education in two socio-culturally and politically distinct contexts. The areas of comparison covered in the paper: types of involvement; recruitment; roles and responsibilities; resource implications; and impact and outcomes (Table 1), provide a framework for the involvement of EBE in social work education and further comparative research. Drawing on the experiences and effective implementation of EBE involvement in social work education in the two countries, the authors close this paper calling for a focus on: *Coherence*, *Prudence* and *Sustainability*. Each contributes to enhancing and embedding the involvement of EBE in social work education.

*Coherence*: concerns ensuring the involvement of EBE is situated holistically within students' overall learning. This requires academics to actively support the process of involvement, coupled with an awareness of *why and what we ask* for in this collaboration. Academics must show a sense of coherence within their epistemology and pedagogy, clarifying the rationale for the collaborative learning inside (academia) and outside (practice). As the international literature suggests, EBE are involved and recruited through a variety of ways, including for tasks traditionally assigned to academics. Considering that EBE can be involved in a variety of ways on social work programmes, academics must have clarity on the learning outcomes they want students to achieve. Situating EBE in social work education is not unproblematic and coherence can contribute to successfully managing any potential challenges in this process. A lack of coherence between what academics ask for through collaboration with EBE, their power within their educational system and their way of teaching, could not only invalidate the potential for integrating experiential knowledge, but could be counterproductive through reproducing biased dynamics.

*Prudence*: refers to academics working in collaboration with EBE and the careful planning underpinning involvement with students. The decision and the planning for EBE collaboration cannot be driven independently by the aims of academics or by students' expectations. The steps

leading up to the encounters between students and EBE must be reflected and discussed in dialogical spaces that allow for reciprocal exchange to co-produce initiatives and navigate challenges. Prudence highlights that knowledge crossing between EBE and academics requires space, time, learning, and humility. Planning for ethical EBE involvement with prudence means reflecting on the details and decisions underlying the collaboration, and awareness of the (potential) consequences that each decision may have on EBE, students and academics. Social work education encompasses theory and practice, and students can encounter a disconnect and dissonance between the two when applying theory to practice. Collaborative learning pathways involve human, ethical, societal, theoretical and social justice issues, and should be realized within social work paradigms that support an anti-oppressive approach and avoid confirming stereotypical and tokenistic dynamics. The collaboration with EBE requires ongoing humility and notes of prudence. Ongoing humility as the idea of being able to learn from each other, concerns academics too. Keeping the 'inspiring conversations' between EBE and social work students on 'the right track' (Driessens et al., 2016) requires academics to have additional skills and creativity. The future of EBE initiatives is linked to facilitating ways to support and place value on the experiences of EBE and to offer students spaces for reflection and pedagogical elaboration on the time they spend with EBE.

*Sustainability:* to successfully promote the involvement of EBE in social work education, organizational support and resources (both financial and human) need to be receptive to taking on this work. This study has shown that the opportunity to co-create an ethical pedagogical method is subject to several conditions that need to be considered throughout the process of involvement to shape the learning experience and achieve sustainable outcomes. The two universities presented in this paper both agree on the concept of collaborative learning between EBE, academics and social work students and that this requires careful planning and preparation (Levin, 2004). The sustainability of the initiative is linked to the ability of each university to be open and connected with networks and associations of EBE in their local communities.

The word sustainability is also used within the context of promoting students continuing exposure to EBE expertise along their learning path. Continued involvement builds a foundation for the key principles of involvement to be integral to the practice of graduating students.

In Italy and Scotland social work education is making space for integrating different types of knowledge. A space that is inclusive of knowledge derived from 'experts by life experience', as a third pillar of knowledge, alongside theoretical and practice knowledge. The blending of these knowledges is central to preparing our social workers of the future for anti-oppressive and empowering practice and 'inspiring conversations' in a complex, rich and ever-changing world.

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