

Spirituality in Higher Education: A Special Interest Group

Report on a meeting held at the *Second International Conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality: Spirituality in a Fragmented World*.

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In today's society interest is undoubtedly growing in the relevance of the spiritual dimension to higher education. A number of universities now host centres specifically dedicated to the study of spirituality and new Master's courses are currently being developed in the field. Further to this, a significant proportion of higher education programmes are beginning to incorporate explorations of the spiritual dimension into their teachings across multiple fields and disciplines. Since spirituality knows no boundaries – professional or other – it is relevant to studies in commerce, politics, the arts, and to almost every sphere of scientific inquiry. Spirituality is also of particular significance to professional and more vocational subject areas, where practitioners are ultimately required to have regard for the spiritual needs of their patients or clients, or to develop the spiritual qualities of their students: for example, in medicine, psychiatry, chaplaincy, social work, management, advocacy, and teaching.

In spite of this, the spiritual dimension of higher education remains a complex and elusive area, quite different to most other elements of the conventional academic curriculum. It presents many challenges to those attempting either to incorporate a spiritual dimension into their teaching and training practices, or to conduct their studies with specific spiritual values or principles in mind.

It is on these grounds that the 'Spirituality in Higher Education' (SHE) special interest group has been established: it seeks to act as a community for those interested in exploring in depth the role of spirituality in all aspects of higher education. The SHE forum was originally founded following a roundtable discussion at the 2010 international conference of the British Association for the Study of Spirituality (BASS), which explored the interdisciplinary teaching of spiritual values. SHE then received initial start-up funding from the Higher Education Academy. Today, SHE continues to be associated with BASS and is interested in fostering collaborations with other international, like-minded groups and organisations in, and/or with a focus on, higher education.

SHE recognises the complexity involved in defining spirituality and so embraces an extremely broad interpretation of the concept. SHE does not advocate or endorse any particular religious or faith tradition and, instead, acknowledges the existence of spirituality in its various forms: be it as a quality or value that can develop or enhance the inner life of an

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individual; as a principle that can help foster in the individual a sense of caring and compassion for others; or as a moral code that can contribute to a wider common good that transcends the self and provokes a quest for answers to life's 'big questions' and mysteries.

Taking spirituality in its multiple forms, then, SHE seeks to encourage discussion of the relevance, or otherwise, of the spiritual dimension to higher education systems in their entirety. Possible avenues of exploration can include, but are not restricted to:

- The extent to which spirituality can and should be acknowledged as an integral dimension of all academic and scientific pursuits.
- The 'added value' that the spiritual dimension can bring to educational aims, and the relevance of this 'spiritual capital' to both the individual and society at large.
- The ways in which spirituality may be taught and even assessed in societies which, in times of financial crisis, have increasingly come to focus on impact agendas and easily measurable deliverables.
- The intricacies of the language of spirituality and its differences in various contexts and cultures and to various policy stakeholders.
- The availability of resources and support systems to assist in the dissemination and development of the spiritual dimension in both teaching and learning practices.
- The development of spirituality as an academic discipline in its own right, examining whether/where this has already been successfully achieved and what still needs to be done to integrate the study of spirituality fully into the curriculum.

To promote fruitful discussions in these areas, SHE welcomes members from all levels and sectors of the higher education system, from all disciplines and subjects, and from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds. If SHE is to become a valuable support mechanism for curriculum development in higher education, it requires the active input of students, lecturers, research staff, academic managers and policymakers alike. By fostering a thoroughly inclusive community in this way, it is hoped that SHE will be able to draw together relevant expertise and personal experiences from a broad spectrum of practitioners and students of both teaching and learning, not just in the UK but in academia worldwide, to create an effective space in which to grapple with issues of spirituality in higher education and to develop long-lasting educational approaches to the spiritual dimension.

Currently SHE has a growing online presence. You can be part of SHE by following and engaging in discussions, posting articles, or sharing your own approaches, resources and views. This can be done both via Facebook (*@Spirituality in Higher Education*) and Twitter (*@SpiritualityinHE*), where you can also keep up-to-date with relevant news articles and items of interest. And for more in-depth discussions, you can join SHE's 'Google Group' forum (see below) which, it is hoped, will eventually come to form the main repository of thoughts, reflections and considerations on all issues relating to and emanating from the presence of spirituality in higher education. Membership of all these online portals is free of charge; all that is required is a general commitment to sharing knowledge resources and experiences.

SHE's online forum is accessible at:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/spirituality-higher-education>.

We look forward to your active participation!