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**KEYWORDS:** Service User/ Carer Involvement, Student Selection, Nursing Interviews

## **SUMMARY**

The aim of this study was to evaluate an innovation where service users and carers were involved in the recruitment of child and adult nursing students. Seventy candidates, four service users and carers and six academics who had been involved in the selection process took part in the study. A short questionnaire was administered to the nursing candidates. Two semi structured group interviews were undertaken, one with the service users and carers and another with the academics. Findings reveal that the involvement of service users and carers in student recruitment was largely viewed positively with all three major stakeholders supporting it. Nevertheless the academics were also mindful of the difficulties that may be encountered in the process. The key message to emerge from this study is that service user and carer involvement in student selection is not without its challenges but with careful planning can be beneficial for all involved.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The involvement of service users and carers in health and social care education reflects the philosophy of consumer-focused, user driven health and social care services imposed by health policy and legislation over the last decade (DoH, 1999; 2000; 2001, 2003; 2005; 2008a; 2008b). Service user and carer involvement in the training of social work and mental health professionals is commonplace due to the fact that it has been a requirement of their regulatory bodies for some time (DoH 2002; GSCC 2005; DoH 2005). Increasingly involvement is required in other areas of health care education. The Department of Health Education Commissioning for Quality document (2009) includes guidance on user involvement in the design and delivery of education and the Nursing and Midwifery Council now requires evidence of involvement in programme development and delivery (NMC 2010).

This paper reports on the findings of a study initiated by the academic lead for service user involvement in the School of Human and Health Sciences looking at a lesser reported aspect of involvement where service users and carers were involved in the selection process of candidates being interviewed for adult and child nursing programmes at the University of Huddersfield. The aim of the study was to evaluate the experiences of involvement from the three key stakeholder perspectives; candidates, service users and academics. The differences between service users

and carers are well documented (Levin 2004; Tew et al 2004) and there is an acknowledgement that there is a difference between the two groups. However for the purposes of this study the term service user will be utilised to describe this mixed group.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The impetus for this initiative arose from a literature review of service user and carer involvement in health care education (Rhodes 2006) that included a review of good practice guidelines for involvement developed elsewhere for example Levin (2004) and Tew et al (2004). Only two articles were identified that specifically related to the involvement of service users in the selection of students. A paper by Vandrevalla et al (2007) reports on a study following the involvement of service users and carers in the selection for a clinical psychology programme at the University of Surrey. Service users and staff worked collaboratively to assess student's suitability for the course. Following the study service user involvement has been formally accepted into the programme's selection process. Another study by Matka et al (2009) describes the approach to service user involvement in admissions to the social work and clinical psychology programmes at the University of Birmingham. This includes the results of a post hoc survey into the experiences and expectations of involvement in the admissions process.

Recruitment to nursing courses at the University of Huddersfield has traditionally been completed through group interviews conducted by a panel of interviewers that includes academics and health care practitioners. It was felt by the principle investigator that this type of interview format could be enhanced by the involvement of service users as members of the selection panel. Potential candidates are interviewed in groups of ten to fifteen. In addition to undertaking literacy and numeracy tests candidates are seen on a one to one basis to check identification, certificates and discuss criminal record bureau (CRB) screening. They then participate in group activities and discussions designed to assess their interpersonal and communication skills alongside their knowledge and understanding about the nursing profession. The service users are actively involved in the latter activities. Like other members of the selection panel they observe candidates during the group activities and panel discussion in order to make an informed decision about candidate's suitability for the nursing course. Initially service users were involved in all aspects of the interview; however both service users and academics questioned the value and necessity of involvement in the whole process.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A mixed-methods research design was used to elicit the views of candidates, service users and academics. A simple questionnaire was administered to the candidates on the day of their interview (Appendix 1) and semi structured group interviews were conducted with service users and academics. It was decided that questionnaires would be used for the candidates because they have the capacity to collect data from a large group of people quickly although the data collected can be somewhat superficial (Polit & Beck 2008). The questionnaire was designed using guidelines from Black et al (1998) and was kept short, jargon free and simple. Of the 98 candidates who were interviewed, 80 completed and returned the questionnaires. The 78% return rate could be attributed to the candidates being asked to complete the questionnaire and leave it in a box outside the interview room at the end of the interview process. After the selection interviews were completed, the returned questionnaires were analysed. The responses to all the questions were examined and thematic analysis was undertaken to detect patterns and regularities as well as inconsistencies in order to identify substantive themes (Polit & Beck 2008).

Semi structured group interviews were chosen as the method of data collection for the service users and academics as they are an efficient means of determining people's views on a given subject. An interview schedule was designed outlining a number of topics, such as views in relation to service user involvement in the selection process and comments regarding the process and elements service users should or should not be involved in. This was used as a guide allowing participants the freedom to answer prompts in as much detail as they wanted (Polit & Beck 2008). The interviews were conducted separately in order to elicit honest views from both sets of participants about their working relationship.

A month after the selection interviews all the service users and academics who had been involved in the selection process were invited to participate in the group interviews. The time delay was due to difficulties in finding a suitable time and date for all participants. Of the five service users who had taken part four attended the group interview, one was ill on the day. Six of the ten academics involved in the process took part in the second group interview, again four were unable to attend on the day. The group interviews were conducted at the University and facilitated by the academic lead (CR) and the project research assistant (IN). The discussions were audio taped and subsequently transcribed verbatim by an administrator who had previous experience of transcribing. The transcripts were then subjected to a process of content analysis using the guidelines written by Burnard (1991). In line with his suggestions the transcript were read several times and careful, detailed notes were made on each category as it developed. This process continued until each transcript had been thoroughly analysed and absorbed. The next stage was to

collapse the categories, condensing sub-categories into broader themes. Finally all themes were filed together for direct reference when writing up the findings.

Ethical approval was obtained from the school research ethics committee. A statement on the questionnaire informed candidates that participation was voluntary and anonymous and would have no bearing on the offer of a place on the course. They were also notified that any comments they made might be used in a paper but would not be attributable. Research information sheets were given to service users and academics and written consent was obtained prior to the group interview. There was a possibility of researcher bias in the study as the principle investigator is also the University's academic lead for involvement and may be perceived as having a vested interest in reporting the role played by service users positively. In order to counteract this, the research assistant working on the research project had no personal interests to declare and therefore became the 'critical outsider' in order to try and maximise the study's objectivity.

## **RESULTS**

### **Nursing candidate's perspective**

Although none of the candidates had considered the presence of a service user or carer before they attended the interview, they generally reflected positively on the experience. Thematic analysis of the questionnaires revealed that the candidates considered service user involvement in the selection process from their own as well as the service user's perspective which generated two main themes.

First, the candidates felt that involving the service user in the recruitment process helped them to understand what would be expected from them in clinical practice. By giving them some 'hands on' experience of communicating with a service user, making the interview process more authentic and 'real'. Since the candidates got a chance to ask the service user questions in a relaxed, informal setting, a large majority stated that they perceived this as an opportunity to find out how they could be better nurses and enhance their own future practice. They also asked information about the NHS as their potential future employer. Having said that, a few of the candidates expressed a worry of offending the service user by giving a 'wrong' answer or comment that would disqualify them from selection. It would appear that while about half the candidates perceived the service user as a powerful source of authority, the other half perceived them as vulnerable and seemed almost afraid to cause them distress by asking questions that they perceived to be of a personal nature, for example, questions about their condition and how it affected them. . A minority of the candidates (n = 6) admitted to feeling intimidated by the larger interview panel. These concerns were understandable as in many cases this was the first formal panel interview that candidates had undertaken.

Secondly, the nursing candidates also looked at the selection process from the service user's perspective; they felt that being involved in the selection process empowered them to influence the future nurses that could be caring for them or their loved ones. Candidates also felt that service user's were especially qualified to

participate in the recruitment process because they could use their experiences to select appropriate candidates

### **Service user's perspective**

As expected, the service users all had very personal reasons and experiences that led to their interest in involvement. Two of them were long term carers for family members, one was a carer as well as a service user and the final participant was a service user. When asked for their reasons for involvement they gave two broad answers. Firstly they wanted to have some input in choosing the people who would be caring for them in the future. After many years of experiencing nursing care in the NHS they had witnessed good as well as bad practice and felt uniquely qualified to be able to comment on what makes a *'good nurse'*. Secondly they were hoping to make an impression on the candidates early in their careers. As one service user phrased it

*'to make the candidates think about us as real people'* (participant 1).

This key element from the service user perspective of giving the potential nurses a *'taste of reality'* thereby enabling them to see them first as 'people', rather than 'patients', then this would improve their mindset and attitudes ultimately making them better nurses. Since all the service users were taken from the University's database it meant that they all had experience of other types of involvement. Without exception they all gave positive feedback about being involved in the selection process and made the following comments:

*I felt very involved and valued* (participant 2)

*Encouraged and enabled to take part* (participant 3)

*I definitely enjoyed it* (participant 1)

In addition to these positive comments one service user (participant 4) also said that taking part in the experience was beneficial for their own personal development helping them to gain important skills, this was affirmed by the other participants.

Of paramount importance to the service user was the ability to genuinely influence the student selection process. Most were aware of the Government's drive for more service user involvement and as such they were initially wary about the process being an exercise in tokenism. Since they were giving of their time and effort it was obviously important to them that their contribution was valued and they had an input in the decision of who was selected or rejected. Having gone through the

experience, however, all four unanimously agreed that their contribution in the process had been valued and they had some influence on which candidates were finally selected.

Since the service users were working with the academics it was important to determine how they had worked together if this initiative is to be maintained in the future. None of them made any negative comments about working with the academics. This may have been because they felt unable to make negative comments when they knew the interview was being recorded and used for research. It is also possible that some valued participating in University events and did not want to jeopardise their position by making negative comments about the academics who were our colleagues. However, the tone of voice and choice of words such as *'they were great'* (participant 1) *'fantastic!'* *'really listened to me'* (participant 4), *'I did not feel pressured to agree with everybody else'* (participant 2) and body language used when responding to these questions seemed to indicate that they had really enjoyed the contact they had with the academic staff.

Other issues to emerge from the service user interviews included how adequately they had been prepared for their new role. Although most of them had talked to students about their experiences in the past it was in a different context and it was crucial to be clear on whether issues such as how much of themselves they wanted to disclose to candidates and the need for confidentiality were discussed prior to the interview. The service users observed that although some preparation had occurred this was often rushed and not detailed. Since all of them had done some work with the University before this did not put them off but they expressed that this aspect of the interview process could have been handled better. One suggested (participant 1), for instance, that it would have been good if a mock interview had been recorded so that they could watch it prior to undertaking the task themselves. In addition they were aware of the limitations of their role and identified that there were certain aspects of the interview that they should not have been involved in such as having access to the candidates' personal details. They commended the academics for ensuring that the need for confidentiality- from both the candidates and themselves - was made clear. Asked if they would do it again all responded enthusiastically that they would.

### **Academic's perspective**

Although there was a general agreement among the academics that involving service users in the interview process was in principle a 'good thing', several issues were raised about the potential complexities. The academics interviewed had only just started working with service users in student selection. As such they were naturally uneasy about what the process would entail and all six admitted that prior to the interviews they were unsure about what to expect. Like the academics

discussed in Felton and Stickley's (2004) study, the academics in this study also felt initially threatened by the introduction of service users into what traditionally has been their 'territory'. Some worried about what they perceived as a possible shift in the balance of power. Their chief concern was who would have the final say on which students should be offered a place if they disagreed with the service user. Despite their initial doubts and reservations, once the academics had had a chance to work with the service user they reflected on the experience positively. It transpired that the service user tended to agree with the academics on the qualities they were looking for in potential students. The academics noticed that the service user's were on 'their level' and often said the same things they were thinking. This assured the academics of their candidate choices. There was a difference of opinion on only one occasion and this was resolved through discussion with acknowledgement that the service user had influenced the decision through their perspective in a positive way. One academic referred to having the service user presence as a form of quality assurance. The academics also concurred that the service user involvement was beneficial due to the impact it had on the potential students.

*I think the potential students liked it (academic 1)*

*More in touch with reality... may therefore help attrition (academic 2)*

Academics were mindful that not only were they selecting the candidates, but in a sense the candidates were also selecting them. The presence of service users as part of the selection team not only made the interview more interesting but also demonstrated their core involvement on the nursing course.

The academics also expressed reservations principally around three areas: confidentiality, cost sustainability and quality. Firstly, the academics were concerned about confidentiality from both the service user and candidate's perspective. In particular there was the issue of how much of the candidate's personal details the service user should be allowed to see in order to help them make accurate decisions.

*..not least with the sensitive nature of some of the things we discuss from a CRB perspective (academic 3)*

*..whether they need to...or whether they could look at them (personal information) for information should they wish to.....some direction (academic 4)*

As is evident from the quotes above, most felt that the service user should just be made aware of the candidate's general history and background but not any other personal details such as where they were from or their academic qualifications. Secondly they wondered if there was adequate funding to sustain service user involvement on a regular basis or whether it was just 'the flavour of the month' as one academic phrased it.

*I just wonder if we could support it ....three times a week.....there are financial implications (academic 5)*

The final concern expressed by the academics was about the quality of the service users. They accurately observed that all the service users who had taken part in the student selection process were articulate well educated individuals who were confident in their ability to do the job. However all service users clearly do not fit into this category and they wondered if the outcome of the interviews would have been different if they had worked with service users who were not as well educated and articulate as the ones they had worked with. Having said this they did acknowledge that before any involvement preparation of all involved is necessary.

### **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study mirror a number of the findings in both of the previous studies undertaken on the involvement of service users in the interview process discussed in the literature review (Vandrevala et al 2007; Matka et al 2009). Specifically there were several links in relation to the rights of service users to be involved due to their experience as recipients of health care and the impression on candidates, making the interview 'real' and seeing institutions work with service users. The positive effect on service users linked to feeling valued and an increase in confidence and development of new skills was also a key theme in all three studies. Alongside this the concerns highlighted by the academics as to who should have the final say on selection as well as the need for appropriate preparation and training was identified. In addition participants in this study suggested that service user involvement was important for quality assurance and that the gold standard is to have a panel that includes a service user, a practitioner and an academic.

As a result of this study service users are routinely involved in the selection process for the nursing courses as part of the panel for the group discussion. Wherever possible the panel also includes a practitioner. The midwifery programme has also started to involve service users in their selection process. The process is coordinated through the admissions administrator and involvement lead to ensure individuals who require preparation and training are identified. The idea of a pre recorded mock interview for training purposes is being explored. The letter of invitation to attend for interview now informs candidates that the panel may comprise of a service user and practitioner. The similarities identified in the three studies strengthens the findings of this study and contributes to the limited body of knowledge associated with service user involvement in health and social care education.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Limitations that may have impacted on the quality of this study are: firstly, the questionnaire was not pre-piloted in order to identify any ambiguities in the questions asked. Since none of the candidates voiced concerns we can only assume the

questions were clear enough. In addition, this study used a small sample size within one Higher Education Institution and the findings may not be generalisable to other settings.

### **CONCLUSION**

This small scale study has demonstrated that the involvement of service users in the recruitment and selection of students for adult and child nursing programmes was on the whole viewed positively. While the presence of a service user on the panel can be seen as an innovative and creative way of working, there is still a long way to go with the 'gold standard' seen as a panel that included academic staff, practice colleagues and service users. As with many initiatives of this kind, this is not an easy option and there is a need for investment of resources in terms of time and money in order for it to be a success. If however the vision to move towards consumer led services is to be realised this is a shift in the right direction.

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## Figure 1 - Questionnaire

The Nursing Department at the University of Huddersfield is involving Service Users/ Patients/Carers/members of the public (from now on referred to as service users/carers) in the selection of prospective students. This is in line with recommendations from the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the Department of Health as we move to a more consumer led service.

It is important that we evaluate this process and we would therefore like to ask you to answer the following questions:-

**Please note that your feedback is voluntary and anonymous. It will have no bearing on whether you are offered a place on the course.**

It is possible that comments made will be written into a paper/report but will be recorded as prospective student comments and not attributed to individuals.

1. A service user was involved in your interview today. Was this something that you had considered before you attended?

**Yes**

**No**

**Comments:-**

2. Do you think that involving service users/carers in the selection of students for nursing courses is a good idea?

**Yes**

**No**

**Why:-**

3. What do you think are the pro's and con's of involving service users/carers in the selection process?

4. How did you feel about having a service user involved in the selection process?

**Thank you for your comments.**

