

## FORUM

# A New Vocational Qualification in Spirituality and Health

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### ABSTRACT

In 2016 a new qualification, the Level 3 Diploma in Practical Spirituality and Wellness<sup>1</sup>, was placed on the Ofqual Register.<sup>2</sup> This is the first spirituality course to be on the Register of Regulated Qualifications. This paper describes how this vocational qualification was developed, its content and its current state of play. Its focus on practice and experience, rather than academic study.

### KEYWORDS

Spirituality, education, vocational, health, wellness, wellbeing, chaplaincy, pastoral, reflective practice, holistic, multicultural, diversity, care

## Personal Background

For the sake of transparency, because teaching in this area can be so coloured by the beliefs and culture of the educator who developed the qualification, I offer some brief personal background. I was born in London in 1948 to humanist parents, a psychiatrist and a journalist, who were deeply distrustful of religion and spirituality. Nevertheless, from an early age I was experiencing, and my heart was touched by, the 'wonder and energy of life'. I use that phrase as my general solution to the semantic tap dance we all encounter around appropriate terminology for describing what exactly it is we are experiencing when we have spiritual experience.

My spiritual development was then supported by 1960's 'flower power' and its convergence of Eastern, tribal, Western, esoteric and mystical spiritual traditions. I wrote novels, was a commissioning editor in publishing, and a social activist. At the same time, I became a meditator and then took two years' self-directed spiritual retreat in my mid-twenties. After that, I went to university as a mature student where I gained my first degree and then a doctorate in political psychology at the London School of Economics.<sup>3</sup>

I subsequently worked for several years as a special needs tutor in Southwark College and then co-founded and directed the Alternatives Programme at St. James's Church, Piccadilly, London. For a while I was the major UK media spokesperson for what was called

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<sup>1</sup> The full title of the course is *Crossfields Institute Level 3 Diploma in Practical Spirituality and Wellness*, Qual No:601/8673/2, Sector Subject Area: Health and Social Care. >>

<sup>2</sup> Often referred to as the Government's 'exam watchdog', The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) is the Government department that regulates qualifications in England; the Scottish Qualifications Authority, SQA, is also accredited by Ofqual. It is responsible for overseeing all qualifications not accredited by universities. This includes GCSE's, A Levels, vocational and specialist qualifications up to postgraduate levels.

<sup>3</sup> Bloom, W. (1993) *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

the ‘New Age movement’, a mixed blessing in many ways. I wrote and edited several relevant books.<sup>4</sup> My background also includes three years psychoanalysis as a client.

For the last twenty years I have made a living from facilitating workshops in various aspects of spirituality, sometimes calling myself a freelance mystic. I have also been leading the small educational charity, *Spiritual Companions Trust*, under whose umbrella we developed the Diploma in Practical Spirituality and Wellness. I am supported by a team of experienced educators all of whom have their own daily spiritual practice and, helpfully, experience of psychotherapy. We also have the wider support network of Spiritual Companions who participated in earlier versions of the course and helped develop it.

## Development

The development of the qualification was preceded by ten years of year-long courses, meeting for a weekend once a month, which explored the spiritual practices of different traditions. Called the *Open Mystery School*, our purpose was to discern the shared practices, insights and benefits that sat beneath the different beliefs, ceremonies and symbols. For example, we learned early on that whatever the tradition there was always a focus on repeated daily practice, as opposed to awaiting a serendipitous epiphany. Whatever the tradition, we could discern important common threads relating to reflective self-management; being of service; and yielding, or surrendering, or emptying, to spiritual experience.

For a while, we explored the possibility of developing this as a Masters programme with a partner university. We withdrew when we realised that it was taking experiential learning into too scholarly an approach; we were also daunted by the bureaucracy and university politics. The ‘Bad Science’ movement was just beginning to gain traction and funding for anything that might be perceived as ‘flaky’ was drying up. Our guiding educational and marketing philosophy at the time was, and still is: *This course is for a hairdresser or an archbishop. It is practical and experiential.*

We subsequently developed a Level 3 qualification with the College of Teachers, an adjunct of the Institute of Education, University of London. However, in 2016 the College of Teachers ended their accreditation services. We then partnered with the Crossfields Institute, an awarding organisation that is sympathetic to spiritual, green and holistic courses, and with them developed the paperwork which Ofqual accepted.<sup>5</sup>

Our first cohort of 22 students completed the qualification in July 2017 and, at the time of writing (January 2018), we have 70 students spread across four centres. Their average age is fifty and many come from the education and healthcare sectors.

Our rationale is that there is an increasing need for spiritually competent people, whose approach is holistic and also highly inclusive, and who celebrate diversity. This is particularly relevant in the fields of healthcare, education and pastoral care. We see this as being based on two important developments. First, the general social tendency away from membership of a single faith tradition to a more general spiritual approach. Second, the

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<sup>4</sup> Bloom, W. (Ed) (1991) *The New Age: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, London: Rider/Channel 4; Bloom, W. (Ed) (2001) *The Penguin Book of New Age and Holistic Writing*, London: Penguin Books; Bloom, W. (1991) *First Steps: An Introduction to Spiritual Practice*, Findhorn: Findhorn Press,

<sup>5</sup> The complete Ofqual specification is available at: [http://www.spiritualcompanions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/PracticalSpiritualityandWellness\\_Ofqual-Spec.pdf](http://www.spiritualcompanions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/PracticalSpiritualityandWellness_Ofqual-Spec.pdf). Much of the course content is also included in Bloom, W. (2011) *The Power of Modern Spirituality*, London: Piatkus Books,

growing evidence and science base demonstrating the beneficial links between spirituality and health.<sup>6</sup>

## Curriculum

The qualification is taught in ninety-six hours of classroom sessions and three hundred hours of home study. It consists of Four Units:

*1 Science and Context.* This unit introduces students to the history, culture and science of the relationship between spirituality and medicine. Learners look at the evidence base, the physiology and the psychology of how spirituality can benefit health. They are supported in developing and clarifying their own language and terms of reference so that they can communicate effectively with clients and colleagues in multicultural and interdisciplinary environments. They also reflect on how all of this is relevant to their own personal experience of illness and health.

*2 Person-Centred Spiritual Practice.* This is the heart of the course where students explore and experience the spiritual practices that benefit health and wellbeing. They are supported in clarifying and implementing the approach that best suits their own personal background and temperament. From observing the diversity of approaches in their fellow learners, they then explore how best they might support others from diverse cultures and with different learning styles to develop their own practice.

*3 Developing Reflective Practice.* Here students learn about the crucial importance of reflective practice for self-care and development, exploring the different reflective strategies, choosing the approach that best suits them, and implementing a daily practice of careful and honest self-reflection. This is built on a foundation of mindfulness and the compassionate witnessing of thoughts and feelings. Students study how reflective practice is a crucial element of self-managed healthcare and psychological wellbeing. They also look at the psychological and mental health challenges that may be linked to spirituality.

*4 Fundamentals of Spiritual Care.* This unit builds on the knowledge and practice of the other three units, focusing on the giving of spiritual care and enabling others to develop their own practice. Students practice the fundamental skills of whole-body listening and how to facilitate a developmental conversation, one-to-one and in small groups, around the health and wellbeing benefits of spirituality. They learn how to lead individuals and small groups into meditation. Students are also introduced to the crucial topic of risk and the procedures for assessing and referral.

## Benefits

Students come for the benefits of both personal and professional development. At a personal level it is difficult to estimate how valuable it is for someone to develop and deepen their daily practice, and become more connected, compassionate and conscious. This can be life changing. Professionally, the qualification can be harnessed to other professional qualifications and skills to develop a career in a more explicit pastoral or spiritual direction. It is also the gateway into the professional network of Spiritual Companions. Additionally, it prepares some students to progress to a qualification in a congruent subject area such as

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<sup>6</sup> We refer particularly to the research at Duke University's Centre for Spirituality, Theology and Health, led by Harold Koenig, and ask students to keep an eye on the Centre's regular publication *Crossroads* which summarises recent research. See: <https://spiritualityandhealth.duke.edu/index.php/publications/crossroads>

psychotherapy, counselling, healthcare, chaplaincy and theology.

## Delivery

At the very heart of the course is a question that we pose to students: ‘When do you most easily connect with the wonder and energy of life?’ The answers vary widely and include the usual suspects such as solitude, nature, caring for others, the arts, meditation, movement, sport and singing. From this person-centred enquiry, we then support students into the rhythm of a daily practice in which they explore, kinaesthetically *feel* and develop the experience. ‘Feel’ is a crucial word here because the physical health benefits can be guided and enhanced through conscious awareness of the body and self-management. Many of the psychological benefits then come from a sense of sovereign self-management inside life circumstances that may be less than perfect.

At the same time, students explore their very private and personal experience of the spiritual. One of the first classroom activities, therefore, is to enquire how they best like to name this dimension. ‘God’ is out of fashion with many students. ‘Source’, ‘Mystery’, ‘Spirit’ and ‘Oneness’ are frequent contenders. Some students like the phrase that I have already mentioned, ‘the wonder and energy of life’, an articulation that seems acceptable in many cultural contexts including humanist.

As is, I hope, evident, we are genuinely open to circumstances, styles and nomenclature. Nevertheless, we assert that to explore and deepen their experience students must commit to a daily practice, but precisely in the style and circumstances that best suit them. We are learner-centred but rigorous. We believe this answers one of the most frequent criticisms of the spiritual-but-not-religious culture, that it lacks discipline and depth.

As tutors, we are careful to disclose that we too are on the same path of development and deepening as our students. Our approach consciously seeks to deconstruct the power dynamics of the professor-student, guru-devotee and priest-worshipper relationships as we become collegial companions. In this respect we distance ourselves from educational philosophies that recommend a professional relationship and distance between learner and tutor. We are closer to religious orders that model co-presence and egalitarian accompaniment. We are also inspired by the methodology of the Twelve Step programmes for addicts in which group leaders hold their authority only by being open about their own similar history and challenges. In this context we have fortunately attracted tutors who have substantial experience of psychotherapy and are therefore at ease with owning and talking about their own challenges and shadows.

We also steer away from the peak experience and epiphany approach to spirituality, which we find unhelpful as it tends to support unrealistic expectations and does little to encourage the rhythm of sustained daily practice. (I have met too many souls who have experienced a significant epiphany and are passively, and usually with some melancholy, awaiting another.) One of our assertions is: *Spiritual experience is like food. It comes in snacks, meals and banquets.*

We have an online Portfolio that includes a daily tick box which monitors that students have done their daily practice. Here I put in a very personal observation about an educational tactic that helps people flow into a sustained daily practice. Persistent friendly nudging and reminding (nagging) is useful.

## Grounded Practice

Inside the four Units there are fifty learning criteria. I will provide a brief taste of a few to illustrate how they have been developed to ensure grounded experiential practice. Thus, within the Spiritual Practice Unit students have to meet these criteria:

- Carry out own daily practice of spiritual connection.
- Carry out practices to deepen health and wellbeing: *Includes kinaesthetic awareness of subtle sensations, relaxation, embodiment, compassionate care to self, yielding/emptying to experience.*
- Demonstrate core skills of meditation: *Includes: stilling, centering, embodiment, detached witnessing, compassion to self and others.*

In the Unit on Reflective Practice:

- Be able to process a personal issue that requires development.
- Investigate a personal issue that requires development.
- Assess appropriate strategies for development.
- Implement appropriate strategy for development.

To achieve the qualification, students have to meet the criteria through actual action. The major challenges we face with our students are therefore not surprising. It is easy to list what they tend to resist: daily practice; feeling what is happening inside their body; owning and being transparent about their own psychological shadow patterns; kindness to themselves and self-care. On the other hand students bless us with: big hearts; independent minds; an enthusiasm to develop and explore; a generosity of spirit in caring for each other that extends to the tutors; a high awareness of ethics and service.

## Conclusion

As we move the course forward our major challenge is to maintain the culture of collegiality, self-discipline, emotional literacy and diversity. I am also concerned about the methodology of vocational assessment, the bureaucracy of which, with its tick boxes and recordings, can pull us away from the pure enjoyment of the teaching and learning. I am becoming aware also that it is probably best not to have learning cohorts that are too large. The economics of sustaining an educational centre, however, favours higher student numbers. This is problematic.

At the time of writing, we are in the process of creating a book and digital portfolio of tutorial resources which we intend to make available to other educators. We hope that our lesson plans will be useful for school religious education, personal and social health education (PSHE), clergy training, and the professional development of anyone in the caring or health sectors.

Finally I want to express some gratitude for my own good fortune. George Bernard Shaw provoked with that uncomfortable and cynical criticism of educators: *He who can, does and he who cannot, teaches.* Not so I respond. A far better aphorism is that *we teach best what we most want to learn.* In that framework I feel blessed to be in the educational business of spiritual practice.

**Notes on contributor**

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