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Appendix
I walk into Mad Geoff’s barber’s shop to get my hair cut. There’s a long queue snaking round the room and almost spilling out onto the pavement. People turn and look as I walk in and Geoff says, “We’re okay now: Ian’s here! We’ll all be writing poems soon!” I join in the laughter and of course I don’t get them all writing poems, although we do talk about poetry, and how it sometimes rhymes and sometimes doesn’t, and one man quotes Daffodils and one man gives us a scurrilous limerick about somebody from Leeds and I have a vision that one day Mad Geoff’s will be a branch of the world of creative writing and he’ll offer degrees and A-levels.

Fanciful, I guess, but reading this report shows me that the world of writing is alive and well and as full of arguments and achievements and forward thinking as ever; the new Creative Writing A-level is a giant leap forward and the range of approaches across all the higher education institutions featured here reminds me, as if I needed reminding, that creativity isn’t a precious jug that might shatter if you drop it, but a robust and unbreakable container for our hopes and ideas.

There’s a line in Beyond the benchmark that’s ostensibly about the new A-level but which could apply much more widely and could even reach as far as Mad Geoff’s crowded shop: “I would hope that a Creative Writing A-level would help keep creative and imaginative ‘doors’ open for students, encouraging craft, analysis but also looking around, engaging with contemporary culture and experience”. I second that: let’s have a Creative Writing component for every educational experience, formal and informal.

We’re living through terrible times and that’s why Creative Writing is vital; creative people will lead any economic, cultural and social revival that’s going to happen and this report is important because it pinpoints the way this is happening already.

Oh, and we’ll have great creative haircuts as well, and then we’ll write poems about them, if Mad Geoff has his way.

Ian McMillan
Poet and Performer
Foreword from the Higher Education Academy

*Beyond the benchmark* is a very welcome addition to the pedagogical research programme of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). It is the latest in a series of productive collaborations between the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) and the HEA, and going back further, between NAWE and the English Subject Centre (2001-11). In addition to major research projects and reports these collaborations have included annual events held around the UK that explore the theory and practice of teaching Creative Writing, the student experience of Creative Writing and the varied routes into the role of Creative Writing lecturer.

It has been my pleasure to help broker many of these events and collaborations and I am particularly excited by the scope and reach of research to be found in *Beyond the benchmark*. Collated from interviews with teachers of Creative Writing at 27 UK universities, this report provides a much needed assessment of the past ten years of rapid expansion of Creative Writing in the higher education sector and it also charts a clear path forward as the subject adjusts to another major change: the September 2013 introduction of a Creative Writing A-level. The A-level will affect how Creative Writing is approached at university, especially in first year modules. It also creates an immediate and ongoing need to train teachers who will be both competent and confident teaching Creative Writing at A-level. The voices of the higher education sector, as well as the report’s author, Paul Munden, are articulate and diverse on the possible ways forward for Creative Writing over the next ten years.

Many other critical issues and topics are addressed herein. These include the structures of programmes around the UK, the recruitment and retention of students, teaching modes and methodologies, including the workshop, research, and inevitably, employability. As a topic, employability is a phrase that falls frequently from the lips of heads of departments and pro vice chancellors alike, not least when the notion of building links and partnerships with local and global employers is seen as a particular goal or imperative. It is an issue that lecturers are asked to address as they design their modules and when they speak to prospective students and parents on open days. Such attention to the notion of employability – and note that this is distinct from employment – is an indicator of both the current economic climate and the changing face of higher education as it adapts to increased fees and the sometimes sharply changed expectations of students and their families regarding what three or four years of undergraduate study will “do” for them and what “impact” and “value for money” can be demonstrated as a result of achieving a BA in any subject. As *Beyond the benchmark* makes clear, Creative Writing programmes are often at an advantage when employability is the topic of conversation because they do not need to “bolt on” a careers focus, as transferable skills, creative versatility and entrepreneurship are a part of what all writers are taught as a matter of course at university.

I believe *Beyond the benchmark* will demonstrate its own impact in distinct contexts and over the next several years. It will aid the higher education sector and individual higher education institutions as a planning tool for the expansion and development of their Creative Writing provision, and as a comparative mechanism against which programmes can measure or assess their approach to teaching and research in Creative Writing. The range of responses, for instance, around the pedagogical value of the workshop and the importance of students learning how to work independently and to read widely, will help many institutions realise they share similar struggles and triumphs. Ideally this report will provide a space for departments or clusters of practitioners to talk about teaching Creative Writing and to do so across the educational sectors. A great opportunity instantiated by the introduction of the Creative Writing A-level is the potential for sustained conversation between teachers of Creative Writing in higher education, schools and colleges.

Who is this report for, then? It is for anyone who values the teaching of Creative Writing and is interested in its further development in higher education as a subject that uses daring and innovation as well as sound pedagogy. Further, *Beyond the benchmark* will be of use to schools, A-level and further education colleges as they embed their own Creative Writing provision with a detailed understanding, provided by this report, of how Creative Writing has taken shape and is continuing to flourish in higher education. NAWE’s specific recommendations based on this report are published at [www.nawe.co.uk](http://www.nawe.co.uk).

Nicole King
Discipline Lead for English Literature, Creative Writing and English Language
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the respondents to this research, who gave so generously of their time, and the members of the NAWE HE Committee, who helped me to formalise the research questions. I am also indebted to the support of the NAWE Management Committee, especially Maggie Butt, chair from 2007 to 2012. Whatever broader knowledge of Creative Writing I have been able to bring to this report derives from the NAWE membership, whose contributions to Writing in Education are much appreciated. Finally, my thanks go to Nicole King, now Discipline Lead for English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing at the Higher Education Academy. She has helped to ensure that Creative Writing is firmly featured in that triumvirate discipline title and her ongoing support for the NAWE HE Committee is invaluable.

Paul Munden.

About the author

Paul Munden is Director of NAWE (National Association of Writers in Education). He has worked as a Creative Writing tutor in schools and universities. His poetry has received an Eric Gregory Award and has appeared in many anthologies, including the Faber Book of Movie Verse and Faber’s Poetry Introduction 7. His first collection, Asterisk*, was published in 2011 by Smith/Doorstop and a collection of new and selected poems, Analogue/Digital, is scheduled for 2014. For the British Council, he has been the writer-in-residence at several Anglo-Swiss conferences, most recently on the Role of Cultural Relations in Addressing Conflict (Geneva 2010). He is the editor of Feeling the Pressure: Poetry and Science of Climate Change (British Council 2008). He worked closely with AQA in developing the specification for the new Creative Writing A-level and is currently completing a professional doctorate by public works at Middlesex University.
1. Introduction

It is ten years since the English Subject Centre published Creative Writing: A Good Practice Guide, compiled by Siobhán Holland (2003) with contributions from Maggie Butt, Graeme Harper and Micheline Wandor. The Guide described a “rapidly expanding province of activity” and even that phrase has been out-done by the reality of the intervening years, during which Creative Writing has become widely established in higher education institutions (HEIs) throughout the UK. The National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE), referenced in the Guide, has itself evolved and is now the Subject Association for the discipline.

The Guide was “not offered as a ‘benchmarking statement’ for Creative Writing, but rather as a tool for lecturers who are developing ... curricula in this area and as a prompt for debates in Creative Writing and the related disciplines of English Language and Literature.” Five years later, NAWE (2008) considered it time for a formal Creative Writing Subject Benchmark Statement and published it together with a Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement. After a further five years, it is once again time to take stock of the subject’s status and requirements.

The picture in 2003 was of English departments “diversifying their work”. Many Creative Writing departments are still sited in that subsidiary role (with some continuing tension) but others have developed considerable independence or positioned themselves differently. Creative Writing is now widely offered as a Single Honours degree and at doctoral level – neither without its critics.

At the time this latest research was commissioned, a similar “diversifying” was taking place at A-level, with a Creative Writing qualification reaching the final phase of its development. A section of this report explores the implications for HE as the A-level is introduced in September 2013. The A-level addresses some of the serious issues identified in previous research into transition but it also presents new challenges to the structure and content of first-year undergraduate degrees.

There are many other challenges, not least on account of the significant changes within HE generally and a growing preoccupation with career-focused education. Creative Writing programmes resist this preoccupation while actually satisfying some of its demands. They offer a very broad education with highly valuable, transferable skills. The term “vocational” no longer seems adequate in view of contemporary dynamics, the portfolio practice of the freelance writer or the range of other careers for which proficient writers are well suited. The way in which employability is addressed at both undergraduate and postgraduate level is a major focus of this report, demonstrating both a considerable commitment and a variety of approach. Institutions are not always aware of the level of variance or how issues have been successfully addressed elsewhere. It is hoped that, in sharing the range of practice on this and other fronts, further enrichments will evolve.

Creative Writing programmes may have expanded and matured but it sometimes seems that they will never entirely shake off controversy. A tirade against the discipline was published as recently as April this year (Royle 2013). Thankfully, such outbursts tend to be countered by more rational and eloquent defence, such as that by Rachel Cusk (2013), who states that “cynicism is beginning to look outdated”. The detailed responses within this report should certainly make the cynic’s job harder. The approaches to teaching and research described are highly developed; they are also impressively self-critical. Most striking is the overall integrity of Creative Writing programmes, ever thoughtful about the nature of creative practice and how it nourishes both the individual and society. The relevance and broad benefits of studying Creative Writing, insufficiently recognised in the past, are articulated here with a confident clarity. In the words of one respondent:

“We reward innovation, artistic ambition, experiment and risk. Our aspiration for graduates is that they leave equipped not only to make a living, but also to take a leading role in creating the culture they wish to inhabit.”

1.1. Methodology

Twelve universities agreed to take part in the research, selected to provide a useful geographical spread and considerable diversity. Each university’s response (gathered either by interview or email correspondence) was based on the same set of 38 questions. These were formed to cover all aspects of Creative Writing in HE, and were grouped under the headings used in this report. The questions were also published online and in Writing in Education (NAWE, 2012), so that any university could respond, should it so wish, and the wider subject community could be fully aware of the undertaking. As a result, 15 other universities took part. The full list is given in the

### 1.2. Statistics

Underpinning the research, NAWE undertook a full updating of the Creative Writing courses database housed on its website. Since UCAS lists only BA degrees, the NAWE list is the only comprehensive summary of Creative Writing degrees at all levels. It is, even so, a listing that makes judgements. It currently features 141 institutions, offering a total of 504 degree programmes; that number includes combined degrees (though not their every variant), and a number of journalism and combined arts courses where Creative Writing is a significant element.

Enrolment figures are supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) under the category of Imaginative Writing (despite the fact that this term is not used by many HEIs[^1]). For 2011-12, the total across all years was 6,945 (of which 5,185 were full-time and 1,760 part-time). The table below shows the change over the past decade (prior to which Imaginative Writing was not on the map).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>2,745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>6,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>7,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>7,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>6,945</td>
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These figures are broken down into undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments, the proportion of postgraduates rising from 20% to 30% across the ten-year period.

Despite the recent overall fall (which is in the context of a general HE enrolment fall of 0.2%) full-time enrolments were up (from 4,730) and indicative figures for new enrolments remain positive. The ratio of applicants to places on some courses is so high that a decrease in applications is of almost no significance. Courses at less prestigious institutions are more vulnerable. There is also some concern about recruitment for less “commercial” MAs (for example, in Poetry).

Student satisfaction and retention would appear to be good, with student feedback enabling courses to evolve. General figures show the percentage of young, first-time degree entrants not continuing in HE after their first year has been relatively consistent at just over 7%. This research reveals a significantly lower figure for Creative Writing students, with some institutions claiming a 0% rate.

Further statistics are given within the sections on set-up and recruitment.

### 1.3. Summary of other findings

The more narrative data captured from the questionnaires and interviews is highly revealing. It shows some significant differences between programmes and describes their various approaches to the subject in detail that is different to the more marketing-led phraseology of their websites. Some claims to “uniqueness” are misplaced, which is unsurprising, given the rapid and constant state of development across so many courses. There is a high level of confidence within the discipline as a whole but there are also concerns – some of a general nature, others relating to specific institutions (which have here been anonymised). Class sizes and contact time remain big issues, and false expectations in terms of publishing and/or job opportunities sometimes skew students’ appreciation of the more essential benefits of their study.

There is a rich range of pedagogy in operation, which deserves full commendation, and some rigorous questioning and defence of the workshop in particular (as also evidenced by the recent roundtable discussion printed in Writing

[^1]: As Steve May (2011), Chair of the NAWE HE Committee points out, these figures are for “students taking Creative Writing as their main named subject ...” The number of students taking some Creative Writing as part of another degree programme must be in excess of 7,000 (for example, there are 60,000 students taking English Studies courses, and we are led to believe that most of these courses now offer some element of Creative Writing).
in Education (Cowan et al. 2012). The importance of wide and attentive “reading like a writer” is universally acknowledged, possibly edging out the workshop from its “signature pedagogy” spot. (Signature pedagogies is a term used by Lee S. Shulman (2005) and explored in Anna Leahy’s contribution to Does the Workshop Still Work? (Donnelly 2010). There is however some intriguing variance of opinion as to the role of theory and even the nature and purpose of critical reflection. There is general agreement on assessment criteria, though the presence of subjectivity is still cause for debate, as was evident at the June 2012 Bath Spa/HEA seminar, ‘Subjectivity in Creative Writing Marking: practical strategies for tutors/practitioners’.

While the new A-level is broadly welcomed, it also highlights the current low provision of courses (or even modules) focusing on the teaching of Creative Writing, something that will surely need to be addressed.

Professional development is given widespread attention, though the aims and means are highly varied. There is interesting discrepancy of opinion regarding publication as the prime goal but consensus about encouraging students to be entrepreneurial in their publishing pursuits. There is evidence of tracking alumni but mainly through central channels that are not necessarily of direct use to Creative Writing departments. The use of Facebook to track alumni is an alternative means adopted by at least one HEI.

Creative Writing textbooks are treated with a degree of scepticism and yet continue to proliferate, possibly on account of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) requirements. Some publications are of course highly valued – especially in the institutions where they originated. There is concern, however, that two tiers of staff may be resulting: those whose publications are valued for research purposes, and those who are treated as “mere” teachers, which is clearly a spurious distinction. As in all subjects, the REF itself divides opinion.

There is widespread recognition of practice-led research (despite the term “practice-based” remaining in REF documentation) but the nature of Creative Writing research is clearly still evolving fast. Wholly new types of PhD are currently being introduced, or being planned. There is notable variance in the scale of creative work undertaken and the requirement to complete whole works (for example, novel, screenplay, poetry collection).

Though relatively few institutions offer formal international exchange, there has over the past decade been significant liaison and development between the relevant national bodies. There has been British representation at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) conference in the US every year since 2000. In 2008, NAWE began presenting the work of UK Creative Writing programmes through the AWP conference book fair, which attracts some 10,000 delegates. The past five years have also seen a NAWE presence at the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) conference, with Andrew Cowan and Andrew Melrose giving keynote talks and a role for NAWE created on the Executive. The more recently formed association for Canadian Creative Writers and Writing Programs (CCWWP) has invited NAWE (and representatives from the US and Australasia) to its conference in 2014. The NAWE conference has featured writer-lecturers from the US every year since 2007, with occasional representation from Australia, Canada, Holland, Abu Dhabi and China. The various associated journals thrive – all international in their scope, though remarkably different in character – and were joined in 2004 by New Writing, the International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing, edited by Graeme Harper and published now by the Taylor & Francis Group. Axon, based at the University of Canberra, is another excellent addition. As individual institutions remain competitive in their pursuit of students, research funding and a distinctive profile, a collaborative community is nevertheless evident, especially on the international stage, where some of the most interesting provocations and resolutions are made.

1.4. Relevance and rewards

As a preface to the extensive quotations from respondents that characterise the subsequent sections of this report, these are the statements about the exceptional range of reasons for – and rewards of – teaching and studying Creative Writing.

Programmes aim to:

- turn out well-rounded, competitive individuals who can think critically and creatively;
- prepare people for a fluid and constantly changing world of work.

They equip students with:

- a range of transferable skills;
confidence in and enjoyment of creative writing;
all-round confidence in communication;
a good editing practice.

and enable them to:

organise their own deadlines;
experiment with a wide range of writing forms and markets;
develop their awareness of form in prose, poetry and drama;
explore and develop individual visions;
establish the symbiotic relationship between good reading and good writing practices;
see literature from the inside out.

I would describe our purpose as the intellectual, personal and professional development of our students, and the teaching of specialist skills in craft and technique. We reward innovation, artistic ambition, experiment and risk.

The purpose is to allow students to explore their potential and discover where they fit in the writing world, and if it is something they will continue with for pleasure or as part of a portfolio career ... Many of our students get positions in publishing, media, etc., even if they don’t directly become ‘creative writers’. So it is a useful training ground and the vocational aspect (reflected in our own work placements) is strong.

Creative graduates are considered to be:

Articulate, able to express themselves both verbally and in writing, creative, independent, problem solvers, engaged, enthusiastic and aware of the world around them.

Team workers, with good presentation skills, creative, imaginative and self-disciplined.

Critical thinkers, aware of the wider writing business and excellent communicators.

Well equipped for further study (in a whole range of disciplines), for teaching, reviewing, editing, organising literary events, using writing as therapy, working in the creative industries or arts administration, or in almost any number of traditional graduate jobs.

Our graduates go into a wide range of careers where communication skills, creativity and independence of mind are valued, for example: newspapers, magazines, PR, advertising, TV, radio, theatre, literary agencies, libraries, booksellers, web and games design, teaching.

Creative Writing graduates will often work in connected areas (or even unconnected areas) while continuing to advance their writing careers. Though employment rates are cited as high, a Russell group university includes “joblessness” as something for which its Creative Writing graduates are well prepared. A temptingly amusing headline for the critics, the true implication is the important, high level of inner resourcefulness with which Creative Writing graduates are fortified: in learning to construct a variety of human narratives within their studies, they are perhaps better equipped than most in finding their own personal ways through even the most difficult of times.
2. Programme structures

A good practice guide or subject benchmark is one that gives institutions confidence in adapting the guidelines for their own individual purpose. It is therefore rewarding to see so many distinctive offerings flourishing from a base of widely shared principles. They do so within a variety of contexts and levels of support.

Some programmes are still embedded within English Literature departments. There are high-profile programmes that sit independently alongside English, History etc. within the School of Humanities; others have similar independence within Performing Arts (one particular BA running independently since 1990). In both cases, BA degrees are offered in a very wide range of combinations with other studies such as Film, Drama, Media, Digital Games, Languages and Philosophy. In certain cases, there exists a Creative Writing Centre, a semi-autonomy gained by sheer physical remove. There remains a widespread belief that the link with English is vital, indeed that undergraduate Creative Writing study is questionable without it. One programme goes so far as to state the purpose of Creative Writing within the combined BA as being to “provide a form of practice-based knowledge to support the study of English Literature”, an extreme end of the spectrum of opinion that many would contest. There is also some reported “exploitation”: English students steered onto workshop-based Creative Writing modules with limited staffing. Sometimes the relationship is simply a convenience, more useful than not, with many staff members teaching both subjects. It is likely that the new Creative Writing A-level will be similarly positioned (as it is in the Awarding Body’s own portfolio), though the importance of writing creatively across all subjects is one of its thrusts. There are universities that already champion this idea: one cites 60 writing-based modules embedded in other departments. (This is somewhat mirrored in the US. A former Chair of NAWE’s HE Committee is now based at an institution where Creative Writing is offered in multiple contexts: Writing and Rhetoric, English, Music Theatre and Dance, Communications and Media.)

Creative Writing is also present, to a limited extent, within Education departments. In one case, this has grown out of a continuing adult education programme, driven by funding changes. It is interesting to note that, where such provision exists, parallel degrees within English departments have veered towards theory and away from more “professional” studies. The potential links with PGCE departments (regardless of the current threat to their status) is further explored in Section 4.

Considering how the subject started in HE at MA Level, the growth of BA programmes (and hence the overall level of staffing) has been dramatic. The number of students enrolled on individual BA programmes ranges from 40 to 350, more typically around 100. (Exceptionally, the Open University (OU) has 1730 FTE students registered as studying Creative Writing. At postgraduate level the range is from 20 to 100, with the number of PhD enrolments sometimes matching that of MAs. A small number of institutions are now offering MFAs, the more prevalent Masters qualification in the US.

Occasionally, classes are swelled by students on the Erasmus programme (for European exchange), despite – or perhaps because of – the lack of Creative Writing provision in their home countries.

The two-semester set-up is now the norm, despite its fundamental misfit with the UK academic calendar. Very few institutions are still geared to a three-term system (such as those who experience it applaud), leaving a large part of students’ attendance time with no input. In view of the financial burden they now face, this may yet prove to be a matter for re-consideration.

2.1. Staffing

Responses show that staffing of programmes varies in proportion to student numbers, though with some set-ups more generously supported than others. At the top end is a department with 22 permanent staff (equivalent to 14 full-time posts) and 30 others. This number has been augmented by a number of new professorial roles prompted by the REF. This contrasts with another department of only two full-time and four part-time staff. There are some major programmes operating between these two extremes, for example with ten full-time and 15 part-time staff (and a related English department three times that size). Some staffing statistics do seem low in relation to student numbers, especially in view of the ongoing recommendation (in the Benchmark Statement) about workshop size.

In all cases, the emphasis is on practising/published writers (though some with magazine or competition track records only). Some prestigious programmes inevitably set high store on the profile of published work, although they also make use of recent graduates as BA tutors, to keep things “fresh”.
Ten years ago, visiting lecturers used to predominate, reflecting the desire for programmes to be characterised by writers still mainly engaged in their “other” professional work. A major shift has taken place, with programmes themselves giving scope to writers pursuing that work as part of their HE contribution; the increased recognition of their creative output as research has been an important factor.

There are some interesting new distinctions made:

We don't employ any hourly-paid, part-time tutors. We pay flat, industry-rate fees to around 14 guest speakers a year – high-profile writers and publishing experts, who give a one-off lecture. In addition, the MA hosts a Writer in Residence. It's a non-teaching post: the Writer in Residence may give the occasional guest talk, but they do not read or provide feedback on student work, plan classes, mark assignments or involve themselves in any academic administration. As a senior practitioner working on their own writing alongside the students, the Writer in Residence has a completely non-judgemental, supportive role, acting as a sounding board for ideas and problems, and providing one-to-one advice through weekly office hours.

Elsewhere, there are high-profile “iconic” professorial posts, which undoubtedly reinforce the sense of writing in academia being strongly linked to the more widely recognised literary world. There are also home-based writer-tutors employed in delivering online courses, evidence of an evolving role for the part-time employee. There is however indication that sessional employment is becoming more difficult to sustain in terms of delivering a core programme, owing to general university stipulations. The OU again represents an anomaly; the number of associate lecturers averages between 150 and 200 (as might be expected for the number of students); the core team is currently just four.

Most programmes are happy with their level of administrative support. This is typically shared with English, though some are now benefitting from a dedicated administrator. Some individuals of course complain of their administrative burden (perhaps with good reason) while others interestingly describe administration as a thoroughly acceptable part of any working writer’s life.

2.2. Unique selling points

Most BA programmes set out to cover all forms of writing, with screenwriting the most common omission. Non-fiction is now widespread, with some institutions stressing its importance while others remain wary on account of the defensive attitude that students sometimes adopt in relation to their autobiographical writing. (This wariness was voiced within A-level discussions, though finally dismissed.) Some more traditional programmes are expanding into crime-thriller writing, writing for children and digital writing. There is some resistance to the very notion of form and genre taking too high a profile, since they “all bleed into each other”, perhaps increasingly so.

Individual institutions are inevitably keen to stress their uniqueness, not always with justification (for example regarding input from publishers and agents, offering teaching modules, or covering graphic novels). The more careful claims would however be enormously useful to students seeking to identify a course appropriate to their particular interests and needs. This is something that might be explored in another context, free of anonymity. It is nevertheless interesting to list a few examples of distinction:

…a heavy emphasis on understanding how the world shapes your writing, and how you can get your writing out into the world in one way or another;

…commitment to professional, one-to-one editorial mentoring;

…an expanded understanding of the creative economy;

…to make students better readers as well as writers – the emphasis on critical thinking would equip students well to do a PhD in English, as much as to write their first book;

It is one of the handful of MAs that actually require all students to finish something (and revise it before submitting). In other words they come out with a product to sell.

There are universities with clear specialisms in terms of form or genre: short story; graphic fiction; poetry; writing for children; IT-related work; games; song/lyric writing. Others offer a thematic rather than genre-based approach.
Some have established local literary partnerships, for example with a theatre, or the rich ecology of literary activity that has grown up around the programme over the years. For some, an industry focus is key, and is reflected in the naming of courses.

Certain programmes undoubtedly benefit from historic reputations or substantial resources pre-dating their university’s formal Creative Writing provision. Digitised tapes from a university’s spoken word archive have been re-presented as an app and distributed via Apple’s iTunes. Available free, indeed promoted as part of Apple’s own advertising, the app gained 20,000 downloads in the first week (and it is even claimed that prisoners in America were making good use of it “like a university on your phone”); an invaluable coup for the programme, not to mention its status within its host institution.
3. Recruitment and retention

In the summer of 2012 – a critical moment in recruitment history, as major fee and funding changes were coming into play – it appeared that Creative Writing undergraduate applications were slightly down, with some exceptions (one down by 20%). This was not the case for postgraduate applications, with one prose writing MA reporting its “massive year-on-year increase” to be ongoing. Another, with a strong industry focus, had benefited from a sharp rise in overseas students (particularly from the US). Poetry MAs, by contrast, seemed vulnerable, reflected in the way that Guardian and even Faber programmes were concentrating increasingly on fiction. While the increase in undergraduate fees had been almost universally applied, the cost of MAs had not been as consistently addressed and literature organisations with Arts Council funding were adding to the confusion, looking to undercut university fees (though hoping somehow to benefit from university accreditation). The vocational value of MAs is likely to become increasingly scrutinised by potential students but this is balanced by an overriding trend towards postgraduate study as a norm. More is said about research degrees in Section 6.

The trend at undergraduate level, where reported, is towards younger, better qualified, more able students, with an increased male percentage. High-profile professorial appointments are cited as a contributing factor in the recruitment of brighter, more ambitious young writers, while “hobbyists” have trailed off. If that suggests a narrowing of student diversity, it is countered by the overall growth of the subject across a wide range of institutions.

Some programmes recruit with great ease, so over-subscribed that they are largely unaffected by any surge or fall in applications. One university reported a fall in 2012 of 15% but in the context of 1,000 applications for 25 places; 99% of its applicants have three A-level grade As and all are interviewed. Other prestigious programmes tell a similar story: 12 applicants for every place, with three As required, up from AAB; 8,000 applications for 110 places, all with AAB grades at the least.

Elsewhere, it is a very different story. Institutions with a lower academic profile are faring less well. Single Honours BA numbers, generally, may be holding up (and in some cases increasing), but not within programmes that are less well established or renowned, where there is instead a resurgence of combined degrees, Creative Writing once again studied with English. Parental pressure is cited as a cause and there is clearly a need to articulate the relevance of the subject, its essential educational value and the employability of its graduates, as described in Section 1, much more widely. An earlier understanding of the subject (for example at A-level) should help, allowing students, parents and teachers to become more aware of what the discipline actually entails. The task, currently, is not helped by the fact that key information sets, regarding graduate employment, do not include freelancers, surely the typical professional writers making headway in the world. Also, the relevance of Creative Writing to all other disciplines is unexplored in most institutions, yet would effectively counter some popular, residual misconceptions of its worth. Parents may be increasingly worried that students are not receiving enough “personal” tuition but Creative Writing stands to gain here, being taught within small groups.

At some universities, local recruitment has been a traditional strength – even a historic mission – empowering a demographic group not typically associated with academic study, and this is likely to continue. Other universities are by definition “recruiting” institutions (where issues of selection are largely irrelevant) and here there is a marked difference in Single Honours uptake for Creative Writing: new offerings have proved dramatically popular.

Students are often clear and insistent about their priorities. Pushed into traditional academic subjects (or indeed Business Studies), they will sometimes sidestep into Creative Writing courses once admitted. Others, on combined degrees, would like to do more Creative Writing than is on offer. High fees are perhaps responsible for a new type of commitment.

My sense is that applicants are more serious and thoughtful about their applications, and they may be choosing subjects they feel most passionate about rather than what might otherwise be seen as a ‘sensible’ choice, perhaps recognising that it’s the degree itself rather than the subject that will have value and therefore choosing something they feel most strongly about.
One of the potential students who attended [an open day] with his parents was a boy who had been offered conditional places at two different institutions: one to do Engineering, the other to study Creative Writing. He was first generation in his family to attend university. I got talking to them afterwards and it was quite clear which option he wanted to take, and which one his parents wanted him to go for. I think perhaps we have to do more to stress the 'employability' of Creative Writing students, and in which areas of work. On the other hand, we also have to be careful with this, both in the marketing and content of Creative Writing degrees at BA and MA level, not to lose the 'creativity', also not to alienate those students who are more interested in the opportunity to express their creativity and to produce challenging and innovative writing by focusing too much on 'jobs at the end'.

Many parents cannot conceive of exerting pressure on an 18-year-old “adult” to choose a “bankable” course, but for as long as some do, there is considerable irony in the fact that they may be overlooking an option of complex worth.

3.1. Transition

There is anecdotal evidence that some new undergraduates receive a ‘shock to the system’ when they arrive at university. They feel underprepared for higher level study in multiple ways and one of the reasons for this is that the teaching approaches employed are different from those experienced at A-level. (Jeffery 2012)

The Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR) website features a number of reports on the quality of post-16 qualifications and their syllabuses. It is revealed that:

Level 3 (A-level/L3) teachers are generally unaware of the pedagogy at Level 4 (L4).

L3 teachers and L4 tutors recognise the need for students to gain independent learning skills and that they should be able to think critically. However, both agree that these and other skills are no longer generally present at transition.

Over 50% of lecturers think that new undergraduates are underprepared for degree level study.

According to 60% of lecturers, their institutions provide additional support classes for underprepared 1st year undergraduates. Classes often focus on writing and independent learning skills. (Suto 2012)

Respondents to this research confirmed that:

Difficulties are usually around independent working; time management; basic writing skills; not enough reading of contemporary writing.

[There is] little knowledge of current affairs, contemporary literature or modern drama apart from TV soaps.

There are of course exceptions, notably within well-established institutions, where existing A-levels are sometimes viewed as “more than sufficient”.

We are fortunate in attracting a fairly ‘academic’ intake, which tends to adapt to the demands of university quite smoothly.

In view of the prevalent statements, however, it is clear that Creative Writing at A-level has a major role to play, and presents a challenge to the orthodoxy of History, English and Mathematics being “the A-level subjects considered to provide the best preparation for degree level study by lecturers across a wide range of subjects” (Suto 2012).

Jeffery (2012) also suggests that L3 teachers could “encourage presentations from outside speakers on their specialism so as to prepare for the format of university teaching”. This relates to the comment that:

NAWE has for many years championed the work of professional writers visiting schools. Increased teaching and practice of [Creative Writing] within secondary schools will create a particularly fertile new context for such work. We believe that there are also likely to be new opportunities for writers to work within teacher development: the benefits of writers working with teachers (as charted in our 2010 report, Class Writing) extend to all levels and across the curriculum, so we trust that the worth of any new provision will be recognised as something to be embedded within initial teacher training. (Munden 2013)
Seeking to establish the veracity of the overall match, this research established that Creative Writing HE programmes are looking for:

- Students who are ambitious, open minded.
- Enthusiasm, a creative, flexible approach, willingness to try new ideas and move out of their comfort zones.
- [Students’] willingness to work on their own initiative, self-discipline, motivation.
- A passion for writing and reading, a willingness to engage with literature and drama.
- A capacity for reflecting on writing.
- Students who have read widely and are familiar with possible genres and forms open to them.
- Students who have begun properly to experiment with their own writing across a range of forms and genres.
- [Students who are] ‘teachable’, i.e. amenable to the approaches common in creative writing classes, especially workshopping etc.
- People to join the creative community with us and take it seriously, committed to helping their peers to improve as writers.
- Drive, ambition, intellectual curiosity.
- Originality (this is far more important than polish), ideas, a sense of urgency; something they really need to say, that isn’t just about themselves.
- Energy; an appetite for challenge, risk and learning, breadth of experience.
- The ability to articulate the purpose of their writing, and to view their work with some measure of objectivity.
- Evidence of commitment to writing – either through prior qualification, or publication record, or other active participation in a writing culture (this could be print, online, spoken word, collaborative, in any medium).

Respondents went on to say that:

- Our student cohort is just as likely to be made up of students from disciplines as diverse as History, Theology and Religious Studies, Media, or Education. The diversity of this student body enables the programme to draw on a rich variety of experience, which helps to enhance the Creative Writing workshops.

The ambitious nature of these “requirements”, pitched against the basic inadequacy of current A-level preparation of students, as described in the OCR-listed documents, suggests that Creative Writing is not only exceptionally demanding in its university entry requirements, but also an A-level subject supremely well specified to prepare students for transition to university study within a very wide range of disciplines.

As a final note, within this already complex scenario, one particular “demand” of students is worth noting, despite its peculiarity in terms of transitional “expectation”.

It nevertheless tallies with some other more muted comments about the emphasis on recruiting “interesting” people that have something to write about.

- It helps if they can show that they have had to overcome some difficulty, i.e. experienced something that they can draw on in their writing.

Yet again Creative Writing enters the realm of controversy, seemingly determined to require more than the statutory – if currently also elusive – academic standards.

### 3.2. The Creative Writing A-level

The Good Practice Guide concerned itself primarily with principles on which universities might base their own introduction of new Creative Writing programmes. Those principles are to a considerable extent mirrored in the new A-level that has finally been accredited.
Universities were widely consulted while the specification was being drafted, and their extensive responses were as follows:

…exciting for new school teachers now able to envisage teaching ‘their’ subject.

Pedagogy thoroughly reflects HE.

The ‘writing to a brief’ aspect is particularly to be welcomed, as this promises at an early stage to introduce the students to the concept of creativity operating within constraints.

Existing A-levels aren’t much use. The approach to literature and drama is too piecemeal and many students have barely read a whole book or seen a play.

I don’t feel that current A-levels develop or test the skills we’re looking for at all.

An A-level in Creative Writing would make a huge difference and could be seen as a similar path to a foundation course in art before studying fine art at university.

Teachers don’t write and sometimes guide students in utterly the wrong directions and praise the wrong things: overwriting, for example, or too much telling. If the Creative Writing A-level could have an excellent course guide (much like the OU Creative Writing guide) it might help to train teachers to focus on, and engage with, the right things.

Existing A-levels do give students a literary background, but they emphasise analysis rather than creativity.

The Creative Writing [A-level] will make a difference. As long as it doesn’t become a vehicle for maintaining mainstream literary culture or establish a narrow curriculum of reading or effects.

Most students are clearly not used to independent working and, crucially, most take some time to acclimatise to workshop culture.

Existing A-levels in English Literature and Language unfortunately seem to have a narrowing rather than expanding effect on students. They tend to enter our programme therefore with ‘safe’ ways of reading and writing, and looking for ‘instructions’ on how to succeed. I would hope that a Creative Writing A-level may help keep creative and imaginative ‘doors’ open for students, encouraging craft analysis but also looking outward, engaging with contemporary culture and experience. I would love to see students arrive more open to and in touch with their creativity and imagination, underpinned by some essential skills on how to realise their talents...

All this makes contemporary work – which is what writers and those involved in writing ultimately pursue. An introduction at this level to the methodology of the writing workshop and to the assessment strategies of creative portfolio and reflective commentary would also be of great value in terms of the students’ transition into HE.

There is currently little opportunity for the creative language work that pupils engage in during early school years to be capitalised upon or developed during the GCSE and A-level period. This gap in school education is often exposed when students enter HE and the workplace, where they are required to think imaginatively. This proposal addresses that gap directly.

I particularly applaud the way you have allied a sense of intellectual adventure and stimulus with a genuinely transferable and vocational element. The whole programme will help encourage students to experiment and grow their skills whilst guarding them against any of the damagingly solipsistic narratives which often bedevil students’ conceptions of what Creative Writing is.

What’s interesting about the proposed Creative Writing A-level is that it makes them think about how they could respond, intellectually and creatively, to a piece of writing – and this would be very good preparation.

An A-level will make a huge difference and necessitate a thorough rethink of the ‘entry level’ for Creative Writing. This is by no means a bad thing.

There was inevitably some concern.

[It] wouldn’t be a ‘home run’ for entry here. English Literature is the requirement. [I] did Biology, and like a diverse A-level choice. Creative Writing with other arts A-levels might look too ‘comfortable’. Qualifications do need to be robust, but evolving. I would hate to see a Creative Writing A-level with a fixed syllabus.

Regarding the fact that not all students will have done the Creative Writing A-level, it was commented:
There may be some difficulties in differentiating at Level 4 between students with Creative Writing A-level and those without but this is no different from the situation we face in our subject area (which combines literary studies and linguistics) in cases where students enter with only one English A-level (e.g. in either Literature or Language). All Level 4 modules are designed to be formative.

The recent article, “Where are they coming from?” published in Writing in Education No. 57 (Wilkinson 2012) is still pertinent, as incoming students will continue to represent varying levels of Creative Writing experience. For those who have studied the new A-level, however, a baseline of knowledge and expectation will have been usefully established.

3.3. Study support

There do of course exist various means of support for students experiencing difficulty in transition. It is mentioned how:

[Students] can be very dependent/needy in terms of relationships with tutors. I fear this will get worse as the fees increase ... [A] compulsory Study Skills module in the first semester covers essay writing, how to précis, referencing/bibliographies, note taking, research (databases, for critical sources), in the context of a critical exploration of academic writing about traditions and culture of writing.

There are study advice services and year tutors widely available, offering pastoral as well as academic advice. One university claims:

…a lot of support ... to help students with the transition from school to university: this includes an Academic Guidance Centre, training courses, induction week, introductory lectures, online help (and a virtual learning environment), and so on.

An important role has been played by the Royal Literary Fund (RLF), which offers a scheme with a specific remit of “helping students with their writing skills ... an exciting and innovative venture which is already having positive results. Universities from all groupings and with different missions have been involved as the problem of poor writing skills is not limited to any sector of higher education”. NAWE has worked closely with the RLF, despite some criticism of the programme dedicating the efforts of creative writers to “remedial” matters.

At certain universities, where there is a significant number of students who have been out of formal education for a long time, there is extra support on offer. Measures include recording classes for individual students, so that those unfamiliar with note-taking can go over the content in their own time, and putting aside extra time to check understanding of course and assessment requirements.

3.4. Satisfaction and retention

A lack of preparedness was felt to result in a steep learning curve for the students, sometimes leading to students failing courses or dropping out of university. This challenge was considered to add to the financial, social, and personal challenges faced by new undergraduates. (Mehta et al. 2012)

In view of the exceptional fit of Creative Writing with HE study, it is unsurprising that retention of students is very high. Drop-out of 5% (below the overall national average) is considered unusual, with ill-health or finance issues contributing.

Some first-semester drop-outs do happen, due to mis-expectations. Interviews – sadly not widespread – help counteract this occurrence. It should also be noted that transfer in sometimes exceeds transfer out, in one case by four to one.

There is, admittedly, some discrepancy between internal feedback and National Student Survey comments (which tend to be closely aligned to results).

Students frequently complain about a lack of contact hours (despite Creative Writing’s edge on this front) and plans to address this through Moodle and other virtual interfaces are not entirely convincing. Nevertheless, many students take OU courses precisely because the lack of physical contact suits their personal and work arrangements.
[Ours] are distance learning modules, so retention is different from campus universities. Even so, Creative Writing modules’ retention and pass figures are far above most other Arts modules.

Module-level feedback is plentiful, and a usefully detailed indication of how courses meet students’ expectations:

…one-to-one mentoring is a particularly useful way of gauging how things are going for individuals.

A local departmental document asks students to reflect on what they have put in, as well as what they have gained. They tend to be very happy with Creative Writing, and the attention given to drafts etc.

It’s part of the course evolution, with students kept fully informed. There are 3-hour ‘open’ meetings each week. There’s constant exchange.

Students appreciate the opportunity to:

…learn the craft of writing in different genres.

…study writing with professional writers of some achievement; the opportunity to study and engage in writing relevant to their own heritage and experience.

Students are particularly enthusiastic about visiting professional writers. There is praise for the level of individual attention from lecturers and their willingness to receive and respond promptly to drafts of work in progress, though as evident from other comments, more of this is available in some universities than others.

The workshop method is very popular, in preference to lectures. It is however mentioned that:

The biggest area of complaint from students is about poor classroom participation by peers.

An additional issue is “timetabling, which is done centrally at this university and often causes difficulties”. The timing of certain content within a module is sometimes questioned, for example students wanting an earlier introduction to particular elements, something that is potentially addressed by the new A-level.

There is some disappointment from students who make choices late and have to accept second-choice options. This is likely to be exacerbated by high fees and therefore a reasonable “right” to their chosen focus. Some students cite the importance of being taught by “published writers in a research unit with an impressive RAE/REF record”. Some student dissatisfaction relates more to their university generally, rather than the course.

Some students cite an issue regarding how their work can be valued on an ongoing basis, regardless of choosing writing as an explicit career. NAWE’s provision (through the Writer’s Compass) is of key importance here: students need to know that they can find support, whatever the trajectory of their work.

[students are] seldom aware of their progression or gain in writing and employability skills, even when these are pointed out … they also often believe that an MA will either guarantee jobs or publication – although we never suggest this.

Some of our mature students have felt that the careers aspects sometimes miss their needs … but the hobbyist students are trending off and this is less of an issue.

Most programmes are modified according to student feedback, with some universities considering this vital (with both content and teaching methods flexible and responsive). Others say that validation fixes courses in stone for long periods.

We will change module content where we feel that this might better engage students. We will not however change content just because it is felt to be ‘difficult’.

We work hard to establish and agree on what we value about our programme, and only shift things when there are real trends within the student feedback, and in our own approaches.

We formalised individual tutorial arrangements for story feedback, following workshop [feedback], also the use of non university-based venues [e.g. libraries and galleries].
We do listen to our students and we try to adapt things. Diverse interests and needs make this difficult sometimes but one of the things we’ve done to address this is a rolling programme of elective choices.

Generic forms though are patronising, and we plan to change. How, for instance, can students aged 18 rate the design of a course?

4. Teaching

The NAWE Benchmark includes a description of the various teaching methods and styles used on Creative Writing programmes. Feedback now shows how positively universities have reacted to the document: it is widely referenced, viewed as appropriately open-ended and found useful in external moderation and validation. Not all respondents were entirely aware of it, however, and one states that: “we benchmark according to the professional and critical standards of the publishing industry”. This is a curious response, seemingly unrelated to teaching or learning. The very notion of a Creative Writing benchmark may therefore need to be refined and re-pitched.

‘Benchmark’ is a convenient word, but ‘keynote’ feels more like the (useful) function of the NAWE document. It only seems like an orthodoxy to people who have a different orthodoxy to promote.

Benchmark, keynote or progressive report, any Creative Writing document will be hard-pushed to avoid one familiar topic...

4.1. The workshop

I have spent the last thirty years giving writing workshops. That is to say, I have spent three decades trying to use a communal, public instrument to help people perfect what is an individual and private, sometimes very private craft. A. L. Kennedy (Morley 2012)

The NAWE Benchmark Statement makes clear that, although the workshop is central to most Creative Writing courses, it takes a variety of forms. This is well described by Philip Gross and others in their contributions to Does the Workshop Still Work? (Donnelly 2010). In the Good Practice Guide, Micheline Wandor suggested that Creative Writing should “jettison the term ‘workshop’ and use ‘seminar’ instead”, something on which she would crusadingly elaborate in her book The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else (2008). Respondents here are suitably scathing of the workshop’s worst traits: “like asking apprentice mechanics to fix a warp drive”.

There’s a typical workshop model that does need to be questioned. How does an 18-year-old know how to criticise something without leadership? It is a false, lazy democracy, and a waste of time – e.g. discussing the use of a particular comma. Close editing is what writers do – but not in public!

The Guide nevertheless championed the workshop’s essential emphasis on “trust, collaboration and support as well as challenge”, and those terms still hold good. (A list of additional merits might include: receiving and responding to peer and tutor feedback, learning to critique, and learning through the process.) The workshop’s worst incarnations have probably now been thoroughly rumbled and we now have prevalent models that are “carefully cultured”, at once more subtle and more rigorous. The Arvon model – the “jewel in the crown” of the Arts Council’s portfolio, practical, skills-led (and free of course of academic constraints) – is cited as exemplary.

Good workshops generate an ensemble excitement, and work that students didn’t anticipate.

A multiplicity of models is undoubtedly a strength but “models” is still somehow the wrong word. A. L. Kennedy (Morley 2012) states her belief that “writing is personal ... This belief, like all my beliefs, affects how I run workshops” and it is this sense of endless creative possibility that distinguishes the workshop. To describe it as an “established” or “signature” pedagogy is to misunderstand it and cast it as orthodoxy – the very thing that Creative Writing programmes strive to avoid. The workshop’s mercurial, enigmatic character is part of its purpose. Students should not be surprised to experience workshops taking place on forest walks, in a theatre space or a Magnetic Resonance Hall.

Cheryl Moskowitz (2013) asks why, if we value writing without a prescribed formula, we should not equally endorse an approach to teaching writing that is equally free of instructions or guidelines. “I cannot think of any writer who would not acknowledge that there is some risk attached to the act of writing, yet when it comes to the
teaching of writing we are perhaps a little less willing to admit to, examine or embrace the idea that risk-taking is part of our role.” At a recent conference at Lancaster University (Changing the Conversation: Artists’ Practice in Participatory Settings, 2013), Helen Nicholson posed the concept of the “poetics of failure”, a version of the mantra from Samuel Beckett’s *Worstward Ho* (1983): “No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” It’s also, perhaps, a mantra for the workshop.

As Philip Gross comments: “We could search for principles and procedures to prevent the failings of the workshop. That search would be the wrong search. For teacher and learner alike, the workshop setting involves skill. Skill develops by practice, by trial (and error), by reflection and repeated new trials over time” (Donnelly 2010).

4.2. **Size matters**

A cornerstone of the *Good Practice Guide* was a limit to the workshop size: 15; the number beyond which the workshop’s sensitive interactivity is diminished. Now it would seem 20 is not unusual and even that figure sometimes conflicts with a general university mandate of 30 (with the rigidity of the timetable a further contributing factor). One respondent mentions 50. Pitched against this grudging expansion, however, are the figures from the higher-ranking universities, where a workshop of 12 or even ten is the norm. On one programme there are plans to reduce this further, to groups of 6 to 8.

There’s a determination to be smaller, and that will surely be de rigueur for all universities, in justifying fees.

This is both logical and contentious, pointing the way towards a two-tier system in which the workshop is either nurtured or distorted, with the student experience varying wildly.

Writers, of course, are masters of ingenuity:

> We have some pride in devising ways to reproduce much of the workshop experience through splitting into small groups or pairs, first modelling styles of response in the whole group class … then sharing our findings, looking for general principles, at the end.

Postgraduate workshops are more consistently small: 4 to 12. The fact that some BAs are coming close to this invokes the idea of them possessing a more “postgraduate feel”. For students elsewhere, within bigger-group scenarios, tutorials may not be a standard offer, accentuating the lower level of their experience. The Benchmark stresses that “the importance of individual attention to Creative Writing students should not be underestimated” and courses that decide to ignore it, for whatever reason, are possibly risking their status.

> Workshops are particularly valued by students … as are tutorials. Students consistently praise both of these teaching methods, citing them as inspirational and instructive for their present and future work.

Meanwhile, as workshop sizes generally expand, their length is sometimes being curtailed; the three-hour format reduced to two, the banality of university room-booking arrangements overriding any pedagogic imperative.

4.3. **Other strategies**

The Benchmark Statement cites the range of “other teaching strategies” involved, such as lectures and project-based learning, and the list is well mirrored in the responses to this research. It is notable that both refer to input by industry specialists and off-campus visits: these are increasingly seen as core, not subsidiary aspects of a course but are addressed here mainly in Section 6 (Employability).

Several of the “alternative” strategies are in truth workshops by any other name, though one university (in favour of “deliberate difference”) is consistent in its rejection of the term:

> We don’t use the workshop method – we’ve replaced workshopping with guided critical self-reflection and masterclass-style feedback.

I’m interested in some of the new, emerging pedagogies, like the National Academy of Writing (NAW) masterclasses that we’ve taken part in. I do think that the workshop format is absolutely necessary but also that other formats should be explored, and new ideas developed.
One programme offers “tertulias”, the Borgesian idea of two or three individuals taking part in a non-academic forum.  

In or out of the workshop or its variants, tutors’ individual approaches to writing are reflected in their teaching. They discuss their own creative process and editing, part of what students value most. As one department puts it: “Their is interesting minds, hard to classify, not celebrity megastars but “hard core”, serious writers.”

One first year module incorporates whole sessions led by visiting tutors offering their own writing methods as well as sharing their work.

Intensive residential elements are increasingly incorporated, reflecting perhaps the popularity of Arvon courses, which may constitute some students’ first, formative experience of Creative Writing tuition.

There is a major focus on “articulating practice through reflection and commentary, knowledge and understanding of contexts (including social, political, cultural, commercial), genre, conventions, and traditions.”

Programmes are clear about the structure of their offerings:

We tend to ‘teach’ for the first hour (craft elements/writing/close reading/pair work/discussion etc.) and then workshop material that has been circulated and read in advance (crucial for a considered response, I think).

Each three-hour session includes a range of teaching and learning methods: short lectures, in-class writing challenges, collaborative exercises, student presentations, debates and discussions, games and experiments, analytical reading, guest talks, one-to-one tutorials.

Teaching text, core readings and writing exercises are delivered in book form, with online forums, workshops and tutor group contact via email, phone and these forums.

Students’ work will be looked at in detail in class once or twice a term. We also use Moodle for peer and tutor informal feedback.

The practice of peer-review (i.e. workshopping) is not introduced till midway through the second year. Everyone [then receives] a 1:1 tutorial the next day ... at all levels: exercise-based learning in the early stages, giving way to the peer-review workshop in the latter part of the BA and at MA level, giving way to independent research.

Online delivery offers, paradoxically, “improved access to tuition”; all elements of discussion and critique are delivered in written form; the entire process particularly well attuned to the study of writing.

In one case, the overall offer is two modules per year; each year-long module consisting of a one-hour lecture and a two-hour workshop per week. Analysing this crudely on a monetary basis, as a student well might, would show that £9,000 buys 144 hours of contact time: £62.50 per hour, a figure that is hard to defend when compared to Creative Writing tuition taking place outside HE.

If this suggests HE is poor value, or even miserly, university involvement in delivering the “teacher days” for the new Poetry by Heart initiative tells a different story: it demonstrates a generous willingness to put academic enquiry at the service of public literary interest and activity; it also shows how a literary critical approach to poetry can inform a project with a more popular pitch.

Creative Writing in HE is distinguished by a critical attention to the creative process itself. It is centred on:

Critical discussion leading to understanding of writers’ (varied) approaches to producing particular effects or features of genre etc., then experimenting for oneself, followed by equivalent critical discussion...

Disciplined use of reflective journals is important on several of our undergraduate modules ... at least one third-year module now asks for a Workshop Log.

Coaching [is] given in creative and rigorous kinds of reflective writing and journal-keeping alongside the creative work.

[We teach] theories and models of creativity, and the postgraduate taught programme has a module on teaching creative writing (still relatively rare).
As programmes evolve, incorporating new staff and new ideas, other tutors are themselves constantly learning. In 2012-13, one programme planned to introduce new modules around ecology, exploring rivers, the unconscious, and devising apps. As this suggests, modules are not necessarily genre-based but structured thematically, so that students move between genres on the one module.

International exchange leads to additional approaches, for instance the “story workshop” pioneered by Columbia College Chicago. Specific arrangements of this type are perhaps more influential than university-wide affiliations, for example with a particular US college. Links of this latter type are in place with North American, Canadian and Australian universities (with one university offering a more formal four-year course that includes a year at Monash University in Melbourne). Within Europe, individual students achieve mobility through placements at universities with an Erasmus Charter, an excellent scheme but not one that links Creative Writing activity as such. Staff exchanges, though favoured, are considered difficult in the current economic climate. The pattern of students’ working lives (funding their studies) means that not all overseas opportunities are taken up.

4.4. Reading

Getting students to read widely is the perennial problem – good students do it automatically, poorer students need to but don’t.

I’ve had at least student say to me that they refused to read others’ books as they didn’t want to have their own writing ‘contaminated’!

This, of course, is what fuels the (rare) objection to Single Honours Creative Writing degrees, but it is countered by those who are frankly in awe of students’ extensive reading. One lecturer comments that students stimulate him to read widely.

If anything is key to Creative Writing pedagogy it is reading – both widely and with critical attention to technique. Philip Gross mentions that “a workshop is as much a reading as a writing group with the reading in the service of the writing” (Donnelly 2010).

The importance of reading “whole texts”, not just “gobbets”, is also stressed, although the breadth and depth of the extracts offered by the OU course books, with their further recommendations, is widely admired.

The number of books published on Creative Writing is overwhelming, without being especially valued. The many “How to write” books, in particular, are not considered conducive to the stimulation of original or innovative writing.

In some people’s view, too many offerings seem to come out of REF-related pressure. One author admits to have written a book at first unwillingly, but managed, in his view, “to turn it into a book of creative writing about creative writing”. Some tutors find the more “eccentric” ones most useful, considering others to be rather pedestrian. There are signs of a shift towards more philosophic offerings, however:

Some of the more recent texts sit uneasily, for me, because they address both tutors and students.

Regarding academic books on pedagogy, it is commented: “It is desperately hard to induce undergraduates to consider the subject on this level”.

“Writers on writing”, on the other hand, are considered especially good, for instance: Martin Amis, The War Against Cliché (2001); Robert Hass, 20th Century Pleasures (2000); Dennis O’Driscoll, Troubled Thoughts, Majestic Dreams (2001); also cited are individual essays, including those by Tony Hoagland and Bill Manhire writing about their practice. Above all, Reading Like a Writer, by Francine Prose (2006) is particularly highly prized.

Various strategies and resources are in place to encourage student reading. First year “reading modules” are common. One university has a Writers’ Room (created with external funding), which is open on evenings and weekends, and contains a library of over 2,000 of the books that staff believe their students should read. Another has a Reader in Residence:

He is a leading bibliophile who appears at least once a fortnight to consult with students. His job is to help them build personalised reading lists for every student, in response to their individual creative ambitions, and to stretch and challenge their reading.
It could be said that some institutions have an “established pedagogy” by way of their “own” textbooks, though they would tend to refute this, laying claim to something more restless and inventive:

The programme operates like a ghost within the university. People are curious, yes, but no one has ever interfered, even though some teaching is very surprising in its pedagogy. From the VC there is never a ‘well done’ but ‘what’s next?’ [The university] is a business-led, capitalist institution, yet harbours diverse, radical left-wing thinkers. It teaches people how to think.

4.5. Theory

Theory (as distinct from praxis) in writing is the last refuge of the scoundrel.

It’s often badly written, pseudo-scientific, and can turn off the natural magic of language.

At the AWP Conference in Denver, 2010, one speaker said: “we don’t want to become obsessed with theory, like they are in the UK” (Munden 2011). The very impulse of Creative Writing in US universities was associated with a rejection of the rise of theory within English Literature studies. Here, the jury is still out, maybe for some time. At the mention of theory, writers seem to leap into two camps, for and against, and whole programmes are similarly aligned. (In Australia, by contrast, theory seems universally embraced.) A requirement to include an “informed location of your work in a critical context or theoretical framework” as stipulated by one university would be anathema for others.

‘Theory’ is generally much more important to English Literature academics than it is to anyone else, and they grossly overrate its interest and its importance.

[Theory is] an integral part — students have to write academic/reflective essays as part of every module.

I’m not sure [theory] helps them much ... witness some of the awful projects done for Creative Writing PhDs nowadays, deconstructing this and that, and in the meantime producing totally uncommercial manuscripts.

This intellectual skilling-up is part of our vocational mission, not an academic add-on.

More balanced views can end up chasing their own tail:

It plays some part – the theory of showing and telling being tied to mimesis and diegesis at L2; the theory of montage according to Eisenstein at L3 – but it is not prominent. And cultural and literary theory are very largely subsumed by practical theories to do with poetics and storytelling.

Amanda Boulter, in “Writing like a Nincompoop” (2005), explores this issue in depth. In her opinion: “Too often ‘literary theory’ is presented within Creative Writing courses as some kind of literary booby trap that will strip Creative Writing of its distinctiveness, and squash its potential under the great weight of English Studies.”

Robert McKee (1999) writes that: “the method of teaching creative writing in American Universities has shifted from intrinsic to the extrinsic. Trends in literary theory have drawn professors away from the deep sources of story toward language, codes, text – story seen from the outside.” Boulter, however, points out that the “turning points, spines, progression, crisis, climax” and other aspects of storytelling that he champions are equally the heart of narratology.

Does there come a time when a particular term is fundamentally unhelpful and should perhaps be avoided? By “theory”, some simply mean “modelling”, a standard (and thoroughly effective) introduction to Creative Writing at primary school level. Others use it as a synonym for the more universally valued “critical thinking”.

I would distinguish between theory and a disciplined reflectiveness. The latter need not be naïve; it benefits from being offered a lexicon of agreed terms, and in the process those terms are opened to consideration and critique. [Our] teaching has a historic (OK, call it old-fashioned) preference for the goals of communicative sensual immediacy in writing, and a caution about offering abstract principles to feed the work. At the same time, a wide range of examples is offered, and the tutors’ own techniques are often informed by the writing experiences that theories formalise. An exciting development is a research group in which creative writing and English academics come together to explore the different languages within which they and we work. I am keen for this dialogue, and the interest in creative-critical writing, to become part of the long-running MPhil in Writing programme (now extending to include the possibility of PhDs).
What many writers working in HE (let alone those outside academia) find repellent is the way in which some theoretical writing is tugged towards a style that is at odds with Creative Writing itself. As Paul Mills (2010) writes: “If this kind of style is the price we have to pay [for institutionalising Creative Writing] then it’s not worth it.” If we accept David Morley’s assertion (in his keynote talk at the NAWE Conference 2012) that “all writing, at its best, is Creative Writing”, then we ought to expect any Creative Writing study to match the standards we set for Creative Writing itself. We need more pieces of critical reflection that are as creative and stimulating as that by Philip Gross (2009), writing about his collaboration with Simon Denison on *I Spy Pinhole Eye* (Gross and Denison 2009). That “captured the essence of [NAWE’s] aim to consider both the craft and the teaching of writing as a combined endeavour. ...it offers an example of one of our most esteemed poets being thoroughly interested in questioning his own practice” (Munden 2009). There is a major difference between this and what is, ironically, a more “acceptable” form of research: the book of poems itself. Such an article allied to the book of poems itself would surely come closer to a recognisable form of creative research, of value to others venturing into similar territory.

4.6. Assessment

He told us you couldn’t really use criteria to assess writing, you had to go by gut reaction. At this level, I think we all accepted that. (Gee 2000)

“At this level”? Such a comment perhaps explains why Booker Prize judges can still resist “criteria” while primary school pupils put up with them galore. Things have nevertheless changed over the past decade. As the Good Practice Guide mentions, NAWE had put forward (in 2003) a sample set of “criteria for assessment of portfolios of writing”. These were developed by Liz Cashdan, Livi Michael, Ian Pople and the late Ann Atkinson. For a decade at least, the matrix they created was a frequently requested document, and during this time, individual universities refined variants for themselves (with or without reference to the NAWE matrix). Criteria are usually very clear: “They aren’t the same as those in other institutions but we rarely disagree among ourselves or with our externals.” There is general understanding, as marking schemes are well related to what is taught. Double marking of course helps, in terms of ensuring consistent interpretation (though an interesting riposte to this was published in Writing in Education 48 [Flann 2009]).

Some programmes are more “literature-based” than others, and there can also be a variation on the degree to which things like poor spelling/grammar or going over the word limit are marked down. Subjectivity still has a grip, hardly surprising in a subject where imagination is highly prized, though one institution admits putting special value on “the subconscious”, which is surely harder to justify or judge. More common variants depend on whether or not creative work is marked in the context of accompanying critical/reflective commentaries, or in the context of evidence of development from drafts – not always a required (or permissible) element. Additionally:

> Work that pushes boundaries can be difficult to categorise, personal taste can get in the way, work that you watched progress can be difficult to objectify.

A comment that “a science fiction course might have different criteria [to that of a literary fiction]” would no doubt infuriate some. However:

> I think every programme has the duty of defining its own individual aims, objectives and learning outcomes, and designing teaching accordingly.

> Any attempt to universalise criteria will simply exacerbate the problem I’ve suggested earlier – a lack of robust diversity, innovation and debate in the discipline.

> In one module of mine, risk taking and submitting work that is not the student’s strongest is asked for … alongside a short reflective [commentary] analysing its successes and failures and possibilities for future development.

> Some possible principles – i.e. rewarding showing rather telling – can be shown to be flawed by exemplary work that defies orthodoxy, and by the inexactitude of the terminology. Having said that, in my travels as external examiner I see common and recurring features in many assessment criteria. This is no accident – but the broader and more universal that assessment criteria attempt to be (i.e. those at university or faculty level as opposed to module level), the more bureaucratic and meaningless they will appear to students. And students are the important readers of assessment criteria – [offering] them the vocabulary of achievement in a particular module … Without such vocabulary they will be unaware what success or failure actually is and are likely to be confused by grades, and even to contest them.
The critical commentary is viewed by many to be of crucial importance. “How else will students improve if not through critical engagement with their work?” Even so, vocabulary can be confusing. “Reflective commentary” is the widely preferred term, though some insist on “reflexive”, others “contextual”; elsewhere “poetics” is seen to offer “a way of allowing creative writing dialogue with itself, beyond the monologic of commentary or reflection”. Irrespective of these nuances, any “supplementary discourse” needs to be distinct from literary critical “justification” of the text; it should not be used as a means of assessment, where judgement of creative work has doubt. Assessing the commentary, with appropriate weighting, requires its own criteria. It should, perhaps, itself be creative:

It is interesting so long as the critical reflection is also a form of creative writing (as with the Letters of Montaigne and other models of elegance).

Some programmes avoid it as a written requirement:

We tend to view the articulated critical responses of the workshop as sufficient occasion for the demonstration of critical understanding.

Others require students to consider, more informally, “how their writing works within the world”. This attitude would seem to bridge the very different requirements of academia and the more commercial literary life. By contrast, most professional writers would surely reject a requirement that:

[Students] must be able to articulate their practice and their process, and also critical/theoretical and other contexts.

There is, moreover, a sense that the “requirement” is not always well taught, viewed by students as an “add-on”. It is said that “they need to write knowing what and how, by design not by accident” but they do not need a framework that skewes the essence of the craft. If writing is a matter of adventure, experiment and risk, then we do students no favours by insisting that it is presented as if nothing has been left to chance.

In some quarters there is resistance to straightforward/banal learning outcomes:

All [our] modules are designed by their own departments and don’t need to conform to any model. Confidence in your programme enables you to concentrate properly on true work. If you are very sure of the way ahead, as an institution, you can then be yourself.

4.7. The worst offence

Plagiarism, thankfully, is not a widespread problem, perhaps because it is seen as “a crime against the act and art of writing, not just malpractice.”

Students come on a CW course, at least in part, to discover or develop a ‘voice’, the signature sound of themselves on the page. It’s my experience that this is a more pressing imperative that the acquisition of grades. So why would they plagiarise someone else’s voice?

Work is routinely checked using the Turnitin website but the visibility of evolving work tends to vouch for authenticity. “We see students for 12 hours of individual tutorials through the course so we see work develop – it’s hard to get plagiarism past that.” The practice of submitting drafts alongside finished work is however sometimes opposed by general university regulations. Yet again, institutional machinery would seem to run counter to good practice.

4.8. Teaching to teach

Are lecturers themselves sufficiently prepared? Can the un-trained teacher teach? These are questions of increasing urgency, in view of current government proposals. There are certainly some worries that the formal preparation for HE lecturers is in some cases too perfunctory.

Much of the pedagogy is formulated through hands-on experience rather than through being a student oneself ... we still function more independently than I feel is entirely healthy. It means we are often ‘making it up’ on the hoof.
As David Starkey describes the situation at Louisiana State University in the 1980s: “No one was hiring good teachers; colleges and universities wanted well-published writers.” (Donnelly 2010: 150)

When asked about connections with education and teacher training departments, several universities sounded keen, but not with fully formulated plans. Some do offer short courses for PhD students who wish to teach on the BA, others arrange placements in schools, but the scope here – especially in view of the new A-level – is very much under-developed. A specific problem identified in the North-West is that PGCE courses are over-subscribed and reluctant to accept Single Honours Creative Writing graduates, a situation that needs to be addressed.

There are at least now some clearly defined modules available within Creative Writing MAs, addressing the teaching of Creative Writing, which should make a positive impact on the teaching credentials of the next generation. Even where these are not explicitly on offer, students are experiencing the various approaches to teaching which they, as future HE tutors, may need to replicate or further develop.

NAWE, in 2010, put forward a proposal for a new type of MA in Teaching Creative Writing. The idea was to bring together the various modules offered by individual universities, creating a national framework within which students could build a programme of study. There was considerable interest expressed in this idea but it has not as yet progressed.
5. Research

The process of Creative Writing may be seen as a form of ‘speculative’ research that is then re-visited and tested through redrafting, reconsideration and revision, as the author explores their own text as its predicted reader.

The above statement in the NAWE Benchmark is deliberately broad and could be construed as relating to Creative Writing at any level. There are no clear lines between the exploratory work of undergraduate students and that of postgraduate students on taught Masters programmes – or even those conducting their own doctoral enquiries. There are third year undergraduate modules that require completion of a full poetry collection or screenplay (and a number of students have gone on to win Gregory Awards with those collections).

The MA is widely considered to be “all about the first book” and yet not all MAs require the completion of a full-length work. Some “aim towards” but do not demand it; others make it clear at interview that the one-year structure cannot involve supervising the writing of a full novel; and to call a course “Starting a novel” at least puts honesty up front. Some limitations are on account of university “equivalence” rulings, whereby “permissible” word counts are centrally determined. This is mainly at undergraduate level, but certainly militates against ambitious work.

Can it really be true that “a finely wrought fragment can be more valuable”? It is surely difficult to argue against the supremacy of courses that actually help writers to fulfil their plans, perhaps one reason for the increasing popularity of the Creative Writing PhD.

Students will sometimes enrol with “a novel to polish” and it has always been the case that some writers choose university simply to give themselves time on their book. For the work suddenly to be classified as research, however, demands a rationale, otherwise it could well be perceived as a convenient whim.

5.1. Practice-based, practice-led

The most prevalent “justification” of Creative Writing (as) research – beyond the Benchmark comment above – is through the critical commentary, itself a widespread feature of Creative Writing study at all levels. In describing such research, the terms “practice-based” and “practice-led” are often used interchangeably but a distinction exists: in the former, the creative output is the prime contribution to new knowledge; in the latter, the research leads primarily to new understanding about practice itself. More generally, however:

Creative work itself forms the centre of gravity of research degree submissions, with a smaller paper showing critical skills, scholarship and an ability to articulate the knowledge gained in Creative Writing terms.

Not everyone approves. Some would prefer to see “traditional PhDs undertaken in tandem with writing first books” (though if the emphasis is indeed on originality, is “traditional” research not something of a contradiction in terms?). One programme has plans to offer a wholly new model, in partnership with an Australian university:

A true creative art PhD. Existing models tend towards a false representation of how creative writing gets done. By all means encourage students to write reviews etc., but not the critical commentary on their own work.

Is the critical commentary outmoded, irrelevant where the creative practice is fully expressive of its research purpose and findings? Some would hope so, mentioning in particular:

…memoir and creative non-fiction essay writing, which feels as if it addresses research questions simply by being written!

Practice-based research would seem to be dominant, though there are some interesting exceptions, for instance a PhD currently underway with Creative Writing group pedagogy as its subject. Others champion “writing about technique, craft and pedagogy, writing about theoretical approaches to memory and writing and the creative process”, while expressing disappointment that: “For research purposes however [the area of creative writing pedagogy] is impossible to justify”. This is of course not true, though there has, admittedly, been an anecdotal sense that anything pedagogical ranks lower than primary research in the relevant subject area.
Instead of focusing so much on individuals’ “ability to articulate the knowledge gained”, Creative Writing departments might do well to concentrate more on that knowledge being fundamentally useful to the writing community. If there is significant knowledge emerging from – or embedded within – Creative Writing research, then it must be published. It will be interesting to see if the new venture from Barbican Press, dedicated to publishing novels written for PhDs, does indeed “push the field forward” (Goodman 2013) If, for Creative Writing, the notion of a growing body of knowledge through research is to be taken seriously, it needs to be visible and accessible. It should, at the very least, be a very simple matter for all doctoral abstracts to be logged and made searchable. Indeed, the structure is already in place. NAWE has for some time proposed a comprehensive database of research but a system of collecting this data has not been effectively established.

5.2. The financial imperative

Universities are understandably very willing to see students translate their desire to write into a research proposal. There’s money to be made from it. (If that sounds cynical, then let it also be said that Creative Writing supervisors have demonstrated considerable sensitivity to students’ own commercial interests, for instance in enabling a doctoral work to adjust to the profitable – though initially conflicting – demands of an agent/publisher.) Writers employed by universities are signing up to this strategy not least because they are claiming similar status for their own creative output. While scientists conduct their research (with or without university funding) under that name and no other, the vast majority of writers and other artists undertake their work under no such banner.

Outsiders inevitably question why writers benefitting from a salary need additional funding, in the form of research grants, to write their books. Some writer-lecturers concur:

Tenured writers in universities complain too much – they do get lots of time off.

[I have] no time for university staff moaning; they are in a position of perfect symbiosis. Why would teaching staff not be writing books?

One respondent even finds it “distracting to be away from teaching”, viewing the interaction with students and colleagues an important nourishment to his craft:

Teaching terms are seen as rewarding as research leave, the tutors themselves gain.

Some institutions, however, categorise staff either as teachers or researchers, a spurious distinction, since the writer’s creative output is what qualifies them to teach. There’s an associated and prejudiced danger that “non-research” staff have no access to funding, for example to the NAWE conference. One way or another, research and funding are joined at the hip.

Some students do gain funding for their research, for example from the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC). A few universities have their own studentships on offer. The reality of most students’ financial arrangements is simply not known: if they pay their own fees, then the system is content to know no more.

5.3. Ethics

Questioned about models of research, one respondent stated: “We tend to stress innovation and transgression with regard to form and subject matter.”

Transgression is a strong word, a bold if not brave one to use in this context. Several recent conference panels (at NAWE, AAWP and NonFictioNow, all in 2012) have explored the idea in some depth, with Randall Albers’ contribution published in Writing in Education (2013). All the more surprising, then, to find questions around ethics answered here rather thinly. Generally, universities’ ethical criteria and committees are considered satisfactory, though there is mention of “masses of forms to submit” (which begs the question as to how writers outside academia manage to negotiate the territory for themselves). One Creative Writing department has taken a positive initiative:

We devised an ethical protocol for interviewing living writers – much simpler than the university’s standard policy (which is based on the risks of social sciences research). It was accepted by the Research Office and relevant committees, maybe reassured to see us looking at it voluntarily. I recommend this as a general tactic: offer a version of your own devising before the standardised model is imposed on you.
Recent research in Australia resulted in a new code of ethics – a simple statement of shared values – being adopted by AAWP. Although NAWE has not chosen to embrace a version of that code, it will be interesting to see how well it becomes established, and to what effect.

Professor Jason Lee (University of Derby) has recently conducted research into ethics codes and guidance in the humanities in UK and international higher education institutions. This research is due to be published by the HEA in the 2013-14 academic year.
6. Employability

Our aim is to produce students who, having experimented with and developed their writing, are effective writers who are prepared and able to pursue their careers as they choose, whether that is on a conventional graduate track, within the creative industries, freelance, self-employed or a ‘portfolio’ worker.

I have set in place, as a core aspect of the course, visiting and teaching in local schools and colleges. I have ensured that the teaching element on the MA fosters valuable practical and theoretical skills, has a progression route and that, alongside the gaining of an academic qualification, students have, as an outcome, enhanced employability: the skills embedded increase the chances of obtaining a place on a PGCE; of teaching in the community; obtaining employment as a writer/teacher for [funded agencies]; or of working in publishing and editing.

Not surprisingly, all universities state a mission to increase the employability of their students. The particular emphasis, however, varies enormously. Specific attention to professional development, formerly the preserve of MAs, now features within BAs too, though it is mentioned that professional development planning (PDP) is considered a bit “abstract” for undergraduates. One programme mentions how “all students are invited to everything”, a reasonable approach, given how students are so varied in their readiness to consider employment matters.

Some programmes have an explicit focus on teaching “hard” vocational skills:

…to enable graduates to build a portfolio career which is relevant to their own practice, whilst they work on full-length projects. Areas we focus on include adaptation, abridgement, working with pre-created characters and worlds, development editing, collaborative working, reviewing, ghostwriting.

We provide training (as part of the course) in basic IT skills, web writing and design, desktop publishing and oral presentation (for which students are given workshops by a professional voice coach).

This focus on professional skills sometimes seems at odds with a programme’s equal emphasis on critical theory, though students in this case are at least being offered a challenging mix. In one university, a long-standing, popular vocational course (in the Continuing Education department) has been discontinued, leaving only the Creative and Critical Writing MA in the English department on offer.

Many universities engage visiting speakers – notably publishers and literary agents but also copy editors, literature development officers and festival coordinators.

Our course includes live projects including a literary festival, which has been running for 15 years, and work placements which range from literary agencies to theatre companies.

At MA level, we have an annual series of visits from agents and publishers and organise an agent mentoring scheme that pairs every graduate with a literary agent for four months at the end of the course. A comprehensive training programme has been developed for the PhD, with research methodology skills and employability as its two main foci.

Not all provision is seen to work well:

Employability classes are scheduled in evenings, so hard for some MA students to access.

An error such as this should easily be addressed but it points up the need to review things regularly and reinvigorate even the best ideas.

6.1. Professional development

Guidance on professional development is increasingly built into the core course provision at undergraduate level. Examples include modules on “writers at work” and a “careers week” in the second year. In some programmes, it is simply an informal offer, focusing on pitching and submitting to publishers. Some “careers advice” is still seen as a central university offering, rather than anything related specifically to Creative Writing.

For one MA programme it is a main focus: a personal development plan is part of the major project requirement, with a one-to-one session provided at the end.
The big commitment we make to all our students on graduation is that if they follow through on the feedback we’ve given, act on their own personal development plan, complete their full-length work and then come back to us, we will knock on doors, put calls in, and do our best to get them to an agent or publisher. The onus is on the student to do the high-quality work first, though.

Another programme’s well-established “master classes” have included input from NAWE staff (which is now a formal offer to any university). Others make use of NAWE resources, such as the “Getting to where you want to be” planning handbook (NAWE 2007).

One consequence of the growth of Creative Writing programmes is that a writer’s career is increasingly likely to involve working in HE. Some courses reflect this particular potential:

MA courses are situated towards the professional preparation end of the academic spectrum with publication as the desired outcome, though here too the courses offer a form of practice-based knowledge to support the study of English Literature. The PhD programme is more research oriented and while many of the students will be working on a full-length creative work which they hope to see published they are also undertaking training as researchers or scholars with a view to pursuing a career in academia.

6.2. Work placements

Many programmes arrange placements for their students and some are considering expanding this provision, in view of the current economic climate. In some cases, placements are the very means by which a programme addresses career preparation. One programme with a professional-writing focus has “30 publishers, agents and writers’ organisations offering placements to our students, mostly at M level.” Some have informal work experience schemes making use of their local small presses and other contacts. Others connect with schools, local authorities, galleries, museums and libraries.

There are work placements – with more planned on this front within the planned MFA: the second year will consist of a big idea/programme that connects with the world, and which could become subsequent employment.

Relationships with local theatres, large or small, have proved particularly fruitful, more a matter of exchange:

The Writing Centre offered [a rehearsal space] as well as the opportunity for directors to work with university staff. We hosted an international playwright in residence, writing a new play as well as teaching. The English Department of course has Shakespeare experts – but no previous link with the RSC. It is now a very positive thing to have live contact with actors and directors. It counters the idea of writers working alone.

Lecturers’ own connections (for example with publishers) play an important role in establishing internships and other work placement opportunities but students are increasingly challenged to make connections of their own, with an entrepreneurial requirement even built into their course.

The module also requires students to engage with external projects, and to identify opportunities for work and professional writing relating to their aspirations on graduation, then to produce CVs, submission and job application letters.

The value of writers setting up their own projects is increasingly recognised, partly for educational and career-based reasons but also as an act of community, which some programmes put to the fore.

6.3. Publishing

External examiners have remarked on the high level of professional preparation for approaching publishers but publication is rarely viewed as the main aim of a course.

[We want students] to evolve and find confidence in their work rather than depend on external validation.

[Our] publisher/agent day comes at end of the Spring term, so students are a little bit prepared for the reality presented, but with scope still to think about implications while still studying. The event is deliberately not at the very end of the course, as that would suggest that publication was The Goal.
Try keeping them [publishers] away! But you don’t validate your programme by having semi-permanent connections with agents/publishers. If you take one, you close down other possibilities.

Publications produced by universities themselves range from the photocopied pamphlet to the lavish anthology with a London launch, aimed at industry representatives.

The MA annual anthology is a major undertaking, supported by a dedicated MA module from which the editorial committee is recruited. This is given substantial financial support.

Some programmes discourage students from self-publishing and some are not keen to publish any work within the institution; others create whole modules around the publishing process – making collaborative editorial and commercial decisions. Certain magazines accept work from students nationwide.

Students set up collectives. Teamwork is an underlying principle of the programme.

They are directors of the medium, not a passive part. Every year it is the students themselves who raise money for an anthology and promote it – a punk DIY ethic: don’t expect people to do things for you; that would be falling for an old lie. You have to re-invent readership every single year, and [our programme] is a mechanism for this. We don’t sit back.

How starkly this attitude contrasts with the rather defeatist view expressed elsewhere that universities have “no staffing or resources available” for publishing of any sort.

### 6.4. Keeping track

Creative Writing programmes are typically very proud of their graduates and more might be done to highlight their successes and varied trajectories. The achievements of alumni are viewed as a selling point for any programme, not just those with strong publishing credentials. One programme mentions that “120 graduates have gone on to become serious writers”. Currently, most tracking is either done centrally or much less formally through subject-specific Facebook networking, though there are instances of a more structured approach, resulting in “a vibrant source of information, discussion and support”.

We stay in touch with students and direct them to publishers, competitions, agents, jobs.

One has just set up a rather impressive national organisation for the promotion of graphic fiction.

One of our MA alumni now has a senior role in the campus Careers Centre and organises Creative Writing-specific careers days and internships.

Some MAs recruit directly from their associated BA cohorts, building a strong community culture; some programme modules have input from recent graduates making their way in publishing or journalism.

Comparisons of “output” – a student equivalent of the REF – would undoubtedly be revealing, and no doubt influence recruitment. Understandably, it is resisted:

The publishing record of graduates is not the measure of success. 5% ‘success’ = 95% failure. Some universities deliberately take on writers with a publishing contract, which is a distasteful sham. Many [of our] students though do go on to do well – as writers, editors, publishers, producers – but we would never list their books.

At the Changing the Conversation conference (2013) it was emphasised that adaptability should be an integral part of any arts education, characterising courses in their entirety rather than provided as a separate(d) module. In this respect, Creative Writing courses are among those leading the way.

We create creative, flexible, literate, resourceful people. That’s preparation.
7. Conclusions

If we are to have a healthy educational culture, then we need ‘thinking’ degrees (such as Creative Writing) offering exposure to a range of ideas, teaching students how to think for themselves and to express themselves eloquently. Those in business would echo that.

Creative Writing in HE has become more assured in its teaching, research, and general conversation with the wider world. It has become more autonomous as a discipline, while maintaining important connections with other subjects – in some cases making its relevance felt across the whole university. Within an admittedly confusing scenario for HE generally, Creative Writing would appear to be as popular as ever.

Nor has consensus across the UK as to what constitutes good practice eroded essential variety. On the contrary, the range of forms and genres taught has expanded greatly, with notable inclusion of digital media. Technological developments have led to new ways of thinking about what Creative Writing is, and what “publishing” means.

Creative and media literacy seems to me to be of increasing importance in our digital age and many new writers are making effective and influential use of new forms.

There has been a marked growth in the area of Professional Writing, also in attention to professional development generally, whatever the focus of the course.

Courses have drawn attention to writing in general and underlined the centrality of writing to our culture(s) as a whole.

Its ‘uses’ in the world are much more transparent – so the public is less sceptical.

For some, new “assurance” is nothing new at all:

The undergraduate rise of Creative Writing ran concurrently with the so-called post-theory era; poetics per se would seem to have been re-occupied by those who write as opposed to those who theorise. This rhythmic shift of power is longstanding – at least since Aristotle and his Poetics.

Creative Writing has recovered the voice it lost 250 years ago.

Some claims for HE courses are still modest. They offer students: “confidence in and enjoyment of creative writing (regardless of their future career intentions)”.

They are giving young writers an opportunity to work with professional writers and polish their craft.

They provide writers with a source of income to support their writing (but may equally make it impossible for those writers to get on with their writing). They're producing more informed readers of writing, which improves the health of the wider literary culture. They make it easier for agents and publishers to source good new writing.

For some, a consequence of Creative Writing’s greater credibility within HE is a sense of it being “academicised”, though it is also commented that:

Creative Writing has also become part of the weave of the school of arts; institutionalised – in a good way.

One perceived downside of popularity is that programmes have a “large number of Creative Writing teachers who are still either under-qualified or have indifferent publication profiles”. The growing academic emphasis within staff recruitment is not universally welcome:

The BA-MA-PhD route is increasingly seen as a necessary qualification for working on Creative Writing courses – which is disastrous considering that it is possible to do that in a lot of institutions without actually finishing let alone publishing a whole novel.

Is Creative Writing at a crossroads, needing to choose either English Studies or the Creative Industries as its travelling companion? Assumptions are already being made both ways:
Creative Writing is a growth area and, linked to a wider study of literature in English, will lead to a transformation of English departments into centres of literary composition and study that defy that narrow nationalistic definition in the next 20–30 years.

Creative Writing ... produces students who are quite specifically ‘critical practitioners’, and who these days are also likely to have experience of a media production in a range of areas/platforms (digital, social media, radio, video), and as such are ... valuable across a wide range of fields within the cultural economy.

There would undoubtedly be a virtue in avoiding any departmental shackles and enabling Creative Writing to play a flexible role within education generally:

The ‘all writing at its best is creative writing’ message needs to become more widespread, in order to unlock imagination within other fields, other ways to perceive within those fields. The old lie of the two cultures still needs to be overturned; it’s so unhelpful at all levels of education. All subjects are connected in complex ways, and this complexity needs teasing out, not erasing.

7.1. The creative economy

Big questions are currently being asked about the impact of the arts on the creative economy. The Arts & Humanities Research Council is running a project investigating “how we think about the value of arts and culture to individuals and to society” (AHRC 2012). Evidence has also been submitted to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, with a recommendation that “the teaching of Creative Writing is included on the Committee’s list of creative industries and supported as such. Creative Writing courses feed other creative industries and provide transferrable skills that buoy British Industry in key ways” (Barnard 2013).

Responses here assert that Creative Writing has affected “not just writing culture but culture in general, producing a new breed of Humanities graduate who not only understands the world through literature, but understands it through making and striving to make”.

They go on to teach others in many different contexts, to use their writing skills in many different roles, to host and contribute to cultural events and programmes, and so on.

The new writers that have emerged from such courses have revitalised the literary aspects of the various festivals that have emerged/developed over the last few years.

Our broader culture is no longer ‘literary’ and indeed is actively hostile to literary values. Hence, one could see Creative Writing as a form of resistance to that culture.

On the economy, it is said that:

Creative Writing underpins around 75% of Britain’s creative industries. Creative Industries in Britain have the largest growth rate of any of Britain’s industries.

JK Rowling and Julian Fellowes are two of the biggest earners in the creative economy and it cannot but be beneficial to Britain to invest in educating the writers of the future.

We need to lobby aggressively to convince ministers and mandarins that JKR and JF aren’t one-offs but the products of a long established cultural tradition that must be resourced and nurtured if we are to maintain our pre-eminent position in the world.

The science v arts arguments are all spurious. Creative industries account for more GDP than banks. As a PhD [science] student/specialist, I could talk to perhaps six others in the world; as a writer I can talk to millions.

A suggested priority lies in:

Developing the potentially unassailable employment and impact narratives associated with Creative Writing – if developed appropriately, capitalising on the subject’s considerable strengths, the subject could become one of the strongest, most resilient strands or disciplines within the HEI sector.

There is, however, considerable resistance to this approach:
The encroachment of ‘Cultural Industries’ and the sense that we should deliver deliverables that can be weighed on a scale of economic or cultural interest. That betrays a lack of confidence in educational process.

We are giving [ourselves] as hostage to fortune if we rest our arguments on showing direct economic benefit to specific industries.

More compellingly:

In unpredictable times, innovation will be the lifeblood of many industries; Creative Writing (like some other creative disciplines) can produce self-motivated graduates with exceptional understandings of team process, of two-way communication and of individual creative thinking: divergent, ‘paradigm-shifting’ etc. but articulate and disciplined.

They generate consumers of literature as well as people who are entrepreneurial of spirit and who can make a business for themselves through starting new initiatives and festivals etc. which also may benefit local communities and eventually become attractions for visitors.

There are also some specific and interesting subtleties to the argument:

We require that students read – and buy – one book per week: 14 books, ten by living writers. We encourage the habit of subscribing to poetry magazines. Very few other types of MA engage with buying books in this way, or set books published in the last ten years. Writers teaching should be active on this front. All reading events bring in large numbers – 4,000 punters buying coffee!

7.2. Community value

The demise of adult/continuing education is considered a real loss. “It means that HE study of Creative Writing feels too isolated from literary culture for all. Theory of course accentuates this.”

Some universities, however, have a long-standing role as their city’s literary hub. Some have an arts centre used extensively for major public events; some have a special relationship with the local literature agency; one runs a major writers’ conference, festival and bookfair. (In other situations, it should be said, a Nobel Laureate can visit a university for a public reading and the city at large not be aware.)

While some universities claim there is no money available for visiting writers, others stage readings every week, sometimes inviting local school students or the general public. Events can attract audiences of over 500 – and make a profit. High-profile (“iconic”) professors have played a prominent role in developing this vibrant live literature culture in which a number of local universities can all thrive by sharing audiences and resources.

The Creative Writing programmes in the area have been very good for poetry, to the extent that the North West (and East) is now something of a poetry stronghold (previously the preserve of London, Northern Ireland and Scotland). Universities have effectively funded this, employing the likes of Sean O’Brien, Paul Farley, Bill Herbert etc. Regional culture has been enhanced.

Where outreach programmes are in place, they are highly valued. Many would like to see this area of work re-invigorated, with positive impact both for the university and the local community.

The community agenda principle also applies to research:

I think that some Creative Writing practitioners in HE who are applying for external funding for research perhaps could do more to think about how to ‘pitch’ their work to funding bodies and perhaps be more willing to engage in ‘applied’ research – e.g. research that seeks to use/discuss writing in therapeutic settings, research on applications of critical reflective writing in a range of training capacities (social work, nursing, etc.) and also to collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, which are in a more robust position re available funding, as well as with those in other arts and performance-based subjects. As far as research funding is concerned, I think if we want to win it, we probably have to be a bit more flexible in the projects we seek funding for, or at least think more in terms of the ‘wider applicability’ agenda.

7.3. Causes for concern

Established success is easily ignored; novelty and crisis always win the day. Creative Writing needs to continue to find new ways of teaching. What doesn’t change, dies.
With the advent of the Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) and other radically new models of education, universities are presented with exciting opportunities – but also threats. Creative Writing is seen as innovative, forward thinking, its very raison d’être being to interpret the world afresh, but while its profile may currently still be that of the interesting new kid on the block, this will not remain the case for evermore, at least not without effort. Equally, it needs to embrace change without pursuing mere fashion-driven novelty that might actually erode its essential strengths.

The voices of doom were noticeably absent from this research and some of the cited “dangers” are questionable. For instance, the possibility of more students choosing combined degrees ought not to be an issue: after all, they may well choose to combine with Creative Writing, given its strength in equipping students with transferable skills.

There may well be increased pressure on staff to bring in external funding, from research and elsewhere, but despite the aggravation that can result, the fact that Creative Writing research can even be considered on this front is cause for celebration.

Some are worried about resourcing and training implications in regard to an increased focus on new digital technologies and forms. It is true that courses focusing on fiction, for instance, will no longer be able to take account only of conventional written forms, published in hard copy, but the potential gains on this front are immense; fiction writer-tutors will surely want to explore new territories for themselves, adventurously, rather than rely on institutional parameters of “support”.

Publishing is perceived to be in a “difficult place” at the moment: “I am not convinced that hundreds more Creative Writing graduates does it in any favours”.

The writing market has been flooded with ‘writing by consensus’ manuscripts, where a workshop ‘norm’ has established what is acceptable and ‘literary’ among the established tastes. I’d support programmes that foster and encourage a kind of guerrilla warfare against these norms.

Does the sheer number of Creative Writing students mean they are “less serious” or that their work is predictable? The first charge is an anecdotal one against undergraduates generally but this research reveals the opposite. It also suggests that “guerrilla” tactics are thriving:

Agents can tell from submissions if someone has attended a Creative Writing degree course as their submissions are usually much better ... and I know of another who says she will always read a submission if she knows it’s from a Creative Writing student/graduate (even though she has loads of submissions every week).

Some would actually say that publishing has never been in a better place:

A more potent threat lies in “the institutionalisation of the writerly imagination”. Not many readers want a surfeit of overly self-conscious meta-fiction or poems about poetry. There is also a perceived danger of becoming “another ‘studies’ degree which is viewed with real distain”. “The ‘real’ writing will go elsewhere, and we will have missed the chance to keep contemporary literature of all sorts in the mainstream of our culture which is HE.” In such a scenario, those pursuing a particular brand of theoretical rigour would prove to be the engineers of the discipline’s downfall.

Creative writing must “not allow the discipline to overwhelm the creativity we are trying to foster” and avoid “becoming too institutionalised. There needs to be space for the eccentric, the unexpected and the radical.”

Special care needs to be taken in nurturing the A-level: “We know that excellent Creative Writing teaching can’t be done from lesson plans.”

Other concerns expressed, for instance, “how young people, not long out of school, can be taught to be writers without a thorough grounding in literature” seem fully answered. Creative Writing courses that “keep [students] in ignorance” of “the writing that has gone before them” are simply nowhere to be found.

There is a clear desire not to let Creative Writing “become a mish-mash of genres and skills”, or “along the lines of a ‘writing for publication’ correspondence course”. Some anticipate “a ‘push’ to more obviously ‘practical’ forms of writing such as writing for business etc.” but the “push” is there as a force to be harnessed to positive effect.
Increased fees are inevitably an issue. A course offered at £5,000 would seem to be attractively “cheap” but varied pricing has yet to be analysed as a factor in students’ choices. Postgraduate fees are taking longer to adjust. They may well retain a greater variance and a uniform increase is certainly feared:

Upping the MA fee to £9,000 would decimate Creative Writing MA as most people are mature students paying for themselves. The MA would become the province of the comparatively well off.

There is also a nervousness expressed around the possibility of students adopting the “customer” profile that management speak has thrust upon them. “Buying” an education entitles no-one to success without proper effort but challenges to grades are nevertheless expected to increase. Creative Writing should however have considerable confidence in its well-formulated assessment criteria and the way in which the workshop and its associated monitoring of progress hedges against misguided complaints.

There were many suggestions received in terms of what might further support Creative Writing students and staff. One request was for:

More regional events for students – addressing, for example, professional development, ‘new writing’, publishing, and including speakers from the creative industries (not just academics).

In some situations this is already being addressed, either by universities working together or through the work of local literature agencies.

Other items on the wish list included:

The further development of Creative Writing research tolerance and understanding within HEIs and funding bodies.

The big AHRC grant for Creative Writing

It seems clear that we need more books focusing on critical reflection, rather than ‘theory’.

I’d be very interested to see a bibliography of all the creative writing texts used on courses – suggestions or ideas for new/different texts are always useful.

I would like to see a national approach to the PGCE issue for single honours Creative Writing graduates so that English departments recognise their worth.

A Creative Writing handbook about expectations and formulations of programmes, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This handbook could cover the range of programmes available, set out different values and structures, but also agree on some central tenants, methods and procedures.

It would be useful for my students to have access to a database or document about ‘careers for writing graduates’, for use before and after they come to our programmes.

7.4 The next chapter

The HEA and NAWE are committed to continuing to provide spaces for the Creative Writing community to share its concerns and achievements, evident in equal measure in the generous responses to this research. Much of the growth and development of Creative Writing over the past ten years began modestly as conversations among peers who share a passion for teaching and learning.

The speed of change on all fronts is bewildering – in digital composition, in publishing, higher education and career structures generally – and yet, as we advocate inventive adaptability, above all else, Creative Writing would seem to occupy pole position in preparing students not just for the range of work that exists today, but also for the unknown portfolio that they may need to contend with in the future. University staff involved with this process are privileged indeed.
References


NAWE (2012) Writing in Education. 57, 8-10.


Appendix

Universities contracted to take part in the research:

- Bath Spa University
- Brunel University
- Edinburgh Napier University
- Newcastle University
- Queen’s University Belfast
- University of East Anglia
- University of East London
- University of Glamorgan
- University of Hull
- University of Manchester
- University of Warwick
- University of Winchester

Other universities answering the research questions:

- Bolton University
- Cardiff University
- De Montfort University
- Edge Hill University
- Lancaster University
- Liverpool John Moores University
- Middlesex University
- Newman University College
- Sheffield Hallam University
- The Open University
- University of Chichester
- University of Gloucestershire
- University of Kent
- University of Nottingham
- University of Roehampton
- University of Sussex
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