Southern Cross University

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Ready for work: Educating literary professionals in a region

Abstract:

This paper is a small case study with a brief description and evaluation of regionally based, largely extracurricular professional writing activities by staff, and the opportunities provided to students in the Writing Program, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University. There may be a perception or assumption by some students that creative-writing opportunities are limited in the region, in terms of number and variety, or difficulty of access. This may be due to their own limited experience of the 'writing world', which is directly tied to the student cohort demographics. One of our concerns is to prepare students for the rigors of a professional life of writing or other related fields in a literary industry. We provide our students with professional training or work experience opportunities: to read, to write, to publish, to be a publisher/editor, to work in a literary industry context. As well, Hartley (2014: 2) argues 'for building on regionalism's concern for place, space, and identity'. Writing and literature are key ways to explore and develop regional specificities. We think that the Northern Rivers is generating a regional literature, a literature of the Northern Rivers Gothic. As teachers, mentors, and residents in a regional area, we recognise that one of our tasks is to help students make connections to existing networks of opportunity, or create them ourselves, through teaching about the literary industry, participating in festivals, holding readings, providing information about publication and competition opportunities, celebrating achievements and engaging in regionally based creative research.

Biographical notes:

Dr Lynda Hawryluk is a Senior Lecturer in Writing and Course Coordinator of Creative Writing programs at Southern Cross University. Lynda lectures in Writing units and supervises Honours, Masters and PhD students. She is the immediate past President of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs and a board member of the Byron Writers Festival. An experienced writing workshop facilitator, Lynda has been published in both academic and creative publications.

Dr Emma Doolan is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Southern Cross University. Her research explores Gothic representations of space and place, particularly in literature

emerging from Australian hinterland regions. Her other research interests include creative writing practice, ecocriticism, feminism, and Modernism.

Dr Moya Costello has four books – two of short creative prose and two novellas – and many pieces individually published in scholarly and literary journals, and anthologies. She has been awarded writing grants and fellowships by government departments and literary organisations. She has been a guest at many writers' festivals, read her work at various venues, been as writer-in-residence at Monash University, and judged many literary competitions. She is an adjunct/casual lecturer with the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University.

Keywords:

Southern Cross University – regionalism – Writing Program – creative writing – professional education – Northern Rivers – Gothic

Introduction: being regional

This paper offers a snapshot of the program and initiatives that teaching staff at a regional university use to engage students in, with a view to developing their potential, through writing-based activities. The snapshot consists of a small case study with a brief description and evaluation of regionally based, largely extracurricular professional writing activities by staff, and the opportunities provided to students in the Writing Program, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University (SCU). The rationale for a case study is that 'specificity, locality, and contingency' are 'three key tenets of critical regionalism' (Bailey 2014: 4), while we also note that 'a variety of approaches to regionalism co-exist', with 'no single model or concept … agree[d] upon' (Freitag and Sandrock 2014). Critical regionalism is a concept borrowed from architecture, that recognises 'the importance of geographically defined places' (Ali 2016: 107), acknowledging the distinctiveness of locales as opposed to placelessness. 'Regional' in our discussion means outside of the state capital cities, such as Sydney (NSW), Brisbane (Queensland) and Melbourne (Victoria) and their immediate surrounds. SCU is part of the Regional Universities Network (RUN) whose 'members all have their headquarters in [Australian] regional cities or towns' (RUN 2018) (and, as discussed below, SCU also has a large online delivery program). SCU campuses are 'located on the east coast of Australia, at the Gold Coast in Queensland, and in Lismore and Coffs Harbour in New South Wales. All are unique regions renowned for their natural beauty and ecological diversity' (SCU n.d.a). To differing degrees, these regions are all situated somewhere between the urban and the colloquially termed 'bush', having aspects of rural or suburban living while remaining in proximity to and dialogue with larger coastal cities.

The focus of this paper is the Writing program delivered from the Lismore campus in the Northern Rivers, a region that encompasses 'the Tweed, Richmond and Clarence

2

TEXT special issue 54: Writing and researching (in) the regions,
eds Nike Sulway, Lynda Hawryluk and Moya Costello, April 2019

River systems of the far north coast of New South Wales' (Garbutt 2011: 125). While the Northern Rivers is known to have 'the highest concentration of arts and creative industries practitioners outside of metropolitan centres' (Northern Rivers Creative n.d.), there may be a perception or assumption by students that opportunities are limited in number and variety, or harder to access because of, for example, lack of public transport and the subsequent prohibitive driving costs across distances.

To describe and characterise the SCU Writing Program briefly, the unique Associate Degree of Creative Writing (ADCW) is aligned with several courses within the School of Arts and Social Sciences, the School of Education, and the School of Law and Justice. Units from the ADCW contribute to a creative writing major in the Bachelor of Business, Bachelor of Arts and a writing minor in the Bachelor of Digital Media and Communications (*Associate Degree of Creative Writing Course review submission* 2018: 10), and a Graduate Diploma of Creative Writing commenced in 2018. Students across these degrees share some characteristics, and ADCW students some specific challenges. Many are 'mature age and returning to study after a long absence, or First in Family' (*Associate Degree of Creative Writing Course review submission* 2018: 4), and often also 'require higher than average registration with Equity and Access services, and report mood disorders, depression and anxiety as consistent obstacles to successfully progressing through their degree program' (Hawryluk 2017).

The arrangements for support for SCU Writing students acknowledge the age, diversity and experience of the ADCW students, with the majority of the Creative Writing cohort female (75%), mature age (51%) and returning to study after a long absence, or First in Family (90%). Almost 20% of ADCW students are from a low SES background, and 17% have a disability. These students have a strong need for support to enable them to participate in the University environment successfully (*Associate Degree of Creative Writing Course review submission* 2018: 4).

Access and Inclusion is beneficial for students in the ADCW: they use this resource at a rate of almost triple the SCU Mean (23% as opposed to 8%) (*Associate Degree of Creative Writing Course review submission* 2018: 4).

Our students may be geographically distanced not only from large, resourced cities, but also from lecturers, other students, or even SCU campuses, since, as mentioned above, SCU has a large online student cohort – some of whom are city dwellers. Digital or electronic technology clearly assists us cover those distances, through Web-based learning management systems, social media, email, and smart phones. Despite these challenges or disadvantages, the students have a keen engagement with creative activities in the region, and we see it as our responsibility to connect students with literary-industry opportunities.

Michelle Hartley (2014: 2) argues for rejecting 'regionalism's pejorative synonyms: parochial, banal, insular, and rural. This dismissive language justifies a status quo that equates the "centre" (of a country, of mainstream beliefs, of established literary modes) with value'. Emmett Stinson (2018) likewise notes the negative stereotyping of regional universities and students:

[S]tudents at regional and certain urban universities – in other words, those profiled as 'low-ATAR' students – are often stereotyped in ways that do not square with my experience. Before leaving a Group of Eight university for a regional one, several friends and colleagues warned me to prepare for a drop-off in the quality of students …. But this is not at all what I experienced.

… I found them much more likely to question authority, or to ask why things were done in a certain way. Such questions might never be voiced at urban institutions, where students would be afraid of appearing naive or foolish. Often, this forced me to confront my own fixed ideas in refreshing ways.

I also found that adopting a hierarchal position in the classroom and relying on my 'expertise' was counterproductive. This meant that … I could focus on facilitating discussions, on being conversational and open, on getting a better sense of who my students are as people, and on presenting myself as an ally whose job was to assist students in learning

SCU 'aims to produce graduates who … experience an academic environment distinctive for its personal approach' (SCU n.d.a). The SCU Writing program, thence, fosters a community of writers for students, whose purpose includes building resilience (Hawryluk 2017). One of our concerns is to prepare students for the rigors, including affect, of a professional life of writing or other related fields in a literary industry. Webb and Carroll (2017: 12) state:

To achieve 'success' in the field – if by success we count the achievement of external recognition along with the affirmation of publication by esteemed publishing houses – it is important not only to know other people, but also to know and be connected with other high profile individuals. It is also important to have, and be able to demonstrate, elder / initiate relationships.

In addition to this, employment in the literary industry is traditionally precarious and low paying (see Zwar, Throsby and Longden 2015) meaning that creative-writing graduates are often required to supplement their writing income with other professional work. All of this makes us conscious of the need to provide our students with professional training or work experience opportunities: opportunities to read, to write, to publish, to be a publisher/editor, to work in a literary industry context.

Case study

Following is a list of industry-based local activities that the SCU Writing program curates; we will discuss each in some detail. Significantly, these activities are not the sole provenance of postgraduates, but undergraduates are full participants and even initiators. Some activities are linked to undergraduate coursework units, such as Introduction to Editing and Publishing in which students produce the University's anthology of student writing, *Coastlines*. Independent-study and work-placement units also provide students with credit points in exchange for volunteer activities. Outside coursework, the university also links students to volunteer opportunities. SCU's Engagement portfolio (SCU n.d.b) seeks 'to create distinctive opportunities'

for teaching and research through industry and community collaboration. So SCU Writing students are engaged in local literary festivals, readings, and performance competitions, and form their own local writers' groups. Writing staff also promote opportunities and student achievements through the Writing Program Facebook group, and a 'Writing Showcase' on the SCU website.

Unit of study: Introduction to Editing and Publishing, and production of the student anthology, Coastlines

The capstone unit Introduction to Editing and Publishing provides SCU students with experience commissioning, editing, and publishing an anthology of student-authored creative writing. The twelve weeks of the study session are broken into topics that roughly track the process of editing and publishing the anthology. This includes managing a production schedule, working within a team, and undertaking practical tasks in editing, design, and marketing.

Students report positive outcomes from the hands-on experience they gain in this unit, alongside the insight into the publishing industry and its processes through lectures and textbook readings. The following are examples of this positive feedback from student evaluation feedback surveys in the practice-based Writing Unit Introduction to Editing and Publishing: 'I have learnt so much about editing and publishing in this unit, including things I will be able to use professionally' and 'This was one of my favourite units in my degree, and has taught me skills that I will actually use for the rest of my career'.

Student participation in external arts and writing-based organisations, such as the popular Byron Writers Festival, provides another demonstration of contributing to, and becoming part of, the writing community at SCU and the wider literary culture.

Bryon Writers Festival (BWF) and Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP)

The ADCW staff have strong and ongoing connections with academic and industry experts through Executive Board membership of both the BWF and AAWP. These connections provide insight into other creative-writing programs and the creative-writing industry, and the subsequent collaborations offer understanding and benchmarking about the expectations of students in other similar courses, the curriculum being offered at other universities, and how these meet industry needs for writers, editors and publishers. They also allow students opportunities to make their own connections with SCU Writing Program and industry professionals to further their education and careers.

During each annual BWF, Writing students blog about festival presentations (https://byronwritersfestival.com/blog/). They also gain professional experience in internships in the Festival office and on special projects like Storyboard which runs workshops to foster creativity and literacy among Northern Rivers school students.

5

TEXT special issue 54: Writing and researching (in) the regions,
eds Nike Sulway, Lynda Hawryluk and Moya Costello, April 2019

Through SCU's sponsorship and involvement with the BWF, SCU students' work is also showcased in the BWF magazine, *Northerly*. The magazine is released quarterly, and each issue features an SCU showcase page. Students submit their work via an SCU Writing staff member, who may undertake some editorial feedback and development, before submissions are forwarded on to the *Northerly* editor for final selection. This provides an opportunity for students to experience submission and editing processes under the guidance of staff members and prepares them for submitting their work directly to journals and competitions in the future.

The BWF also regularly runs writing competitions such as the Heading North short-story competition or Flash Fiction competition. Since these are usually national, students can be very proud of competing successfully against a number and variety of writers. The Festival also annually awards the Byron Writers Festival prize to an academically high-achieving SCU Writing student.

Other literary festivals

The Northern Rivers region hosts a shifting complement of literary festivals, some like the Byron Writers Festival and the Bellingen Readers and Writers Festival long-running, others more short-lived. SCU Writing staff are active participants in and supporters of both new and established festivals. For example, while the Lennox Head Poetry Festival, Yamba Writers Festival, and Gold Coast Writers Festival were running, SCU Writing staff and students took part either reading or delivering talks. Staff and students regularly attend and present at Bellingen Readers and Writers Festival and the Grassroots Writers Weekend (which moves around the NSW North Coast, and was initiated and organised by an SCU casual lecturer and PhD alumnus, Iris Curteis). For students, festivals provide professional experience of reading before audiences (see immediately following), an opportunity to extend their writing skills though information or writing sessions, and connections to a wide regional network of writers and industry professionals.

Readings

Readings give students an opportunity to construct a public image of themselves as professional writers. At local readings, students learn and practice performance skills, write biographical notes of introduction and provide a promotional-ready photographic image of themselves. Through readings, students also edit and critically appraise their work, understand organisational and entrepreneurial skills in terms of producing a reading, receive immediate feedback from an audience of peers, and hear about the work of other writers including their lecturers.

For several years, the Writing Program has held an annual reading at the Lismore Regional Gallery (the initial partnership was between the Gallery and SCU's visual arts program), featuring two staff and two students. The readings match a current exhibition at the Gallery: for example, a life-writing reading to match the biennial Hurford Hardwood Portrait Prize. Units such as Writing from the Edge sometimes

hold an internal class reading at the end of the session, with a microphone and the requirement of writing a biographical note and contributing to event-management decisions. Students have also organised readings at the University bar, and an on-campus performance of scripts written in the Writing for Performance unit.

Staff and students also organise or participate in other community readings, such the monthly Lismore Live Poets event and book launches and discussions at local bookshops.

Partnerships with local events and institutions outside the literary industry provide further opportunities for Writing students to gain practical experience in a cross-disciplinary context; other examples are staff and students reading at an annual Arts Vs Science Festival organised by the Northern Rivers Science Hub, and a poetry program run by a student on a local community station River FM 92.9.

Writing and performance competitions: Fusion Festival Poetry Competition, Nimbin Performance Poetry World Cup

As well as readings, students participate in a variety of local and University-sponsored competitions.

Students compete regularly in the Nimbin Performance Poetry World Cup and have reached the finals, or won the People's Choice Award. (Nimbin is a village in the Northern Rivers.)

The annual University Fusion Festival celebrates cultural diversity at SCU, and Writing students have won monetary prizes in the Festival's poetry competition. The poems are enlarged and displayed in the Learning Centre, providing students with exposure for their work.

More generally, UniLife, a branch of SCU's student support services, has a number of student awards, including Excellence in the Arts, which has often been won by a Writing student. The criteria for this prestigious monetary award includes publishing at a national or state level, contributing to the University and a local artistic community, and active engagement in their artistic practice and mentoring others in their field.

As an example of the professional flow-on effect of these competitions, one student has organised a short story competition in her Northern Rivers subregion, the Clarence Valley.

Writing group: WORDS/SCU Writerly on SCU campus/es

On-campus undergraduate students have initiated an on-campus writing club. Both iterations of the club – Writers' Organisation Run Directly by Students (WORDS) and SCU Writerly – held/hold a meeting once a week to workshop members' writing or to have a session of writing. The club gets support funding from Lismore External and Undergraduate Students' Association (LEXUS). Such clubs provide opportunities for

7

TEXT special issue 54: Writing and researching (in) the regions,
eds Nike Sulway, Lynda Hawryluk and Moya Costello, April 2019

and demonstration of entrepreneurship, and organisational skills such as acquiring room space, marketing, and facilitating workshops.

Writing@Southern Cross University Facebook page

The Facebook group has a membership of just under 400 Writing staff, students and alumni. The group provides additional support and contact for online students. But for all students, online and on-campus, the page enhances the sense of a writing community whose members are seen to be actively part of the literary industry. Information is posted about opportunities for publishing and entering writing competitions, SCU Writing Units, student achievements, resources for writing, and literary events. These have resulted in, for example, two advanced-level undergraduate students and one Honours student undertaking internships leading to ongoing paid work with the BWF and *Northerly* magazine. Student writers have also been published in journals, magazines and edited collections. The calls for papers for these publications have been posted in the Facebook group. Student publication, work and volunteering successes are celebrated in the group for students to model the outcomes of posted opportunities here, and online in our Writing showcase.

Writing showcase

The 'Writing showcase' pages (*'Coastlines* anthology', 'Visiting writers', 'Published work': https://www.scu.edu.au/school-of-arts-and-social-sciences/creative-arts-showcase/writing/), on SCU's website, promote and celebrate our student-produced anthology, *Coastlines*; demonstrate that we have access to nationally and internationally acclaimed writers; and recognise and celebrate our writing students' achievements. The recognition and celebration provided by these pages are central to letting our students know that they belong to a national and international literary community and industry.

Research: reading and writing the region

Not unlike the regional literatures of Tasmanian Gothic and Southern Gothic, we think that the Northern Rivers is generating a regional literature, a literature of the Northern Rivers Gothic. In her PhD thesis for Queensland University of Technology, Emma Doolan (2017) argues that:

> Australian Gothic scholarship … tends to focus on the Outback and bush as the genre's dominant locations ... Tasmanian Gothic stands out as the only established regional category of Australian Gothic ... However, some scholars have begun the task of identifying other regional variations ... Such studies take into account the specificities of region, of history, geography, climate, and landforms to contribute nuanced theories of the way the Gothic genre has mutated and been modified in Australian contexts, and the cultural uses to which it has been put. (22-23)

8

TEXT special issue 54: Writing and researching (in) the regions,
eds Nike Sulway, Lynda Hawryluk and Moya Costello, April 2019

The academic work of staff and postgraduate students at SCU contributes the category of Northern Rivers Gothic to this growing catalogue of Australian regional Gothics. Thus, SCU students and staff are the authors of many key creative works in this category.

In works that include SCU adjunct lecturer Jesse Blackadder's (2005) *After the party* and SCU alumnus Jessie Cole's *Darkness on the edge of town* (2012) and *Deeper water* (2014) (2), Doolan (2017) 'identifies a distinct and heretofore unrecognised strain of … Hinterland Gothic emerging from these regions' (2).

PhD and Masters creative-writing theses by Tessa Chudy (2014) and Christine Tondorf (2016) respectively have investigated a NSW North Coast regional noir and Gothic, along with Writing staff. Chudy (2014) aimed 'to use the landscape as a character in its own right – haunted, damaged, but somehow timeless' (75), uncannily excessive in its extremes of landscape and weather. Tondorf (2016) gives both the hinterland or interior and the coast Gothic characteristics. Chudy, Nell Cook and Moya Costello (2010) surmise that 'the excess of subtropical regional Australia' produces a Gothic effect (2). Lynda Hawryluk has presented a number of Gothic-related conference papers too: about fear and Australian coastal Gothic (2017c; 2017d with Emily Brugman; 2018) and with Doolan (2019) about establishing Northern Rivers Gothic as a mode of artistic production.

Hawryluk's Gothic-related creative works are the poems 'Blue berries' (2017a) and 'Noise carries on a still night' (2017b).

Costello's creative works are the prose poems/microfictions 'Northern Rivers: A Gothic tale' (2012, 2018) and 'Rain in the Northern Rivers' (2019), both adapted extracts from a manuscript, 'Northern Rivers'.

This growing body of research and creative writing adds to collaborations between SCU Writing staff and students, and to the artistic production of the Northern Rivers region.

Concluding remarks

Neil Campbell (2016: 5) suggests that region means 'being open to … something beyond the local' and, rather than having a 'challenge deficit', we are 'aware of potentials', 'the possibility of shared purpose as the concerns of *here* are linked to *there'*. In parallel, RUN (2018) claims that regional universities 'help drive national success', via their contribution to the development of 'regional economies and communities'. Equally, Adam Shoemaker, as SCU's Vice Chancellor, made a case for a New Regional Deal to 'create a workforce for the future' (SCU n.d.c). For regionalism understands that 'the local and specific' are 'interventionist' in wider, more distanced global projects' (Campbell 2016: 3).

Writing students in regional and urban universities alike share the many challenges of working in the literary industry. However, we recognise that regional students face additional challenges such as increased requirement of support services, distance from

9

TEXT special issue 54: Writing and researching (in) the regions,
eds Nike Sulway, Lynda Hawryluk and Moya Costello, April 2019

traditional centres of literary production, and, perhaps most key, perceptions of lack of opportunity in the regions. As teachers, mentors, and residents in a regional area, we recognise that one of our tasks is to help students make connections to existing networks of opportunity, or create them ourselves. In summary, at SCU, we do this through teaching about the literary industry, participating in festivals, holding readings, providing information about publication and competition opportunities, celebrating achievements and engaging in regionally based creative research.

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11

TEXT special issue 54: Writing and researching (in) the regions,
eds Nike Sulway, Lynda Hawryluk and Moya Costello, April 2019