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Creative Writing Research Degrees: Range and Rigour

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In 2008, a snapshot of Higher Education in the UK reveals a rapidly growing number of professional doctorates, work-based learning doctorates and practice-based PhDs in subjects including Creative Writing. But there continues to be widespread disagreement about the equivalence of these forms of higher level degrees.

More than 10 years ago, in 1997, the UK Council for Graduate Education put together a report on practice-based doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design, which summarised a practice-based PhD as, 'The mastery of the existing techniques and knowledge base of the subject, a critical and analytical attitude towards them, and ability to apply them with a view to originating new knowledge or understanding and an ability to originate a contribution which is judged valid and significant'.¹ Despite the clarity of the advice within this report, there continues to be an undercurrent of snobbery in some parts of the academy, which claims that practice-based doctorates are somehow less intrinsically valuable than purely research-based doctorates, that 'thinking about' is more original than 'doing'.

It is curious to reflect that there are as many universities in the UK offering a PhD in Creative Writing as in the whole of the USA. Many colleagues in the USA believe that the 'exit degree' for Creative Writing should be the Master of Fine Arts (MFA), whereas it is clearly the PhD in the UK. Delegates at the AWP conference in New York in January 2008 were surprised to learn how different the British PhD is from a US PhD. The US PhD in Creative Writing has a fairly large taught element, with regular papers to be submitted. By contrast a British research degree – for any subject, not just Creative Writing – is very much students' own work, unfurling at its own speed, without term papers. There might be one taught module in research methodology, but beyond that, the development of a student's doctorate is entirely at the student's own pace, in their own style. Students are registered initially for an MPhil, and have to present work detailing their progress at the point of transfer to the PhD, but otherwise, no term papers, no essays, just the major work in progress. In this, the UK PhD is not unlike a medieval apprenticeship with one of the craft guilds. At the end of their 'time' the apprentice would produce an apprentice piece or master piece which was judged by the masters of the craft guild as of good enough quality to



allow the apprentice to become a master of their craft. Similarly, the UK Council for Graduate Education report describes 'The award of a PhD thesis admits the bearer to a community of scholars. It signifies that the holder is capable of distinctive/original thought and work, undertaken for the award'.

The report goes on to say that the degree should be awarded by 'knowledgeable and appropriately qualified peers'... 'On the basis of subject specific criteria'. But debate still rages about what, exactly, constitute suitable criteria for a PhD in Creative Writing. Should the creative work be 'publishable' for example? That's often a criterion used by course directors. But what does it mean? Does it mean that a PhD student should never undertake experimental writing which would probably never find a home with a publisher looking to make money in the market place? I don't think so. Last year I examined exciting work which sought to find a crossover between dance and creative writing. This was clearly never going to be a best seller, but it was ground-breaking research.

Our variety of views about the criteria for the creative work is nothing compared with the levels of disagreement about the critical work and its relation to the creative work. The 1997 report says, 'The practice-based doctorate advances knowledge partly by means of practice – originality, mastery and contribution to the field are demonstrated through the original creative work'. It suggests that, 'The written thesis and the creative work are of equal or near equal importance'. I believe the creative and critical work should be like a diptych or a double mirror. One can exist without the other, but they become a work in their own right from the intelligent reflection of the one upon the other. But in practice, the weighting of the critical and creative, and the definition of the critical, varies widely from place to place. For most UK universities, the complete thesis including the creative work, is either 80,000 or 100,000 words in total. The creative work – the novel, or collection of short fiction, or play or collection of poems is the centrepiece of that. But obviously a novel is unlikely to be the same length as a poetry collection or a play. A novel itself might well be 80,000–100,000 words. So some universities require an edited version of the novel to accompany the critical work.

Around the second part of the thesis, the critical work, there is even less agreement. Some universities require as little as 10,000 words of critical commentary others require up to 60,000 words. Can these be equivalent? And what should the criteria for the critical element comprise? The report suggests that a candidate should be able: 'To apply methods and techniques appropriate to the subject in self critical and rigorous ways to grasp contingent areas of knowledge context and production', that they should be able to document 'the process of origination in a way which is communicable to peers in a permanent and reproducible form' to develop 'sustained and logical argument contextualised to relevant discourse' and justify 'actions and decisions relating to process and product'. How can we begin to align this sensible advice for all practice-based degrees to the particularities of PhDs in Creative Writing?

In Creative Writing in the UK we have an additional and generational problem, caused by the very newness of the subject. Many academics in Creative Writing have at least a first degree in English Literature. Many hold MA or PhDs in Literary Studies. But a PhD in Creative Writing is *not* a PhD in Literary Studies. I have examined Creative Writing PhDs where the candidate

had written a poor piece of literary theory for which they hadn't had the inclination, the preparation, or the theoretical background. This is a trap we must avoid at all costs.

The report summarises doctorateness as 'the transition from being instructed on what is already known, to the ability to originate, explain and justify something new'. It usefully suggests, 'whereas an artist can simply present his or her end product, and refuse further explanation, the academic art researcher is obliged also to map for his or her peers the route by which they arrived at that product'. This means that each critical element of a dissertation must be as unique as its writer, and as unique as the original work. Each writer will begin at a different location, with different psychology, aims, social context and reading life. Each creative work will take its own path, reading widely from different creative and theoretical work. A creative writing dissertation may draw on literary theory, but it may also draw on sociology, psychology, history, physics, anthropology, fine art, performance arts, philosophy, and so on. It examines the impact of all of these outside influences on the writer and the writing. It is a conscious reflection of the largely unconscious act of writing.

Some current examples show just how broad these PhDs can be and how ludicrous it would be to suggest that one theoretical framework should fit all.

I have a Nigerian student who has adapted one of the novels of Chinua Achebe into a stage play which he has taken back and performed at different locations in Nigeria in order to return the works of an Igbo writer to his own largely unlitary society.

Another of my students is an ex-patriot South African who is writing an alternate history novel set at the time of the first democratic elections in South Africa. His commentary will focus on the difficulty he has found in deciding on an appropriate form for writing about a moment in history when it seemed that events could go in any direction, and the outcome was dangerous and unpredictable.

Poet Ros Barber has become convinced that Christopher Marlowe wrote the plays we ascribe to Shakespeare, and is writing a novel in blank verse about the story as she sees it, along with a critical commentary which combines Shakespearian scholarship with psychology, surmise and academic sleuthing.

Novelist Sue Gee, whose first degree was in Art History, has written and published a novel about a fictional early twentieth century painter, and her commentary, examines the various ways in which visual art has been rendered into words in fiction, by others and by herself.

All of these are as personal as the act of writing itself and can't be constrained within one theoretical straitjacket. The research degree provides a space or arena within which the creative, theoretical and critical can be productively assimilated and shaped into something new.

We should remember that practice-based research degrees have a very proud heritage. Professional doctorate degrees have been part of Higher Education since they were first conferred in Paris in the twelfth century. For six centuries professional doctorates (in Law, Theology and Medicine) were pre-eminent. We sometimes think of the PhD as the only research degree, but the modern PhD wasn't invented until the early part of the nineteenth century in

Berlin. The first US PhD was conferred at Yale in 1861, long before the first in the UK which wasn't until 1920. And there are other forms of practice-based research degree. The Doctor of Music (D Mus), based on practical musical compositional work, has been available in the older universities in England since the 1600s. In the USA there is a similar degree called Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA), available at Ivy League institutions, which may also be based on practical performance, though usually includes a written component too. In the UK by 1998 there were 109 professional doctorates on offer ranging from the obvious doctorates in Engineering and Teaching to the DProf – the Doctoral in Professional Practice which is a work-based learning research degree, open to anyone from any job. A Doctorate in Fine Arts (DFA) is available in the USA and also in the UK and the Doctorate in Creative Arts (DCA) is common in Australia.

In my own university alone it is possible to take a research degree in Creative Writing by one of four routes. The most common is a PhD, with the option of a PhD by published works for a highly regarded writer in a particular field. Creative Writing can also be taken as a DProf, which might be suitable, for example, for a practising scriptwriter or journalist, whose own paid work is inextricably linked with their creative practice. It is also possible to take an ArtsD, a Doctor of Arts in Creative Writing. This is for an experienced practitioner whose current practice forms part of a body of existing work, such as a well-published poet or writer of children's fiction, who wants to explore some new avenue in their work through a research degree and where the knowledge is truly embedded in the creative work. Choice between a PhD, an ArtsD and DProf signals different aims in undertaking the degree, rather than one being superior to the other.

It is time for the academy to get to grips with the range and variety of criteria and approaches to research degrees in Creative Writing, to find a way to embrace the subject's breadth while ensuring its rigour. The Higher Education Network of the UK National Association of Writers in Education (the UK subject association for Creative Writing) has recently published research benchmark criteria², not to homogenise research in Creative Writing, but to allow it to come of age, to assert its uniqueness as well as its independence and equivalence.

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Note

1. In 1997, UK Council for Graduate Education report on practice-based doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design (www.ukge.ac.uk/publications/reports.htm).
2. NAWÉ Creative Writing Research Benchmark Statement. <http://www.nawe.co.uk>