Service user and carer involvement in student selection and practice learning

A best practice guide for employers involved in the social work programme in England
Introduction

The first part of this guidance offers examples of good practice for service user and carer involvement in selecting students for the OU Social Work Degree, based on discussions with sponsoring employers and research on best practice. The second part focuses on practice learning, combining employers’ examples with extracts from Open University guidance. The first part has also been produced as a ‘stand-alone’ document for ease of reference.

In 2009 – 2010 the Service User and Carer Advisory Group to The Open University Social Work Degree in England led a pilot project to look at service user and carer involvement in the OU programme in England. The group’s report (2010) provided several recommendations for change. Recognising that many employers already work in partnership with service users and carers, it was proposed that examples of this good practice should be made widely available for all sponsoring employers. The group suggested meeting with employers to learn more about best practice, to look at any barriers to delivery and to collectively seek out solutions.

The second part of this guide considers examples of how service users and carers can contribute to students’ practice learning.

The group recognised the complexities of distance learning within The Open University and felt that these discussions could inform a best practice guide for employers, allowing them to incorporate the most appropriate level of involvement within their organisation without being over prescriptive on the approach.

We hope that this best practice guide, developed through engagement with employers, and shared learning and experience, will enhance the involvement of service users and carers in student selection and practice learning in The Open University Social Work Degree in England.

Author

Ann Johnson, on behalf of the Service User and Carer Group to The Open University Social Work Degree in England
Biographies

Ann Johnson

Ann Johnson is an equality consultant and runs her own business, HUSK, which specialises in Disability Equality Management and Awareness. Ann has worked on projects for and within the West Mercia Probation Trust, Federation of Small Businesses, as well as many local authorities, education providers and Primary Care Trusts. Ann has had much involvement in the transformation of social care, communicating change for Shropshire Council and developing service delivery strategy with Kingston-on-Thames Authority. Ann is currently directing a new social enterprise called Wave-length that will challenge how people with disabilities are perceived by others. HUSK was awarded a Chamber of Commerce business excellence award in 2009. Previous to starting her own business Ann was an HR director for an environmental company for ten years, which gave her vital experience in understanding the needs of people. Ann is also a qualified mediator.

Ann believes that people with disabilities are often limited not by the barriers they place upon themselves but barriers placed upon them by others.

Ann is passionate about providing support to the business sector and currently holds the positions of Chairman of the Shropshire branch of the Federation of Small Businesses and Chairman of Shropshire Young Enterprise. Through this involvement Ann also sits on two local authority business boards. Ann is also a past director of Young Enterprise West Midlands and Business Link West Midlands.

Ann lives in Shropshire with her husband and their three grown up children. She lives a full and satisfying life, whether it is through work or through socialising with friends and family. Ann is also a ‘very’ independent wheelchair user.

Rashida Suleman

Rashida Suleman lives with her family in Nuneaton. She has four children and cares for her mother in law and is also employed as a health care assistant. Rashida has been a carer since she was 14 years old. When Rashida reflects back over the experience of her long term role as a carer she believes that often people do not know where and how to get help. Rashida’s experience is that the role of the women as carers is reinforced through strong cultural expectations and to ask for help is not expected. Several years ago Rashida was invited to a carers support group and as a result of the support that she received she has become a tireless campaigner for the rights and needs of carers to be recognized. She also provides support to other carers on a voluntary basis. As a result of this long term commitment to these issues Rashida has received two awards in 2004 and 2009 for volunteering in the Community. Rashida has also recently been recognized as a patron for International Women’s Day by Warwickshire County Council and appeared on local radio. She was also recently invited to Westminster to mark the launch of the Social Work Task Force Recommendations.

Rashida has developed an interest in how social workers are trained. In more recent years she has become involved in working with her local council and University in talking to social work students about her experiences. She has been involved in interviewing students who have applied for social work training. Rashida has also worked for and is still currently involved in the activities of UNTRAP which is a carer and service users’ network based in Warwickshire. Rashida became involved in the work of The Open University Pilot Project on service user and carer involvement in February 2010 and has made a significant contribution to the work of the project since this time.
Project team members

The research for this best practice guide has been sourced through several approaches, including findings from the Service User and Carer Group (England), two employer events held in May and June 2011, telephone interviews with employers and written responses from those involved in student selection.

Employer events were held in Birmingham and London and offered those attending a ninety minute session to explore good practice in service user and carer involvement, and to identify gaps, barriers and solutions.

The sessions were delivered by Ann Johnson and Rashida Suleman at the Birmingham event and Ann Johnson at the London event. Following the presentation those attending were asked to identify the barriers they faced in engaging service users and carers in the recruitment of students and in supporting students’ practice learning. Participants were then asked to suggest solutions to the barriers identified.

Fran Wiles and Gill Walker, from The Open University Social Work Programme, supported the project and contributed to its design. Following the employer events the following people contributed to the research:

Sharon White, PQ/CPD Coordinator OD Consultant at Doncaster Council
Jayne McGregor, PQ/CPD Coordinator OD Consultant at Doncaster Council
Paulette Peters, Organisations & Workforce Development at Northamptonshire Council
Rose Bradley, Practice Trainer at Worcestershire Council
Jane Rozier, Practice Learning Adviser at Cambridgeshire Council
Suzie McLagan, Social Work Qualifying Lead Development Officer at Shropshire Council
Alison Higgs and Fran Wiles, from the OU Social Work Programme, commented on the final draft.
Part 1: 
Service user and carer involvement in student selection

Benefits of engagement

Whilst the GSCC sets a clear requirement to involve service users and carers in some stage of the selection process, employers suggested that agencies should think beyond the basic requirement and consider the real value and benefits of such involvement. The development of the social model of disability, driven by papers like Putting People First\(^1\) and particularly self-directed support, promotes the need for individuals to be at the forefront of decisions about services provided for them. This principle can be usefully applied to the selection and support of future social workers.

Service users’ first-hand knowledge in receiving care and support from social workers can mean that they are well placed to identify the personal qualities of an effective social worker. Service users and carers can benefit the process in many ways: evaluating CVs and application forms, designing interview questions, being panel members, and providing useful and constructive feedback for applicants afterwards. Service users and carers can provide a perspective not considered by others on the panel; they can reveal stereotypes held by the candidate and allow the employer to see how applicants respond to a service user.

When applicants are not exposed to disability within their own family or circle of friends, they can be easily influenced by portrayals of disability in the media which might reflect charitable, medical and other negative depictions of vulnerability. Some applicants may come into contact with service users and carers only when they are vulnerable, in crisis or in confusion. Many service users and carers live extremely fulfilled and successful lives, however, and so it is important to reflect their varied and invaluable contributions in the selection process. Presenting service users and carers as equal partners helps to challenge stereotypes, assumptions and perceived capabilities.

One employer, approached by someone who had taken part as a service user on a recruitment panel, offered the following feedback:

"Your involvement in the selection process for the sponsorship programme was invaluable because of the different perspective you gave both in the initial screening of applications and in assessing performance at interview. I remember realising, when you gave me your comments on the applications, that I had completely missed some key points one candidate raised because I was thinking of so many other criteria when I read through the application. I think there is also a danger when you are working within an organisation that you have pre-formed opinions of candidates. Someone independent, with experience of being in receipt of services, can judge better how … you would feel if you were inviting that person into your home for the first time and relying on them to have your best interests at heart."

We see from this comment that including service users and carers in the recruitment process provides a further expert to the panel, another viewpoint and that alternative question. This partnership approach allows employers to best judge the desired social workers for the future, in assessing fully their values and academic ability.

This guide looks at practical examples of how employers are involving service users and carers, but first of all considers some of the barriers that can arise and suggestions for overcoming them.

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Overcoming barriers to involvement

Service users and carers can face many barriers when asked to participate in the recruitment, selection and practice assessment process. The barriers – both real and perceived – can be thought of as physical, social and environmental.

Physical barriers, often encountered at the interview venue, include:

- Obstacles that prevent ease of access to a venue or meeting room
- Inadequate lighting
- Noise and distraction
- Lack of hearing loop
- Inaccessible toilet facilities
- Location to public transport
- No accessible parking facilities
- Poor signage
- Inaccessible communication or information
- Room layout

Social barriers can be created through:

- Imbalances of power
- Assumptions made about capability, level of knowledge and experience
- Well-meaning but patronising comments and support
- Stereotyping of service users and carers
- Knowledge and experience needed to support the service user or carer
- Timely payment of expenses or their impact on benefits or other income sources

Environmental barriers can be created through:

- Events on the day, or leading to the day: someone providing care or being in ill health may have an unexpected absence which they had been unable to predict
- Events leading up to the day or the meeting might create emotional anxiety or stress, so it is vital you consider how the service user might feel on the day and allow time for this within the process

Involving service users and carers in selection can remove a ‘them and us’ approach. This kind of response can, in itself, be a barrier for service users and carers involved in the process, especially if they feel that they are not valued as an equal partner or that their contribution is not fully appreciated.

Despite the barriers, service users and carers’ individual experiences and knowledge of their own personal requirements may have made them adept in informing and educating others. Many carers and people with disabilities are extremely confident in their knowledge, delivery and the contribution they can bring to a panel or assessment. So it is always best to meet with the individual(s) at the earliest possible opportunity so as to understand any potential barriers and how best to work together.

Physical barriers can usually be overcome by discussing the requirements of the service user or carer ahead of seeking a suitable location. This requires the employer to allocate sufficient time to planning the selection process. It might be that the individual can suggest a building or meeting room that they are already very comfortable with. It is also good practice to invite a person with physical needs to the venue ahead of time so that they can assess the layouts, facilities and equipment and that any concerns are rectified before the meeting.

It is also useful to provide people with advance information about any identified barriers. This might be to inform someone with a mobility impairment that there will be a ramp placed over steps, suggesting that they will require some assistance; that there is some distance to travel between the reception and the meeting room, or that they will need to use a lift etc. This will best prepare the individual(s) for the meeting and avoid any unnecessary stress or frustration from unexpected barriers.

Social and environmental barriers can be reduced by allowing time to find out about the needs of the service user or carer, to understand any concerns, additional support needs, and agree solutions to perceived barriers – or even to consider a ‘plan b’ approach.

In the longer term, removing social barriers such as stereotyping, assumptions, charitable and medical models, might be best managed by internal staff training and awareness programmes. Over time, continued and close working with service user and carer groups enables all staff to become familiar with best practice models for involvement: not just in selection but also in assessment, mentoring and other additional support to the learning process.
Planning for best practice

Challenges for employers and how to overcome them

All of the employers that we consulted recognised the value of service user and carer involvement. However, many cited barriers to such involvement, which ranged from issues of finance and resource to some of the practical barriers of finding the right people. The extent to which service users’ and carers’ involvement is perceived as valuable for the organisation as a whole can also impact on the resources made available.

In times of financial restraint it is not unusual for an organisation to suggest cutting down on the time allowed for planning and the cost of additional input or requirements. When faced with such an environment, we hope that the best practice identified in this guide will assist employers to weigh up the costs with the on-going value of involvement.

At the employer events, whilst we encouraged the listing of barriers, we were heartened by the solutions provided in order to overcome them. Employers were able to provide many examples of best practice which can be categorised under the following headings:

- Finding people to take part
- Planning the process
- Preparing for the selection day
- Examples of selection processes
- On the day: supporting participants and coping with the unexpected
- Reflecting on the process.

Think broadly

If there are budget restrictions, one approach could be to use the selection process as an opportunity for service users and carers to contribute to the wider needs of your organisation. For example, having a panel of service users and carers on site might provide the opportunity to combine discussions on impact assessments of other services, and discuss involvement in other areas of the social work degree programme such as mentoring and Train the Trainer options.

Finding people to take part

Some employers found it difficult to find the right service user and carer individuals that would be able to provide the desired outcomes of the recruitment process. Particular difficulties were found in identifying suitable participants from children’s services and adult learning disability services.

Other employers had very limited service user and carer resource pools to choose from and were concerned that they were creating ‘professional service users’. In the workshop session, this led to an interesting debate, as other employers saw it as an advantage to create a pool of experienced, well informed service users and carers.

On the other hand, it was felt overall that there were many benefits to widening the pool of service users and carers so as to provide improved availability, greater numbers and wider experience. It was also suggested that those with less positive experiences of social care would also make a helpful contribution.

Whichever approach is taken, it is important for employers to be clear about the qualities, values and experience needed in individuals providing support to the process. This will help service users and carers to identify the support they can bring to the process. Without having clear criteria – which could in turn be planned with service users and carers – employers could be in danger of limiting involvement, creating imbalances or, at worst, allowing the service user to feel inadequate or out of their depth, jeopardising future involvement.
Support from external organisations

There are several examples of employers working with external organisations to bring a wider pool of service users and carers into the selection process. This can remove the barrier of reaching the groups perceived to be harder to reach and can provide individuals who are confident and trained in selection processes. There are a growing number of service user led groups throughout the country which can provide an extensive resource, knowledge and experience from people willing to engage in the process. An example is UNTRAP (Universities/User Teaching and Research Action Partnership) in Warwickshire\(^2\), which provides informed service users and carers for the selection process. Many universities and employers also seek support from national organisations such as Barnado’s and People First, which train users of services – including young people and people with learning difficulties – to take part in recruitment and selection.

In-house approaches

One concern about the above approach might be the suitability of those seeking to provide support. This barrier can be overcome through an employer getting engaged with the group at an early stage, starting to understand individual skills, gaps in knowledge and perhaps helping to provide the necessary development skills needed to support the group so that they can fully inform the selection process. There are some good examples of employers providing ‘Train the Trainer’ programmes, asking service users and carers who have been previously involved in the student selection process to inform and educate others who might want to support the process in the future. This approach can provide more resource into the programme, create sustainability and facilitate a wider pool of service users and carers, allowing for back-up provision when needed. One local authority employer explained that they have worked hard to develop a local user led group, informing and improving member skills so that their contribution has become more valuable over time, to the extent that some of the service users and carers have obtained PTTLS (Preparing To Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector) qualifications which they now use in student workshop sessions.

It is also important to consider what training can be offered to service users and carers who take part in student selection. One employer commented that internal panel members (local authority employees) could only do this work if they had received selection training, whereas this was felt to be unnecessary for service users and carers as they provided an external perspective.

Another view is that by not providing any kind of recruitment training for a service user or carer, there is a risk that they may feel unprepared. They might – for example – unintentionally ask an interview question which could be construed as discriminatory. Consideration should therefore be given to the level of understanding that service users and carers have in fair and equitable selection processes, and their need for further guidance. Such guidance should not work to constrain service users’ and carers’ contribution to the selection process, but rather to enable them to act within the same legislative and best practice policy as the other panel members. Even when training is limited, time should be allowed before the interviews to discuss the questions planned, the hoped outcomes of the applicant’s responses and a reminder of any legislative or best practice working introduced to selection processes.

\(^2\) [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/healthatwarwick/untrap/]
Planning the process

The process of engaging service users and carers should be considered at a very early stage of planning for student selection. Early planning will allow for consideration of the range of ways that service users and carers can participate and may lead to obtaining broader community involvement. It allows time for innovative thinking around managing any external pressures, reduced budgets or changes in resourcing levels.

Consideration should be given to involving service users and carers throughout the entire process, from setting questions, reviewing CVs and application forms, panel involvement on the day, selection and feedback. It is also useful for employers to engage with service users and carers in creative thinking, especially if seeking a fresh approach to selection processes. Enabling service users and carers to share the learning from their previous experience of recruitment processes can often provide solutions to barriers, stimulate improvements and offer new ideas.

Preparing for the selection day

Lack of time, employers told us, is one of the most common barriers they face. Achieving successful and meaningful engagement with service users requires time for planning and preparation, time to implement new ways of working, and time to ensure requests for reasonable adjustments are met.

Working with service users and carers to develop the assessment strategy from an early stage enables gaps can be addressed, such as building the confidence or alleviating the concerns of those participating. Such concerns might be around physical barriers, payment of expenses or requests for a deeper knowledge of the process, and perhaps wanting to be more informed on the social work role or recruitment processes. Sufficient time needs to be allowed to ensure that all those on the panel are well briefed and supported.

Finding the right building, meeting room and managing requests for reasonable adjustments can also take time, and if not considered properly might have a negative impact on the interview process. Such requirements need to be discussed at an early stage; for example, carers may not be able to arrive at the start of traditional office hours, and others may need provision to be built in for additional rest breaks. Such requests may impact on the duration of interviews, start times and whether there might be a need to spread the process over two days. Early engagement with service users and

‘Everyone is an individual’

Employers recalled a variety of unanticipated requests for reasonable adjustment, which included a requirement to take regular breaks for food, a request for the meeting room to be placed adjacent to toilet facilities, and a request for a bed to be provided so that the person could rest at given intervals in the day. In the latter instance, the employer had needed to work with the individual to achieve a compromise, as neither a bed nor space for a bed could be provided. In this case, the agreed solution was to provide a reclining chair.
carers at the planning stage can allow for flexibility and sensitivity around meeting people’s needs, and avoid complications ahead of sending out the final details to other panel members and applicants. Managing requests for reasonable adjustments once the process is already underway can create unnecessary and sometimes costly administration. Having to ask for a change of meeting room and schedule, which might impact on other attendees’ availability, can leave the service user or carer feeling that they are causing problems.

Despite these examples, it is always very important not to make assumptions about the reasonable adjustments that might be requested by an individual, even if the employer has aided someone with a similar disability before. It should be remembered that everyone is an individual and reasonable adjustment requests can be very varied.

Payments

As a matter of principle, most organisations will wish to recompense service users’ and carers’ time, expertise and travel expenses on an equal basis to other panel members. However, the nature and method of payments should be discussed in advance of the involvement, in the same way that you would clarify reimbursement for any other external participant. One barrier which is often overlooked is how different methods of payment might fit with the employer’s existing payment processes. Payment may be essential on the day to cover expenses, but ill planned reimbursement might impact on any benefits being received by a service user or carer.

Service users’ and carers’ financial circumstances can be very varied and they may request alternative solutions to payment; some are self-employed, whilst others may be retired or claiming benefits. Financial reimbursement may attract income tax or reduce a benefit payment, so pre-discussion about the paperwork, amount, method and timing of payment is essential so as not to cause complications afterwards.

An example of negotiating payment method

One employer explained how they had resolved difficulties around paying a service user and their supporter:

‘Payment has sometimes been difficult due to benefits being received by carers providing support for a panel member, so as a solution the money was paid to the organisation they worked with. The service user … is now paid as an independent consultant, with additional payment being made to cover the cost of a carer. This has now paved the way for expenses to be paid promptly to those providing support (although this approach is not standard for the local authority).’
Examples of selection processes

Our discussions with employers revealed a variety of creative approaches being taken to ensure that service users and carers are fully involved in the process.

Open University guidance

Drawing on employers’ experience, The Open University’s Opening Doors guidance to employers suggests the following:

Some agencies have invited a service user to be a member of the interview panel, to help devise the questions to be asked at interview or to take part in the short-listing of candidates, while others have asked a service user to observe and comment on a group-work session. A service user with whom the client has worked can be asked to provide a statement about the candidate.

If you are unable to involve a service user for any reason, we can provide you with a set of interview questions which have been developed in consultation with a service user and carer. Please contact the Admissions Manager to request a copy.

A service user and carer involvement day

One example, which encompasses a very holistic approach, is that of service user and carer involvement days. Each day focuses on a particular service area, either children and families or adult care, where applicants participate in activities and get feedback on their performance. The applicants’ merits were discussed at the end of the full session and in order to aid the process photos were taken of the applicants so that service users could recall them. The employer emphasised that it was important to take the photos as the applicants arrived so that service users could match the pictures with how people had actually looked on the day. Those attending give marks for each applicant and the collated information provides a weighting which contributes to the whole selection process. The employer commented that, in these informal sessions, they invariably found that service users’ judgements correlated with the outcomes of the formal interview panel. This approach can be useful in gaining input from service users and carers who might be less suited to being a member of a panel. This process could be further supplemented by a confident service user and carer on the interview panel.
It is important to be clear about the desired outcomes of such an event or activity: what feedback do you want from those attending? Careful planning is also needed to address such issues as: how will the marking work? How can you draw more out of the participants beyond ‘they were nice’? How might you prepare the applicant for this type of activity? How might you extract useful feedback from this process to unsuccessful applicants? All of these questions would need to be considered ahead of holding such an event or activity, and again should be debated with service users and carers at the earliest opportunity.

Another employer provided an example of a shared approach – described in the box below – which includes service users and carers who might not feel so comfortable in a formal panel approach but can nevertheless make an important contribution to the selection process.

The employer explained that this process can create various challenges: funding, logistics of an accessible venue, continued engagement, and getting support workers along to assist the service users. Time is needed to make it meaningful. It was felt that facilitating the involvement of carers and service users does require “a push and encouragement for attendance”. There can be difficulties around panel member consistency because this three-part process might need to stretch across two days, and this did not always suit all service users and carers. Nevertheless, this approach remains the employer’s chosen method of student selection.

This example illustrates a way of helping to remove some of the barriers discussed earlier, as it allows a more genuine involvement of service users and carers. It also provides a back-up for the service user or carer supporting the interview panel: if the panel member is unexpectedly absent, another service user or carer might be selected from the round table group.

A further example was of a session that had been supported by two different service users due to the ill health of one, which disrupted consistency. However, it was acknowledged by the employer that ill health could happen to anyone on the panel and would be managed in the same way. Interestingly, the service users were sourced from local user led groups and from a local College. The same service users are now involved in other areas of the organisation, including practice assessment, which has meant that they have become quite experienced in helping to support the local authority. This is an example of how employers – and the Social Work Programme – can enhance sustainability by engaging with external and already established service user and carer groups.

**Round table approach**

One employer described a ‘round table’ approach. The selection process has three elements: an interview panel (with a service user or carer involved); a round table discussion (made up of a group of service users and carers) and a written exercise. The employer explained:

‘On the day there is a planning meeting, agreeing the process and outcomes for the day. The round table group usually comprises 3 – 4 people, including service users who can be accompanied. The group selects a chairman and agrees on the process and questions to be asked. Service users and carers usually ask three or four questions which they can choose from a list of suggested questions (and they can also bring their own). The round table then marks students generally on the ‘soft skills’ – personality, engagement, participation etc. The feedback contributes to the whole selection process.’

Each element is weighted as follows: interview panel (20) written exercise (10) and round table (5). This is then aggregated up to 100. This process allows for service users and carers to be involved throughout the recruitment process, both in the round table discussion and on the selection panel. Service users and carers are involved from the outset of the process by being invited to offer questions for the applicants. They also receive copies of the applications for review before the interview process. The applicants then spend allocated time in the round table discussion. This can allow for a group of service users and carers to work together and feel secure in asking pre-designed questions.
More ideas for managing the selection process

Employers offered other practical suggestions for best practice management of the selection process:

In advance of the selection day, encourage service users and carers to add a question to the interview process that best reflects their experience and knowledge.

Send papers out to service users and carers in good time, at least a week in advance, as time needs to be given to reflect on CVs and application forms, to help create questions to be asked and to provide information ahead of the day.

Questions, timing and interview process should be discussed in advance with all those involved in the panel. It can also be a good idea to run through the interview questions out loud in advance. One employer stated that it was not until after the interview process that they realized that whilst they had collectively agreed the panel’s questions, when verbally relayed to the applicant they did not come across fluently. More reflection time with the whole panel would have prevented this problem.

Arrive early!

In order to avoid these eventualities, employers suggested that it was a good idea to arrive early on site and pre-view the meeting room to ensure that requests for equipment, reasonable adjustments and support have been fulfilled. Early understanding of a situation can help in finding alternative solutions and avoid any inconvenience to the service user or carer, or embarrassment to the organisation. It is also good practice to have time allocated ahead of the sessions to once more go over the practicalities of the day with a service user or carer, and to agree any final decisions best left to the day of the event. This often means that people can be reminded of the process and the value they bring, and provides another opportunity to ask questions and help a group of less confident people feel happier about their part in the delivery.

Reflecting on the process

It is often the case that issues do not materialise until feedback is obtained after the event. One employer explained a situation where there had appeared to the applicants to be four people on the panel where in fact there were only three people and the fourth member was providing support as a scribe to the service user. On reflection it was felt that this should have been explained to the applicants in advance of the interview. This illustrates the value of seeking feedback and reflecting on the process, in order to learn and improve in the future.

On the day: supporting participants and coping with the unexpected

‘The best laid plans of mice and men’ can often be a phrase applied to any meeting, event, project etc., and unexpected events must be planned for when engaging with service users and carers in the recruitment and selection process.

Whilst there is always the possibility that any member of a selection panel can be absent on the day, the risk of absence might be greater with service users and carers, especially if they have practical challenges in their lives. If this is identified as a potential risk, back up plans can be considered which might include providing telephone numbers on the day or evening before, in case any changes need to be made, or by having a plan to substitute the service user or carer. The ‘round table’ approach, described earlier, is an example of how contingency plans can be made.

Other unexpected barriers might be the unavailability of an expected piece of equipment that is essential to the service user or carer taking part. We have come across many examples of employers who had been told that buildings are accessible and yet arrived to find barriers on the day. These can include unexpected items blocking access routes, a lift that is temporarily out of order, or a hearing loop system that no-one knows how to operate.

Reflecting on the process

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Part 2: Service user and carer involvement in practice learning

The second part of this best practice guide combines Ann Johnson’s research, undertaken with employers, with extracts from the OU’s Practice Learning Guide. The latter has benefited from joint work undertaken with members of the OU Service User and Carer Group, following their evaluation report of service user and carer involvement in the OU’s Social Work Degree (England).

It is important to note that these extracts are provided here for illustration, and that students and practice assessors should refer directly to the OU Practice Learning Guide for further information.

Service users and carers can make a valuable contribution to students’ learning through providing feedback on their practice. In addition, employers offered examples of ways in which service users and carers could provide other kinds of support for students’ practice learning. For example, in some OU regions, service users and carers provide input into practice learning workshops and provide recommendations for students’ further development and learning. One agency also described a process of mentoring.

Obtaining service user and carer feedback

The Open University expects students and practice assessors to make ongoing use of service users’ and carers’ feedback throughout the Practice Learning Opportunity (PLO). The OU's Practice Learning Guide (Section 4) states that:

The student and the practice assessor are responsible for seeking service user feedback on their practice. In addition, students are encouraged to include feedback from carers. Students are expected to seek meaningful, first-hand feedback about different aspects of their work from service users. There are different ways in which this can be done and these should be discussed in supervision.

At certain points during the Practice Learning Opportunity, the requirement for service user and carer feedback is built into the assessment process. One of these is when practice assessors engage in ‘direct observations’ of students’ practice which includes interactions with a service user. The Practice Learning Guide contains a detailed explanation of the process to be followed, and emphasises that:

Students will need to get clear permission from the service user and/or other participants (written, if possible) that the observation can take place. If a video is being made, the service user should be informed that it is only for the purposes of the practice assessor assessing the student and will be destroyed once the assessment process is complete.

In its report, the Service User and Carer Group recommended that the University increased the opportunity for students to gain meaningful feedback from service users and carers following a direct observation. For this reason, students are now required to seek feedback for at least three direct observations. It is accepted that gaining feedback from service users and carers can be difficult especially in times of crisis, emotional strain and stress. The OU guidance advises that:

Different methods of gaining feedback will need to be planned according to the nature of the student’s involvement with, and the needs
of, particular service users. For example, not all service users will be able to provide written feedback so other kinds of ways of asking and recording their views will need to be developed. Similarly, some service users may not have chosen to have a social work intervention, but they can still be asked about the quality of the service provided by the student.

When the service user or carer is experiencing a particularly difficult situation, the practice assessor may feel reluctant to request feedback as it can be deemed to be inappropriate or insensitive. This is an understandable response, but the risk here is that the assessor might make assumptions about the service user’s or carer’s willingness to offer feedback. Feedback after very difficult interactions, if the individual is prepared to give it, might be especially valuable for the student’s learning. One employer recounted an occasion where the service user had received a difficult phone call whilst the student was there, and it was not felt appropriate to seek feedback on the student’s practice. However, it is always worth considering whether the service user or carer would be willing to provide feedback at a later date, when feeling less stressed. Of course, after consideration or despite all efforts, it may not be possible to ask service users and carers for feedback. In this case, the Practice Learning Guide asks students to ‘reflect on this and briefly explain why’, so that at least the principle and possibilities for obtaining feedback remain important.

Another employer suggested that the process is always challenging, especially when seeking feedback from someone with significant communication or cognitive difficulties, such as a learning disability or dementia. Another dilemma is that service users and carers often want to provide positive feedback and not endanger a much needed service or relationship; this can lead to general comments like ‘the student was nice’. Practice assessors then need to devote further time and resources to explore such feedback in more depth.

Such problems suggest that in some cases different approaches are required: either more time should be allowed or encouragement given for more in-depth methods of engagement. In encouraging meaningful feedback, closed questions that might simply result in a response such as ‘yes’ or ‘no’ would be best avoided. Responses like ‘she was nice’ might be built on with additional prompts such as ‘why was she nice – can you describe this for me?’ or ‘can you describe your experience or how you felt?’. If difficulties in gaining feedback are anticipated then students and assessors should build this into the planning of feedback.

One employer’s example of obtaining meaningful feedback from service users and carers with a learning disability is to use simply phrased questions accompanied by ‘smiley’ type faces to circle. In another example, a student had used photos of herself doing various activities on placement as a kind of aide memoire for written questions such as ‘did I do what I said I would do?’, ‘did you think I was reliable?’ ‘what could I have done differently’ etc. Visual prompts of this kind can create a more detailed response or a dialogue.

Although these examples are helpful, the process of obtaining feedback will need to be carefully considered and planned in relation to the individuals concerned.

In addition to seeking feedback after an observed meeting or event, it is a good idea to gather feedback on the student’s practice over a longer period. For example, asking a service user and carer if the student followed through on tasks following a meeting would provide valuable and meaningful learning over several visits. One employer has plans to introduce the keeping of journals where individual service users or carers would be encouraged to record their feedback on a regular basis; another employer is currently trialling a similar approach.
Opening Doors 2011/2012

Employers best practice guidance

Using service user and carer feedback in student assessment

Even before feedback is obtained, it is important to consider how this will contribute to students’ learning and assessment. The Practice Learning Guide advises that, when planning direct observations, the student and practice assessor should set out a written agreement that addresses (among other things) how service users’ or carers’ feedback is to be used. The same approach could usefully be applied to feedback obtained at any point during the practice learning experience.

In order to learn from the feedback, students will need to allocate time to reflect on it in supervision sessions. Reflection on service user and carer feedback can, in turn, contribute valuable insights when students are writing about the application of skills, values and theories in their academic assignments. To strengthen this process, the Service User and Carer Group proposed an additional reflective tool: the Values-Based Record of Practice which students discuss with their practice assessors in supervision sessions. The Practice Learning Guide (section 4) clarifies that, in completing this reflective activity students should pay particular attention to:

- factors considered when obtaining service user/carers feedback;
- how service user/carer feedback has been used in supervision to develop practice and reflection;
- how module materials have helped develop practice with service users/carers; and
- how personal values have been challenged through work with service users/carers.

Practice assessors draw on a range of evidence when evaluating a student’s practice and writing the report, and this should take account of service user and carer feedback. The Practice Learning Guide offers the following advice:

- Service user and carer feedback should be used as a source of evidence throughout the Practice Assessor Report … [including] recordings or notes of their own discussions with service users and carers that the student has been in contact with … The practice assessor can also include comments made by service users.

Other ways in which service users and carers support practice learning

Service users and carers have contributed to the OU’s teaching materials in various ways, including talking about their own experiences and commenting on drafts during the production process. In addition, there is an opportunity for tutors to invite a service user or carer to participate in one of the Practice Learning Workshops. Arrangements of this kind are not always possible, and are in any case organised by the OU rather than the sponsor. However, it may be helpful to share an extract from the guidance provided for OU tutors about preparing for this session in advance. The Tutor Guide for ‘K315 Critical Social Work Practice’ emphasises the importance of being clear about the aim of the session and paying attention to practical issues such as the suitability of the venue. Advice to tutors includes the following suggestions:

You might like to discuss with students the reasons for inviting a Service User or Carer to [the workshop] … so that you can think together about how to make this learning experience as fruitful as possible. You could also discuss the role of the service user and the different ways in which they can add their perspective to the teaching session. … [The workshop] will need planning and organising; you may wish to design and deliver it jointly with a service user.

Students usually find this a very powerful learning experience and in advance of the workshop you could also ask students about:

- ensuring the service user feels welcome and comfortable
- suitability of the venue
- possible ethical issues.

Use this discussion to encourage students to think about a range of ways to hear and appreciate service user and carer perspectives. You could suggest they look into how service user feedback is gathered in their agencies, what use is made of it. This will help your group to gather meaningful feedback from users of services about their own practice, which they need for their Practice Assessment Report and especially, for their Values-Based Record of Critical Practice.
Some agencies do, of course, involve service users and carers in their in-house training sessions. One employer provided an example of service users being involved in delivering post qualification workshops in adult social care, particularly Professional Relationships and Multi Agency Working workshops. These sessions have gone beyond the recounting of individual service users’ and carers’ ‘stories’ and have provided real depth, real partnership thinking and the opportunity for reflection. The employer recalled a session where, due to initial IT problems, the service user opened the session and by the time the IT was restored the service user had covered all the areas planned within the employer’s presentation.

From research and discussions with employers, it is clear that support for practice learning is often provided by the same service users and carers involved in the recruitment process. This continuity can bring added value to engagement, building trust and familiarity for students, employers, assessors, service users and carers. In some cases this relationship has developed into service users becoming mentors to students, providing on-going support to the learning process.

Many of the issues which can create barriers for involving service users and carers in recruitment (discussed in Part 1 of this guidance) are equally likely to occur when developing other kinds of involvement. The solutions are also similar, and include having well thought out processes, sufficient time for planning and the right level of support to meet individuals’ needs.

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**Overview**

We hope you have found this best practice guide, based on feedback and suggestions from employers, helpful in finding the best way for your organisation to involve service users and carers in recruitment and in practice learning. Employers who took part in developing the guide identified tangible benefits of this involvement: service users and carers can provide insightful and highly beneficial input into the selection of students, helping to ensure that entrants are of high calibre with the right academic and personal potential. Service users and carers can also contribute to students’ practice learning in a variety of ways. However, such meaningful and often innovative approaches require time and resource, and the challenge for employers is how to balance service user and carer involvement with the need to manage scarce resources.

Many of the best practice examples suggest that investment into continued working with local groups and building up strong partnership relationships with service users and carers can help control costs, create sustainability and the potential to support other areas of students’ learning. Often service users have continued to work with employers and students helping with mentoring, sharing workshop delivery with staff and in some cases providing Train the Trainer programmes. Thus, if the involvement of service users and carers is managed effectively, it can in fact reduce cost and resource input for employers.
Service user and carer involvement in student selection and practice learning

A best practice guide for employers involved in the social work programme in England