

# Spirituality Support Network for Doctoral Students and Early Career Researchers

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Early in 2014, a temporary part-time facilitator of the new 'Spirituality Support Network for Doctoral Students and Early Career Researchers' being established by the British Association for the Study of Spirituality (BASS) was appointed. This report describes the background to this development; the inaugural meeting of the Network, which was held on 19 May 2014 at the beginning of the Third International BASS Conference, *Spirituality in a Challenging World*; and plans for the future.

## Background

### ***Aims of BASS***

As part of its commitment to encourage and facilitate scholarship and research in spirituality, BASS has always been aware of the need to provide as much support as possible to those who are new to the study of spirituality. To this end, in order to highlight the eclectic nature of the field and to contribute to its growth and coherence, BASS has plans to create a database on its new website<sup>1</sup> of recently completed doctoral theses. However, informal discussions with new researchers suggests that, while access to completed research is useful and helps to 'justify' their own research, opportunities to discuss work-in-progress with others engaged with similar issues are crucial.

Thus, with the intention of launching a 'Spirituality Support Network for Doctoral Students and Early Career Researchers' at its Conference in May 2014, a successful application for a small grant was made by Dr Cheryl Hunt, on behalf of BASS, to the Blaker Education Fund<sup>2</sup> to cover the cost of a temporary part-time facilitator to help in the establishment of the Support Network.

### ***Rationale for the Spirituality Support Network***

Research in spirituality is developing within and across a number of disciplines but, because interests in spirituality cross international, cultural, subject and professional boundaries, they are often reported in publications and at conferences and meetings which do not generally cross-fertilise one another. Consequently, individuals researching spirituality tend to work in relative isolation with little opportunity for the exchange and synthesis of ideas. Doctoral students and early career researchers, in particular, can sometimes find it difficult to articulate and justify such work in settings dominated by more 'conventional' research. This is especially so if their own research also draws on methodological approaches that challenge

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bassspirituality.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> This is administered by The Scientific and Medical Network: <https://www.scimednet.org/>

existing paradigms. BASS wishes to encourage and support young researchers in the field by establishing a 'Spirituality Support Network'.

### ***Aims of the Spirituality Support Network***

The aims of this Network are to:

- provide a safe forum for the critical and open minded discussion of spirituality, including ideas that go beyond conventional paradigms and which are often difficult to articulate in research settings that are increasingly driven by a materialistic outcomes-based rationality;
- support the integration of intuitive insights with rational analysis, acknowledging that spirituality can be understood viscerally and imaginally as well as cognitively;
- emphasise the importance of spiritual and holistic approaches in research and practice within academic disciplines and professional practices.

### **Inaugural meeting**

#### ***Preliminaries***

Following my appointment as temporary part-time facilitator of the Spirituality Support Network, I had several discussions with Dr Cheryl Hunt and Professor Wilf McSherry (joint coordinators of the project) and got in touch with a number of doctoral student groups and individuals through the existing BASS networks, a counselling forum, and online through Twitter *via* @phdforum. I also sent a letter in advance of the conference to all registered participants, inviting those who were interested to attend the inaugural meeting which was scheduled for the first afternoon of the conference.

#### ***Process***

Initially there were 12 confirmed attendees but, in the event, 21 people attended. Following an initial round of introductions, three questions were addressed. The first focused on what participants loved about studying. The purpose of this question was to engage people with why they are doing what they are doing. By focusing on the positive, people were able to explore their motivations for research and therefore to build upon what concerned them most, which was the second question. This provided a lively and stimulating debate in which some participants found that others shared their loves and concerns, whereas, prior to this, they said they had often felt entirely on their own. The third question invited participants' ideas and their vision for a potential support network. This enabled them to continue to discuss their loves and concerns and to begin to draw out some practical solutions as to how these might best be encouraged and supported.

#### ***Responses***

All the responses were summarised on a flipchart during the meeting. Below, I have themed the responses to each of the three questions. A recurring theme through responses to all three questions was the separation between the general doctoral process (irrespective of discipline) and the personal impact of studying for a doctorate where the personal spiritual journey itself was an issue for some.

QUESTION 1 What do you love about studying?

<b>IDEAS</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>
different disciplines	writing
conceptualising	analysing
nurturing ideas	conversation
consolidating ideas	reading
	dissemination
<b>DISCOVERY</b>	<b>PERSONAL / OWNERSHIP</b>
people you meet	making a difference in the world
new practice	it's yours
tangents	buzz / stress working towards a deadline
diversity	opening up mind
how things are connected	stimulation
exploration	humble knowing
topic	
data even when bizarre	
eureka moments	

QUESTION 2 What are your concerns?

<b>THE DISCIPLINE</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>
mediating - bridging the gap between people and institutions	writing coherently
new ideas into practice	dissemination
going on too many tangents	bad supervision
never ending	passing viva
boundaries - how far can I go before I am distinct from others	external examiner - do they understand?
finding new ideas	technology
someone else having same idea	
	<b>PERSONAL IMPACT</b>
	running out of steam
	financial impact
	not being able to understand
	having a breakdown or spiritual awakening
	isolation and loneliness
	Uncertainty about future - then what?
	balancing commitments
	bailing out after 6 years of study
	lack of focus

QUESTION 3 What are your ideas / vision for support?

ALREADY PROVIDED BY BASS	ONLINE SUPPORT
getting into a network	Twitter
private website	debate
website as an online resource	writing group
journal	website as an online resource
GENERAL ADVICE AND GUIDANCE	IN PERSON / PEER SUPPORT
funding	linking up with a peer mentor
writing for an audience	proof reading friends
publication guidance	research retreats
dissemination	awakening space
	international pool for dissemination / peer collaboration

### ***Suggested future developments***

As illustrated in response to question 3, BASS already provides support such as the opportunity to become part of a network; a website; a journal; and an international pool for dissemination.

#### ***Website***

One idea from the group was for BASS to further develop the website as an online resource which might include a student section focusing on concerns such as publication guidance, funding advice, and a forum where students can share resources, ask questions, disseminate research and so on.

**Action:** A representative of doctoral student and early career researcher members will be appointed to the BASS Executive Committee in order to advise on, and assist in, such developments.

#### ***Student/early researcher conference***

Some participants were interested in organising another face-to-face meeting such as an annual student conference. The focus of this would be on practical skills such as writing workshops, disseminating research, proof-reading each other's works, and inviting guest speakers; as well as providing a place of retreat and quiet and opportunities to explore personal spirituality, such as yoga, meditation *etc.* The intention is for students to organise and run this themselves and to keep costs as low as possible.

**Action:** I have agreed to work with two volunteers from the group who are interested in taking this further, with a planning meeting arranged in the autumn of 2014. The BASS Executive Committee will also consider at its autumn meeting how it may best be able to assist in this development.

#### ***Online Support***

Following the inaugural meeting I sent an email inviting participants to share a general 'bio' with the rest of the group. However, this was not done by everybody.

During the conference I established a Twitter feed reporting from the conference. This proved quite successful but, since the conference, it has not been as active as anticipated since it requires up-to-date information.

**Action:** I am willing to post information if it is sent to me but, ideally, the Twitter account should be facilitated by an active member of BASS who is familiar with online networking.

## **What you can do**

My own temporary appointment as facilitator for the Spirituality Support Network is coming to an end but I would be very pleased to discuss future possibilities with anyone who might be interested in playing an active role in the Network, in any way. The inaugural meeting was extremely positive and there is a clear need for such a Network. Please consider what contribution you may be able to make to its future development - and contact me or Dr Cheryl Hunt (c.hunt@exeter.ac.uk) to discuss and take this forward. We very much look forward to hearing from you.

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