

ESRC Research Seminar Groups: Conclusion Report

Researching Spirituality as a Dimension of Lifelong Learning Award No: RES-451-26-0008

Award holder

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1. Details of the award

Duration 22 January 2004 to 31 December 2005
(extended to 31 March 2006 because of sick leave taken by
award holder, November 2005 to February 2006)

Funding from ESRC £15,257.34
Funding from University of Exeter £500 for sundries.

2. Aims and objectives of the seminar groups

Aims

- i. To develop, through a series of seminars bringing together educators and researchers from a number of different disciplines and professional backgrounds, a forum for debating the function of spirituality in, and its implications for, lifelong learning.
- ii. Within this forum, to explore understandings of spirituality and of research methodologies appropriate to such investigation.
- iii. To support the research of members of the group, foster collaboration and cross-fertilisation, including internationally, and encourage wide dissemination of this work.

Objectives

- i. To begin to collate research on aspects of spirituality being undertaken within the UK which may have implications for lifelong learning policy and practice.
- ii. To embed UK research in this field within a wider global structure through rigorous dialogue with colleagues in the international research community.
- iii. To support the work of group members who are engaged in research in the field through debate and critique of work in progress.
- iv. To engage educational practitioners/research users in debates concerning the place and function of spirituality in lifelong learning policy and practice.
- v. To produce a series of working papers and an edited book as a means of disseminating the work of the group.
- vi. To organise two one-day open national conferences (one linked to an established national conference for adult educators and researchers) to inform and disseminate the work of the group

3. Approaches adopted to advertise the series

- Six open seminars were held in association with the Universities of Exeter (two meetings), Surrey, Sussex, Sheffield and Canterbury Christ Church University College: they were advertised *via* research, teaching and professional networks associated with these institutions.
- The Sheffield and Sussex seminars were run as pre-/post-conference events attached to the Annual Conferences of the *Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA)* in July 2004 and 2005 respectively: they were advertised *via* national and international adult education and university networks. The SCUTREA website has carried information about the seminars throughout the series.
- The Surrey seminar (in central London, June 2005) was run in association with the *International Conference on Organisational Spirituality (ICOS)*: it was advertised *via* a range of business, management and consultancy networks.
- Information about the series was sent *via* the personal and professional networks of core group members and other participants to individuals and groups known to have an interest in this topic.
- The award-holder gave a paper at the 2005 Annual *Discourse, Power and Resistance* Conference (Plymouth) which made reference to the series. Materials were also displayed.
- Information has been available on the University of Exeter Website throughout the series.

4. Programmes of events

In total, 11 meetings took place: six were 'open' and five were 'closed', as detailed below:

4i. Five open seminars all adopted the following format:

09:30-09:45 **Welcome**; 'housekeeping' and introduction

09:45-10:45 **Who are we and what are we doing here?** Space for all participants to introduce themselves and their particular interest in the seminar

10:45-11:10 **Presentation by an invited speaker**

11:10-11:30 Refreshments

11:30-11:50 **Focussed discussion following the presentation**

11:50-12:15 **General discussion**: How (if at all) does 'spirituality' impact upon participants' own learning and/or work?

12:15-13:15 Lunch

13:15-14:00 **Presentation by an invited speaker, and discussion**

14:00-14:45 **Presentation by an invited speaker, and discussion**

14:45-15:00 Refreshments

15:00-15:45 **Small-group discussions**: suggestions for developing this work

15:45-16:00 **Reflections on the day**

- 4ii.** The *ICOS* conference was held over two days and encompassed a wide range of activities, including workshops and presentations by national and international speakers. Participants who would not otherwise have been able to attend the event were subsidised *via* the seminar series - which was subsequently able to incorporate and build on the conference materials and discussions.
- 4iii.** Interspersed between the open seminars, there were five 'closed' meetings of the core group of seven members. The group used a co-operative inquiry approach to record, reflect upon, and consider the implications for research and practice of issues arising from the series and their own work in progress.

5. Participants

Because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the explicit intention to ground discussions in participants' own experience rather than simply to talk 'about' spirituality, attendance at each of the open seminars (excluding *ICOS*) was restricted to no more than 24 people. Attendance on 8/7/2005 at Sussex was badly affected by the London bombings. There were 106 participants in the five open seminars and 97 in *ICOS*; several attended more than one event. Most were drawn from across England, some from Scotland. There were seven international participants (from Australia, Canada and the USA) in addition to the international participants in *ICOS*. Of the 106 open seminar participants:

- 52% were university lecturers or researchers, primarily from education, management, medical education, psychology or sociology departments;
- At least 12% were post-graduate students (some people who did not register as students were also studying part-time for various degrees, including PhDs, EdDs, and/or church ministry qualifications);
- 12% worked in schools, colleges or youth work;
- 10% were affiliated to church or other religious organisations;
- 8% were from voluntary organisations or independent consultancy/training groups;
- 6% were involved in medicine or health care.

Of the 97 participants in the *ICOS* event, approximately 80% were from business or voluntary organisations and 20% from the education sector.

6. Level of demand

Every seminar attracted a minimum of 20 participants; for some there were waiting lists as prospective numbers exceeded 24. Those on waiting lists were offered first refusal of places at subsequent seminars.

7. Meeting objectives

- Objectives i-iv and vi were all met.
- Objective vi was exceeded: the seminars were linked to *three* national conferences.
- Objective iii was met through presentation and discussion of work in progress by core group members and other invited speakers in the open seminars and, *in addition*, through the five co-operative inquiry meetings of the core group.

- With one element (c) excepted, Objective v has been met, as follows:
 - a. *Working papers*: Background papers to several of the presentations were circulated in advance of the seminars. Detailed accounts of every meeting were written up and circulated to participants for comment – these background papers, accounts and comments then became part of the data informing the work of the core group.
 - b. *Published papers*: To date, the award holder has presented two conference papers and written two book chapters incorporating information about the series (due for publication in 2006: Trentham, UK; Post Pressed, Australia). Two core group members have had a paper accepted for an international conference hosted by SCUTREA in 2006, based on their perceptions of the series and the issues it has raised.
 - c. *Edited book*: The possibility of this is actively under discussion, initially with Sussex Academic Press which publishes a spirituality series. However, the pressure on potential contributors to publish work which is guaranteed to be in print for consideration in the next RAE seems likely to delay progress on this project.

8. Feedback from participants

This has been overwhelmingly positive and is reflected in the number of participants attending more than one seminar. Each seminar ended with verbal ‘reflections on the day’ but many email responses have also been received following circulation of the written account of each seminar. These responses have been collated (approximately 5,000 words). They include the following comments:

- *‘I left feeling very excited that I’d found a way to unite all parts of myself and my work’* (Researcher).
- *‘Thank you very much for a wonderful conference. It was great to be able to share our interests and an excellent opportunity for networking’* (Doctor).
- *‘I want to say how much I enjoyed [the day]. The discussion of spirituality without it being a theology argument is very “young” in academia but at least it has commenced and you have definitely put it on the map – well done and thank you’* (PhD student).
- *‘It was particularly valuable that participants came from different professional backgrounds to contribute to and benefit from [the day]. The balance of input from speakers and participants was just right and there was a rich blend of theory and practice to challenge our minds and nourish our souls! I do hope you will be able to take this work forward as it highlights a key ingredient in life-long learning that has for too long been overlooked or under-explored’* (Retired teacher educator).

Several responses also came in the form of personal reflections and creative writing inspired by the seminars.

9. Activities arising

Discussions are currently taking place between five institutions about the preparation of a research proposal based on issues arising from the seminars, including the nature of the methodology best suited to an investigation in this domain.

Dr Cheryl Hunt (27 March 2006)