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Systematic Review of Service User and Carer Involvement in Qualifying Social Work Education: A Decade in Retrospect

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Abstract

Service user and carer involvement in social work education is well established in the UK and other countries. There has however been limited research on the outcomes of this for social work practice and its subsequent impact on service users and carers. This has been noted in a previous systematic review involving one of the current authors. The current review aimed to synthesise literature from the previous decade (2011–2020) and follows on from the earlier review. PRISMA scoping review guidelines were followed and twenty-eight papers met the inclusion criteria that were framed. Data were extracted and tabulated according to the framework for the evaluation of educational programmes used in the previous review and analysed using narrative synthesis. A ten-item critical appraisal checklist was used to assess the rigour of all papers. The findings were similar to the earlier review. Most studies were from the UK and few evaluated change in students' skills or subsequent practice; none evaluated subsequent outcomes for service users and carers. All stakeholders were positive about the perceived benefits of service user and care involvement. Future research needs to use more robust evaluation methodologies and evaluate skills development for students and outcomes for service users and carers.

BASW
The professional association for
social work and social workers
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Background

Service user and carer (SUC) involvement is a key component of social work education in the UK. The strengthening of the user movement in the UK since the 1990s has supported this (Levin, 2004), though the shift to a new qualifying degree in social work in 2003 (Brown and Young, 2008; Roulston and Duffy, 2010) and related policy (e.g. Department of Health, 2002; Scottish Executive, 2003) has made SUC involvement mandatory throughout social work education in the UK (Askheim, 2012).

The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) envisage the development of a proactive strategy to facilitate SUC involvement in all aspects of design and delivery of social work programmes (IASSW and IFSW, 2021). Internationally, however, there remains wide variance in SUC involvement in social work education. In North America, for example, the role of service users in social work education remains elusive (Austin and Isokuortti, 2016). In Europe, the situation is much the same, though it reflects different government policies on user involvement in different parts of Europe (Rhodes, 2012). Countries in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, and Germany, are experimenting with different modes of SUC involvement, though there remains in Eastern Europe a strong dichotomy between professional experts and service users, with the former considering the latter as being 'demanding' and only having 'problems' (Zaviršek and Videmšek, 2009), though there are signs that the gap between professionals and service users is closing (Urek, 2021). Whilst user involvement is considered desirable in principle, it is yet to be mandated in every country.

To synthesise knowledge about SUC involvement in social work education, Robinson and Webber (2013) conducted a review of models and outcomes in papers published up to December 2010. Twenty-nine papers were included in the review, twenty-seven of which evaluated SUC involvement in qualifying programmes and twenty-five of the papers were from the UK. Robinson and Webber (2013) noted the lack of outcome measures concerning SUC involvement being used routinely in higher education social work courses or in evaluations. Sixteen papers in their review involved classroom teaching or classroom skills assessments, whilst the others provided evidence of a range of SUC activities such as engagement in home visits, conference attendance, assignment marking and placement feedback, which has also been observed in more recent papers (e.g. Unwin *et al.*, 2018).

This systematic review aimed to evaluate international developments in the evidence base for SUC in social work qualifying education in the last decade (2011–2020). In particular, it aimed to synthesise current approaches to SUC engagement in classroom teaching and learning in social work qualifying programmes and to evaluate the outcomes of SUC involvement for social work students to help ensure this process is informed by the current best evidence.

Methods

A scoping review approach and narrative synthesis of the findings was used to collate evidence from studies published in the last ten years. The review followed the PRISMA scoping review guidelines (Tricco *et al.*, 2018). A protocol for the review was developed but was not published.

To be eligible for inclusion in the review, papers had to be published in a peer-reviewed journal between January 2011 and December 2020, to avoid an overlap with the previous review (Robinson and Webber, 2013). Papers were included if they described a model, approach or strategy of SUC involvement in learning and teaching qualifying social work education at either undergraduate or postgraduate level and if they presented some evaluation data of the effectiveness or usefulness of the involvement strategy, approach or model. Papers were excluded if they only presented authors' opinions and had no evaluation data. In addition, papers were excluded if they only referred to SUC involvement in social work research or the education of other professional groups. Where the evaluation of SUC involvement in social work education was presented alongside their involvement in the education of other professional groups, papers were only included if the evaluation data from social work education was disaggregated. Papers that solely discussed or evaluated practice placements in qualifying social work programmes, or involvement in recruitment and interviewing for social work programmes, were excluded. Further, literature reviews that did not present any original data were also excluded.

We searched six databases: Social Policy and Practice, EMBASE, Medline, PsychInfo, Scopus and Web of Science. This was supplemented by searches of Google Scholar and Social Care Online. Reference lists of eligible studies and related literature reviews were also searched. A combination of search terms relating to social work education and service user, or carer involvement, was used. For example, a sample search string was:

> ('Social work education' OR 'social work student') AND ('service user involvement' OR 'carer involvement' OR 'consumer participation' OR 'consumer involvement' OR 'citizen involvement' OR 'expert by experience' OR 'expert with experience' OR 'lived experience' OR 'stakeholder involvement')

Duplicates were removed and abstracts screened for inclusion by both the authors. Papers were reviewed concurrently and retained at this stage if eligibility could not be determined from the abstract. Following initial screening, full papers were retrieved to assess eligibility based on the inclusion criteria. The papers were reviewed independently by two reviewers who applied the inclusion criteria and subsequently met to re-solve any disagreements. A total of twenty-eight papers met the criteria for inclusion in the review. The PRISMA flow diagram can be found in Figure 1.

Data were extracted into a spreadsheet and subsequently tabulated (Table 1). Information was extracted about each paper (author and country); the service users or carers who were involved in social work
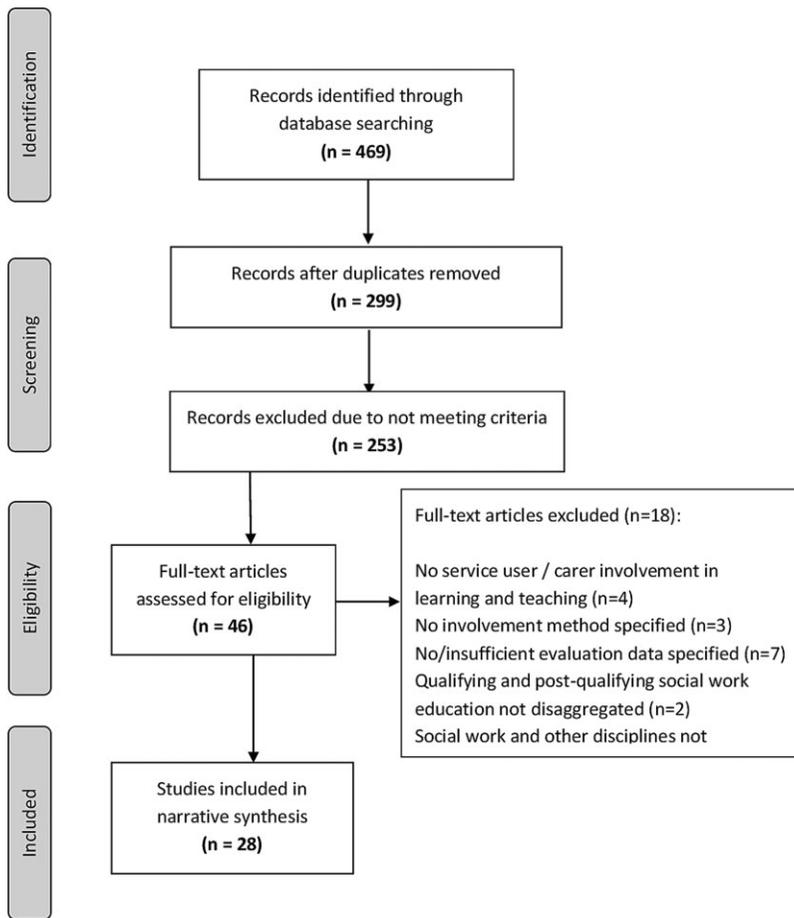

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram.

Table 1. Critical appraisal checklist

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis?
2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate?
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified?
4. Is the method of data collection well described?
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored?
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed?
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified?
8. Are the findings credible?
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?
10. Did the authors identify any limitations?

education; the involvement strategy which was adopted; the evaluation design and data collection methods used to evaluate the service user or carer involvement and key findings from the evaluations. The findings were extracted in summary form and tabulated according to the framework for the evaluation of educational programmes used by Robinson and Webber (2013). In summary, this evaluated learner perceptions (level 1a); service user or carer perceptions (level 1b); staff perceptions (level 1c); modification in attitudes or perceptions (level 2a); acquisition of knowledge and skills (level 2b); changes in behaviour (level 3a); changes in organisational practice (level 3b) and benefits to users and carers (level 4).

The quality of the evaluations was appraised using a ten-item checklist. A custom-made tool was developed for this purpose because studies did not always use standard designs which were amenable to appraisal using a published checklist. The ten-item checklist was based on tools developed by the Cardiff University Specialist Unit for Review Evidence and each item was scored yes (1) or no (0) giving a summary score of 0–10 for each paper (Table 1). The quality appraisal was completed independently by two researchers and any differences in scores were resolved through discussion. These were tabulated in the final column of Table 2.

Findings extracted from the papers were synthesised using a narrative synthesis (Pope *et al.*, 2007). Grouped according to the level in the framework for the evaluation of educational programmes (Robinson and Webber, 2013), the narrative synthesis summarised the qualitative and quantitative findings from the included papers. The synthesis weighed up the strength of evidence, whilst considering the quality of the studies, to reach conclusions about the current state of the evidence base.

Results

Twenty-eight papers met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review. Most ($n = 21$) were from the UK (England, $n = 9$; Scotland,

Table 2. Summary of included papers

Paper/country	Service users and carers	Involvement strategy	Evaluation method	Key findings (evaluation framework level)	Critical appraisal score
Skilton, 2011; England	Steering group of service users and carers, university-based, no sample size	Role plays and interviews with service users as actors	Verbal feedback and self-complete questionnaire from thirty-nine students; feedback from service users; discussion with module leads	Students—able to practise communication skills, perceptions were challenged, learnt about themselves and how they present to people, including importance of anti-discriminatory practice and attitudes towards disability. **(1a)** Service users—students' skills in reflection and analysis needed some development. **(1b)**	4
Smith, 2011; England	Two parents who had previously been involved in child protection services	Recorded interviews with parents sharing experiences of social worker involvement	Self-complete questionnaire to students (no sample size provided); informal discussions with parents	Students—reported benefits and practice insight as a result of listening to the views of the parents; links between theory and practice were enhanced. **(1a)** Service users—reported a positive experience. **(1b)**	6
Askheim, 2012; Norway	Service users recruited as students ($n = 24$) alongside social work students	Joint course on empowerment with social work students	Self-complete questionnaire to all students	Students—better understanding of the link between the concept and practice of empowerment, relational competence had developed. **(1a)** Service users—new knowledge and personal insights, become more aware of their own possibilities. **(1b)**	5

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Paper/country	Service users and carers	Involvement strategy	Evaluation method	Key findings (evaluation framework level)	Critical appraisal score
Duffy, 2012; Northern Ireland	Victims and survivors of the political conflict in Northern Ireland	Lectures over a two-week period, followed by tutorials with service users. Case study/vignette material prepared jointly by the academics and service users	Self-complete questionnaire by students ($n = 144$) and practice teachers ($n = 38$); interviews with eight service users and five academic staff	Students—it was important to study issues related to 'The Troubles'. More than 90 per cent gave the module very positive approval. **(1a)** Service users—it was important for the students to know that living with the experiences of loss and trauma are enduring. **(1b)** Academic staff—degree of concern about feeling responsible and needing to protect the service users. **(1c)** Practice teachers—positive and confident that the students were well prepared to deal with issues related to sectarianism, the needs of victims and survivors. **(1c)**	6
Duffy and Hayes, 2012; Northern Ireland	Multiple service user groups in the fields of learning disability, looked-after children, addictions, mental health, criminal justice, and health and disability	Small student groups interacted with service user groups within a module on social work values	Repeated measures: Students self-reported knowledge and understanding of social work values at four points over the course of the module	Service users—recognised the positive contributions that they had made, and the benefits of helping social work students with a core aspect of their learning. **(1b)** Students—as the module progressed, students' ratings of their level of knowledge and understanding of values increased; the most significant factor was the visit to a service user group. **(2b)**	7

Table 2. (continued)

Paper/country	Service users and carers	Involvement strategy	Evaluation method	Key findings (evaluation framework level)	Critical appraisal score
[Mackay and Millar, 2012](#); Scotland	Service users and carers as co-partners in joint teaching	Service users in classroom sessions with social work students in the Disability and Mental Health module	Self-completed question-naire for students	Students—listening to 'real stories' helped them to move between lived experiences and theories. Dispelled myths and stereotypes. **(1a)** Academic staff—good partnership working; attention and thought-ful care paid to the process of in-volving service users is fundamental to ensure a positive learning experience for all. **(1c)**	3
[Tew et al., 2012](#); England	Group of service users and carers ($n = 6$)	Collaborative Learning Initiative using a blended learning ap-proach; social work and nursing students undertook a sequence of joint learning with opportunities for dia-logue with service users	Pre-post self-completed questionnaires with free text responses for students; focus group with service users	Students—consolidated their exist-ing approach to practice, whilst providing deeper understanding of mental health issues, with the-oretical perspectives being 'fleshed out' and also challenged by the perspectives of service users. **(1a)** Service users—breaking barriers between groups. **(1b)**	4
[Campbell et al., 2013](#); Northern Ireland	Victims and survivors of the political conflict in Northern Ireland	Pairs of lecturers and vic-tims/survivors chairing learning groups of fif-teen students. lectures and tutorials	Self-complete question-naires with Likert scales and free text responses completed by students ($n = 144$) and practice teachers ($n = 34$)	Students—were positive about this form of teaching and engage-ment with victims and survivors of the conflict, though a minority felt that the teaching had not al-tered their views. **(1a)** Practice teachers—reported gen-eral levels of satisfaction with preparedness to work with con-flict related situations. **(1c)**	6

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Paper/country	Service users and carers	Involvement strategy	Evaluation method	Key findings (evaluation framework level)	Critical appraisal score
Coulter *et al.*, 2013; Northern Ireland	Victims and survivors of the political conflict in Northern Ireland	Pairs of lecturers and victims/survivors chairing learning groups of fifteen students	Self-completed questionnaires with Likert scales and free text responses completed by students ($n = 144$). Semi-structured interviews with lecturers and victim/survivors ($n = 14$)	Students—appeared to increase their awareness and capacity to practice in a divided society, though opinions regarding students changing their views in response to the teaching were less positive. **(1a)** Lecturers and victim/survivors—agreed that the teaching was important, though there was concern about the possible dangers and risks in students 'exposing' their feelings about such sensitive issues. **(1b, 1c)**	5
Duffy *et al.*, 2013; Northern Ireland	Service users ($n = 3$) and carers ($n = 3$)	Assessed role plays in preparation for students' first period of practice learning	Pre-post self-completed questionnaires by students ($n = 45$ and 34); focus groups with service users ($n = 3$), carers ($n = 3$) and academic staff ($n = 8$)	Staff and students—found involvement to be real and authentic, that service users were able to engage with the issues that they have encountered and bring these to the role-play. **(1a)** Service users—this encouraged some students to engage more meaningfully and show their skills. **(1b)**	9
Kirwan, 2013; Ireland	Two mental health service users	Mental health social work module audited and co-taught with service users	Longitudinal mid and end-point self-completed student evaluations ($n = 20$)	Students—awareness of service user perspectives improved, their understanding of mental health problems expanded and their conceptualisation of mental health social work changed. **(1a)**	4

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Paper/country	Service users and carers	Involvement strategy	Evaluation method	Key findings (evaluation framework level)	Critical appraisal score
Quinney and Fowler, 2013; Wales	Five service users and carers	Online asynchronous discussion groups involving both service users and carers (n = 5) and students (n = 9)	Content analysis of on-line discussion groups and informal student feedback	Students—experienced collaborative learning where power relations could be balanced; high quality of social and cognitive interaction was observed during the online discussions; and students indicated that the experience challenged them to think differently about service users. **(1a)**	5
Leonard et al., 2015; England	Young people (n = 10) aged fifteen to twenty-four years from diverse cultural backgrounds with experience of being looked after	Model of co-production was used to develop a series of group mentoring events for social work students with young people	Post-session verbal and written feedback provided by students (n = 6), mentors (n = 10) and project group members	Students—highlighted the importance of reversing the power dynamic. Their preconceived expectations of the relationship were challenged, and students reported to be more child-centred and child-focused. **(1a)** Mentors—raised awareness of how young people can feel intimidated by social workers; and how to communicate with children and young people. The impact on actual practice was not evident. **(1b)**	2
MacSporran, 2015; Scotland	Four service users were involved as mentors	Service users acted as mentors to students in year 1 observational placements, and mentor feedback was used to assess readiness to practice	Pre-post self-completed measures (n = 24) and focus groups with students (n = 4), project mentors and agency support staff	Students—Four students participating in the project reported a greater increase in their self-efficacy than other students. An important learning outcome for them was realising the importance and challenge of communicating in different ways. **(2b)** Service users—reported improvements in confidence, learning new skills, feeling involved, feeling more independent, having a good reputation for themselves and for the agency. **(1b)**	5

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Paper/country	Service users and carers	Involvement strategy	Evaluation method	Key findings (evaluation framework level)	Critical appraisal score
Terry et al., 2015; England	Service users with health conditions or disabilities ($n = 14$)	World Cafe event bringing service users and students together to undertake a range of activities together	Post-event self-complete questionnaire ($n = 57$) and focus groups with social work students ($n = 1$ group), service users ($n = 1$ group) and nursing students ($n = 2$)	Students—Did not report an increased understanding of each other's roles, though some improvements in understanding the unique perspectives of each profession were noted. **(1a)**. Service users—noticed impact on students' learning. **(1b)**	9
Cabiati and Raineri, 2016; Italy	Service user members of self-help and mutual aid groups ($n = 80$)	Daylong meeting including individual and group conversations between members of mutual-aid groups and students	Pre-post self-completed questionnaires evaluating attitudes towards mental health problems, including free text option ($n = 100$)	Students—reductions in stigmatising attitudes towards service users were observed. **(2a)**	8
Driessens et al., 2016; Belgium and Netherlands	People experiencing poverty ($n = 5$)	Service users co-facilitated module on 'social work practice with individuals'	Self-complete questionnaire ($n = 60$), focus groups with students and an evaluation meeting involving staff	Students—perceived the participation of service users as beneficial. Enhanced the students' respect for their survival strategies, perceptions and experiences. **(1a)**	5
Hitchin, 2016; Scotland	Members of a service user and carers group with mental health problems ($n = 5$) or a learning disability ($n = 1$)	Students practised professional communication skills with service users in role plays	Self-complete evaluation forms; service user verbal and written feedback	Students—reported a variety of learning outcomes: 'The importance of listening', 'Not to dive in too quickly to "fix" things', 'To be more empathetic', 'How to deal with silence', 'To stay calm and really listen to what they say'. Some felt the workshop was too early in the programme. **(1a)** Service user—participation in the workshops was a positive experience. **(1b)**	6

Table 2. (continued)

Paper/country	Service users and carers	Involvement strategy	Evaluation method	Key findings (evaluation framework level)	Critical appraisal score
Hughes, 2017; England	Not specified	Classroom-based contributions to teaching	Focus groups, interviews, and written narratives ($n = 20$ participants; six students, fourteen qualified social workers)	Students—reported enhanced awareness of lived experience; took on board suggestions of good practice from service users and carers; developed a more critical 'real life' understanding. **(1a)**	6
Laging and Heidenreich, 2017; Germany	Service users ($n = 9$)	Weekend seminar focused on 'what is good social work?' using a variety of techniques of bringing service users and students together	Semi-structured interviews with service users; written feedback from students	Students—reported benefits of getting into direct contact with service users; impressed with life achievements of service users; understood 'the other' better. **(1a)** Service users—gained an understanding of how social work is taught. **(1b)**	6
Loughran and Broderick, 2017; Ireland	Two service user groups ($n = 14, 13$) with history of opiate use	Co-development of a case study for an assignment on a social work masters module on social work and addiction	Assignment letters, reflective summaries, case discussions from students ($n = 64$) and focus groups and feedback from service users	Students—reported benefits of engagement with service-users; feedback was helpful; increased awareness of use of language; recognised need to be sensitive, respectful and empathic. **(1a)**	9
Tanner et al., 2017; England and Northern Ireland	Not specified	Classroom-based contributions to teaching	Longitudinal cohort (wave 1 $n = 35$; wave 2 $n = 9$); phone interviews ($n = 10$); focus groups ($n = 18$)	Students—highly valued the opportunities to meet with and learn from service users and carers. **(1a)** Students—felt that service user and carer involvement had developed their social work values and enhanced their skills. **(2a, 2b)** An example was provided of how the contributions of service users had directly impacted on their social work practice. **(3a)**	8

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Paper/country	Service users and carers	Involvement strategy	Evaluation method	Key findings (evaluation framework level)	Critical appraisal score
Duffy *et al.*, 2021; Northern Ireland	Service user educators (*n* = 8)	Drama students and service users performed role plays with students	Self-complete evaluation from students (*n* = 89) and focus groups with service users (*n* = 2), drama students (*n* = 16) and academic tutors (*n* = 5)	Students—reported reduced nervousness, increased confidence in the use of their skills, ability to show empathy, a greater approximation of the role-play to real-life practice and higher overall rating of the learning experience. **(1a)** Service users—students appeared very nervous but managed the role-play as though it was a real-life social work intervention. **(1b)**	9
Lucas and Thomas, 2021; Scotland	Care-experienced young people aged twelve to eighteen years (*n* = 4)	Young people were interviewed to create audio bites for a 'Children and Families' module relating to their personal experience of being looked after	Online evaluation for students	Students—rated the audio-bites as 'excellent' or 'good' and described how they might use learning in their forthcoming practice placement, by considering what intervention style they would use and the importance of listening, questioning skills and empathy. **(1a)**	2
MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2020; Northern Ireland	Group of young people who have experience of social work involvement	Shared Stories Narrative Model for students on the 'Preparation for Practice Learning' module	Students provided brief feedback after the session	Students—questioned their understanding of the concept of social justice and identified the growing inequalities within society. **(1a)** Service users—liked giving the students feedback; though one felt the student came across as knowing everything about him. **(1b)**	2

Table 2. (continued)

Paper/country	Service users and carers	Involvement strategy	Evaluation method	Key findings (evaluation framework level)	Critical appraisal score
O'Shea and McGinnis, 2020; Ireland and Northern Ireland	Young people involved with the justice system (*n* = 13)	Opportunities for interaction and mutual sharing in informal settings outside the classroom to create a DVD learning resource for social work programmes	Focus groups and semi-structured interviews (students (*n* = 10) and young people (*n* = 13)) and pre-post questionnaires by students (*n*=10)	Students—helped them to review their prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes; developed values and skills in listening; being non-judgemental and respectful. **(1a)** Service users—felt valued and empowered to take ownership of the project alongside students. **(1b)**	7
Skoura-Kirk *et al.*, 2021; England	Members of the social work Partnership Initiative group (linked to physical disability, mental health, growing up in state care, caring for a family member), *n* = 7	Service user-led role-plays	Self-complete evaluations from students (*n* = 32), service users (*n* = 7) and practice educators (*n* = 4) completed at two time points	Students, service users and practice educators—reported an overall improvement of the students' professional skills, though each group highlighted different strengths. **(2b)**	7
Fox, 2020; England	Six service user and carer involvement experts	Involvement in classroom teaching	Discussion in the workshop was undertaken around five questions. No formal structured evaluation	Service users—developed expertise 'beyond the SUCI role'. **(1b)**	8

The bold text in parentheses correspond to the levels of service user and care involvement as presented in the in-text description for Table 1.

$n = 4$; Wales, $n = 1$; Northern Ireland, $n = 7$). Whilst three papers were from Ireland, the remaining countries in the sample had one paper each (Norway, Germany, Belgium and Italy). It is noteworthy that no studies from outside of Europe met our inclusion criteria.

Service users brought a range of expertise to the social work education they were involved in. This included experience of child protection or being care experienced (e.g. Smith, 2011; Lucas and Thomas, 2021); mental health problems (Kirwan, 2013; Hitchin, 2016); substance misuse (Loughran and Broderick, 2017); chronic health conditions and/or disabilities (Skoura-Kirk *et al.*, 2021); criminal justice system (O'Shea and McGinnis, 2020) or poverty (Driessens *et al.*, 2016). Studies from Ireland and Northern Ireland included victims of political conflict as experts (e.g. Coulter *et al.*, 2013).

Strategies for SUC involvement included role plays (e.g. Duffy *et al.*, 2021); interviews (Smith, 2011); one-to-one conversations (Cabiati and Raineri, 2016); small group discussion (e.g. Quinney and Fowler, 2013); involvement in learning groups (e.g. Campbell *et al.*, 2013); shared stories (MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2020); case studies (Loughran and Broderick, 2017); workshops and seminars (e.g. Fox, 2020); lectures along with regular teaching faculty (e.g. Driessens *et al.*, 2016) and the use of digital aids such as videos (e.g. Duffy, 2012) and audio bytes (Lucas and Thomas, 2021). In this review, their involvement in role plays was the most common strategy along with delivering teaching alongside lecturers in the classroom.

Most of the included papers ($n = 15$) used a qualitative design, whilst very few ($n = 2$) used exclusively quantitative methods. Many ($n = 11$) used a combination of both. A few studies (e.g. Skilton, 2011; Tew *et al.*, 2012) did not clearly articulate the design used and this had to be inferred from the method of data collected and the analysis presented. The evaluation strategy adopted for all the projects included some form of student evaluation and feedback. In addition to involving students, some included feedback from other stakeholders such as the service user experts themselves (e.g. Loughran and Broderick, 2017); from other academic staff (e.g. Driessens *et al.*, 2016); practice teachers (e.g. Campbell *et al.*, 2013); project group members (e.g. MacSporran, 2015) and qualified social workers (Hughes, 2017). Data were gathered using self-completion questionnaires (e.g. Hitchin, 2016); focus groups (e.g. MacSporran, 2015); semi-structured interviews (e.g. Hughes, 2017) or written (e.g. Kirwan, 2013) or verbal feedback (e.g. Leonard *et al.*, 2015). Seven studies conducted pre-post evaluations (e.g. MacSporran, 2015); whilst the majority collected data only after the educational experience (e.g. Askheim, 2012). Only three studies in our article pool used multiple time-points for data collection (e.g. Duffy and Hayes, 2012).

Almost all the studies included in this review collected data on student perceptions (level 1a in the evaluation framework; Robinson and

Webber, 2013). Students reported benefits and practice insights gained from listening to the views of service users (Smith, 2011). They valued the opportunities to meet with and learn from service users and carers (Tanner *et al.*, 2017) and felt this enabled them to make better links between theory and practice (Smith, 2011). Listening to 'real people' and to 'real stories' appeared to help them to move between lived experiences and theories, and dispelled myths and stereotypes (Mackay and Millar, 2012). Opportunities to listen and interact with the service users enabled students to question their understanding of the concept of social justice and to identify the impact of inequality on individuals, groups and communities (MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2020), and helped them to review their prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes (O'Shea and McGinnis,2020). Students felt they had a better understanding of the link between the concept of empowerment and the practices of empowerment, their relational competence had developed and they learnt to be more open and inclusive (Askheim, 2012). Additional learning outcomes reported by students included the importance of listening (Hitchin, 2016); increased confidence in interacting with service users (Duffy *et al.*, 2021); improved communication (Skilton, 2011) and questioning skills (Lucas and Thomas, 2021).

Studies which focused on particular service user needs, such as mental health problems, for example, found that students' assumptions about mental health had been challenged and their knowledge was deepened (Tew *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, studies from Northern Ireland which focussed on the experiences of political turmoil found that students were positive about engagement with victims and survivors of the conflict and felt that they could explore their views on how sectarianism can be challenged and how to deal with the needs of victims and survivors of conflict. A minority, however, felt that this teaching had not altered their views (Campbell *et al.*, 2013).

Service users' perspectives on their participation in social work education were commonly reported (level 1b, Robinson and Webber, 2013) with benefits for themselves and for the students. For themselves, they reported having a positive experience (e.g. Hitchin, 2016); increasing their confidence and self-esteem, and feeling valued and empowered (O'Shea and McGinnis,2020) and learning new skills and feeling more independent, building a good reputation for themselves and for their agency (MacSporran, 2015). In terms of benefits to students, service users recognised the positive contributions that they had made (Duffy and Hayes, 2012). For example, they felt it was important for the students to know that living with the experiences of loss and trauma are enduring (Duffy, 2012); that young people can feel intimidated by social workers and how to communicate with children and young people who did not want to communicate with the social worker (Leonard *et al.*, 2015). However, they acknowledged that students' skills in reflection

and analysis needed some development (Skilton, 2011) and that social work students seemed at a disadvantage regarding mental health in contrast to nursing students (Terry *et al.*, 2015), for example.

Five studies reported findings relating to staff perceptions of SUC involvement in the educational programme (level 1c, Robinson and Webber, 2013); two reported the views of practice educators and three reported the views of academic staff. There was agreement that SUC involvement was of great importance in the early stages of the training of social workers (Coulter *et al.*, 2013). Staff found the involvement of service users to be real and authentic (Duffy *et al.*, 2013), though thoughtful care needed to be paid to the process of involving service users to ensure a positive learning experience for students (Mackay and Millar, 2012). However, there was concern about the possible dangers and risks in students 'exposing' their feelings about sensitive issues and, consequently, it was felt important to ensure that the learning environment was safe (Coulter *et al.*, 2013). There was also a degree of concern about feeling responsible and needing to protect the service users (Duffy, 2012). Practice educators reported satisfaction with students' preparedness to deal with issues related to sectarianism and to address the needs of victims and survivors (Campbell *et al.*, 2013).

Only five papers reported findings at level 2 in the evaluation framework (Robinson and Webber, 2013). One study (Cabiati and Raineri, 2016) found reductions in students' stigmatising attitudes towards service users (level 2a). Four studies reported findings from level 2b. Measured improvements were found in knowledge (Duffy and Hayes, 2012); social work values and professional skills (e.g. Skoura-Kirk *et al.*, 2021) and self-efficacy (MacSporran, 2015).

Only one study reported findings at level 3 in the evaluation framework (Robinson and Webber, 2013). Tanner *et al.* (2017) provided an example of how the contributions of service users had directly impacted on students' social work practice (level 3a). No findings were reported at level 3b or 4 of the evaluation framework.

The methodological quality of the included papers was highly variable, with critical appraisal scores ranging from 2 to 9 (mean = 5.8). The more robust papers tended to use multiple methods, either a combination of quantitative measures and qualitative data collection (e.g. Duffy *et al.*, 2013) or multiple forms of qualitative data collection (e.g. Loughran and Broderick, 2017). These studies provided more information about the methods used and were clearer about their limitations. In contrast, the papers which were more susceptible to bias paid minimal attention to evaluation methodology and there was often limited transparency in how the authors arrived at their findings, raising doubts about their reliability (e.g. MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2020). Whilst many studies considered the ethical issues of involving service users and carers in social work education, the ethical implications of the evaluations were

not always fully considered (e.g. Leonard *et al.*, 2015). Studies reporting findings at level 2 and above in the evaluation framework all scored 7 or above, with the exception of MacSporran (2015) which received a score of 5, indicating that these studies largely paid more attention to their methodology.

Discussion

A similar number of papers met the inclusion criteria for this review ($n = 28$) as the previous one (Robinson and Webber, 2013; $n = 29$). Although this review focused only on SUC involvement in qualifying social work education, only one paper included in the previous review reported data at only post-qualifying level. Also, although the previous review included papers published over a longer time period than this review, it included only one paper outside of the decade from 2000 to 2010. This review focused on SUC involvement in learning and teaching, which may have restricted the number of eligible papers, though it is important to note that the previous review included very few studies which did not evaluate SUC involvement in learning and teaching. We can therefore conclude that there has been little change in the number of papers evaluating SUC involvement in social work qualifying education in the 2010s.

The groups of people involved in social work qualifying education and the strategies employed to involve them were diverse, possibly indicating the use of creative thinking about SUC involvement to help ensure that it is appropriate and engaging for all those involved. There were some examples of the creative use of digital media to capture the experiences of marginalised groups (e.g. O'Shea and McGinnis, 2020) and encounter methods such as a World Cafe (Terry *et al.*, 2015), though most used classroom methods. This does not appear too different from the previous review. Co-facilitation or co-production of learning and teaching sessions was common, though it is important to note that SUC involvement was largely determined by social work educators. The notion of coproduction in social work education has been strongly recommended by several professional bodies (e.g. SCIE, 2015; SWE and BASW). A notable difference in implementing the notion of coproduction is where service users were recruited as students in a course on empowerment (Askheim, 2012). In subsequent work Askheim *et al.* (2017) observe that whilst service user involvement in the UK has adopted the strategy of mainstreaming them in all aspects of social work education, the Scandinavian approach has been to offer joint courses for social work students alongside those from service user organisations.

SUC involvement in qualifying social work education is reported as being a positive experience for both students and service users, carers

and experts by experience. Sharing stigmatised 'lived experiences' on issues such as mental illness and substance misuse within the classroom can function as a form of social support for the service user and/or carer (Weerman and Abma, 2019). The papers included in this review shared the finding of the previous one (Robinson and Webber, 2013) that SUC involvement appears to have a positive outcome for students as well. It is however difficult to assess if the presentation of positive outcomes only for both SUCs and students in the papers reviewed is entirely free from publication bias. For the SUCs there was no indication in the papers shortlisted, of any emotional labour experienced or a sense of their classroom involvement being burdensome. Perhaps the perceived benefits of participating in some meaningful activity far outweighed any sense of the experience being stressful or overwhelming. Only one paper (Tanner *et al.*, 2017) reported behavioural change in students at level 3 of the evaluation framework (Robinson and Webber, 2013) and none at level 4. Therefore, we still know relatively little about the extent to which SUC involvement leads to positive change for the people who social workers work with.

The methodological quality of studies included in this review was variable, which suggests that our conclusions need to be treated with some caution. In addition, the evaluation designs used in the past decade do not appear to have evolved much from the previous review (Robinson and Webber, 2013). There remains a paucity of research that establishes the impact of SUC involvement on social work practice and outcomes for service users and carers. This needs to be a priority for future studies to ensure the investment of SUC time in social work education can be justified by evidence of positive outcomes for other service users and carers.

The UK literature on SUC involvement is well advanced in contrast to many other countries, which is likely to correspond with SUC involvement being a mandatory element of qualifying social work education in the UK. The predominance of papers from the UK in both reviews suggests that SUC involvement in social work education in other countries (and its evaluation) has not advanced at the same pace. Whilst this review suggests SUC involvement has a positive impact on students and their learning, it cannot reach any conclusions about its impact on social work practice to inform international developments.

This review only included papers which included evaluation data; descriptions of SUC involvement with no evaluation data were excluded. Additionally, the requirement for disaggregated evaluation data reduced the number of papers included in the review. It therefore may not reflect the full diversity of models of SUC involvement currently in use internationally. A further limitation is that the critical appraisal tool used is a hybrid composite measure developed for this review that has been previously untested and needs to be validated. In addition, SUC were

not involved in undertaking this review, so it is possible that it reflects the perspective of social work educators rather than SUC. However, the original review on which it is based (Robinson and Webber, 2013) was coproduced with a service user and this review followed the same methods. That this review reached a similar conclusion suggests that the evidence base has not substantially developed in the last decade. Future reviews of this literature could be enhanced by including an appraisal of the extent and nature of SUC involvement within the research to explore the extent to which the studies were informed by SUC perspectives.

Conclusion

This review has found sufficient evidence to recommend the continuance of SUC involvement. Professional regulators such as Social Work England (2021) require co-production with people including SUC in the delivery of social work education, which this review can usefully inform. How this would be sustained in the UK context would largely be predicated on the funding support made available. This review has highlighted gaps in relation to SUC involvement particularly in terms of the evaluation modalities used. In particular, future research needs to use longitudinal methods to follow students into practice to explore the impact of SUC involvement on the quality and outcomes of their practice. These studies need to be informed by a Theory of Change to ensure appropriate outcomes are measured and that change can be reasonably attributed to the SUC involvement. Quantitative studies measuring outcomes need to strengthen their sampling and analysis to help ensure that more rigorous evidence at levels 3 and 4 of the evaluation framework can be produced. The improved quality and quantity of research at this level can help to better inform the international development of SUC in countries where it is less well developed.

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