

Victoria University

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Don't mention it's a PhD novel

Abstract:

As part of a research project, Creative Writing and the Enterprise University, a group of publishers, academics and creative writing students were interviewed. One of the key findings from interviews with both staff and students was the overwhelming importance attached to student publication (see Sparrow et al. *Creative writing in the enterprise university* AAWP 2009). While an increasing number of novels produced as part of writing programs are being published, some publishers remain sceptical about the value of creative programs and are critical of the way that 'academic' and 'scholarly' writing impacts on the creative works. This paper will focus on the responses from publishers in particular, their views on the impact of creative writing programs on Australian literary publishing and the implications of the 'market focus' for creative writing programs especially at the postgraduate level where engagement with both theory and practice is considered, at least by many of the academics, to be essential.

Biographical note:

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In Australia, like the UK and US, there has been a steady increase in the number of people wanting to do PhDs and MAs in creative writing. In the first survey of creative writing doctoral theses in Australia, Nicola Boyd identified '199 creative writing PhDs, DCAs and a 'Doctorate' awarded between January 1993 and June 2008' representing a steady increase from the one awarded in 1993 to 'Graeme Harper at the University of Technology, Sydney (Boyd 2009). This increase reflects the general increase in the number of all students enrolled in creative writing programs in Australia.

According to the Australian Association of Writing Programs website there are now 38 Australian tertiary institutions offering creative writing programs at TAFE, undergraduate and/or postgraduate level. There are now '14 professors and six associate professors across the country...all [who] teach, supervise or research in the field' (Muecke 2009) and a growing number of successful writers in Australia and overseas who are graduates of creative writing programs including: '...novelist Tim Winton and Tracey Chevalier, and Booker prize winners Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro...' (Webb and Brien 2006).

Last year in *The Australian* Stephan Muecke, Professor of Writing at UNSW celebrated the growth of creative writing programs and the contribution they make to the development of Australian literature and writing, and to the theoretical and critical work in the field. Malcolm King, who was the head of writing programs at RMIT, responded with a series of criticisms of the programs.

It's clear when university teachers and marketers talk about creativity or creative writing what they are really talking about is another C-word: commodification... Historians will look back at this period in Australia's literary life as the time universities made large amounts of money by becoming dream factories for budding writers and others. Too often, the dream has proved an illusion. (King 2009)

The growth of creative writing programs has occurred alongside the decrease in literary publishing (Carter 2007; Davis 2007) and, as Malcolm King points out, the dream of publishing 'has proved an illusion' if not for all, then for many creative writing students.

So why are creative writing programs on the increase? Muecke suggests the reasons include the growing interest in creativity and the creative industries in the broader community, the focus on vocationalism and, at a postgraduate level, a 'scholarship that will at least pay the rent' while students write.

The Dawkins reforms of the tertiary sector in the 1980s helped bring creative writing into universities but no one expected that these programs would survive let alone flourish in a university sector focussed on vocationalism (Glover 2007).

The 'enterprise university' is a neoliberal project and education has become a marketable and marketed commodity. There is no question that creative writing courses are popular with students. Though it seems counterintuitive, this market focus, it can be argued, has created a desire for writing programs:

The romantic notion of the writer involves an implicit rejection of the marketised economy: the writer is free from money-grubbing materialism to pursue a higher ideal,

the exploration of 'what it means to be human': as Faulkner put it, 'The human heart in conflict with itself' (1950). In another characteristic inversion, the Enterprise University marketises this rejection of marketisation to enrol students into what one academic rather bitterly calls a 'sausage factory.' (Sparrow et al. 2009)

Increasingly, all universities are building and strengthening industry partnerships. A growing number of universities have a range of program advisory committees with industry representatives for their major programs. There is an increasing emphasis on learning in the workplace components and these are now part of most degrees. At all points, the student is being directed towards the workplace and the programs are under continuing pressure to meet the needs of industry.

This is a major shift away from liberal understanding of the university as a 'community of scholars' focussed on making a contribution through research and teaching. While it is unlikely, no matter how much some of us yearn for it, that we will ever be able to reclaim those liberal ideals, it is important to have some discussion and analysis of the impact of this industry focus – especially at the postgraduate level where it is not the development of skills for the workforce that is the emphasis but the tailoring of research for a particular commercial outcome.

As part of a research project, 'Creative Writing and the Enterprise University', a group of publishers, academics and creative writing students were interviewed¹. One of the key findings from interviews with both staff and students was the overwhelming importance attached to student publication (see Sparrow et al *Creative writing in the enterprise university* AAWP 2009):

The first striking finding from interviews with both staff and students at all three universities was the overwhelming importance attached to student publication. It had been anticipated that publication might be seen as *an* important outcome; it was not anticipated that it would emerge so consistently throughout the interviews as a determinant of the courses' success or failure. (Sparrow et al. 2009)

Not only are the students we interviewed hoping for publication but they are expecting some assistance from the University towards that goal. This is not surprising as increasingly the universities are marketing their courses as leading to publication. I took part in an information session at the Victorian Writers Centre a couple of years ago where one colleague from another university arrived with a suitcase of published books, books published by students from the creative writing program he represented. He took the books out as we were preparing for the session and stacked them one on top of the other until they formed a tower. At the end of the session, while the rest of the panel chatted to each other, the students or potential students were lined up to talk to the lecturer with a tower of books – who could blame them.

I have some concerns about the rising vocationalism at the undergraduate level, however, it is the focus on the 'industry' and publication at the postgraduate level that I find particularly problematic. In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss the responses from the publishers we interviewed and raise some of the issues and implications of the 'market focus' for creative writing programs especially at the postgraduate level.

According to the Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies 'Framework for best practice in doctoral education in Australia':

A graduate of a doctoral degree program should have demonstrated the capacity to design and implement at a high level of originality and quality, either an original research project(s) of significance to a discipline or cross-disciplinary field, or a research-based project(s) addressing an important problem or question concerning policy and/or practice in a profession or industry...(2007)

A PhD is expected to make an original contribution to knowledge. There are still academics in universities who do not believe that creative practice – be it writing or visual art or performance - can constitute research. Those of us working in the field are continually fighting for the legitimacy of 'practice-led' and 'practice-based' research. A market focus at the postgraduate level is likely to further compromise the position of creative writing research. As one academic said:

I see it as contradictory within the academy to try and hone marketable work because that just means joining the already written, and if you're encouraging work to fulfil expectations of the status quo then you're not really encouraging anything new.

There are a number of stories circulating about particular publishers and their views of our programs. There is one publisher from a middle size independent publishing company who, I am told, will not let his writers mention their PhD in creative writing – if they have one – not even in the acknowledgements section of the published work. One assumes he thinks this will put readers off. Jen Webb and Donna Lee Brien wrote of their experience of talking to publishers in 2006:

... a number of publishers... articulated their frustrations with such programs' failure to produce writers capable of working within the strictures of the profession, and the oversupply of people calling themselves 'writers' who, they felt, wildly overestimated their talent and ability. (Webb and Brien 2006)

As part of the 'Creative Writing and the Enterprise University' research project we undertook in-depth interviews with five Australian publishers. Given the small sample size, these interviews cannot be considered statistically valuable but rather *indicative* of the kinds of attitudes one might find among publisher towards creative writing courses. The publishers came from a range of publishing houses: one from a large multinational, one from a well established large independent, two from established small independents, and one from a small new independent publishing house.

At some point in all the interviews with publishers a comment was made about talent and craft. The publisher from the multinational company put it this way:

...it's about talent, isn't it? All I'm saying to you is that if somebody has the interest and the intention and these days the money to go and do a course, then they'd be very well advised to do it. What comes out the other end won't be because of the course, it will be because of the talent of the person. But the course will have helped bring the talent out if it's there, or conversely indicated to the person that they actually don't have that talent, which has its own value.

Even though we know that the notion of writer as ‘genius’ is an idea that was shaped, indeed constructed, by the social, political, and historical factors, we continue to indulge in particular aspects of it – especially the idea that talent is the ‘stuff’ that great writers and artists are born with, that can’t be taught. This is, and continues to be, a dominant discourse in the creative arts. At this point I do not intend to do a critique of this notion but rather to note its prevalence; it not only permeates all of the interviews with the publishers, but also with a number of the academics and students.

Generally speaking all of the publishers we interviewed were supportive of creative writing programs and their continued existence. Among the smaller publishers all had published writers who had done creative writing courses. The publisher from one of the more established small publishing houses said that about ‘a third’ of the novels they had published in the last three years were written or partly written in creative writing programs.

These programs help, they told us, ‘bring that talent out’ by teaching writers a range of craft skills as well as helping new writers to develop networks and understand the industry. The publisher from the large multinational company said:

...the work being done in those courses is commendable and a significant contributor to the quality of our literature... I can think of one immediately – in the case of Nam Le ... He uses his skill to research some of the best writing courses in the world, and he ends up in the Iowa course in the US, where he meets internationally known writers. As a result of which, *The Boat*, a collection of short stories becomes a best seller... musicians don’t just sit down and write music. Painters don’t just sit down – there are techniques involved. You need to learn those techniques and you need to learn them from professionals. And you need to have peer assessment and you need to have rigour and the best way of getting that is to go to a well-regarded course.

The publishers also agree that as a result of creative writing programs the manuscripts submitted to them are of a higher quality and the writers have a greater understanding of the publishing and editing processes. Both publishers and academics talked about the importance of the editing skills taught in these programs. The publisher from one of the smallest of the independents said:

...more writers are expected to have extremely well edited work before it gets to the publisher because publishers have less time and money to put towards the different aspects of getting a book to print... That is another one of the hugely beneficial things about these courses...

All of the publishers we interviewed had gone out to speak to students in creative writing programs. Three publishers talked about seeing the programs and courses as a way of marketing their books and journals, as well as a potential source of discovering new writers. The publisher from one of the established independents said:

I’m going in as much as anything to get the word out about [the publishing house] but also to see if there’s anyone I think good in there, has talent and hopefully find new writers, which is self-serving to me, but it’s also to their advantage because obviously they want to get published.

Alongside these positive comments, there were a number of criticisms that publishers made of creative writing programs. Most of the publishers made some comment about there being too many programs and too many graduates. The particular problem, the publishers said, is that these students are given the impression that they will be published. The publisher from a well established large independent company said:

Sometimes you come out of it thinking that you have a *right* to be published and you have a fairly good *chance* of being published, and it's probably not true that you have a good chance of being published, simply because of the numbers of books being written and the numbers that are being published.

However, the most common criticism of especially, but not only, PhD and MA programs, was that the approach is often 'too academic'. One publisher talked about a manuscript she had been considering:

...we've been reading and enjoying but it was the product of a PhD and it just wears the PhD far too heavily for us to be able to publish it. It's a real pity ... It's very difficult to try and fit in your academic requirements and also write a book that people really want to read. That sounds a bit harsh but I just don't think that the academic requirements are necessarily always leading you towards a book that is going to be published.

And later the same publisher talked about some of the problems with novels written as part of academic programs:

... there isn't much plot, or the plot is just a series of things that have been tacked on to each other rather than something that appears to have been thought about beforehand. Where character is strong and writing is strong, but plot hasn't really been considered. And where you feel as though the research is extraordinary but it's just incredibly dull. You feel as though you're learning something rather than enjoying something and you happen to be learning something along the way. You actually feel very, very much as if you're *learning* something.

While publishers lament the student expectation that they will be published, they also advocate for more focus on the production of publishable work. One publisher makes these suggestions for how the programs might be improved:

But they could be helped by some of them being taught in such a way where the end result is discussed a bit more, right from the start. Like, 'Do you want this book to be a publishable book?' and then look at the examples of the books that you think it fits within that kind of category... Because it seems as if sometimes that you can be writing in a bubble and not realise that it actually has to be, not just read but marketed and there has to be a way that your publishing company can express what you're doing in that book. If you can't then that's a bit of a sign.

It is this focus on the production of a publishable book – both from the publishers and from the students - that catches us, by us I mean those of us supervising postgraduate students, in a bind As one of the academics we interviewed said:

...students who do what you might call postgraduate work in Masters and PhD in particular – a strong percentage of those would want to... do something a bit more edgy, a bit more radical, experimental, challenging. I think that raises the tension of that question – they don't want to do just the popular, they don't want to be Tim Winton...and here I'm not disparaging Tim Winton by the way ... but you do get a sense in the latter years of a PhD, if they haven't published and ...their writing is being rejected by publishers ... and we know ... that publishers are very cautious about looking at fiction that is coming out of universities... the real tension in people getting towards the later years of a postgraduate program, is... "Do I really want to be a published writer, or do I really want to pursue a very strong idea"

We know our students want publication. We know our programs are more likely to attract students if we have a history of strong publication outcomes. We celebrate these outcomes. We use them to market the courses. Every writer writes to be read and no genre has fewer readers than a PhD thesis. However, we also want to support, encourage and mentor students to take risks, to push boundaries, to take writing into new places. To engage in theory and philosophy. To make new and original contributions to knowledge. To take the discipline forward.

In science and engineering there is a long history of industry partnerships at the postgraduate level. Without these partnerships much research in these fields would never be done. The research is expensive and government funding is often inadequate. The challenges and problems associated with industry funding research are well documented in the literature and includes issues around intellectual property, commercial licensing, community access, the types of research that are given priority and those that aren't etc (Shamoo and Resnik 2002; Cesaroni et al 2004).

In an industry where there is an oversupply of the 'product,' I doubt that we will ever have publishers wanting to fund creative writing postgraduate students and their projects. However, if the focus is on the market, on producing what is publishable, then it is likely that instead of making a new and original contribution to knowledge, students will be working to produce works that meet market requirements. This will, I believe, result in a loss for both Australian literary fiction and for creative writing as a discipline.

A PhD involves more than writing a publishable novel. And yet we all know, and our interviews with students show, that most are undertaking a PhD with the primary aim of writing a publishable novel. Of course some have other reasons too – there is the lure of the scholarship, the hope of ongoing work in academia, and for some the desire to do research based creative work. A PhD requires that the candidate be interested and engaged in the research, in literary and cultural theory, in the question that they are investigating through their creative work. If both the student's focus and the supervisor's focus are on publication then there will be a continual process of self-editing, of shaping for the market.

Some programs are more market focussed than others, and it would be unfair to represent the whole field as market focussed. As one young academic argued:

I'm not convinced though by the argument that it's simply a case that these things are kind of servicing the publishing industry. I think they do more than that. I think the

relationship is more complex. It's important to recognise the ways in which actually creative writing in the academy is a challenge to those neoliberal ideas and those pragmatic ideas.

Creative writing programs, all creative arts programs, do challenge the academy in which the positivist scientific approach to research continues to rule, even while the rhetoric among funding bodies and university policy makers advocates more collaborative, engaged and creative research.

In this paper, my aim has been to raise a number of questions and concerns about the connection between creative writing in the academy and the industry, especially at postgraduate level.

It's important to put more emphasis on postgraduate research degrees as research training and let students know that while they are expected to make a contribution to knowledge, their work is not necessarily expected to be of publishable quality but a stepping stone on the road to their development as academics, scientists, philosophers or writers. We need to make sure students know that not all work produced in creative writing programs at postgraduate level will get published. After all many well published writers (both inside and outside the academy) did not have their first novels published.

It is also important to remind students and ourselves that the best literature has pushed the boundaries, and while it may look 'non commercial' this doesn't mean it is not important work or that it will never be published – I think of the works of W.G. Sebald as one example.

Most importantly there needs to be more discussion around these issues across the field. In order to have an effective discussion we need to undertake research into the nature and quality of the writing and research produced at postgraduate level in creative writing. At the moment we don't really know what is being produced by creative writing postgraduate students. Our knowledge is limited to our own students, and to the students whose work we have examined. This is an area that needs more research: What are our postgraduate students researching? What are they contributing to knowledge in the field? What are they contributing to literary culture?

Endnote

1. This project was funded by Victoria University. This paper is based on the research undertaken by research team included Jeff Sparrow, Rjurik Davidson, Angelika Papadopoulos and myself.

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