

# French framework on service users' participation in social work education

Programme Erasmus+ "Strategic Partnership"  
May 2021

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This document aims at proposing an overview of service users' participation in the training of future social workers in France. Two main lines of thought have influenced this work : what is the evolution of the legal framework for service users' participation in the training of social workers ? What are the current experimentations and questions in relation to that topic within educational institutions in France ?

## **1) Evolution of the legal framework regarding service users' participation to the training of social workers**

Participation is a concept that is constantly reinvented, its recurrent use being related to the fact that « it is laden with an history and ideas that make sense for many researchers, public policy makers and social workers as well as for civil society » (Bresson, 2014). If many have their own views on this concept, for most people it refers to « the answers to a major societal issue referring to the implementation of a true democratic ideal and the principle of equality » (ibid.).

### **1.1 Service users' participation within governmental social policies in France**

In France, citizen's participation has historically become an issue within the context of the new social movements that appeared during the post 2<sup>nd</sup> world war period. Participation arose then through the impulse of various movements, particularly involved with the defence of underprivileged communities, in order to question public authorities on the need to involve people affected by poverty and their organisations in framing and implementing policies promoting equal access to rights (CNLE 2011). In 1983, the Hubert Dubedout report, entitled « Together, redeveloping the city » introduced citizens' participation as a manifesto for a democratic transformation of the management of urban areas. This report was then considered as the founding text for social development in suburban areas.

These initiatives, within the framework of suburban social policies, thus illustrate the transition from a « consultative democracy » to a « participatory democracy », in other words from the « welfare state » to a « facilitator state » (Donzelot et Estebe, 1994). As of the 1990s, « public policy makers try to formalise, institutionalise and promote a true social engineering of service users' participation » (Wuhl, 2008). In this context, sociologist M. Carrel underlines the necessity to take into account the French bureaucratic tradition according to which



« participation is based on a vertical, hierarchical and top-down principle potentially leading to some institutional rigidity » (Carrel, 2013).

Regarding the social sector, we have no choice but to note that « the systematic mentioning of the notion of participation within official texts is fairly recent » (Jaeger, 2017). Nonetheless, it was one of the major aspects of a circular note dated 1982 on « the main guidelines for social work » by the National Solidarity Minister, Nicole Questiaux. « Addressing social workers, (the Minister wishes) thus to build up a new form of citizenship based on social intervention (Deverchère, 2017) and declares that « considering service users as citizens requires to hear their voice and make it arise if necessary. It also requires to help them take part in the shaping of their own future. Finally to involve them in the organisation of social services and institutions. It therefore means running the risk of protests and objections. » (CSTS, 2007).

These words, which have left their mark on many professionals, have to be related to a major change in the French social context. The previous period, from 1945 to the late 70s, was characterised by a reinforced welfare state. In this context, social support fell within « an enchanted relation to the future (strong belief in social progress) » (Foucart, 2005). In particular, service users are perceived from their perfectibility, that is to say, as if they were on their way to emancipation » (ibid). The slowdown in economic growth, rising unemployment and funding problems for social protection lead to a redistribution of responsibilities between the State and individuals. Thereupon, « individuals are invited to take responsibility for their own protection » (Soulet, 2005). In other words, social responsibility is progressively transferred upon individuals' responsibility.

Facing a disengaging State, we witness a transformation from a welfare state to a « socially active State » (Feltesse, 2005). One notices a recomposition of social policy with, retrospectively, a distinction between so-called « passive public policies » (based on protectionist measures) and so called « active social policies » when benefits are awarded in return for « a commitment to participate more actively within society » (Barbier, 2008). Thus, « everybody must have a plan and act in order to remain socially included whatever resources available » (Soulet, 2005).



## **1.2 Evolution of service users' role in public policy**

In the preceding context, the bases of social support are being questioned. Indeed the unequal relationship between social workers and service users remained « acceptable while the promise of emancipation was maintained » (Ion & rayon, 2003). From then on, the notion of social assistance becomes widespread, based on the assent of the person concerned, seen as autonomous and responsible for their own life. « We move from the notion of working « on » someone's situation to the notion of working « with » someone » (Astier, 2009). If this change occurs it is because « everyone is considered responsible for their own life » and « will have to find the motivation to take part in society » (ibid).

French Parliament heads in that direction, considering service users as normal citizens, imposing their participation in any decision. We choose here to develop particularly the main provisions of the 2002.2 Act, renewing social support along two lines: direct participation of the people in the way they will be assisted ; participation of the people in the organisation of the institution. In that respect, service users play a major role, since their involvement changes the nature the scope of social intervention.

In the meantime, « another feature arises, service users' participation being based on the recognition of their own expertise » (Jaeger, 2017). This legitimizes people's ability to express themselves on the social measures and actions applied to them. A double phenomenon underpins this change. On one hand service users movements that claim to have some expertise so far disqualified by scientific and professional knowledge » (Deries et Overney, 2017). On the other hand, the European Union's influence on member States in order to implement and coordinate their social policies along this line.

The Act of 1998, on combating social exclusion, conferred for the first time to underprivileged people the right to take part in the policy making process related to fighting poverty. Its objectives were ambitious, including the intention to consider service users « as full partners » in the process of designing new policies. In that respect, French government progressively impulse citizens' participation in the making, the implementation and assessment of social policies (CNLE, 2011).



Three types of forum for participation emerge :

- « Small-scale forum, involving service users (RSA beneficiaries, citizen's committees) ;
- Large-scale forum, open to all kind of participants on a voluntary basis (such as Regional/National Committees for service users) ;
- Official bodies (National Council against poverty and exclusion, National Council for child protection) » (HCTS, 2017).

In any case, some questions still remain in terms of participation's procedures, whether it is contributive, representative or direct, local or national.

One can also wonder to what extent these developments change social workers' practices. During the 2012 National Conference against poverty, employers from the social sector express some doubts on the situation. Participation thus appears « neither satisfactory, nor efficient or making sense, at any level » (Deverchère, 2017). In view of this fact, the government introduces in 2013 a pluriannual poverty eradication action-plan, with a strong aim « to renew social work ». For this purpose, a national Conference on social work is organised (Etats Généraux du Travail Social - EGTS) in order « to provide social policies with a strong political dimension and the future professionals it requires ». Such wording suggests that social workers' training and education will become a key issue for the EGTS.

### **1.3 The EGTS : Social workers' education in question**

If service users' participation is then an evidence for all governing institutions, how can we expect it to be included within social workers' education? In many higher educational institutions, various initiatives are already taken in order to promote service users' participation in the training of future social workers. In the meantime, civil society movements perform some experiments on participation, such as ATD Quart-Monde who have set up since the year 2000 some « action-research » programmes in order to encourage « the merging of knowledge and practices » (Ferrand, 2008).

It is within this context that, in 2013 and 2014, in order to prepare the EGTS, regional gatherings are organised in order to draw up an inventory and launch a collective reflection upon this issue. It is important to underline that during these discussions, « the issue of education was not adressed in a usual way, that is to say as a matter reserved for unions and/or educational



executives, but as a challenge for civil society movements, their employees and volunteers, and (above all) service users » (Lechaux, 2016). Five thematic groups were in charge of synthesising the workshops and making proposals on various issues. In that respect a group in charge of « education and lifelong training » recommends to « modernise the content and methods for future professionals' education », developing new pedagogical approaches including « service users' participation and the enhancement of their expertise within social workers' education ».

Another group, named « users' place in devices », transposes the recommendations of the CSTS (tightly linked to the EGTS) published in 2015 and entitled « Rethink relationship with citizens. "Stop calling us users ». It is particularly recommended to « involve people experiencing poverty in social workers' education [...], capitalising on their expertise and not only their testimony » (Recommendation N°8). The aim here is to develop educational/training programmes mixing « experience-based, scientific and practical knowledge in order to learn how to share responsibilities ».

In addition, this report invites to consider social workers' education as an ideal space in order to facilitate changing practices : on the one hand, by transferring recommendations in terms of participation's good practices, on the other by encouraging the emergence of a professional position based on service users' potential. This echoed the CNLE report which, in 2011, already recommended to « rely on the expertise of people who find themselves in a vulnerable situation » for the education of future social workers. The aim is to encourage them, once graduated, « to promote and put in practice service users' participation », so that this issue may form an integral part of their professional practices.

It is important here to focus on an issue discussed during the EGTS. While one of the five working groups was entitled « users' place in devices », the CSTS suggests to « proscribe the expression « service users » as long as it is not used in relation with a specific object, device or policy ». The expression « service user » is being questioned since it evokes a form of dependency on some institution. In the meantime, voices are heard expressing their commitment to that expression. For these people, amongst which Roland Janvier, the use of this expression allows to preserve the idea of « making use of institutional social devices ». « Changes in terminology conceal the nature of the interaction that lies in the foundations of social intervention » (Janvier, 2016).



What terminology should therefore be used in order to « consider social intervention in a context where it encourages the promotion of citizenship » (ibid) ? Other expressions are suggested, such as « concerned/involved persons » following the model developed by Yann Le Bossé. This author suggests distinguishing the persons *involved/concerned* « who must concretely deal with the consequences of social intervention » (service users, most of the time) and *implicated* persons « who have an interest in the situation, but do not have to cope with its consequences » (professionals mainly) (Vallerie in CSTS, 2015). One can wonder, beyond semantics, to what extent what is here at stake is « a process of individualisation of a social model » which causes the individual to alternate between the role of a « responsible citizen » and a « client-user » (Deverchère, 2017).

#### **1.4 The interministerial action-plan in favour of social work and social development, a « historical break »**

At the end of the EGTS, an interministerial action-plan is introduced in 2015. Embodying an « undeniable historical break » (Lechaux, 2016), it is entitled « Better support to the people ». Amongst the 26 announced measures, the third one provides for the « compulsory participation of service users in the training of social workers », as from september 2017. Compared to the « slow modernisation dynamics of social workers' education » arising from the EGTS, « the action plan is contrasting by its ambitious dimension, both in terms of its orientations and its control mode » (Lechaux, 2016). It is, indeed, the only measure with a mandatory status.

This measure specifies that « participation of service users is particularly efficient in order to establish an equal dialogue with students, beyond all other professional issues. It also encourages people's confidence and the restauration of trust among them. Recognising thus users' expertise, the possibility given to them to take part, even occasionally, to social workers' education will be systematised ».

In march 2017, in the first assessment of the implementation of this action plan, it is recommended to « ensure very carefully that service users' participation, now enshrined in various texts, should be actively put in practice ». In june of the same year, an official communication is released, introducing the accreditation package for higher educational institutions. In its pedagogical part, information are expected in relation with « the terms of service users' participation in the training of future social workers ». Ultimately, the third



measure of the action plan is part of an overall process consisting in introducing a quality control approach for higher educational institutions.

### **1.5 Definition of social work : towards a better acknowledgement of service users' expertise**

This action plan also emphasises « the need to consolidate a generic definition of social work in the law in order to declare the French political plan in that respect » (HCTS, 2017). It is suggested that this definition should be a transposition of the international definition », approved by the IASSW at the Melbourne conference in 2014 (ibid). The initial drafting of this definition is assigned to the HCTS, and then in view of its legal recognition, is enshrined in the « Code de l'Action Sociale et des Familles » in 2017.

The action plan suggested that « social work should be based on service users' feelings and life experience, on their « expertise from usage » ». The definition of social work builds on the action plan stating that social work « leans on academic knowledge inspired from social sciences and humanities, on professionals' theoretical and practical knowledge and service users' experience, the latter being associated to the answer to their needs ». In other words, these guidelines allow to « acknowledge the skills of service users, to take their experience into account, including in the process of production and transmission of knowledge » (HCTS, 2017).

This definition can be considered as « the witness of a change in the status of expertise and knowledge » (Soulet, 2016). Some authors (Barnes, Crawford), describe « the call for citizens' participation as some opening within public institutions for experiences that were beforehand ignored, questioning the ties between experience knowledge and those of qualified experts » (Godrie, 2015). For them, this call partly reflects « the inadequacy of professional expertise to solve certain challenges » (ibid). This « shift in the perception of expertise » (Soulet, 2016) can be related to the recognition of experiential knowledge that has led to the introduction of peer-assistants (Godrie, 2014), peer-support coordinators (Demailly, 2015) or « big brother volunteers » (Divay, 2016).

We must notice that the recognition of this form of expertise is supported by other movements, of which the one initiated by « Associons nos savoirs ». This group, which associates the healthcare and social work actors, take part in the dynamics initiated by the 2015 « Vancouver





declaration » laying the foundations of citizens' participation to professionals' education. In 2018, a consensus has led to the drafting of an advocacy paper, named « the Paris declaration » (Casagrande, 2019), « to reassert the complementarity of knowledge [...], to support those who use experience knowledge in pedagogy » (ibid). The French Ministry for Health and Solidarity was one of its original signatories the year of its publication. But how can the recognition of service users expertise legitimise their contribution to social workers' education ?

### **1.6 The reform of social work degrees « through the prism of participation »**

As we have just described it, the EGTS and its action-plan have raised many questions in terms of participation and the necessity to transform social workers' education. It is in this context that was initiated a reform of social workers' qualifications, on the basis of the 10 measures « for a better recognition of social workers and a modernisation of their education » from the 2015 action-plan. That reform was adopted between 2016 and 2018. Nonetheless, if we look into this reform « through the prism of participation », « we can only point the difficulty to identify, within the new curriculum, the place for participation and citizenship » (Crespo, 2019).

More specifically, this reform has led to the creation of a set of common standards and skills in order to « encourage cooperation and complementarity » amongst professionals (ministerial decree, 22-08-2018). Among the 9 targeted skills, it is expected to « stimulate service users' skills and encourage their participation ». Among the 6 bodies of knowledge facilitating the development of these skills, one of them is namely related to « service users' participation and citizenship ». We can notice that « the concrete implications of the notion of participation remains to be determined » (Jaeger, 2019) and that the introduction of the notion of citizenship blurs even more the outcomes of this reform.

In addition, the differences, if not disparities, amongst the various curriculum as regards the topic of participation raises many questions. One wonders thus whether the responsibility lies primarily on each educational institution « to be vigilant and demanding to make sure that this issue is common to all curriculums » (Crespo, 2019) ? We also notice that, although service users' skills are namely referred to here, the issue of their expertise or experience is not mentioned. Still, the recognition of these abilities, enshrined in the definition of social work, could be considered as a major lever in order to establish, right from social workers' education,



a more balanced relationship with service users. In what way can such a reform, « based on so few incentives » (ibid), encourage service users' participation in social workers' education ?

We therefore have to check out how teaching staff manage to introduce service users' participation within the programmes. « Is it imperative to include service users' expertise and isn't that exactly where it should start ? » (Deries & Overney, 2017).

## **2) Service users' participation in social workers' education, a « salutary shock » ?**

In 2015, during the introduction of his action-plan, the Minister of Social Affairs requested an « identification of good practices in order to disseminate the most promising projects ». Various initiatives will thus be launched :

- The work of the HCTS, leading to the publication in 2017 of the report « Service users' participation to governing bodies and social workers' education » ;
- A transnational project carried out by two French and two Spanish higher educational institutions giving rise to a report in 2019 on « the issues, terms and conditions of service users' participation to social workers' education » ;
- A project lead by the UNAFORIS, supported by the DGCS, resulting in the publication in 2018 of a « Guide for service users' participation to social workers' education ».

Such projects and works aim to encourage new initiatives, since the idea is now « to base education on a collaboration between educational institutions, employers and other actors, specifically service users » (Lechaux, 2016). Where the 2015 action-plan encourages this kind of approach, priority must now be given to « specify the purpose of participation (and its various dimensions) and its shape (how should it be implemented ?) » (Laprie & Minana, in Delhay & Galliot, 2019). It is then necessary, relying on what educational professionals say, to clarify the implications for all participants : students, service users and teaching staff.

### **2.1 Aims, types of actions and « watch points »**

For teaching staff « the 2015 action-plan raises many questions : who must participate ? How can we identify participants ? What kind of compensation should we provide them with ? Should we privilege individual or collective discourse ? What are the expected benefits for participants ? What are the limits of participation ? [...] To what extent should we plan,



organise debates and fuel controversy ? » (Delhaye & Galliot, 2019). It is therefore necessary to question the aims of a pedagogical programme involving service users. In the UNAFORIS guidebook, these aims are identified as such, for all participants :

- « Get to know and understand each other, leave room for each participant and their specific knowledge.
- Develop and sustain skills in order to act together in terms of social intervention.
- Question representations, practices and intervention impacts.
- Identify conditions to collaborate » (UNAFORIS, 2018).

How is this kind of experimentation put into practice in higher educational institutions ? Philippe Lebailly, on the basis of the analysis of various pedagogical programmes, suggests the following typology :

- Approaches that aim to particularly integrate experiential knowledge within education ;
- Approaches that aim at changing relationships and reducing distance between professionals and service users ;
- Approaches that tend to facilitate common intervention, co-construction and co-decision amongst students, service users and professionals ;
- Approaches that aim at involving service users in the plan, the organisation and staff of the educational institution.

This typology is non exhaustive but, introducing various modalities of participation, aims at « opening up new possibilities » (Lebailly, 2019). Let's add up that these modalities can be applied either in pedagogical or research activities, according to a collaborative framework.

Various experimentations have thus been carried out and allow to identify, according to various authors, some « watch points ». We suggest here to have a focus on two of them. The first one is related to what we call « knowledge relegation ». « Education provided by service users must have the same status as what is provided by others and be taken into account within assessments, in order to avoid the risk of a lack of consideration by students » (HCTS, 2017).

The second one focuses on the necessity to adapt to the difficulties or constraints faced by service users. « These difficulties can be due to their lack of availability, mobilisation or action capacities » (HCTS, 2017). In that respect, this responsibility cannot rely on the teaching staff's will only : it has to be collectively shared by the institution, the administrative and pedagogical staff and, of course, students.



## **2.2 What is at stake for respective participants**

**Regarding students**, testing service users' participation is an opportunity to question their own participation in « their educational programme, pedagogy and the build up of their own empowerment » (HCTS, 2017). The idea would be for them to have « room to experience their own empowerment and, building on this knowledge, enable them to support service users' empowerment » (Jouffray, 2017). This author bases his assumption on an isomorphic principle, applied to education. In this way, « the same principle and methodology used with service users would be applied to social workers ' education » (Jouffray, 2017).

Moreover, « integrating service users' expertise to pedagogy also requires to take into account students' experience-based knowledge » (FEHAP, in HCTS, 2017). All the more so that there is « a significant proximity between professionals' and service users' conditions » (Jaeger, 2019). Here, this author refers to a research on a group of social work students of which 65% experience health difficulties, social precarity and mobility problems. Therefore, while examining the role of various types of knowledge within education, « service users' participation allows us to rediscover to what extent pedagogy is based on an interaction between new and pre-existing knowledge » (FEHAP, in HCTS, 2017).

In order to « transmit new knowledge », the challenge would be « to give voice to the voiceless » (Chardin, 2019). In that sense, we could examine **the role of service users**, considered as « a new type of lecturer » (Jaeger, 2019). In the UNAFORIS guidebook, a choice was made to designate them as « concerned-resource person », defined as such : a person – whatever their level of vulnerability -, resource – in possession of a transferable life-experience -, concerned – to distinguish them from other potential participants (elected officials, experts, professionals, etc.). The designation process is closely linked to the status of participants. It is thus envisaged to involve service users as « expert-instructors » in the 2015 report or as a « casual instructor » according to the 2015 action-plan and lately, as « co-instructor » in the new strategic plan against poverty in 2020.

One of the conditions to ensure service users' participation would be « to grant them with a real status » (Chartrin & Dooley, 2019). In this way, some specific training is envisaged, including « an awareness to their own expertise, in order to avoid any further controversy in relation with that kind of knowledge » (ibid). In the same time, this kind of approach could be refuted on the



ground that « there is no question of initiating a professionalisation process for service users involved in education » (Jaeger, 2019).

The status issue is indeed related to one of the CSTS recommendations, published in 2015, suggesting to avoid limiting service users' participation to a « mere testimony ». This issue reflects the question of « the division of labour within education » (HCTS, 2017). Is it appropriate, from a pedagogical perspective, that some participants give a mere testimony of their experience while others provide an analysis of these situations ? Then, « how do we ensure that service users' participation generates free speech, discussions, consideration of other points of views » (Ferrand, 2021) ? One of the conditions for real participation is to allow comparing opinions amongst different kinds of expertise. Would it therefore be a question of encouraging social workers' acculturation towards « a process of democratic conflictuality and coproduction of expertise » (Carrel, 2013) ?

In the « ladder of participation », established by Angela Towle and her colleagues, « sharing an experience » and « taking part in an educational process » are considered as distinct levels of participation (Towle, 2019). In this case, participants are patients taking part in health workers' education (we notice here a great convergence, in terms of participation, between health and social matters). These authors state that the ladder « is not supposed to represent a form of hierarchy since all levels of the scale serve a different purpose » (ibid). In the field of social workers' education, could we then argue in favour of a complementarity, and no hierarchy, amongst various kinds of expertise ? What is in common here could be « a substantive effort in terms of recognition of each kind of expertise, legitimacy of all opinions, [...] and a stronger awareness of one's status in the social domain » (Ferrand, 2021).

It would therefore seem that « social workers education is to become an « open-cut » process, shared with service users and social institutions, leaving teaching staff without a monopoly on this activity » (Lechoux, 2016). The question remains, **for pedagogical staff**, to know how to develop educational programs in a way that they facilitate participation from each partner, in his stead. This issue is becoming more acute in a context where the role of pedagogical staff is changing quite drastically. « We are moving from a transmission-based educational model to a model oriented on the development of individuals skills, in which staff must adopt a facilitating position, while renewing the learning environment and building up experience » (Paul, in Jouffray, 2017).



We have collected more than 20 publications, produced between 2017 and 2020, on service users' participation in social workers' education and written by pedagogical staff, sometimes jointly with service users. This could illustrate a « growing awareness among educational institutions where, during the EGTS, this issue [...] used to raise concerns or resistance » (Jaegger, 2017). Whether the so-called « participation shock », expected by public authorities in 2018 « in order to comply with the obligation to implement public policies with service users », has had a real echo within educational institutions is an important question. In that respect, it would be necessary to explore the extent of educational institutions forcing to implement service users' participation and how this injunction is perceived.

## **Conclusion**

We agree that, in accordance with the UNAFORIS, developing service users' participation can only happen in « a progressive way, by capillarity among educational institutions » (2018). Collaborating with service users requires « to accept uncertainty inherent in all « work in progress », not knowing where this is going to lead – but at least with a clear idea of its purpose » (Cometti, 2020). The purpose on which there is a consensus lies in the need for a profound transformation in the perception of service users and of social work. Consequently, it appears important to launch some assessment procedures, in order to measure the effects of these new pedagogical approaches on various participants, which is the aim of this strategic partnership project.



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