

Write Now: Teaching C21 British Literature in Global Higher Education

Professor Katy Shaw,
Northumbria University UK



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Introduction | **Katy Shaw**



Teaching C21 British Literature Today

More than half the world's students study Shakespeare, but the story of English Literature does not end with the Bard. C21 British Literature has always been a popular area of study in UK universities, but until now we didn't have a clear sense of where, how, what or why it is the subject of teaching and learning in HEIs globally. In 2020, the British Council, Northumbria University and the British Association of Contemporary Literary Studies (BACLS) conducted the first evaluation of the teaching of contemporary (post-millennial) British Literature on higher education programmes delivered outside the UK and Ireland.

Through a comprehensive survey of international HE programme leads and an analysis of its findings, this research report maps the current context and identifies resourcing and development potential for promoting the teaching of contemporary British Literature overseas by:

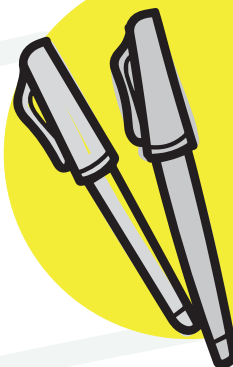
- **Capturing the first global picture of where, how, what and why is being taught**
- **Revealing trends and gaps in international contemporary British Literature teaching provision**
- **Pinpointing new opportunities for promoting the work of contemporary British writers**
- **Identifying key areas for teaching resource enhancement**
- **Proposing new pathways for international knowledge exchange and networking.**

Through literature we can engage in a global conversation about the diversity of contemporary Britain today. The recommendations of the research are intended to enable knowledge transfer, to encourage international capacity and partnership building in the international HE sector and to influence policy and strategy formation in the international subject community, the British Council and the UK publishing industry, as well as make policy recommendations to UK government on the economic contribution of writing and publishing to a post-covid, post-Brexit global Britain.





Executive Summary



1.

Higher Education institutions across **all five continents** currently teach C21 British Literature at under or postgraduate level, with strong representation in **South America** and **developing countries** on the DAC LIST OF ODA Recipients;

2.

The **lecture and seminar format** dominates the teaching delivery of C21 British Literature at HE level globally;

3.

Lecturers are motivated to teach C21 British Literature due to **student demand to hear new stories about contemporary Britain**, and also because it offers **diversity of representation** and **rebalances curricula** away from the classics of literature;

4.

Lecturers mainly inform the design and delivery of their teaching using academic criticism (monographs, edited collections and journal articles) but would like more trusted online resources like the **British Council Literature website**;

5.

Future areas of future development include **enhanced secondary sources, continuing professional development opportunities and greater networking and sharing of resources** internationally between teachers in the field, as well as with authors and publishers.





Opportunities for

Publishers

to increase commission of accessible, affordable, shorter-form (print and digital) academic criticism on contemporary authors and key works in C21 British Literature written with a global audience in mind; to work with the emerging markets and audiences identified by this research to promote sales and representation and enhance marketing to facilitate audience development;

British Council

to build on the success of its writer directory website through strategic investment in new resources and cross-sector collaborations that develop projects that showcase best practice, enhance knowledge and enable professional exchange between practitioners teaching C21 British Literature across the globe;

BACLS

to advise and support international colleagues on teaching C21 British Literature and provide a vital link to UK HE curricula by sharing digital teaching resources, facilitating professional development opportunities and mentoring and developing international membership and networking capacity;

British Government

to consider what measures can be taken to address the outcomes of research and the potential social, cultural and economic benefits to a multiplicity of national and international stakeholders.

Research Context

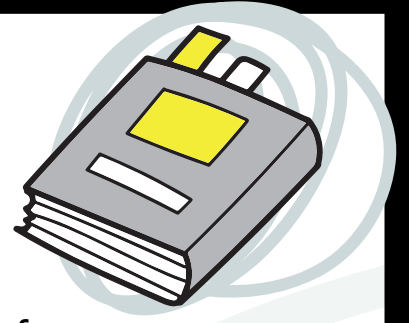


There has been a rapid global rise in the teaching of English Literature at Higher Education (HE) level, even in countries in which English is not the national language. Until as recently as the year 2000, overseas English Literature HE programmes were few and far between, but over the past two decades there has been a significant increase in the number of English Literature programmes available in HE institutions. Yet, within these twenty-first century programmes, advertised curriculum content focuses predominantly on pre-1900 texts (from Shakespeare to Dickens) at the expense of more contemporary British writings.

The under-representation of contemporary British Literature on international English Literature HE programmes was first identified by British Council in 2013. Working with Granta magazine (a global publication profiling the best new writings in English), the PI and Co-Is engaged in a global seminar series, sending writers selected by Granta as the '2013 Best of Young British Novelists' to visit international HE institutions that deliver English Literature programmes. As part of this project, the PI also authored a series of lectures and thirty seminar plans for international English Literature teachers to use as resources to support the delivery of more contemporary texts in their curricula.



Global Landscape



This initial activity generated qualitative testimony from international English Literature subject and course leaders that suggested a problem of under-representation of contemporary British Literature on their HE programmes and provided the PI and Co-Is with new information about the potential scale of the issue. Feedback from university staff attending the workshops revealed that the study of 'contemporary' British Literature often ends with texts written in the 1900s on international undergraduate curricula. As a result, international cohorts could be exposed to a very different experience of subject content from that of their British and Irish cohorts.

Since this intervention, no research has been undertaken into the representation of contemporary British Literature on overseas English Literature HE programmes. Five years on from this initial intervention, this new research aimed to capture a clearer picture of the teaching of contemporary British Literature on international English Literature programmes in HE two decades in to the twenty-first century.

The research underpinning this report was conducted via a global survey comprised of multiple choice and open text field questions that aimed to generate quantitative and qualitative data to enable triangulation in a relational analysis. Following a successful pilot and resulting enhancements, the survey was distributed to leaders of international English Literature HE programmes (subject heads, programme leaders, course directors) across the world.

These individuals were identified with assistance from the British Council's network of international offices. Each respondent was sent an email outlining the context of the project, the aims of the research and a link inviting them to complete the survey. At the end of the survey, respondents could choose to volunteer their email address, but were assured that individual survey results would be anonymised to protect fullness of response.

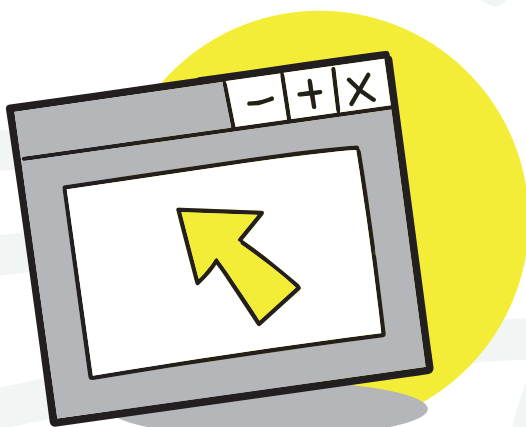


Where is C21 British Literature Taught?

The survey generated **responses** from **40 countries** on all **5 continents**.

Results showed a high representation in Spain, Poland and Russia, but also a strong presence in USA Mexico and Cuba.

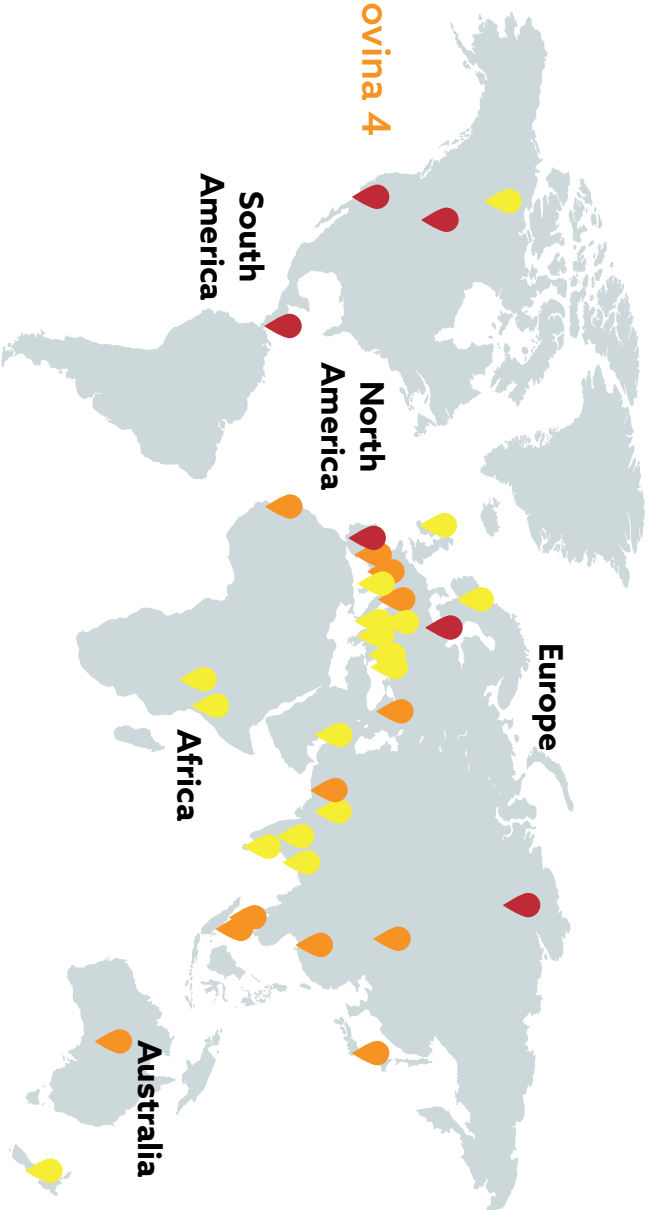
45% of responding countries are on the DAC List of ODA Recipients, of which 14 are low and middle income countries based on gross national income (GNI) per capita as published by the World Bank, and 4 are Least Developed Countries (LDCs) as defined by the United Nations (UN).



Where is C21 British Literature Taught?

● Yellow 1-2
 ● Orange 3-5
 ● Red 5+

- China 4
- Poland 5
- Italy 4
- Denmark 1
- Ireland 1
- Egypt 2
- Kosovo 2
- Spain 13
- Bosnia & Herzegovina 4
- Greece 1
- Ukraine 1
- Russia 12
- Kuwait 2
- Albania 2
- India 1
- Motenegro 1
- Japan 3
- Turkey 2
- Hong Kong 3
- New Zealand 1



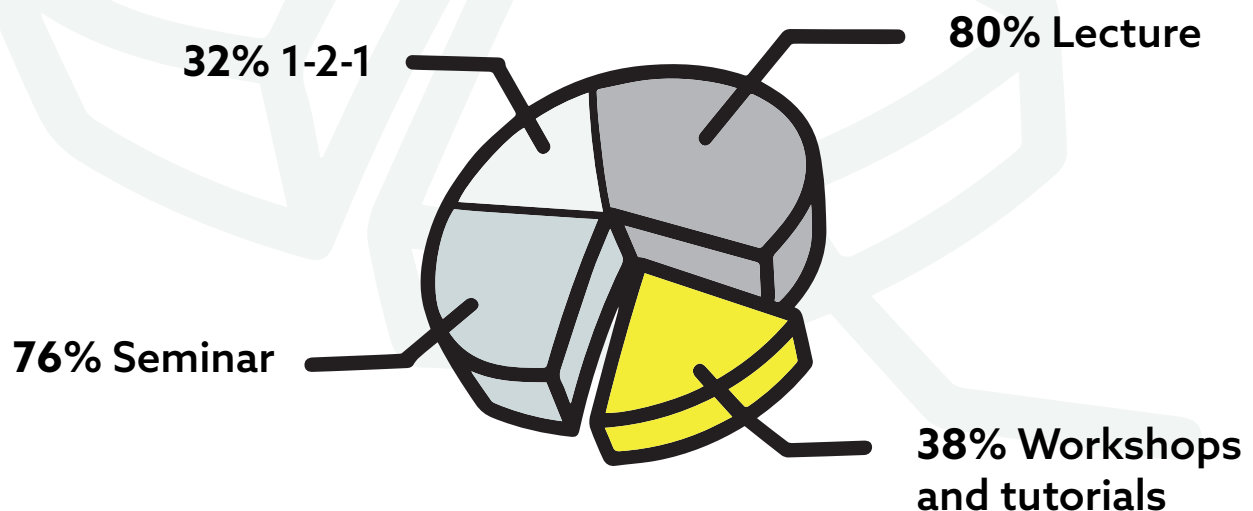
- Malaysia 3
- Singapore 3
- Bangladesh 1
- Kenya 1
- Georgia 3
- Canada 1
- USA 6
- Colombia 3
- Mexico 11
- Sudan 2
- Nepal 2
- Nigeria 1
- Cuba 5
- Sri Lanka 1
- Uganda 1
- North Macedonia 1
- Pakistan 4
- Senegal 1
- Australia 4

How is C21 British Literature Taught?

The classroom-based lecture/seminar format continues to dominate teaching delivery at both under and postgraduate level although there is an appetite among practitioners to explore new digital forms of delivery and engagement.

C21 British literature is slightly more popular with graduate students (67%) and emerges as an increasingly popular subject of PhD level study, with 46% of respondents citing experience of supervising projects in the field.

The main focus of teaching delivery globally is on 'literary fiction' (71%) with other areas of popular delivery including Science Fiction, Gothic, and poetry.



Why is C21 British Literature taught globally?

Motivations for engaging with C21 British Literature in the classroom include trends in teacher training, rebalancing the traditional literary canon in order to decolonise the curricula, and as a response to the pressures of plagiarism.

Strong responses also emerged in relation to the relationship between C21 British Literature and discourses of diversity, as well as its capacity to build cultural capital and promote broader socio-political knowledge in students.

However, the most popular reason to teach C21 British Literature was in response to 'overwhelming student demand' to study the area.

Accessibility:

'students find it more accessible than literature from previous historical periods'

Socio-Political Impacts:

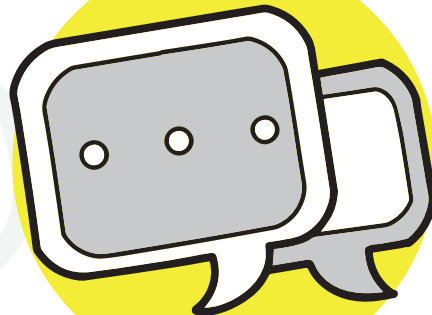
'it is culturally far more aligned to our students' concerns and cultural understanding and can map onto their own identities.'

Rebalancing curriculum:

'there is too much focus on classics/canon, so we teach it because it is otherwise very much underrepresented in our syllabus'

Cultural Context and Knowledge Transfer:

'it is a useful tool to transfer updated knowledge to students about contemporary British society.'



What do Teaching Staff Use to Design and Deliver Teaching in C21 British Literature?



The majority of respondents rely upon contemporary criticism published in academic monographs, edited collections and journals as the main source of information informing their teaching of C21 British Literature.

Literary awards, media and the British Council Literature website were also cited as significant sources of information for the development of teaching materials, along with staff attendance at national literary festivals and subject community word of mouth.

In Britain, the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) monitors and advises on course content and quality in UK to ensure parity of experience and knowledge in named subject degrees offered by different providers.

Frameworks for content and coverage in Literature are more variable internationally and this flexibility means increased scope for individual staff to allow their personal taste to influence course content.

The research suggests that the biggest influence on what aspects of C21 British Literature are taught in the global classroom is the personal taste of the teacher, but diversity of representation and the availability of relevant secondary sources (from academic publishing) also constitute major influences on staff selection.

57% of teaching staff globally do not consider themselves to have the resources they consider necessary to teach C21 British Literature in the classroom today.



Top 6 Sources Informing Teaching

Academic Books
& Journals



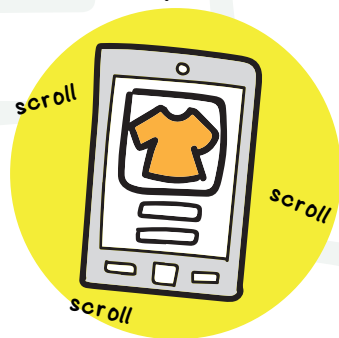
Literary Awards



Newspapers
& Magazines



Social Media



British Council
Literature Website



Literary
Festivals



Top 3 influences on what you choose to teach

Personal Taste

Diversity of Representation

New Academic Publications

What future developments would enhance the teaching of C21 British Literature?

New secondary resources, in the form of both print and digital criticism, was identified by respondents as a necessary prerequisite for further teaching development in C21 British Literature.

As well as underpinning the future of their current teaching, practitioners state that these resources would also enable them to deliver in new areas of interest, including British-Chinese authors (including Xiaolu Guo), Black British writing (including Zadie Smith and Bernadine Evaristo) and engage with new literary representations of the diversity of contemporary Britain.

C21 British Drama also emerged as a popular area of interest for future teaching, and an area with an identified poverty of criticism and resources for teaching. Continuing professional development opportunities were also identified as having the potential to enable future provision.

Examples include visits from British authors to global locations, and guest lectures (in person and/or digitally delivered) from contemporary British literature departments at UK universities to colleagues and cohorts across the world.

Networking with other teachers in the field was another popular idea for future development. 98% of those surveyed said that they would be interested in joining a global network dedicated to C21 British Literature teaching, especially if it had a focus on sharing best practice, secondary resources and teaching materials.

Resources

*'I wish The British Council Writers Directory could be updated regularly'
'We need more open/free online access to (recordings of) staged plays online'
'There is a poverty of secondary criticism and sources from academic publishers and contemporary publishing. Students are sometimes intimidated by C21 British Literature because there are entire aisles in libraries dedicated to Shakespeare, but maybe 1-2 articles max. for works published in the last few years).'*

CPD

'there is a need for training for how to research c21 British Literature because these are text which might not yet have a big academic publication footprint. This would be invaluable'

Networking

'being part of an international network of academics teaching British contemporary literature would be really useful'

Recommendations

The findings from this report are best addressed through a cross-sector response. By working much more closely together we can significantly enhance the teaching of C21 British Literature around the world now and in the years to come.

To do this we need to shape and invest in new resources, professional development opportunities and international networks for practitioners.

Through a combination of global and place-based initiatives which harness local and international resource, we can enable longer term change and create new opportunities for staff and students of the future.

This would significantly strengthen a currently burgeoning field of teaching and learning, writing and publishing, as well as promoting awareness of contemporary Britain in a post-covid, post-Brexit context.

This research identifies opportunities for:

Academic Publishers to increase commission of accessible, affordable, shorter-form (print and digital) academic criticism on contemporary authors and key works in C21 British Literature written with a global audience in mind;

British Authors and Literary Publishers to work with the emerging markets and audiences identified by this research to promote sales and representation and enhance marketing to facilitate audience development, as well as to develop digital resources as well as in-person engagement opportunities between authors and global readers both digitally and in person;

British Council to build on the success of its writer directory website through strategic investment in new resources and connecting existing resources through cross-sector collaborations that develop projects that showcase best practice, enhance knowledge and enable professional exchange between practitioners teaching C21 British Literature across the globe, and as a strategic priority in the OECD countries identified as emerging markets by this research;

BACLS to advise and support international colleagues on teaching C21 British Literature and provide a vital link to UK HE curricula by developing international membership provision and sharing best practice in teaching, digital resources including reading lists and sampler curricular, as well as online CPD and enhanced virtual networking opportunities;

British government to consider what measures can be taken to address the outcomes of research in order to better support international student recruitment, the global export power of our literary and academic publishing industries as well as their contribution to a post-Brexit economy, the promotion of the English language internationally, and role in cultural knowledge transfer about contemporary British society to the rest of the world.



Conclusion

The impact of teaching C21 British Literature does not begin and end in the classroom. Global teachers of C21 British Literature know that Britain is more diverse than it appears in the traditional English literary canon, and they want new knowledge and access to texts, resources and criticism that reflects this.

The research underscores the vitality of C21 British Literature and offers the first understanding of its contemporary presence in global HE classrooms.

This research was conducted during the 2020 global pandemic, and its aftermath offers unique opportunities to address the recommendations of the research by harnessing the digital connectivity and new platforms and practices for sharing information and practice that were birthed by necessity.

It has also led to a new recognition of power of international collaboration in confronting the challenges that lie ahead.

By actioning the recommendations of this report, we can ensure that generations of students are well placed to understand and navigate the implications of a global event will stretch well into the decade ahead of them.

These recommendations have the potential to enhance pedagogic teaching design and delivery, professional development and networking within global higher education, to transform commercial understanding of emerging readerships in the UK literary and publishing industries, and to enhance political awareness of the potential power of the role of C21 British Literature as an advocate for the country on a global stage.

We hope that the research acts as a catalyst for further intersectional studies to develop further insights into teaching design and delivery, to generate new CPD opportunities and facilitate new subject and/or professional networks that internationalise the subject area and in doing so support C21 British Literature in the decades to come.



Credits

Thanks to the educators across the world who volunteered their time to take part in the survey. Thanks also to **Dr Jim Hinks, Sinead Russell** and **Cortina Butler** for their contributions to the planning and writing of this report and to **Professor Robert Eaglestone** for contributions to the critical thinking informing the work.

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