

# **The Power of Partnership: Northumbria University x New Writing North**

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**Partnership working is a stylistic trait of how we deliver at Northumbria University. It is at the core of our university strategy, is central to how we think of ourselves as an institution, and shapes our civic role, responsibility and engagement around widening participation. We have an ambitious and distinct portfolio of strategic partnership agreements with several national cultural organisations like the BFI, but also with organisations based within the North East, including New Writing North and the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Live Theatre and Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums. We collaborate together through teaching and learning, research and knowledge exchange, impact and public engagement. This tripartite approach generates shared knowledge, furthers cross-sector understanding and creates added value for our students, researchers and professional colleagues.**

While some university partnerships can be perceived as surface level memorandums of understanding between organisations, or ‘dual logoing’, whereby each institution proudly displays the logo of the other but in practice collaborates little, our cultural partnerships are defined by their deep focus on measurable knowledge exchange and inclusive innovation. Unlocking opportunity, extending the reach of new research, and developing a sustainable R&D ecosystem is central to the role of universities in growing the cultural and creative industries in the North of England. By connecting the sector to the latest R&D and graduate talent, our cultural partnerships link students and staff to commercial developments and facilitate a fluidity of industry knowledge and networks.

Northumbria’s longest cultural partnership is with [New Writing North](#). Northumbria has worked in formal partnership with the biggest writing development organisation in the UK since 2008. It reinforces extensive links between the two organisations that each make a unique contribution to culture, creativity, new writing, practice-led research and development in the region and beyond. Our partnership sets a framework for continued collaboration that reflects New Writing North’s status as a centre of excellence in creative writing and reading and Northumbria University’s mission to make a powerful contribution to cultural and economic development and wellbeing in the region. The partnership has Creative Writing and the Humanities at its heart, but encompasses activities with many departments across the academic faculty from forensics and policing to law, cultural management and leadership, and medical humanities. Together we have co-designed and co-delivered a series of interventions that aim to address access to creative skills, representation in the creative industries and the devolution of the creative economy beyond London and into the regions and nations of the UK.

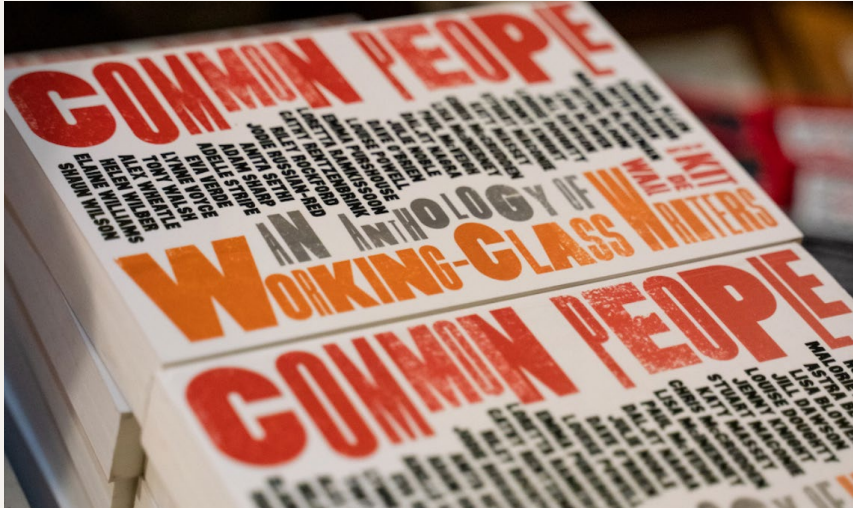
**Teaching and learning** and skills development are at the core of our partnership. New Writing North designs and co-delivers an industry module as part of the Creative Writing Masters programme and teaches on the undergraduate programme in Creative Writing. They also contribute teaching and host student placements from the Cultural Management Masters. Through our partnership agreement, they participate in student employability activities including placements and professional skills training. A key strength of the Northumbria model is the provision of financial support for partnerships alongside a strategic plan for inward investment and income generation through collaboration. This can also involve bringing resources together across sectors to create new employment opportunities both during higher study and after graduation.

We also have a strong history of co-supervising PhD research projects on Collaborative Doctoral Awards that involve six month placements for students working with NWN and hosting students within the NWN offices on campus. Through our partnership, students can experience jobs, cultural experiences and opportunities that they might not otherwise have even known existed. By working with an industry partner, we can connect the best new talent and research to create a pipeline to the cultural and creative industries that helps diversify the workforce, develop knowledge and networks, and unlock the impact of innovation beyond the institution and into the general public to enhance understanding of debates around the value of culture today.

**Talent development** is another key strategic focus of our collaboration. Northumbria University works with New Writing North to sponsor the annual Northern Writers' Awards. These unique work-in-progress awards discover and support writers in the North of England and develop new talent for UK publishing. They offer a wide range of opportunities for writers at all stages of their careers, including publication, mentoring, manuscript assessment, writing placements, retreats and cash awards to buy time to write. They are the largest writing development programme of their kind in England. As a result of partnering to deliver the [Northern Writers' Awards](#) we are able to work together to offer a special award for university students and alumni which sees the winning writer receive on-going support to develop their creative ambitions.

Through our partnership, we have worked together not only to deliver the awards but to co-produce new collaborative research and high level advocacy to enhance understanding of the impact of the awards across the last decade on writers and the writing industry. This includes the 2018 report 'The Value of Writing: Ten Years of the NWAs', a co-authored evaluation of over 250 writers who have won an award and gone on to achieve professional success. The resulting research report allowed us to see for the first time the long term impact that the awards had on writers, to assess the value for money of the project in terms of wider economic impact, to see how we could improve the scheme, and to understand the wider regional and national impact of the work.

Importantly, the report reflected back to us the status and importance of the awards as part of the regional and national talent development pipeline. As a direct result of the insights into the award programme provided by the research, NWN were able to make key changes to their business planning and programme design that led to significant improvements in their performance and provided added value to sponsor beneficiaries and winning authors. The outcomes of the research were presented as a series of policy recommendations to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Performing Arts in the Houses of Parliament as part of an inquiry into effective methods of developing regional talent and enabling social mobility in the creative industries and was an invited discussion topic at the [Northern Lights Conference](#) in Scotland, produced by Scotland's First Minister at the time, Nicola Sturgeon.



Common People an anthology, edited by Kit de Waal, published by Unbound

**Diversifying the workforce of the creative industries**, especially the UK publishing industry, has formed a key focus of our collaborative research strategy. In 2018, our Common People research project aimed to identify new unpublished working-class writers, to create opportunities for these new writers to have their voices heard and their words published, and to offer them professional writing and career development. Common People was significant because it brought together all seven of England's regional writing development agencies – New Writing North, Writing West Midlands, New Writing South, National Centre for Writing, Writing East Midlands, Literature Works and Spread the Word, with Northumbria University – for the first time in a national intervention. The agencies worked collaboratively on the programme supported by a grant from Arts Council England and a crowdfunding campaign run by publisher Unbound. The project comprised two distinct elements: an anthology, edited by Kit de Waal and published by Unbound, which profiled work by new and established authors; and an accompanying professional development programme to support the new writers involved as they made their debut in the industry.

Northumbria academics worked with NWN colleagues during the programme to gather detailed empirical research on its impacts and to track the evaluation of the intervention. This work highlighted barriers that many writers faced, including attitudes from the publishing world towards working class writers, and offered compelling policy recommendations to government to rebalance access and representation in our world-leading publishing industry. The findings and associated recommendations were drawn together into a wider analysis that formed the basis for a report, Common People: Breaking the Class Ceiling in UK Publishing that was published on May 1st, 2020. The report details how the full diversity of voices active in British society is neither heard nor acknowledged in UK publishing today. It calls for the publishing industry to be more representative, to work collaboratively with regional cross-sector partnerships, and for new forms of investment to level the playing field in the regions.

The impact of the Common People report was a product of its collaborative design and delivery. The report was the first of its kind carried out on this specific issue and carries much weight and value for those working professionally with writers. Upon launch the report was featured in

news items in all the publishing industry newsletters and bulletins, provoked a feature in the Guardian and received write ups, opinion pieces and commentary in the Observer and many trade and sector news sites. It was shared by prominent writers, commentators and industry professionals and provoked much public debate.

The report was embraced by industry and the arts sector with Sarah Crowne (Director of Literature, Arts Council England) writing ‘this essential report, published during an international crisis, shows the research isn’t less important - it’s more important. It points the way towards the world we must shape on the other side’. The recommendations of the report initiated real action and developments within industry. Several new businesses have been set up in response to Shaw’s call for more literary agencies outside of London: Laxfield Literary Associates was established by Emma Shercliff, the former Sales and Rights Director for Cassava Republic Press U., The Liverpool Literary Agency (the first business of its kind in Liverpool, that aims to link northern writers from diverse and under-represented backgrounds to the UK’s ‘big five’ publishing houses) was formed, and the Sophie Bradshaw Literary Agency was established by the former non-fiction publisher at The History Press. The report has also been referenced by many industry bodies and organisations including the Royal Society of Literature and the Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society. We are continuing to engage with the All Party Parliamentary Group for Diversity in the Creative Industries on how we can further frame the knowledge that the report has generated.

**Diversifying the workforce of the UK publishing industry** is another key focus of this work. In 2021, Northumbria University and NWN partnered with global publishing house Hachette to co-design and co-deliver a world-first masters’ level qualification that is specially designed to respond to recognised skills gaps within the contemporary publishing industry. It covers all stages of the publishing process, from commissioning and editing through to marketing, sales, data and production and provides students with a guaranteed work placement with a global publisher and the opportunity to work on live writing development projects. Students are taught by expert academics and by specialists and staff from both Hachette UK and New Writing North.

With Hachette UK recently opening five new regional offices across the UK – including one in Newcastle-upon-Tyne – and with New Writing North developing a flagship Centre for Writing, the partners hope that the new course will reinforce the North East’s already significant reputation for being a creative centre for writing and publishing. The MA has a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion in publishing and the partners hope that diversifying the future workforce will be a key outcome. To support this the partners will offer a [£2,000 scholarship](#) for one highly gifted student from an under-represented background each year. The shared partnership vision for the MA is to develop the next generation of publishing talent and to give graduates a real-world understanding of the skills needed to work in the UK publishing industry and the myriad roles available to graduates of the future.

To ensure our research and talent development work reaches the world beyond academia and policy making, we drive a civic engagement programme with NWN where we work together to co-produce a number of public and civic engagement events with the university including [Crime Story](#), a unique live event that sees leading forensic, police and legal professionals

working together with a live audience to process and solve a fictional crime commissioned from leading writers, who have included Denise Mina, Paula Hawkins and Anne Cleeves. We also produce Crime Story branded events such as author events, writing classes and a podcast series. The [Newcastle Writing Conference](#) is also co-produced by the partners and offers an annual event at which aspiring and early career writers can learn from and network with professionals from the publishing industry.

Partnership working is vital to creating and scaling resilient and sustainable ecosystems of innovation in culture and the creative industries. English devolution will unlock new ways of working at a local level to catalyse this in terms of decision making and inward investment but university partnerships remain a vital means of connecting our best new talent with the best new knowledge today. By working hand in hand, we can develop a better understanding of cross-sector needs, priorities and opportunities and extend our influence beyond the regional to national and international contexts through policy making. As our cultural partnerships continue to grow at Northumbria, we look forward to making the next steps in this collaborative journey together.

## Biographies

**Katy Shaw** is Professor of 21st-century writing and publishing at Northumbria University, UK and Director of the [UKRI/AHRC Creative Communities programme](#). Her research interests include devolution and culture, diversity and inclusion in the creative industries (the subject of her 2022 [TED talk](#)) and the redistribution of the creative industries from the capital to the regions and nations as part of the 'levelling up agenda'. She is the author of the 2021 APPG Inquiry report '[The Case for Culture](#)' that set out policy recommendations, many of which have since been adopted by UK government, on how to rebuild rebalance and recover cultural production post-covid. She sits as a commissioner on the [LGA Culture Commission](#) and the Gordon Brown Union Commission. Her policy consultancy focuses on R&D, innovation and the role of HEIs and further education in cultural partnership working. As Professor of writing she is the author of [five monographs](#), four edited collections as well as journal articles and essays on contemporary British literature and is the author of the British Council 'Write Now: Teaching 21st-century Literature Globally' report. She can be found on Twitter [@profkatyshaw](#)

**Claire Malcolm** is the founder of [New Writing North](#) the writing development organisation for the North of England that produces major literary awards and prizes, festivals and events and programmes to support writers from underrepresented backgrounds to access industry. She was recently part of the team that has launched a new MA in Publishing with Hachette UK and Northumbria University. She was awarded an MBE for Services to Literature and Young People, holds an Honorary Doctor of Letters from Durham University and is one of the Bookseller's 150 people influencing publishing.



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