

Journal Article

**Reflections on Student, Service User and Carer Involvement in Social Work Research**

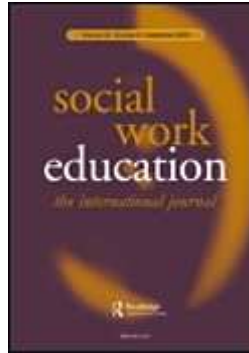
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**Reflections on student, service user and carer involvement in social work  
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**Abstract**

This article will reflect on the experience of undertaking a participatory action research influenced study within a module on a social work degree programme. In doing so it will touch on some of the literature associated with student, service user and carer involvement in qualifying programmes, and in particular research and module design. It will outline the history of service user and carer<sup>1</sup> involvement in respect of a specific module within a singular degree course. It will provide an overview and some findings of the study, which sought to evaluate the involvement of an inherent service user and carer group within that degree course. However, as service user and carer involvement within degree programmes has had significant attention within the wider literature, the current study seeks to present a reflexive commentary on student, service user and carer involvement in research modules and participatory action research. Whilst the research presented here should be regarded as an initial foray with acknowledged limitations, it equally highlights some perspectives that lead to understanding of how greater levels of students, service user and carer

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<sup>1</sup> The term service user and carer is used consistently thorough out this text, this is, as is explained because it is the name adopted by the group central to this account. Further it tries to reflect the inclusive nature of all those who receive social work and social care services. It is used therefore as both a specific descriptive noun and a collective summary term; it is not used to imply any other meaning or interpretation.

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2 involvement within social work research might be achieved, in particular in the  
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4 context of social work qualifying programmes.  
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10 **Introduction**  
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15 The research project presented by this thesis sought to offer an exploratory and  
16 participative enquiry into the nature of service user and carer involvement within a  
17 social work qualifying programme. Whilst we describe the approach and some of the  
18 specific findings, our primary purpose is to provide a reflexive analysis of the  
19 sometimes challenging process of getting to and undertaking the research and what  
20 can be learnt from attempting to construct an inclusive, participatory model. Thus,  
21 the presented discourse seeks to explain its epistemological assumptions through  
22 consideration of the literature and events that located the project, describes the actual  
23 process and its findings, and finally reflects upon the practicalities of undertaking an  
24 aspiring participative research approach, alongside the emergent learning outcomes  
25 and possible implications.  
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39 **Literature Search**  
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43 Despite its avowed purpose, it can be argued that social work as a profession  
44 has not always located service user and carer knowledge or expertise at the core of its  
45 research or service development (Beresford, 2000; Warren, 2007). However,  
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47 throughout the 1990s and into the beginning of this century the concept of user and  
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49 carer involvement in social care has, through changing political and legislative  
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landscapes, gained increasing momentum (Brown and Young 2008, Nolan et al, 2007b, Warren 2007). (A useful tabular summary of the developments of these movements is provided by Warren 2007, 119-125). This momentum has led to an increasingly embedded role for service users and carers within social work education and social work research, particularly with the change to a degree qualifying programme (Agnew and Duffy 2010, Brown and Young 2008, Evans et al 2002). The impetus for this can be seen from a number of sources including the English government White Paper, 'Modernising Social Services' (Department of Health, 1998) which advocated greater prominence for service user and carer views (Edwards, 2003, 341) and the new frameworks for the degree programmes (Green and Wilks 2009, Gupta and Blewett 2008). Thus, this recently changing movement has reinforced (and responded to) a legislative and policy framework that has increasingly placed support and mandatory requirements for such involvement (Beresford 2000, Hernandez et al 2010, McLaughlin 2010, Warren 2007).

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Service user and carer involvement has origins which are to be found in a variety of contexts (Beresford 2000, Brown and Young 2008, Warren 2007).

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Historically, it is possible to cite a number of wider inclusivist or rights movements, such as civil rights, welfare rights, self-help and survivor groups, which in turn have then contributed to international service user movements and the more recent overt British service user and carer movements. Further, both Beresford (2000) and Warren (2007) identify experiences of a lack of accountability in the traditional welfare system, lived poverty and exclusion, the rise of consumerism, emerging normalization philosophies and new positive collaborative working, all supporting an environment that fosters increased involvement. They further reference an increased questioning by

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2 service user and carers regarding who gains the benefits from social care research.  
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4 Building upon Arnstien's ladder of citizen participation and other such models (Green  
5 and Wilks 2009, McLaughlin 2010, Warren 2007, Yeung and Ng 2011), this  
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7 involvement in social care has established itself along a continuum from consultation  
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9 through more collaborative involvement processes to service user and carer controlled  
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11 experiences. It takes place across a range of social work settings: individual care  
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13 planning and service provision, commissioning, planning and development of  
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15 services, organisation and management, workforce recruitment and training, student  
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17 education, research and service evaluation (Warren 2007).  
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23 There are studies that have examined the barriers which explain the slowness  
24 of this journey to a more comprehensive involvement (Hernandez et al 2010, Warren  
25 2007). These barriers can be considered to exist at two broad levels, essentially typed  
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27 *individual* and *organisational*, and usually include: professional (perceived) resistance  
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29 (Evans et al 2002), cultural attitudes and assumptions, poor communication with  
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31 service users and carers, structural and systematic restrictive practices, and demands  
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33 on professionals. Such factors then contribute towards accounts of negative individual  
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35 experience, which in turn become an inhibitor to involvement. Alternatively and less  
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37 frequently, studies have sought to illustrate the corresponding factors which  
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39 contribute to achieving greater participation (e.g. Hernandez et al., 2010).  
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45 Lyon (2000) suggests that social work has not always necessarily embraced  
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47 research within either it's academic or practice considerations. However, there has  
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49 been a more recent ascendancy of empirical and evidence based practice and  
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51 consequently a prescribed inclusion of research on degree programme curriculums  
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2 (McCrystal and Wilson 2009). Where this has *both* traditionally and more recently  
3 taken place, it has often been of the scientific and positivist type paradigms and has  
4 only latterly encapsulated wider social sciences' adoption of more qualitative and  
5 narrative perspectives. It is these latter ontological and epistemological positions  
6 which are more conducive to the involvement of students, services users and carers in  
7 research. Additionally, this has also traditionally been (and predominantly continues)  
8 to be the domain of professional researchers and evaluators; emancipatory and  
9 participatory approaches require a redistribution of power to bring about real changes  
10 in approach (Beresford, 2000). Thus, while (student), service user or carer research  
11 and involvement is becoming an increasingly significant factor in research, and more  
12 specifically social work research, it has taken longer to become embedded than the  
13 more general involvement in practice outlined above (Fenge 2010, McLaughlin  
14 2010). Such participation in research can also be usefully considered alongside similar  
15 continuums, from research without involvement through to that involving consultation  
16 at an individual level, and on to full user participation/control at a collective level  
17 (Beresford 2000, Fenge 2010). Involvement can be found in various elements of the  
18 research process: identifying topics, peer reviewing proposals, commissioning  
19 (reviewing funding applications), developing and designing research, managing  
20 research, undertaking research, interpreting findings, dissemination, training of peer  
21 researchers and action or outcomes following research (Beresford 2000, Warren  
22 2007). Participatory research is likely to have involvement in the majority rather than  
23 odd elements of this process (Beresford 2000, Fenge 2010, Warren 2007). Such  
24 involvement benefits numerous interest groups, including academic staff, students,  
25 service users and carers (Brown and Young 2008).



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Service user and carer involvement in social work (and specifically in research) helps us explore and address the claims and ownership of what is considered to be or not be knowledge (Brown and Young 2008, Fenge 2010, McLaughlin 2010). Typologies of social work knowledge are often described in the context of a profession or the individual social worker and as such do not always explicitly incorporate the service user and carer knowledge (Drury-Hudson 1997, Green and Wilks 2009, Meemeduma 2001, Osmond 2005, Osmond 2006, Trevithick 2008). In this context, Beresford (2000) states that service user knowledge is fundamentally different to all other forms of social work knowledge, in that it is also and uniquely consequent upon direct experience. Knowledge creation is an important consequence of the research process (Nolan et al 2007a). This increasingly complex interpretation and growing acceptance of what are different types of social work knowledge can be seen both in the possible ways of creating or acquiring knowledge and the possible various sources of knowledge (Gupta and Blewett 2008, Pawson et al 2003, Nolan 2007a).

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The authors of this paper would argue that participant action research has a role to play in this process of considering multiple truths and extending epistemologies. Participant action research requires that the power and influence traditionally held by the professional researcher is transferred to others who are involved throughout (Fenge 2010). The *process* of this research method is as important as the outcomes, and an awareness of power is particularly dominant. It is not, however, a linear process, and requires that our understanding of valid knowledge includes the consideration of others experiences and 'insider' knowledge to generate action to counter oppression. Unfortunately, some researchers (typically of a classic

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positivist ilk), still believe that many service users lack the necessary understanding and knowledge of research to be able to participate meaningfully and often see the results of such research as poor quality or biased. To ensure validity of such contributions to the theoretical and knowledge constructs of social work (to which research plays a key role) Beresford (2000), purports three actions to generate greater inclusivity: equality of respect, equality of validity of contributions, and equality of control (ownership). Fenge (2010) notes this is only possible with appropriate training and support for service users and carers, enabling them to engage in all aspects of the research project.

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There are genuine implications for research design if a move towards high levels of collaboration or service user and carer control is aspired to. Empirical design of research frequently suits policy makers and research practitioners who want evidence-based practice of 'what works' (Smith, 2009, 91). Some will see randomised control trials (RCT) as the experimental design 'gold standard' (D'Cruz and Jones, 2007, p.95) but in the field of service user participation a study based on selective interventions and controlled variables presents distinct ethical and practical problems. Nolan et al (2007b) suggest that participatory design approaches overcome some of these difficulties through consideration of a range of relationships, pluralities and reflexivity. As authors, we have found ourselves increasingly asking why all social work research design does not adopt these principles if the research is to genuinely resonate with the social work value base.

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Similarly, levels of involvement within qualifying training programmes and - specifically - the relatively recent introduction of the degree and mandatory

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2 requirements can be said to be both increasing and developing across the continuum  
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4 of possible levels of involvement (Agnew and Duffy 2010), Brown and Young 2008,  
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6 Moss et al 2009, Warren 2007). Typically, this can be summarised into two areas of  
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8 involvement; management (co-ordination, advisory group and programme  
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10 management structures), and activities (admissions, lectures, assessment, and  
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12 curriculum evaluation). Pertinently, the service user and carer group that is in part the  
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14 subject of this paper has involvement within both of these spheres.  
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18 Participant action research is thus at the service user and carer controlled end  
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20 of the continuum of involvement in research, in that it establishes a research design  
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22 that has service users and carers sharing in determination of focus, process,  
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24 interpretation and outcomes. Fenge (2010) confirms that participant action research  
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26 thus successfully addresses issues of power politics and empowerment. Further, its  
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28 focus is very much a change orientated one, and intended to improve the social  
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30 situations being studied (D'Cruz and Jones 2007, Gilbert 2008, Gupta and Blewett  
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32 2008). In wanting to suggest that it is this design approach which most successfully  
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34 ensures full service user and carer involvement, we would cite the following  
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36 principles stated by Whitmore and McGee's (2001): non-intrusive collaboration  
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38 (including ownership of the project by the group); mutual trust and genuine respect;  
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40 solidarity (all humanity is connected by a common journey and shared destiny);  
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42 mutuality and equality (everyone's interests are important); a focus on process  
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44 (informal interaction that goes beyond a detached working relationship and respects  
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46 others' cultures) and awareness of language as an expression of culture and power.  
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48 This is what Gilbert (2008) summarises as the three principles of: people (active  
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50 service user and carer involvement throughout the process), power (addressing the  
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2 traditional imbalance of other research approaches) and praxis (transformation of the  
3 academic into practice). The rest of this paper reflects on our experiences of the  
4 resultant dichotomy presented by attempting to reconcile a resource constrained  
5 organisational demand for involvement with our informed desire to implement these  
6 principles.  
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### 12 Contextual History - the Research Project

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‘Before proceeding to reflect on the success (or otherwise) of our attempts to  
reconcile such disparate factors, it is worth briefly evaluating the key data which  
emerged from the project. The degree programme was itself in its fifth year, and this  
project describes a project with to its third cohort of final year degree students. With  
the change from the diploma in social work to a degree, the Care Council in Wales  
had given the various institutes funds to further develop any existing arrangements  
they had for service user and carer involvement. This particular university thus sought  
to establish a more formal Service User and Carer group (SUCG) and provide more  
co-ordination and resource support, encouraging a great involvement in a variety of  
the activities that supported the provision of the degree. At the time of the project the  
SUCG had been established for four years and had twelve members<sup>2</sup>, (two of whom  
are co authors of this article). An exploration of author involvement and ownership  
occurs further on in the discussion part of the article.

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The lecturer on the “Research and Evaluation” module discussed within this  
paper was approached by the social work programmes’ service user and carer co-

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<sup>2</sup> The subsequent year to the final year described here the University elected not to continue with its  
social work degree. Whilst it has indicated an aspiration to establish a masters qualifying programme,  
the future of the SUCG is currently a very uncertain one.

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ordinator with a view to inviting representation from SUCG to contribute to a session on the module. The lecturer's response was an open one, but expressed a preference to work with the SUCG to develop a more integrated role for the group within the module, thus endeavouring to emulate Beresford's (2000) aspirations of equality of respect, validity and ownership above more common tokenistic contributions (Gupta and Blewett 2008, Moss et al 2008). The project outlined below represented the second year of such integration. The first year of attempting such integration was with a comparable methodology that sought to encourage an evaluation of the service user and care involvement as experienced by third year students on their final year practice placement. Unfortunately, as a consequence of lack of attention to due research process by the lecturer, a set of host agencies resistant to having students explore their levels of service user involvement and a group of students fearful about asking such questions of those with the power to fail them, meant that the project was exploratory rather than fully formed research. When reflecting on that first attempt, we realised that we had worked with the assumption (of all stakeholders being equally committed to service user and carer involvement) and unchecked optimism (why wouldn't providers be interested in improving involvement). However, the barriers identified in the literature search and the SUCG group experience, should have probably guided us otherwise. We further realised that if we were to be successful in maintaining an approach formed around principles, we would have to pay more attention to encouraging reflections on these possible inhibitors during the planning and design process (Agnew and Duffy 2010, Brown and Young 2008, Gupta and Blewett 2008).

The learning acquired from the first year of integration of the module was thus taken into the following year. The students undertake the research module in the first

1  
2 semester of the third year of the degree, prior to going on to a final one hundred day  
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4 practice learning opportunity. Two members of the Service User and Carer Group  
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6 elected to participate in this module. The nature of their involvement and any possible  
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8 project with the students was introduced in a lecture during a different module with  
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10 the same lecturer towards the end of semester two, in year two of the degree; this  
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12 reflected some of our learning in regarding the need for long-term planning and run in  
13  
14 time, as outlined below. This seemed important given the previous experience, to  
15  
16 ensure the students had sufficient time to reflect on what was being proposed. One  
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18 particular student, a co author of this paper, was enthused enough by this session to  
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20 write an exploratory paper over the summer break, focusing on the subject and its  
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22 issues. The role of such initiators or champions in enabling and maintaining  
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24 involvement seems quite crucial (Evans et al 2002). Further, the encouraging of active  
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26 peer teaching helps move towards a more anti-oppressive relationship within the  
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28 classroom (Badger 2010). The students were given this exploratory paper as  
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30 background reading to both the module, and as consideration for an integrated project.  
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32 A dedicated session was used to explore the issues raised by the paper, the outcome of  
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34 which was to agree the nucleus of a proposal paper to be submitted to (and  
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36 subsequently approved) by the Programmes Degree Management Group.  
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38 Subsequently, three teaching sessions in the module were given over to the research  
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40 project and utilised for developing the design and methodology approaches; these  
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42 were attended by the Service User and Carer group members.  
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47 The group were able to identify an overall research topic entitled “The efficacy of  
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49 the Service User and Carer Group across the degree as a whole”. The possible design  
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51 options were quickly reduced to either a longitudinal study (committing subsequent  
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2 years of the same module to repeating the research<sup>3</sup>) or a cross sectional survey. The  
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4 methodological discussion included thoughts of semi-structured interviews,  
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6 observation, natural or existing data, mixed methods, possibilities of sequential or  
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8 simultaneous data collection, and concerns about likelihood of any engagement from  
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10 ex-students. Five broad sample groups were identified: current students, previous  
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12 degree student cohorts, academic staff, representatives from the hosting  
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14 agencies/partnership and other members of the Service User and Carer Group. The  
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16 majority of students actively participated in the process, with a smaller minority  
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18 echoing the same concerns as their predecessors about the extra work involved which  
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20 did not directly contribute towards their final degree mark. Some of the students,  
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22 consistent with wider research findings, clearly approached the module with a level of  
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24 ambivalence and or fear (Cameron and Este 2008). This level of student engagement  
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26 offered us two reflections. Firstly, that already by year three some students would cite  
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28 some of the same barriers to supporting involvement as qualified practitioners  
29  
30 identified in the literature search. Secondly, that in both truly integrating any such  
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32 process and acknowledging the student concerns, whether in the future such research  
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34 should actually be part of the assessed element of the programme.  
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37 The group concluded that they were seeking to ask research questions consistent  
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39 with a cross sectional survey design and questionnaire method. In exploring an initial  
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41 large question list, they quickly identified seven overall themes:  
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- 45 1. Awareness – and knowledge of the Service User and Carer Group.
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- 47 2. Involvement – with the group in terms of frequency, contact, interviews etc.
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50 <sup>3</sup> The longitudinal design became rejected over time, as the students increased understanding of the  
51 participatory nature of this research project meant that they felt that subsequent years of students  
52 needed to experience the whole research process and form their own understanding of chosen topic,  
53 design and methodology.  
54

3. Benefit – relevance, value, difference.
4. Purpose – and intent.
5. Support – for participant action research.
6. Improvement – on current arrangements, if any.
7. Impact – what are the outcomes of the group’s existence for college, practice, student, agencies and the group itself?

It felt these themes were consistent enough to all samples, offering the possibility of designing a single questionnaire that could be explored with all groups. Sample considerations were finalised to identify seven specific sample cohorts: the other two current student cohorts, the first two (now graduated) student cohorts, academic staff, members of the Service User and Carer Group and representatives from hosting agencies. A final questionnaire was agreed, translated and then taken by the students for dissemination and data collection. Distribution varied from physical handout for current students, posting for graduated cohorts, to electronic mailing for external professionals. Much discussion and consideration was given at this point in time about the issues of the class of students as participant researchers and their contribution to the data set or not. Whilst participant action research orientated approaches would support this, the group felt that the chosen methodology and in particular the notion of students answering questions they had designed was perhaps not consistent with such a position.

Data return rates varied, and as representative samples of the total cohorts, only returns from the lecturers and hosting agency representatives exceed 50%. ~~No~~ returned questionnaires were received from the graduating cohorts. This was very disappointing, and whilst it could reflect their possible commitment to service user

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2 and carer involvement, it almost certainly reinforced the reality of the barriers to  
3 participation. The limitations of these numbers have contributed to our conclusions  
4 about the research only being indicative and essentially a pilot, rather than  
5 substantially representative. Nonetheless, a total of 29 individuals actively involved in  
6 the degree programme offer a useful data set to reflect upon. The composition of the  
7 returned questionnaires, and therefore the research participant population the findings  
8 are based on, was: current first year students (student yr 5) (n=11), current second  
9 year students (student yr 4) (n=6), lecturing staff (lecturer) (n=5), SUCG group  
10 members (SUCG member) (n=3) and hosting agency representatives (agency) (n=4)<sup>4</sup>.  
11 Due to both time constraints and the lack of access to any electronic data analysing  
12 software for practitioners and service user/carers, the questionnaire data was manually  
13 analysed. This is a real barrier to genuine involvement, in that the university  
14 entitlement system to accessing electronic resources that support research activity are  
15 not easily or normally granted to service users and carers or practitioners in the field.  
16 Emergent data themes were then analysed and compared with the originally identified  
17 areas for exploration, consistent with the highly structured nature of the questionnaire.  
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37 Despite the limitations of the sample size the data findings offer some  
38 interesting perspectives on their subject matter of service user and carer involvement  
39 within a specific social work qualifying programme. We provide only some of the key  
40 findings here, as they tend to echo material already available. In terms of awareness  
41 and knowledge of the Service User and Carer Group, most respondents appeared to  
42 first meet the group prior to any formal introduction to it or its purpose. For many  
43 respondents (n=13), this appeared to be through the student intake interview process.  
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52 <sup>4</sup> The codes in brackets are used to identify cohort responses and direct quotations in the remainder of  
53 the text.  
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Smaller number of students could identify first being introduced to the group in welcome week or at a lecture. For other agency and teaching staff initial contact with the group is described in terms of coming across them in the context of other work related activities, rather than within any formal process.

Respondents suggested a very mixed level of awareness of the group, its input and purpose on the degree. Professed levels of awareness were much greater for the most recent of the student cohorts (student yr 5) than their preceding year (student year 4). This possibly could reflect the role of the SUCG increasing with each subsequent year of the programme. This sense of an increase in SUCG involvement over time, as all parties become more familiar with the potential of the group, was echoed in a response of a year 4 student, who suggested they saw the service user and carer group “*more than in the first year*”. For students and lecturers this awareness was often described more in terms of a purpose allied to having an influence on students understanding of the impact of social workers.

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“*How you can make a difference or a complete mess of a vulnerable person’s life*” (student yr 5)

Local authority representatives were more likely to acknowledge a limited awareness of the group: “*not good enough*” or “*ad hoc*”. A smaller number of respondents from the year 5 student cohort and the SUCG membership would describe their level of awareness in very positive terms. In terms of being able to identify actual numbers and members of the groups, respondents’ answers were again varied, although not inconsistent with their accounts of awareness and the actually active membership.

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3 More interestingly all respondents other than the members of the group struggled to  
4 identify more than one or two members by name. Thus, on a positive note there is an  
5 evident awareness of the existence of the dedicated service user and carer group and  
6 some of its individual constituent members; this is, however, tempered by rarely being  
7 described in assured detail. That said, this awareness is not always a result of direct  
8 contact with the group or members of it. Respondents across all cohort types were  
9 more likely to meet individual members of the group, than interact with the group as a  
10 whole. Disturbingly, two of the lecturer respondents indicated they had never met  
11 with the group or its members.  
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22 Overall involvement of the group was usually described as positive but  
23 restricted and thus under utilised. In describing the participation of the group as  
24 overwhelmingly beneficial, the students would refer to benefits about being “real”  
25 and contributing to a discourse about bridging a gap between placement and college  
26 or academic and practice. This response about having greater integrated involvement  
27 typifying those given,  
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37 “.....need to work towards meaningful SUCG involvement in every aspect of the  
38 degree programme”.(SUCG member)  
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42 Specific involvement of the group in the short listing and interviewing for prospective  
43 students appears to be very well embedded and received positively. Typically the  
44 responses were,  
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*“Yes, made me feel at ease and encouraged me through the interview” (student year 4)*

and

*“Fully involved and opinions valued as much as any other panel member” (lecturer).*

Participants were asked about whether they felt there should be a specific service user and carer module. Responses were equally mixed, and where there was caution it was expressed as a response interpreted as a dichotomised choice and with preference for integration in other modules. Finally, in terms of involvement and its benefits, the participants were asked to indicate whether they thought the SUCG gained any benefit from their involvement. Responses were all positive; for students, lecturers and agency representatives this resulted from perception of their ability to influence and shape future generations of social workers. For the SUCG respondents and a couple of first year students this was more clearly expressed in terms of direct feelings of empowerment. These sentiments are succinctly combined by a second year student

*“I hope it makes them feel valued and that drawing on their experiences we can develop the qualities they feel necessary for good social work practice” (student year 4)*

Whilst accounts of involvement were predominantly unambiguous and positive, the same could not be said for the group’s purpose and intent. Second year students and agency hosting representatives were mostly likely to identify having not had the purpose of the group explained to them by the university and consequently

1  
2 expressed difficultly in explaining the groups' purpose. Indeed, hosting agency staff  
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4 only described this intent in terms of having service user and carer involvement as  
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6 being a mandated requirement for the programme. The students continued their earlier  
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8 discourse about the group bringing real life into the classroom and improving  
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10 practice.  
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14 When invited to comment upon the supporting environment for and  
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16 communication with the group, the responses were amongst the most complex and  
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18 critical, but couched with an intimation of ongoing improvement. Thus, as one of the  
19  
20 group describes it a "...minefield but getting better" (SUCG member). The majority  
21  
22 of student responses indicated that they had discussed these issues with the group in  
23  
24 coming to conclusions about an environment and relationship that they described as  
25  
26 tense, undervalued and insufficient. There was a palpable sense that outside of the  
27  
28 classroom or a management meeting context, SUCG shared a more critical dialogue  
29  
30 with students. The insufficiency theme was echoed by all respondents in terms of  
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32 practical support not offered, such as friendly timetabling, consideration of disability  
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34 needs and financial support for participation. The picture portrayed was not  
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36 exclusively negative, with a small number of respondents (n=4) seeing the support,  
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38 communication and value as being good. This complex ambivalence was reflected in  
39  
40 words from a given list that the participants identified as most readily applying to the  
41  
42 groups involvement. With the most popular chosen words as: informed, limited,  
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44 varied, service user led and well prepared, and conversely the words identified as least  
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46 applying as; adhoc, random, dynamic and controlled. Intriguingly, one host agency  
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48 staff representative suggested that this whole area of support, barriers, difficulties and  
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communication for and with service users and carers could be explored as an assignment itself.

In contrast, the group's impact was seen as almost unambiguously positive in raising student awareness of what was consistently identified as "real life" and preparing them for practice. This was consistently referred to in terms of increasing insight, understanding and broadening perspectives, with typical responses such as: "To see the whole picture not just the problem (student year 5). The impact of the group is also considered as one of the contributing bridges for a gap between the perceived academic and practice divide.

Finally, the participants were asked to suggest what if any improvements, on current arrangements they would like to see. The responses echoed the sense of an involvement which was in its infancy rather than something of a fully mature nature. Thus, suggestions made were repeatedly for more of what had begun, thus more time with the group, diversity in its composition, Welsh speaking members, integration across all aspects of the course and its management and (genuine) partnership. This latter point was couched in terms of things that had perhaps not yet been done. In recognising the value of the group, some participants wanted to suggest that there should be consideration of extending the groups remit: one suggestion was of co-joining this group with ones on similar social work degree programmes, another participant suggested

"Perhaps this model could be extended to the health services and other professions (student year 5)"

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4 When given a list of areas in which the group should be involved, three aspects were  
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6 consistently identified by all: selection of students, design of the degree and  
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8 preparation for placement. Further: assessment of students, provision of placement,  
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10 teaching provision, learning agreements and quality assurance all received support  
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12 from more than seven participants.  
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16 The research highlighted that the purpose of the group, its support and  
17  
18 inclusion has not yet been made as routine or sufficient as some aspirations would  
19  
20 have it. There is an implication within these findings for this institution and others to  
21  
22 ensure that involvement of service user and care groups is genuine, meaningful, well  
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24 resourced, supported and actively developed, perhaps mirroring the same calls being  
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26 made across wider social work provision (Beresford 2000, Hernandez et al 2010,  
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28 McLaughlin 2010, Warren 2007).  
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### 31 32 **Discussion and Reflections** 33

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36 The research and its process are both limited and useful. It could undoubtedly  
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38 have been improved in terms of its construction, design and implementation. It is thus  
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40 almost by definition a contradiction, in having aspirations of inclusivity that are not  
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42 necessarily fully matched by the processes it followed or the resources that supported  
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44 it. We accept that what we achieved was not full participatory action research, rather  
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46 than a process influenced by an aspiration towards adopting its key principles. In one  
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48 sense we see this as the natural process of developing a “legitimate constituency” for  
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50 a more substantive and comprehensive level of involvement across all stages of the  
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2 degree programme (Green and Wilks 2009). Nonetheless, it does offer a window on  
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4 student, service user and carer involvement in a social work degree programme, and  
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6 research and research modules in particular. That said, the authors feel its real value  
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8 and discussion is not necessarily in its research findings, which provide valid  
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10 confirmation of increasingly well established perspectives, but in the observations,  
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12 reflections and learning outcomes from the process. It is these experimental actions  
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14 (Norton et al 2011) which we have therefore also touched on in the above account,  
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16 and wish to explore further.  
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21 The involvement of the group is actively welcomed by all stakeholders within  
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23 the degree programme. Whilst this is further positively identified as beneficial, it is  
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25 predominantly focused on a preoccupation with student needs and learning outcomes,  
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27 specifically with bridging the perceived gap between academia and the real practice  
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29 world. There does not yet seem to be a more entrenched acknowledgement of the role  
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31 that such a group can play in the transformational change agenda (D’Cruz and Jones  
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33 2007, Gilbert 2008). Indeed, as authors we felt that we were supported in our  
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35 endeavours as long as they did not require too much from people and did not threaten  
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37 revolution. The sense that we had was of support for the notion of making our own  
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39 extra investment, but little encouragement to recruit others who regarded this as a  
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41 distraction from their primary (and arguably systematised, institutional) preoccupation  
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43 with passing degrees and doing care management.  
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47 Our reflections on the process can be summarised into three themes:  
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49 commitment, understanding and change. In respect of the first of these, our account  
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51 reflects different levels of commitment across a range of participants and moments in  
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2 the process. It seems that if genuinely involved participation is to occur then  
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4 dedication to a number of constituent elements is required. At the heart of this is an  
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6 active acceptance that social work values (specifically emancipatory and anti-  
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8 discriminatory aspirations) need to transfer into the classroom and the research  
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10 process. In the simplest sense, this is a genuine commitment to sustained involvement,  
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12 whatever that might mean in terms of costs incurred. This is no different to the world  
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14 outside of academe, such that experiences of collaborative working during qualifying  
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16 education become important in mirroring the expectations that should fall on students  
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18 once they enter qualified practice (Badger 2010). If we are, then, talking about how  
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20 this is done on research modules, then an approach modelled on the principles of  
21  
22 participatory action research does this particularly well (Norton et al 2011). In our  
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24 shift away from a lecturer controlled method, this represents the need to commit to  
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26 shared ownership of process and outcomes. This is done by an enthusiasm for  
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28 attention to process and relationships (Gupta and Blewett 2008), we therefore spent a  
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30 lot of time talking both in and out of the classroom, and developing our own  
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32 innovative partnership arrangements (Agnew and Duffy 2010). In valuing the  
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34 multiplicity of expertise, understanding and adopting a non scientific research model,  
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36 we were demonstrating our assurance to different pedagogical approaches to  
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38 knowledge and involvement (Green and Wilks 2009). But, above all for us, this  
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40 required a commitment in terms of effort and time (Gupta and Blewett 2008). Thus,  
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42 we persisted despite the difficulties encountered and the project happened only  
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44 because some of the students and SUCG members did over and beyond what others  
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46 expected of them.  
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In overcoming some of the encountered barriers and obstacles, we feel that enthusiasm needs to be supported by a clear understanding of the specific conditions for success. In being more successful second time round, our experience reinforced the need for sufficient planning for staff, students, service users and carers alike (Agnew and Duffy 2010, Brown and Young 2008, Gupta and Blewett 2008). We have presented a project that is full of limitations, many of which come from the project being unsupported by strategic commitment, and an acknowledgement of the need for adequate support and resources (especially time and money) (Brown and Young 2008, Evans et al 2002, Gupta and Blewett 2008). Even where social work programmes are successfully beginning to address these basic resources issues and complement this with the necessity of including training for service users and carers (Moss et al 2009), this does not always mean (and our project and the SUCG is no different) an inclusion of built in time, fiscal and training resources for service users and carers to engage in the specifics of teaching and undertaking research and evaluation. One simple example of this for us was that when it came to finishing the writing up of the project, only the university lecturer had access to specialist software for data analysis and literature searching. Nonetheless, we found different ways to ensure that the total project (including this paper and its authorship) was equally owned by all. The final understanding is that of the need for and valuing of different knowledge types, voices and research processes. This is thus the awareness and acceptance of alternative epistemologies and pedagogies, which it can be argued even, has implications for the privileged perspective of the academic peer reviewed journal.

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These commitments and understandings in turn, then, imply processes that represent change. Thus, it means accepting a different approach to research and

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3 | evaluation, letting go of control and accepting, critical feedback, leading to areas for  
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5 improvement (Jones 2001), against a backdrop of changing environments, where all  
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7 players are treated equally (Moss et al 2009). Whilst the wider research world is  
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9 increasingly looking to inter-institutional partnerships, we feel that that individual  
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11 institutions (and even departments) need also to be working in new, localised  
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13 partnerships, with more collaborative group processes (Gupta and Blewett 2008). This  
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15 will require some strategic re-orientation, and the adoption of new systems and  
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17 priorities (Brown and Young2008). We often felt like we were doing our research  
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19 project in a vacuum, sustained by our own awareness and motivation rather than any  
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21 strategic and integrated approach. More specifically, changes in strategic vision will  
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23 require visualisation of not only service user and carer involvement across all aspects  
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25 of possible continuums but also how more specifically research fits into whole  
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27 qualifying programme approaches (McCrystal and Wilson 2009) and how research  
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29 modules might contribute to the on going evaluation of partnerships delivering  
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31 programmes.  
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35 Perhaps the most useful outcome of this study is that (like much research) it  
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37 highlights the need for greater exploration, specifically around involvement in design  
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39 and management of the qualifying programme and constituent modules before  
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41 suggesting any substantive conclusions can be drawn. It continues to support the need  
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43 and arguments for greater involvement of service users and carers on qualifying social  
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45 work programmes. In particular, it calls for a greater understanding and support for  
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47 what are the implications of having university staff, students, service users and carers  
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49 involved in highly participatory research processes, integrated into tight degree  
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51 programme timetables and specific curricular based outcomes. It further demonstrates  
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2 and articulates the need more generally for the greater involvement of participant  
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4 action research informed approaches to social care research, where service users and  
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6 carer groups have a significantly more inclusive involvement. It is clear that a greater  
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8 level of involvement in such programmes and the evaluation of any such involvement  
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10 are only likely to improve the evolving effectiveness of social work qualifying  
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12 programmes. In this sense, we have sought to find and give attention to the extent to  
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14 which participation exists and is valued as well as how it can be achieved and what  
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16 value it adds (Hernandez et al 2010).  
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### 21 Conclusion

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24 This reflective account is of a developmental and exploratory nature. The  
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26 research contained within is probably not as robust as any equivalent process  
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28 supported by greater, dedicated resources. The findings hint at a number of positive  
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30 outcomes that have occurred since the increased involvement of the service user and  
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32 carer group on the specific qualifying programme, but with a cautionary note that this  
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34 in itself is not sufficient, and needs to be subject to continual evaluation and  
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36 development. This, in turn, needs to be supported by genuine commitment from all  
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38 involved parties, alongside allocation of adequate resources. Nonetheless, despite  
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40 these limitations, the process and reflections upon it offer us an insight into some of  
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42 the difficulties of undertaking such a piece of participation action orientated research  
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44 in the context of a social work degree course. Social work student involvement in  
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46 design and active research (and service user and carer involvement in research  
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48 modules and participatory action research) is not without its obstacles, but has the  
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50 potential to be both rewarding and to resonate with overall social work values and  
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2 principles. It seems reasonable to suggest that qualifying programmes should aspire  
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4 for and monitor increased student, service user and carer involvement, and that those  
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6 processes should include substantive elements of qualitative and not just quantitative  
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8 evaluation. Further, this should include research and research modules, rather than  
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10 simply focusing on the easier-to-do elements. This article reflects a process which has  
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12 generated knowledge in a participatory way that is defensible, thought-provoking and  
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14 action-oriented whilst offering a challenge to accept that differing types of knowledge  
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16 claims can help to generate a fuller picture, and lead to better qualifying programmes  
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18 and research-informed outcomes (McLaughlin 2010).  
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