



# Advancing Sexuality Studies Short Course: A Short History

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## Introduction

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It all began in 2003, in a café at the intersection of Columbus Avenue and Broadway opposite the Lincoln Centre in New York. Two new arrivals from the Antipodes met for the first time. I was one of them, having just moved from Australia to take up a post in the Department of Sociomedical Sciences at Columbia University in late 2002; the other was Dr Barbara Klugman, recently arrived from South Africa to take up a Program Officer's post at the Ford Foundation, with a portfolio focused on sexuality. A chat over coffee and cake about the newness of it all for us both led to some serious sharing of ideas about the state of sexuality theory, research, training and politics globally and about what Barbara might do with her new and yet to be fully committed portfolio.

Many subsequent and more formal discussions were had during the next two years of my time in New York, during which a number of the initiatives Barbara went on to develop were talked over. One that we agreed upon very early on was the need for better training of experienced developing country researchers in the latest ideas on sexuality theory and research. We agreed that there were plenty of sex research 101 opportunities, but little beyond that—particularly that focused on what has come to be known as Critical Sexuality Studies.

By 2005, we had an idea fairly well worked out. First, the course would draw largely on the emerging field of Critical Sexuality Studies, rather than sexology or sex research. Second, Ford would propose to the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS) that it hosts the development and implementation of such a course. To cut a long story short, IASSCS agreed to take on the project; I was asked to become the Project Director; and the project became a collaboration between IASSCS and my Centre, the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, based at La Trobe University in Melbourne, to which I had returned from New York in early 2005.

Our thinking about this initiative went like this: first, in the West, university level courses in Critical Sexuality Studies and its innovative research methodologies had received little attention and few resources in general, except for where HIV and AIDS was framed as an undesirable consequence of sexual activity. In the developing world even less was available, and most training opportunities were dominated by medical, biological, behavioural and/or psychological accounts of human sexuality.

Second, in the late 1960s, the emergence of second-wave feminism and new sexual liberation movements contributed to a growing critique of the approaches that sexology and sex research had followed. New theories of sexuality had emerged, constituting the multifaceted, interdisciplinary field of Critical Sexuality Studies, crossing several social science and humanities disciplines. The commonality, however, is that Critical Sexuality Studies work focuses on the shifting relationships of power, knowledge, context, and culture. This field can perhaps best be observed in journals like *Sexualities*, edited by Ken Plummer, *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, edited by Peter Aggleton, and *Sex Education*, edited by Michael Reiss (interestingly, all based in the UK), but also in articles submitted to a range of disciplinary journals in Health, Education, Sociology, Anthropology, Development Studies, Media and Film Studies, Gender Studies, Queer and Feminist theory, and in various Humanities fields. Critical Sexuality Studies is a very broad church. We believed that the training of sexuality researchers in many parts of the world had failed to keep pace with these remarkable shifts in knowledge and research regarding the study of sexuality. Nowhere was this clearer than in the field of HIV and AIDS, dominated as it was by psychology, epidemiology and behavioural science.

Third, the sexuality field was dominated by the global North, which had a tendency to impose its constructions of sexuality upon other cultures. We agreed that the HIV pandemic had been a tremendous force in extending a Western conceptualisation of sexuality; a conceptualisation that often regarded itself and posed as universal knowledge about sexuality. HIV and AIDS also extended and amplified the similarly positivist and postcolonial groundwork laid by reproductive health and development work since the 1950s.

Two imperatives for our task emerged:

1. To develop a new advanced course that drew on Critical Sexuality Studies;  
*and*
2. To do so in a way that engaged with the complexity of global North–South power relations and knowledge systems.

The project came to be titled ‘A Short Course in Advanced Sexuality Theory and Methodology in Developing Countries’, and it aimed to stimulate key players in various developing countries to ‘shift gears’ in relation to their own country’s understandings of sexual cultures, sexuality issues and research responses. Further, it aimed to disrupt post-colonial power dynamics whereby sexuality theory developed in the global North is applied to, or imposed on, ‘different’ cultural traditions in the global South. Consequently, a reflexive and collaborative approach to working internationally was adopted. This was to ensure a rich diversity in the final course curriculum and a greater likelihood that the course would be taken up by various partners who have a direct stake in its content.

**The project had four phases:**

Phase One	A scoping and feasibility study (1 year)
Phase Two	Curriculum development (1 year)
Phase Three	Piloting and evaluation (1 year)
Phase Four	Roll-out (2 years)

**Phase One: scoping and a feasibility study (late 2006-late 2007)**

Phase one consisted of a range of components:

- a. Setting up the architecture of the project, which involved the establishment of an International Advisory Committee of experienced sexuality researchers from a number of countries, largely from the global South, including other IASSCS Board members;
- b. Establishment of a regular ARCSHS–IASSCS collaboration and consultation mechanism;
- c. Hiring staff (Dr Sean Slavin from ARCSHS was appointed Project Coordinator);

- d. An international audit of existing, pertinent, higher-level, English-language training programs;
- e. Site visits to South Africa, East Africa, Indonesia and Vietnam; *and*
- f. Designing the curriculum development and testing process for subsequent phases.

### The international audit

The aim of this audit was to develop an overview of the worldwide field of Critical Sexuality Studies to ensure that the proposed short course did not duplicate existing resources, was relevant and appropriate to developing country contexts, and represented the most up-to-date thinking about training in the field. This included details, where available, of courses, curricula, resources and pedagogical approaches.

We found a plethora of undergraduate and basic professional training courses offered worldwide; however, advanced courses, i.e. postgraduate level or beyond, were far fewer. We found less than 20 worldwide at that time. Only a minority of Critical Sexuality Studies research conducted and published in the previous six years was identifiably linked to the handful of training programs available internationally—in other words, there was a research and teaching gap. We also concluded that researchers and other academics working in the field of critical sexuality studies did not form any coherent group; they came out of various disciplinary backgrounds, worked in various academic departments, research centres or NGOs, and many tended not to regard themselves as sexuality researchers. Conducting this audit enabled us to map the intellectual terrain of Critical Sexuality Studies research and teaching worldwide. It supported our conviction that there was a need for advanced training in critical sexuality studies in the developing world.

### Results of the audit (available at [www.sexualitystudies.net](http://www.sexualitystudies.net))

The audit found that available sexuality-related training could be broken down into five broad strands:

1. HIV and AIDS
  - Public health frameworks

- Sexual behaviour equated to sexual risk; pleasure and meaning absent
  - Some sexual identities not represented, e.g. lesbians
2. Sexology
    - Highly medicalised, positivist, search for origins or explanations, e.g. hormones or genes —but it is a contested field
    - Concentrated on sexual pathologies & dysfunctions; clinical responses
  3. Sex research
    - Behavioural and descriptive strand focused on diversity of human sexual behaviour
  4. Sexual and reproductive health (S&RH)
    - In the West: focused more on reproduction, less on STIs; highly individualised understanding of sex
    - In the developing world: S&RH overtaking STIs & fertility; extended to social and political questions including male & female circumcision, & sexual violence; new focus on sexual rights
  5. Gender Studies
    - Often gender = women; gender as a relational system of power often neglected
    - Relationships between gender, sexuality and biological sex sometimes poorly theorised
    - interdisciplinary nature of gender studies often overlooked

### Site visits

During early 2007, we made a series of site visits to assess where the piloting of the course might take place. We had already decided that Indonesia might be a very good place to do this because the university infrastructure was sophisticated, and during a series of visits since the early 1990s I had seen the capacity for sexuality research grow remarkably. We also needed to work in English, and Indonesian academics and researchers do that quite well. Barbara Klugman suggested that we select a second site in sub-Saharan Africa to provide a comparison with the Asian pilot, and after visits to South Africa and Kenya and Uganda, we decided to offer the African pilot in Kenya with both Kenyan and Ugandan participants. These site visits also identified co-hosting organisations, possible resources, and potential participants.

With the results of the audit and the sites visits, we then approached Ford successfully for funding for phases two and three.

## The International Advisory Committee

An International Advisory Committee was established to assist in the development of Phase 1 of the project. Committee members provided very useful information about sites and institutions as well as contacts who might be interested in participating in the project as it developed. The Committee also met face to face once in Lima in 2007 during the 5<sup>th</sup> Biennial IASSCS Conference to review phase 1 progress as part of the development of subsequent phases. Committee members were:

- Professor Gary Dowsett, Chair, Australia
- Dr Sean Slavin, Secretary, Australia
- Professor Violetta Barrientos, Peru
- Dr Shalini Bharat, India
- Professor Carlos Caceres (ex officio), IASSCS, Peru
- Dr Khuat Thu Hong, Vietnam
- Professor Margaret Jolly, Australia
- Professor Robert Morrell, South Africa
- Dr Sylvia Tamale, Uganda
- Dr Chi-Chi Undie, Kenya
- Dr Saskia Wieringa (ex officio), IASSCS, The Netherlands
- Dr Barbara Klugman (ex officio), Ford Foundation

## Phase 2: curriculum and resource development (2008-2009)

The second phase of the project focused on developing the curriculum of the course. Although the course would be piloted face-to-face as a short course, it has always been the intention to develop the course for multi-modal delivery, via the internet, and/or by distance learning, and by selecting elements of the course to incorporate into other teaching programs. So the course was designed to be modular, with a view to possible accreditation at some future time.

The project invested strongly in developing partnerships during 2007, and in phase 2 we established a Curriculum Working Group (CWG) that drew members from the proposed pilot sites of East Africa and Indonesia, and also from South Africa and Vietnam (where field visits had been made) and from Australia and Europe. The purpose was, first, to ensure that the curriculum would be responsive to local concerns and circumstances and to international trends in the field of critical sexuality studies. Second, we wanted to build capacity among a group of emerging developing-country academics by involving them in the production of the curriculum based upon local and international content. Third, we hoped to boost local 'buy-in' so that the final course was developed with genuinely diverse input. This also served to help consolidate relations with the collaborating partners in the pilot sites. We made a conscious effort to include a diverse range of mid-career people, as consultations suggested that these people had more time available to participate in the development of the curriculum and would benefit most from becoming involved in the network we were establishing.

The CWG had its first meeting in April 2008 in Perth, Western Australia. This was a highly successful meeting. Among its achievements were a finalized set of aims and learning objectives for the course and detailed work on the module topics, including: modes of delivery; teaching and learning styles; content; assessment ideas; a strategy for commissioning work on the curriculum; and sharing and networking among the group.

**The agreed overall course aims were to:**

- Increase the quality and diversity of research and training activity into human sexuality in the developing world.
- Develop and enhance existing skills levels in undertaking complex research into, and the development and application of theory in, the field of Critical Sexuality Studies.
- Connect with other multi-disciplinary investigations and initiatives in international sexuality research and advanced training.
- Create a wider network of researchers and practitioners using critical sexuality studies to investigate and contribute to cultural analysis and production, global sexual and reproductive health, HIV and AIDS, and justice in gender and sexuality.
- Contribute to the development of an increased global dialogue on human sexuality, particularly through IASSCS.

**The agreed learning objectives were that participants would:**

- Show an increase in skills, knowledge and networking capacity in sexuality research and theoretical development.
- Initiate and stimulate dialogue between locally based knowledge frameworks, critical sexuality studies and global discussions of sexuality.
- Work critically with advanced sexuality theory and research methodologies.
- Employ innovative methods for researching human sexuality in specific settings.
- Gain enhanced capacities to encourage sexuality research in their own countries and regions.

Module topics evolved from an initial list drafted by the project team, on the basis of Phase 1 consultations and field visits. This list was then the focus of extensive discussion by the CWG. A number of CWG members volunteered to take on development of some of the modules. It was agreed that research methodology training would be built in as an integral part of each module, where suitable. We remain open to the possibility that new modules may be developed in the future, either by us, our partners, or as academics in developing countries take up the course

and offer it in their local contexts. Indeed, these may also arise in response to shifts in the field of study.

### Scoping studies

During Phase 2, a scoping study was commissioned in each pilot site with the specific brief of collecting and examining local material on sexuality, sexuality theory and research methodology. The scoping study consultants were asked to:

- Gather local published data about sexuality, especially grey literature.
- Assess pre-existing opportunities for the study of sexuality in the chosen location.
- Map current local issues in relation to sexuality.
- Locate institutional partners, course facilitators, potential participants and venue.

This was a highly successful activity and produced two quality reports that were subsequently published on the project website.

### Module development

Some modules were written by members of the project team, others were commissioned from international experts in the field or from partner organisations represented on the Project Advisory Committee and the CWG. Considerable work was undertaken by the project team after module development to ensure a consistent standard of content prior to the pilots.

#### **Module topics**

The project team, the CWG and other module developers maintained email contact during the module development phase then, following initial submission, all draft modules received two peer reviews. The project team added further suggestions and fed these back to module developers, who revised their work in light of all the comments. The penultimate versions of the modules were reviewed by the CWG during the IASSCS Biennial Conference in Hanoi in April this year, and finalised by the ARCSHS project team.

### Pilots

Two pilot versions of the course were run in July and August of 2009: the first in Mombasa, Kenya, with participants drawn from both Kenya and Uganda; the second in Surabaya, Indonesia, with participants from across Indonesia. The local partner organization in Kenya was the Population Council and in Indonesia it was GAYa Nusantara.

#### **The aims of the pilots were to:**

- Validate the course content and delivery modes in two different cultural contexts
- Gauge the balance between the international and local content
- Assess the ‘pitch’ and ‘register’—e.g. the appropriateness of language and vocabulary, the level of conceptual difficulty, suitability of reference and other bibliographic materials, and the local applicability of course content
- Appraise the various learning activities and pedagogical approaches; *and*
- Conduct participant evaluations of the course with a view to its refinement, working towards Phase Four roll-out.

We did a somewhat different set of modules in each site, with a number that overlapped, in order to test as many as possible. Comments were made regarding the number of pre-readings expected, the complexity of some modules, and the need for mixed methods within all modules.

### Evaluation

The evaluation process had a number of components:

- A pre-course assessment
- An assessment done at the completion of each module
- A post- course assessment

- These used a questionnaire format with forced-choice and open-ended questions
- There were module assessments for both facilitators and participants
- Participant focus groups
- Evaluator questionnaires
- Observer questionnaires

The evaluation was, of course, qualitative given the small numbers in the pilot courses, but responses can be tallied to reflect trends and inferences. The full evaluation report is too large to include, but here are some preliminary highlights. I have chosen some that reflect more upon the North–South politics of this course rather than its processes. The evaluations of the course by participants in both sites were generally very supportive. Here are some highlights from the evaluation findings, bringing together responses from both sites:

Questionnaire item	Rated 'Good' or 'Very Good'	Pilot site
Ability to understand modules	95% 95%	Mombasa Surabaya
Degree to which materials enabled me to apply what I was learning	92% 94%	Mombasa Surabaya
Cultural relevance	88% 99%	Mombasa Surabaya
Political/moral acceptability	79% 98%	

Phase 3 ended with the refining of individual module content, development of an overall format for course materials, adjustment of resources as necessary and development of overarching Short Course documents.

## **Phase 4: roll-out of the final course** **(2010 onwards)**

Phase Four will be managed directly by IASSCS from 2010 onwards, with advice from La Trobe through an implementation committee. The issue of course accreditation will be explored.

## Conclusion

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The process of developing this course was a challenge. It was a lengthy and expensive process, but one worth the time and money if a truly advanced course was to be developed, and if that course was not to be simply a Western overlay on non-Western Cultures or an imposition of the global North's ideas about sexuality on the sexual culture of the global South. As the course rolls out during 2010-2011, and hopefully in the years thereafter, we shall see how successful we have been.

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