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## Fruitful reflections: research, assessment and farewells

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Neale, Derek (2016). Fruitful reflections: research, assessment and farewells. *Writing in Education*, 74 pp. 5–6.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wie-editions/editions/nawe-conference-collection-2017-part-1.html>

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## **Fruitful reflections: research, assessment and farewells.**

The HE Committee has an elected timeframe of roughly three years. At this halfway point in the life of this present committee, it is useful to reflect on what has been done so far. There are also other reasons to reflect, which I will get to later. First the committee and its busy agenda. Many of the tasks and projects have been mentioned in previous columns. Last year, to remind you, we engaged in a consultation with HEFCE in response to recommendations in the Stern Report for REF 2021. We suggested in that consultation that a separate Creative Writing sub-panel be established, reflecting the subject's growth and evolution into a fully-fledged (practice-based) research discipline. This has not yet received a response, but in a later stage of dealings with HEFC, the committee submitted an experienced and diverse list of Creative Writing academic nominations for the 2021 research exercise panels. Again, at time of writing, we are still waiting for confirmation of the outcome. We have also contributed to ongoing discussions with HEFC and other bodies on the issue of open access, the incoming scenario in which academic publications and theses will be required to appear on open access repositories. NAWE has actively lobbied for universities to establish protocols for, and the statutory right to, permitted exceptions from this open access mandate, namely for all texts published by trade and non-academic publishers. In so doing we are defending the publishing rights for creative work and works for a general audience. So far our negotiations have met with a good response; the work is ongoing.

Following sustained efforts from this and previous committees, NAWE has succeeded in persuading HESA to change the national codes and subject titles used by UCAS to identify course and subject titles, so that they are now more nuanced and include the term 'Creative Writing' (rather than just 'Imaginative Writing'). Previously, the confusing disparity between actual course titles and HESA code-titles contributed to the subject's statistical invisibility. The committee has also now successfully updated the Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement. You will recall this has been an ongoing task for the last 18 months and I am happy to say it is now published; I hope it will be of great use to the creative writing research and practice community - see.

One startling development apparent in the statement is the burgeoning number of MFA programmes. This has long been the major Creative Writing qualification in the US but recently the UK has seen an unprecedented rise in MFAs. UK versions tend to follow the American model in their focus on the use of workshop teaching, though they may involve a variety of other elements, such as: the production of a book-length creative work; creative writing teacher training; academic literary study; student interactions or placements with the publishing industry or external bodies; extended periods of independent or supervised practice-study. What is intriguing from a research perspective is that some UK universities narrate their MFAs as an alternative to PhD study, while others narrate them as an ideal preparation for doctoral study. This will be an interesting space to watch.

Last summer NAWE co-organised the Shared Futures event with University English in Newcastle, and the HE committee were well represented on the conference's

panels. Aptly, the guest article for the new issue (Volume 4) of *Writing in Practice* (another of the HE Committee's projects) is a wide-ranging, seminal reflection on the origins and history of creative writing in the UK. The article is written by Andrew Cowan, Director of Creative Writing at UEA. But no, the history doesn't begin as you might expect (in 1970 at that university). Think nineteenth century, think philology, and think of some very familiar issues – getting critics to read more contemporary writing and getting would-be writers to read more of their predecessors. See – It is a sign of maturity when a subject can reflect without any of its fledgling insecurities, explicitly and eloquently, on its own history, its strengths and its frailties. This article is apposite in other respects, tallying as it does with the current 'shared futures' theme; it was first published in a book titled *Futures for English Studies*.

The November NAWE conference buzzed with HE activity, not least the well-attended HE Network session in which we repeated the call for *Writing in Practice* submissions and new peer reviewers. Both calls are still echoing – please submit your work for the next issue, and please volunteer to join the journal's peer review college – see the website. Peer reviewing is good for you, it has been proven. Good for your career, your CV, as well as your subject community; your expertise is needed, but I can guarantee that you will learn and grow from the experience. There was also an extremely keen turn out for the conference's PhD network session; the network is another committee support project, though run by students. The session was one which prompted action. A seminar was organised for March 2018 on Creative Writing PhD commentaries, and I'm happy to say there will be an audio recording of this, which addresses the concern voiced at the conference about access to network events, especially for those located at northern universities. We hope to hold more events around the country, but this requires PhD student involvement too. If interested, get in touch. Similarly, there was a seminar in February on how Creative Writing will be assessed in REF2021 – this too was recorded; both sessions have been co-organised by NAWE, the Institute of English Studies, and the OU's Contemporary Cultures of Writing research group – see here for details and recordings: <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/contemporary-cultures-of-writing/node/25>

The final reflection is more personal – on how much the HE sphere of NAWE's activities owes to Paul Munden, who is leaving the organisation. This will no doubt be noted in other parts of this issue, but I would just like to reflect on how much Paul will be missed by HE folk. His mark on our activities is indelible and typified for me by the phrase 'I can do that'. With his truly collegial nature and fierce enthusiasm, I have long seen Paul as the embodiment of NAWE, what it could and should be. His mark is in several places but I am especially glad that his commitment is manifest in a lasting and influential publication, the HEA collaboration (once a HE committee project), *Beyond the Benchmark*, which he edited. The key word in that title is 'beyond', it summarises Paul's optimism about the project – that project, the last project, the next project and all of NAWE's work. It helps you realise that reflection forward and outside the proverbial confines of immediate vistas is always needed. In a national organisation, for instance, it is imperative to look beyond national boundaries. Paul is a great internationalist and that is something that I certainly

gained and learned from working with him. The HE committee will hope to meet up with Paul and work with him again on occasional collaborations. You will note that Andrew Cowan references *Beyond the Benchmark* as essential creative writing reading – a consultative text where our subject is truly reflecting on where it is and where it wants to be.

**Reference Links:**

*Beyond the Benchmark*

NAWE Creative Writing Research Benchmark

*Writing in Practice* Volume 4

REF2021 assessment seminar and Creative Writing PhD commentary seminars:  
<http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/contemporary-cultures-of-writing/node/25>