



Experiences of service users involved in recruitment for nursing courses: A phenomenological research study



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to gain insight into service users' experiences of participating in recruitment for Adult, Mental Health and Child nursing studies at the authors' university; to establish potential motivations behind such participation; and to make suggestions for improved future practice. The involvement of service users in nurse education and recruitment has for some years been required by the Nursing and Midwifery Council, but there is a dearth of publications on the meaning of that involvement to participating service users. It is hoped that this study will contribute to this body of knowledge.

A phenomenological approach was selected, field-specific focus groups of service users being facilitated using a semi-structured interview format; these were audio recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Participation was subject to the service users having been involved in recruitment to nursing studies at the authors' university and the focus groups took place either at the university or at the child participants' school.

Themes identified demonstrated largely positive experiences and a sense of meaningful involvement for all concerned. Findings indicated a close link between the values of the participants and those of the wider NHS, benefits to a sense of wellbeing and achievement, as well as the need for greater ownership of the recruitment process by service users. Potential lessons for academics wishing to promote greater service user involvement in student recruitment are articulated.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a blossoming of service user and carer [SUC] involvement in healthcare education, prompted by a range of publications, exposés and other events reflecting the trend towards more individualised care. The UK Department of Health called for this at the beginning of the current decade (DoH, 2010), as did the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC 2010). The impetus was maintained both by the Willis Commission (2012) and the report by the Francis committee into the calamitous inadequacies of care at the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Trust (Francis, 2013). In many universities in the UK, the participation of “experts by experience” in teaching, assessment and curriculum planning is now routine, although practice varies considerably across the nation (Terry, 2013). It has been argued that dissemination of relevant activity has been weak, and that relevant publications are few

(Tee, 2012; Terry, 2013).

Whilst the number of research papers relating to teaching by “experts” seems to be increasing (e.g. Tremayne et al., 2014, Strøm and Fagermoen, 2014, Scammell et al., 2015), there have been considerably fewer publications on the subject of this involvement in student recruitment, despite the NMC's requirement for it (NMC, 2010, G3.7a), and despite the guidance produced by National Health Service Employers (NHS, 2015) in securing the participation of children; an informal study by Rouse and Torney (2014) of the merits of SUC involvement in selection being the only example produced by a literature search at the time of writing.

Following the call from the NMC for SUC involvement in recruitment, this participation has also been identified as desirable by O'Donnell and Gormley (2013), and claimed to be “successful” by Rouse and Torney (2014). The latter authors offer data indicating that the

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experience of involvement was positive for all involved, and that it enhanced the efficacy of the selection process, despite some concerns expressed about process. At the authors' university, SUCs have been involved in recruitment to Adult, Child and Mental Health (MH) pre-registration nursing programmes for up to 4 years. Whilst anecdotal evidence suggests that it is widely seen as a positive development, no data has been collected regarding the nature of the "expert" experience. It was anticipated that such data would have the potential to influence this development within the university and may inform similar initiatives elsewhere.

The research question was therefore 'what are the lived experiences of service users involved in recruitment for nursing courses?'

2. Methodology

The Heideggerian phenomenological approach was adopted as it matched the study's aim to explore lived experiences. Focus groups encourage participants to share experiences, allowing the researcher to explore similarities and differences in perspective (Doody, Slevin and Taggart, 2013), so were utilised to facilitate discussion about the participants' involvement with student nurse selection. Separate focus groups were set up for the SUCs involved with each of the three nursing pathways. A question guide was developed and used with each focus group to avoid interviewer bias. This guide included questions on motivation to participate; what the experience was like; whether there were any benefits to involvement; and whether there had been any surprises during participation. The researchers facilitating each group had had no previous contact with the service users [SUs] in that group, a decision made to reduce bias and promote candid discussion.

Participants were recruited from the faculty database of SUs and needed to have participated in student nurse recruitment. Two Adult (50% response rate), thirteen Child (85% response rate, aged 13 to 17 years), and ten Mental Health (100% response rate) service users consented to participate. It should be noted that the pool of Adult service users was smaller than the other two groups as service users had only been involved with interviewing on this programme for 1 year. Therefore, one focus group was completed for adult nursing service users, and two focus groups each were organised for the child and MH service users in order to allow meaningful participation.

Each focus group discussion lasted less than 1 h and was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data, code it, and identify themes from subjects' experiences with their meanings to participants. Different researchers independently coded the transcripts and themes were agreed. Following this process SUs from each focus group reviewed the coded transcripts from their interview and agreed with the themes identified.

The study was approved by the faculty research ethics committee. Given the potential vulnerability of the SUs ethical considerations were important within this study. Consent to participate was obtained from Adult and MH service users following the provision of written information and a full verbal explanation. Opportunities were offered to all participants for subsequent discussion in private and/or signposting to support agencies if required. No participant requested this. Consent was obtained from the young people following liaison with their school, and all correspondence with these participants was via the school. As these young people remained under the care of the school safeguarding was in place. A child specific information sheet was used and consent forms were collected from the child, parent/carer and school. The young people were supported by their teachers throughout their focus groups which took place at the school. A chaperone accompanied the researcher conducting the focus groups.

3. Description of Current Involvement

Each of the three pathways operate differently to involve SUs in

recruitment. The Adult and MH SUs observe a group discussion undertaken by candidates on a given topic and mark against specific criteria. The Adult SUs may alternatively observe the individual candidates as part of a workstation. The Child SUs undertake individual discussion with the candidates and ask them four questions that they themselves identified and then score them accordingly. For each of the pathways the SU interaction forms part of an overall picture and no candidate is excluded based solely on this element.

4. Presentation of Emerging Themes From the Focus Groups

Identified themes are presented in Fig. 2. These are organised by size according to those most widely discussed within the focus groups and therefore deemed most important to the SUs themselves. These themes were also validated by the participants within the subsequent group discussions. Whilst relationships between themes will not be discussed within this paper, the illustration demonstrates where overlap was recognised from the data.

4.1. Partnership

The concept of partnership and being seen as an equal was important to participants. Some felt they were "involved as a colleague" (Adult SU) and not just "as a lay person coming in" (Adult SU) and that discussion was conducted on "a fairly equal basis" (Adult SU). In addition, another stated how important it was to "feel valued, that your opinion and your voice matters" (Mental Health SU). This was explored further when participants discussed how lecturers responded to their feedback on candidates. Participants felt listened to when giving feedback on, and scoring candidates. For example, one stated "the professional might say "oh yes ok, in retrospect" and we changed it" (Adult SU). This was also reflected by a child service user "the best thing about doing the interviewing is we have a say". It is noteworthy that service users might hear and interpret what is said by candidates in a different way. A participant remembered discussing with the lecturer the content of a response. The participant had stated what they heard "and they are like 'oh I didn't hear that'...and you are like 'yeah that is what that person said'" (MH SU). However, there was also evidence that when lecturers explained the rationale for their scores it was accepted; "they would say why they'd given a different mark and you'd think 'oh yes you're right'" (Adult SU). The partnership theme was also evident in the conduct of the interviews. At the start of one participant's involvement in the revised selection process they were interviewing with a lecturer who was still adapting to the new approach. This led to discussion between them as to how they would proceed, and resulted in their working "out a format and it worked really well" (Adult SU).

4.2. Benefit of Lay Involvement

The desire to improve services for future users motivated many subjects. Negative experiences were discussed and the desire to "change the view of doctors and nurses in practice" (MH SU) was articulated. However, the more frequent motivating factor was seeing themselves as an expert resource, with a wealth of experience to share; "we sort of know what we are talking about" (Child SU), "like they say, you can't get it from a book" (MH SU).

This benefit of the 'expert' lay involvement continued with the recognition of the importance of exposing candidates to the "people like us" (Child SU) that they could be caring for in future. One of the child service users stated, "I think that it is important for them to actually meet disabled people", whilst a MH SU reflected that "When the service users are involved it is very good for the prospective new students because a lot of them have never met someone with mental health", whereas an Adult SU felt "I think I'm looking at it from the point of view that if I was ill...would I want that person looking after me".

This was additionally supported by the idea that academics may be

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