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Creativity and Research in the 21st Century

I made an ill-advised promise in the last issue of *Writing in Education*: that NAWE would launch an updated version of the Creative Writing research benchmark statement at the English: Shared Futures conference in Newcastle. Needless to say, by the time of the conference the draft was still a work in progress and in no fit state to share around. The working group's discussions and deliberations are ongoing.

Guilty admissions out of the way, here is the history and why it is worth pausing on such a benchmark. Back in 2008 the then NAWE HE Committee Chair, Graeme Harper, and fellow committee members launched the first Creative Writing benchmark statement. Fifteen pages long, the first ten were concerned with the art, craft and science of teaching Creative Writing. The document proved influential – the subject of Creative Writing needed it, teachers in HE needed to substantiate their teaching methods and requirements with recourse to an authoritative working statement of what the subject was and what it could be. Those first ten pages went on to inform and influence the eventual QAA Creative Writing teaching benchmark statement which was launched in 2015; several people from the HE committee past and present were on the QAA working group. But what of the final five lonely pages? Divorcing research from teaching is inherently more difficult in a subject like Creative Writing than it is in other disciplines.

The first thing to report about the work in progress – the fundamentals of the 2008 statement will remain intact. Much is still pertinent and the basis and ethos unsurprisingly have not shifted. Some contemporaneous elements that are subject to time's movements will be altered and clauses added in relation to what we, the subject and the subject association, have learned in the past nine years or so. Now as then, the most common mode of research is via writing. The researcher explores, articulates and investigates via his or her practice – the writing of poems, short stories, novels, creative nonfiction, plays and films, computer games, and more. We know this – but still, not everyone does. Hence the continued need for the statement.

Of course, the creative outputs and artefacts in themselves involve research, as do their formal considerations. But practice is central, 'critical or theoretical understanding is contained within, and/or stimulated by, that practice' (so says the old NAWE statement p.11). There are several audiences for this statement. It is for Research or Graduate Schools in universities where Creative Writing exists, but also for universities where creative writing doesn't yet exist but might in the future. It is for heads of Creative Writing Departments and Arts and Humanities faculties, so all bodies might understand the Creative Writing practice-based ethos. It is also for funding bodies and those who assess research proposals and research outputs.

Within the community of Creative Writers the statement is intended for two main audiences – Creative Writing academics who maybe have 'research' in their job description and need to narrate how writing practice fits with their research profile. The second audience is made up of PhD students, their supervisors and examiners. In this respect it is a great help having the NAWE PhD Network involved in the working group.

The Creative Writing PhD student typically (though not exclusively) writes a book-length work together with an accompanying critical commentary or exegesis which focuses on aspects of contextual analysis and investigation. The first UK Creative Writing PhD student was at UEA in 1990 - Fadia Faqir, a Jordanian writer whose first novel *Nisanit* was written as her MA dissertation at Lancaster University. Since then Creative Writing PhD programmes have become increasingly common in the UK and Australia, but less so in the US where the Master of Fine Art (MFA) remains

the predominant top-level qualification. What arose at my panel at the Shared Futures conference, mainly voiced by my colleague on the HE Committee, Carrie Etter, was an alarming variation in quality of regulation, supervision and provision for Creative Writing PhD study across the sector. This made us pause and consider adding a new section to the 2008 statement on aspects of good PhD practice.

In conventional, more academic models of research, the PhD is an independent-study project and not taught (though this can vary). Yet in Creative Writing formal and thematically innovative work – worthy of the label ‘research’ - is undoubtedly also produced at MA level. Fadia Faqir’s MA novel was research, just as was her PhD novel; Ian McEwan produced the story collection *First Love Last Rites* at MA level; Lorrie Moore produced her formally innovative first story collection *Self-Help* as part of her MFA dissertation. Are these not research outputs?

These are the sorts of debates we have had. MA-level study has often been seen as the natural home of Creative Writing university study, yet MAs don’t feature in the QAA teaching benchmarks – nor do they feature in the original NAWE research statement or conventional research discussions about other subjects. MA students are strangely betwixt and between.

Our other considerations of course include institutional and governmental audits – how to incorporate some of the key REF21 terms such as *impact* and *environment* into the document. Those sorts of categories didn’t exist in 2008, and concern about our subject’s fit with national research assessments has been much discussed in the past in *Writing in Education* and also in *Writing in Practice*.

It goes without saying – and I’m quoting more or less from the new statement here - creative practice research can result in critical works that are published, and these can be connected to, combined with, or stand relatively free from, the practice that informs them. But there is usually a symbiotic link between the two; they are often in dialogue with one another and in effect pose questions which are reciprocally answered. This is but one of the ways in which practice-based research can fit the national audits. But our rewrite will concur very much with the old statement in saying that practice, rather than being a vehicle for what may be termed ‘factual’ knowledge, is more a synthesizing process that brings about both knowledge and emotional awareness through imaginative interpretation and representation of experience. In 2008 that was true and it is true now.

No, I’m not giving a date this time, but do expect the new research benchmark sometime soon.

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