

Case Study 2 - Professional Development needs of Creative Writing Practitioners

Introduction

In July 2013, Bath Spa commenced a one year project funded by the Higher Education Academy. The project examined the ambitions and professional development needs of creative writing doctoral researchers at Bath Spa University through a series of online surveys and video dialogues with both doctoral researchers and their supervisors. The aim of the research was to identify challenges and to highlight approaches that work well with a distinctive practice-led field.

Bath Spa University has a long history of supporting engaged research which impacts beyond academia. The University's Graduate School supports a growing community of PhD students from a wide range of countries who work across a range of arts, humanities and social science fields. We have a concentration of candidates undertaking practice-based work in the fields of Art & Design, Music and Creative Writing. PhD students at Bath Spa are "dual citizens" – working closely with their subject community in our academic Schools to share work in progress but also working within the Graduate School, in a multi-disciplinary environment, to address a wide range of professional and personal development needs.

Creative Writing sees our largest number of PGR enrolments, with some students opting to remain at Bath Spa after taking one of our highly vocational MAs in Creative Writing and with some joining us from MFA programmes in the USA. What all candidates have in common is a high level of professional achievement – with many coming to us to write will be their second or third novel for a leading publisher. Our students may have already won prizes for their work and, in some case, act as judges on leading literary prize panels.

The Creative Writing PhD is offered in three modes of study (full time, part time and via low-residency with on-line learning). In the academic year 2014-15, we had 38 students enrolled on our PhDs in Creative writing: 11 Full Time (28%), 16 Part-Time (42%), and 11 Low Residency (29%). The age range is 27-64, with an average age of 46 and a median age of 47. In terms of gender, 29 students are female and 9 are male. The students are mainly self-funding, though we continue to recruit students funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) via our partnership in the South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership (SWWDTP).

The overarching aim of the final report to the HEA is to put forward a series of recommendations for supporting practice-led PhDs. From the start of the research, a multi layered and overtly experiential approach was undertaken in order to critically investigate issues arising from undertaking a creative practice doctorate. As such, the project examined a range of data including:

- an online survey sent to all creative writing doctoral researchers;
- a series of in-depth semi-structured video dialogues with doctoral researchers and supervisors;
- a follow-up survey sent to creative writing supervisors;
- a review of policy documents pertaining to doctoral degrees and training;
- an analysis of the results of the 2013 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey;
- an analysis of Vitae's report on career ambitions and career destinations, and the results of Vitae's research leaders survey;

- an assessment of Vitae's Researcher Development Framework in terms of creative practice research.

Drawing on the findings of the above investigations, this project provides some key insights into the development needs of creative writing doctoral researchers. One of the main project outcomes is an online video series that highlights the views of both creative writing doctoral researchers and supervisors on issues such as career ambition, skills development, professional and academic values, and audiences, as well as some sample footage from the Creative Writing PhD Forum.

Executive Summary

The report draws on a small-scale study of the perceptions of doctoral candidates in our creative writing PhD and their supervisors about the role of training and development in their PhD programme at Bath Spa University. Through a combination of online surveys and semi-structured interviews with doctoral researchers and their supervisors, the project examines the many reasons people undertake a creative writing PhD and the role the PhD is thought to play in their continuing professional development. Given the small and focused nature of the study, our aim was not to identify general trends from the data, but to understand the individual experiences of our doctoral researchers and how they relate to the findings pertaining to career ambitions and student experience detailed in the aforementioned Vitae and HEA reports. The report puts forward a number of recommendations, which are detailed below.

Project Recommendations

- To refer to PhD students as professional researchers. This broadens the scope of the PhD so it is not understood in terms of solely academic training.
- To take an honest approach to recruitment and provide realistic advice on career development so as to manage the expectations of doctoral researchers and help them plan effectively for the future.
- To ensure doctoral researchers are aware of the changing higher education landscape and the policy context in which their doctoral studies are located.
- To develop a suite of career case studies that highlights the varied career paths that creative arts PhD graduates have taken.
- To offer training on portfolio careers and entrepreneurship within the arts sector, providing specialist advice on the nature of the creative industries and how to make the most out of your practice.

The full report can be found in our University repository at: <http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/5762/>