

IFEPS-THE HISTORY, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

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It was late in 1991 when IFEPS was established formally, at a meeting at Coombe Lodge in England. That meeting had been preceded by a great deal of work, which had started, again in England, in 1984. The 1984 meeting was a conference on prison education, sponsored jointly by the Home Office - the British Government Office with responsibility for penal affairs, and by the Open University, at that time the principal providers of higher education in the penal setting. My recollection of that meeting brings up an image of a wide diversity of interests in prison education displaying themselves, some administrators, some policy makers, many practitioners and providers, along with some whose interest was in research: and the realisation that we all met, from time to time, at conferences and meetings, that we each knew very little about what the others were doing, because our conversations and presentations were only fragmentary. It was Ken Neale who, at the close of the meeting, put forward an impassioned appeal for a combination of enthusiasm and resources and for a concerted move forwards: it had become evident that, whilst valuable work was being done in the field and developments were happening on the ground, these were rarely even recorded, never mind properly evaluated by trained researchers. And this left the policy makers and administrators with very little backing in their efforts to make sense of our penal systems.

But IFEPS was still some way off. The sympathetic hearing which had been accorded to Ken Neale's words were not translated into any action for a further 6 years. In 1990, the North American organisation, the Correctional Education Association, held an international conference in Vancouver. At that conference the same concerns emerged and Ken Neale was invited to form and chair a working party dedicated to setting up some structure which would pull together all these different strands.

Ken put an enormous amount of work into this, using his considerable administrative and drafting skills to carry through a difficult series of meetings which culminated at the Coombe Lodge meeting on the 15th December, 1991 when IFEPS was formally brought into this world.

As I recall it, that meeting was attended by European and North American participants only, though others - such as the University of Melbourne were there in spirit. Steve Duguid of Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, presented the proposal. It was not an easy task, for many aspects were discussed at some length and with some acerbity. But, in the end, eight prospective centres signed up. They were, Simon Fraser University, California University at San Bernadino, the University of Minnesota, Lenoir Rhyne College in North Carolina, The Staff College at Blagdon, the Universities of Leeds and Leicester in England and the Folk High School Bergen in Holland. In addition, the universities of Barcelona and Melbourne intimated their intentions to join by establishing centres.

It is appropriate now, as we approach our tenth year, first of all to remind ourselves of those original intentions and principles; secondly, to see where we are up to now - and how we got there - and, thirdly, to take a careful and critical look at the way forward.

There were four principles informing the meeting in 1991;

1. That the forum would be a 'collection of centres' rather than an organisation based on individual membership.
2. That the word 'penal' was to be interpreted as widely as possible.

3. That emphasis would be placed on collaborative effort, hence the international dimension of the organisation.

4. That the special emphasis of the organisation was to forge links between the researcher and the practitioner, grounded in true reciprocity.

These principles were refined in a founding statement. Whilst this statement is too extensive to quote in full, it is perhaps worth mentioning that the determination was not to compete with existing organisations but to cooperate with them, and that we were committed to pro-active roles involving, for example, the developing world, to consulting with international bodies such as the UN and the Council of Europe, to undertaking consultative work, publishing, establishing links between the world of prison and the world of education at large, promoting staff development and, above all, enriching prison programmes.

The main area of discussion at the founding meeting had little to do with the aims of the organisation - these attracted universal agreement - but focussed on the constitution and the attendant financial arrangements. The first issue was the concept of affiliated centres rather than individual membership ; it was felt that individual enthusiasm carried the organisation forward and individuals may well move around or wish to make a contribution without necessarily being able to commit their organisation. The second issue was the proposed autonomy of the separate centres and some concern about the strength and practicality of the proposed central steering group drawn from the centres. Finally, there was extended discussion about the implications of the proposed financial arrangements. It was proposed that there should be no annual subscription, simply a joining fee, and there were no detailed rules about the expenditure of any funds - this latter causing some unease, for example, with the British contingent used to working within rules established by the Charity Commissioners. The initial fee, after all, involved the expenditure of public funds.

But several things have happened since then. Indeed, it is quite nostalgic to read some of the words which served to introduce the proposal. Reference is made to, 'new initiatives and emphasis being given to educational provision for prisoners,' and to, 'the development of community based options'. And we expressed the view that, 'The complex, changing and diverse alternatives now being offered in education and training programmes have created new horizons and promising new opportunities'.

All that seems a long way away. I speak from the perspective of Western Europe but with some knowledge of changes in North America. First, there has been a distinct hardening of political attitudes towards the issue of crime and punishment, and that from both sides of the political fence. This is fuelled largely by the fear of crime on the part of the electorate, the generation of opinion in the press and by politicians' view of what is the most popular stance to adopt towards the electorate. And this is reinforced by a declared shortage of resources which, when taken with an emphasis on security and punishment rather than treatment, diverts resources away from the latter towards the former. So, choices have narrowed and direct educational provision has diminished, in the case of some establishments in the UK, to an alarming and depressing extent.

But other factors have to be borne in mind. For if the aim of IFEPS was to bring together the interests of researchers and prison education practitioners, as well as rehearsing the problems within the prison walls, we have to remember that there are also problems in the research bodies. Again, resources are short and, what is more, are more and more closely directed at projects which are perceived to play a part in the economic race, or to be in line with the perceived public interest which is often short term rather than long term. So any public funding which is available for research into the penal system tends to be

directed at issues related to security and crime prevention rather than the impact of a variety of prison regimes on prisoners. And it is these funds, in these days of limited term appointments which pay researchers' wages and keep them in existence.

Again, a direct impact has been made on reciprocal activity between practitioners and researchers by changes in the management of prison education - again, I speak here with no knowledge of developments in Australia. But in both the UK and North America, a lot of the initiative for IFEPS had arisen from the close and fruitful working relationships between prison education practitioners and colleges and universities. This was very true in my own University, where my initial research arose, quite simply from my interest as a university teacher who, on a weekly basis, taught in a prison. Later, we were to develop experimental programmes in other prisons overlooked by joint Boards of Studies made up of university and prison staff. The same was true in Leeds, where that University's prison programme was run as a piece of action research, monitored and recorded. The Simon Fraser programme in British Columbia was perhaps the most developed of all these, with university staff actually based in the prison. All of this, one way or another, enabled the researcher not only to have access to the data but also to get the feel of what conditions were like and the context of the activity. And, just as importantly, it gave the prison educator a sense of belonging to an institution beyond the prison, and of ownership of any research project which might emerge.

And that is how things were when IFEPS was founded. Despite some concern at the Coombe Lodge meeting about the structure and financing of the enterprise, there was no doubt at all in participants' minds about the value and feasibility of the aims. And some things did happen. Perhaps most notable was the piece of research undertaken jointly by the Simon Fraser team and the Leeds team. You will no doubt recall that this was a hard-nosed look at the impact of a liberal arts programme on prisoners and their recidivism and culminated in a useful report as well as several useful spin off articles - just the sort of thing which IFEPS had in mind. A useful programme of conferences, devoted to issues in prison education and prison regimes emanated from the Leeds Department: several universities established IFEPS study groups, based on a cross section of representatives from across interested faculties: Leicester launched an experimental accredited programme in a local high security prison and developed, along with the Staff College, the first moves towards a post-graduate staff development programme for prison education staff.

Apart from the changing context, to which I have referred already, the one factor which has had a deleterious effect on most, if not all, of this is the widespread policy of 'outsourcing' prison education by either establishing in-house agencies or contracting out the work to external agencies.. This has had the effect of placing prison education on functional, pricing basis - so many hours bought in for so much cash - and, in the case of contracting to an external agency, means that those prison education staff who survived the economic blitz now have new employers. In neither of these cases did the new agency have any interest in research or in the employment of university staff within the programme, and one consequence is the closure of all three programmes referred to above, Simon Fraser, Leeds and Leicester. Moreover, the new employers usually take a narrow view of staff development and are not willing to see their staff spending time involving themselves in university affairs. Without the direct involvement in prison programmes, or the immediate access to relevant data, most of the faculty researchers have drifted off into other pastures. In other words, the two groups which IFEPS was formed to bring together have now, by force of circumstance, had to look in opposite directions.

Other bodies thrive. The Correctional Education Association in North America is active and informed and the European Prison Education Association goes from strength to strength, as it provides increasing support and attracts more and more members in Eastern Europe. The National Universities Continuing Education Association in the States maintains a special interest group in the States and, in the UK, the National Institute of Adult Education is prepared to publish. The agendas of these bodies are not only worthwhile, they are necessary, for they provide support to those in an increasingly isolated work setting, they discuss political and management issues, they will exchange news about good practice and will provide, from time to time, a much needed shoulder to cry on. Indeed, the conferences which I have most enjoyed, as an outsider, have been those of the EPEA - I not only have a good time, but I come away uplifted by the dedication of those involved. But, I would emphasise, research is not on their agenda, nor would one expect them to have the expertise, the time or, indeed, the residual energy to undertake significant policy-informing projects.

My conclusion has to be that IFEPS, as an international research-based body is moribund: it is with some wonder and no small delight that I am aware of the liveliness of the Australian limb which has a healthy membership, good leaders and does some very fine things. But I have to emphasise my main point which is that it is a limb which sustains its own life. The international dimension, the body, never really had the opportunity to get born, so internationalists now meet only at the Australian conference and that is a compliment to those of you working so hard here on this continent.

The time has obviously come for some sort of a review. On the one hand I am not only an optimist, I am an idealist. I see an increasing international need for some sensible policies to be applied to our penal settings, and policies based on informed research rather than the gut feelings of electorates. This is highlighted for me in Eastern Europe where some regimes, albeit with the most monstrous problems, are genuinely willing to make a fresh start but just do not know what to do or how to do it.. And the pressure towards good practice must be maintained elsewhere. On the other hand, I am never too happy to leave dead or dying bodies lying around the place - at times they can fertilise the soil, at others poison the water or inhibit new growth.

In conclusion could I, albeit with all modesty, make the following suggestions. And I make these here, for this occasion, as I have said, is a tribute those who have kept IFEPS and its ideals alive and well, but they are addressed to all IFEPS members everywhere.

There are three main points to provide a context for these suggestions. The first two embody my personal conviction that the two main props of IFEPS -research and internationalism - are as important now as they were when IFEPS was formed. Research is important, for in this particular instance it is not undertaken simply for intellectual pleasure or interest - it has a vital role to play in the justification of what practitioners are trying to do, and in the formation of a properly informed social policy as an antidote to the more usual knee-jerk reaction. And, in attempting to make some sense of imprisonment, could make such a long-term contribution to social policy. Moreover, what the practitioners are attempting to do is so vitally important that they, themselves, must not be afraid of learning more about what they do and how they do it.

Internationalism is important, for two reasons - first that an interchange of information would advance knowledge at a more rapid rate and, secondly, that the countries more developed in this area should - and I use that moral imperative deliberately - be prepared to support those less so. A lot of people are waiting for our help and advice, with their governments just at the very beginning of the policy forming process.

But this is not to diminish the problems.

First, a means has to be established of forming a forum to take the review forward. And many centres - often for good reason - seem to have dropped out. Nor is there a clearly defined international focus or executive group to call such a meeting. And it could just be that other potential centres who have never heard of IFEPS have developed in recent years.

Secondly, if such a review body can be formed, they would have to look at the constitution of IFEPS to decide whether the current, loose federal structure is adequate to carry the enterprise forward.

Thirdly, my view is that the relationship between IFEPS and bodies, both national and international, with similar interests should be on the agenda - I have here in mind dedicated bodies such as the CEA and the EPEA, and others such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe who have had related topics on their agenda.

But the bottom line will have to be funding. The Leeds/Simon Fraser Report is an example of what can be achieved with adequate funding, but it would appear that nationally generated funding of this sort is both hard to come by and is unreliable. The ideal would be to find a source - a philanthropist, a foundation or a truly international body such as UNESCO - to resource a centralised fund which is both adequate for research but which, at least, provides a central monitoring, disseminating and publishing body - even a commissioning body - to bring IFEPS to life.

With that, I bow out. It is a disappointment to me that IFEPS has not been able to achieve more. But if the will is there, then all things are possible, and what has been achieved here in Australia, both pays tribute to the quiet energy of Bob Semmens and all those who have worked with him, and is an example to the rest of us.

If a meeting can be convened, it would be symbolically appropriate to come again to Coombe Lodge - which I know will be both welcoming and available in the year 2000.

This paper is billed in the programme as my 'swan song' - rather alarmingly from my point of view, the notion is based on the widely held view that the swan sings only once, and that at the end of life. But this swan has sung before and, if asked to sing again in support of IFEPS, may well be coaxed back into life and away from his slippers and garden spade. Thank you for your invitation, your invitation and welcome, but particularly for the friendships over all these years. Good luck.