

# UNIVERSITY-BASED TRAINING COURSES FOR LITERARY TRANSLATORS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: AN OVERVIEW FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM

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**Abstract:** As part of a wider project exploring literary translation in the United Kingdom, the present article profiles the three named postgraduate taught courses focusing exclusively on literary translation which are currently available at universities in the United Kingdom: the MA in Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia (UEA); the MA in Literary Translation Studies at the University of Warwick; and the MA in Audiovisual and Literary Translation at the University of Essex. After providing a concise summary of the situation regarding (literary) translator training in the British context, online sources are used to obtain information regarding the structure and course content of each of the three degree programmes under analysis. The findings are presented, contrasted, and discussed, before some proposals for further research are outlined.

**Keywords:** translator training; postgraduate degrees; translating literature; higher education; MA Literary Translation

## 1. Introduction

Literary translation is commonly considered to be a prestigious, high-status specialisation, and sociological studies of translators and interpreters have sometimes delved into greater detail on this topic. For example, a survey of translational professionals in Finland illustrated that among their peers, literary translators do “enjoy higher esteem than other translators” (Ruokonen & Mäkisalo 2018: 10), and the author’s preliminary study has also shown that literary translators could potentially be viewed as elite in sociological terms, although further empirical research is of course required (Hoyte-West 2022a). As with other types of translation and interpreting, it has been suggested (see e.g., American Literary Translators Association n.d.) that one way of acquiring and developing the necessary skills to be a literary translator is through appropriate training, such as via enrolment on a relevant postgraduate degree programme at an accredited tertiary institution. Indeed, this can be “the fastest, most focused route into the profession” (Page 2018).

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare  
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Received: 30/04/2023

Revised: 29/05/2023

Accepted: 05/06/2023

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Accordingly, this contribution, in brief terms, aims to shine a light on selected degree programmes in literary translation in the British context. It is part of a more extensive study seeking to give a broad panorama of the literary translation landscape in the United Kingdom. To date, this has included profiles of selected British awards and prizes for literary translation from various perspectives (e.g. see Hoyte-West 2022b), and three further manuscripts are currently in preparation. Though there have been numerous studies describing the format of translator and interpreter training in various nations, few have focused particularly on the training options for literary translators. In profiling relevant British university-based programmes in literary translation, this article therefore complements previous work in the domain, such as Hyde Parker's (2009) concise overview of the evolution of literary translation education in the United Kingdom over the past decades as well as King's (2019) research thesis comparing six translation degree programmes, which although centring on North America included one British institution within the parameters of its analysis.

## **2. Brief Remarks on (Literary) Translator Training in the United Kingdom**

As leading translation studies scholar Anthony Pym observed more than a decade ago, there are several different national models of university-based translator training across Europe (Pym 2009). These include countries such as Spain where translation and/or interpreting is traditionally offered primarily as an initial or undergraduate degree. This approach can then be contrasted with those countries where translator and/or interpreter training is mainly offered at the postgraduate level; that is, after candidates have already completed an undergraduate degree in another subject, typically but not necessarily related to languages and philology. Accordingly, university-based translator training in the United Kingdom is primarily offered at postgraduate level – i.e., leading to the award of a relevant taught master's degree (e.g. MA or MSc). In common with the general structure of postgraduate qualifications in the United Kingdom, other awards such as a Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) or Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip) are sometimes available, typically to students who choose not to complete a full MA programme. It is worth mentioning that in recent years more and more named undergraduate degrees focusing on translation and/or interpreting have become available, with courses offered at institutions such as Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, the University of Swansea, London Metropolitan University, and several others.

At the postgraduate level, a glance at the relevant websites demonstrates that the range of universities which offer taught courses in translation primarily focus on practical translation – technical, specialised etc. Indeed, British translator training programmes were formerly well-represented in the European Commission's flagship European Masters in Translation (EMT) consortium, with 13 programmes at 12 universities represented among the 60 international universities selected for the previous 2014-2019 iteration of the initiative (European Commission 2014). Indeed, it can be argued that the EMT is an important model for best practice in translator training at the European level, with its various member institutions adhering to a range of core competencies to ensure quality. However, within the network there is also

space to allow for a variety of approaches, languages, and course structures to be incorporated into individual programmes (for more detailed information, see e.g. Schmitt 2012; Torres-Simón & Pym 2019; etc.). However, with the United Kingdom no longer one of the European Union's member states, no British programmes or institutions feature in the current 2019-2024 incarnation of the EMT (European Commission 2023). In addition, there are of course other relevant organisations with a mission related to the propagation and promotion of translation competence and skills and the development of relevant models and templates. These include PACTE, a research group which has conducted extensive research in that domain for many years (for more information, see e.g. Hurtado Albir 2017). Turning specifically to relevant literary translation-based initiatives, a key organisation is the PETRA-E consortium of several European universities. In 2016, the consortium developed the comprehensive PETRA-E Framework of Reference for the Education and Training of Literary Translators (PETRA-E Network 2023a). Through a series of detailed competence-based descriptors, the PETRA-E Framework outlines five independent levels of performance from novice to specialist: LT1 Beginner, LT2 Advanced Learner, LT3 Early Career Professional, LT4 Advanced Professional, LT5 Expert (PETRA-E Framework 2023). In addition, as a mark of its international scope, the relevant documentation has been made available in 11 European languages (Bulgarian, Croatian, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish (PETRA-E Network 2023a)) and examples of relevant research featuring the Framework include Percec & Pungă (2017) and Pungă & Percec (2017).

With the focus of many British postgraduate degree programmes being largely on more market-oriented areas of translation, literary translator training is commonly offered as an optional module within broader MA or MSc degrees in Translation Studies (see Hyde Parker, 2009). This is demonstrated by some of the entries for UK-based institutions listed on the Course Database webpage of the PETRA-E Network (2023b). Further analysis of the relevant university websites also reveals several additional factors, including the fact that some of the degrees in Translation Studies are centred primarily or exclusively on analysing specific theoretical and cultural aspects of translation, rather than on the acquisition of practical skills. And additionally, though there are indeed advanced modules in literary translation offered at several universities across the United Kingdom, it is apparent that there are very few named taught postgraduate degrees in "Literary Translation" as an independent subject of study. There are, however, several research-based master's qualifications available such as the MA by Research in Literary Translation at the University of Swansea, and in the past taught courses were available at other institutions such as the University of Middlesex (Parker 2009). Indeed, the current overview will profile briefly the three full qualifications dedicated to literary translation which are currently available in the British context: the MA in Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich; the MA in Literary Translation Studies at the University of Warwick; and the MA in Audiovisual and Literary Translation at the University of Essex in Colchester. As such, it is worth noting Jean Boase-Beier's succinct formulation – and which appears not to have changed much in the intervening quarter-century – that the objectives of attending a literary translation course may be:

*“(a) to provide a qualification in literary translation; (b) to provide students with the means to speculate on, to discuss and to carry out research into literary translation; (c) to give help in establishing contacts with other literary translators and with organisations, publishers and academics in the field; [and] (d) to help students to translate better.” (Boase-Beier 1998: 34)*

At this juncture, it is important to underline the availability of other, non-degree options for literary translators in the United Kingdom. These include the professionally-oriented short courses offered by the universities of Bristol and Warwick (and in the past by City, University of London), as well as the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT)’s summer school at the UEA. In addition, as also noted in Pym, Grin, Sfreddo, and Chan’s (2013) extensive analysis of the status of the translational professions in Europe and elsewhere, other certification options for translators are available in the United Kingdom. Regarding literary translation, the Diploma in Translation (DipTrans), which is the main vocational translation qualification offered by the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL), features the option for candidates to sit a semi-specialised paper in ‘Literature’. This examination is situated at postgraduate level and can be taken in a wide range of language pairs, independent of prior attendance at any specific training course (CIOL Qualifications 2023).

### **3. Aim and Approach**

As indicated in the introductory remarks, this study aims to obtain more background information regarding university-based literary translation qualifications in the United Kingdom. It is an exploratory and desk-based analysis, and similarly to the author’s previous overviews of translator and interpreter training in various national contexts (see e.g. Hoyte-West 2020; 2022c), it employs a literature-based methodological approach to examine online sources such as university prospectuses and course syllabi. Though brief in its analysis and presentation, it is hoped that the descriptive foundations provided in this study can be built on to provide deeper analysis in subsequent projects. Building on the selection of the three named postgraduate taught degrees in literary translation outlined above (at UEA, Warwick, and Essex), information about the structure and requirements for each of the three qualifications will be presented, noting any similarities and differences displayed.

### **4. University-based Training Courses for Literary Translators in the United Kingdom**

The first course presented is the MA in Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia (2023a), which was also the only non-North American course featured in King’s (2019) comparative study of university translation degree programmes. A modern university, it is world-renowned for its excellence in literature and creative writing, as demonstrated by its links with famous authors such as the Nobel literature

laureate Kazuo Ishiguro (The Nobel Prize 2017). It also hosts the British Centre for Literary Translation (BCLT), a dedicated research centre of the University, which as its website states, “support[s] the MA” programme (University of East Anglia 2023b). According to the online prospectus (University of East Anglia 2023a), the MA in Literary Translation falls under the auspices of the School of Literature, Drama, and Creative Writing. In common with the vast majority of taught MA/MSc degrees in the United Kingdom, the degree comprises 180 credits (equivalent to 90 ECTS), with a duration of 1 year full-time or 2 years part-time enrolment. The basic entry requirement to the degree comprises an upper second-class honours degree (2:1), which should preferably be in a literary subject. In terms of structure and language combination, the MA course caters for all languages into English, and consists of the following four compulsory modules. Three are of 20 credits (10 ECTS): ‘Process and product in translation’; ‘Translation theory and history’; and ‘Case studies’, plus a 10 credit (5 ECTS) seminar in ‘Literary translation research and methodology training’. Noting UEA’s expertise and reputation in those fields, students in the MA can choose an optional 20 credit (10 ECTS) module from the areas of creative writing, literature, or publishing studies. The main component of the degree, however, comprising half of the total credits (90; 45 ECTS) is the master’s dissertation, which can take the form of literary translation with a commentary or a critical essay (University of East Anglia 2023a).

The second course featured is the MA in Literary Translation Studies at the University of Warwick (2023). Like UEA, the University of Warwick is a highly-ranked modern university and is also well-known for its teaching and research in languages and literature. It also hosts the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, an annual award which recognises excellence in the translation of a literary work by a woman writer into English. The MA degree in Literary Translation Studies comes under the umbrella of the Warwick Writing Programme, within the University’s Faculty of Arts. As with the course at UEA, it is also composed of 180 credits (90 ECTS) and can be followed on a full- or part-time basis for one or two years respectively. The academic entry requirement is a 2:1 degree, and once again, literature or modern languages are the preferred disciplines. In terms of linguistic combinations, all languages into English are accepted, with the departmental website (University of Warwick 2020) noting that in the past source languages have included major European languages such as French, German, Italian, and Spanish, major international languages such as Mandarin Chinese and Russian, as well as minority languages such as Catalan and Welsh. According to the prospectus (University of Warwick 2023), the format of the course includes a mandatory module entitled ‘Translation Studies in Theory and Practice’ to which – depending on the year – students must take either a further compulsory module on ‘The Practice of Literary Translation’ or participate in the ‘Literary Translation and Creative (Re-)Writing Workshop’. A further additional core module is to be chosen on a topic relating to translation and/or literary studies, to which an optional module can be added from elsewhere in the Faculty of Arts. With a limit of 16,000 words, the MA dissertation can take the format either of a literary translation with an accompanying critical commentary, or as a research-based thesis

exploring some relevant aspects pertaining to practical, theoretical, and even sociological aspects of literary translation (University of Warwick 2023).

The third and final degree programme presented here is the MA in Audiovisual and Literary Translation, which is taught at the Department of Language and Linguistics at the University of Essex (2023). Like the other two institutions, the University of Essex is a well-regarded research-based modern university. In terms of the specific nature of the MA course, it differs from the two previous examples by combining the named study of literary translation with an additional specialism in audiovisual translation. It too follows the standard 1-year full time/2-year part-time format, with the degree comprising a total of 180 credits (90 ECTS). The entry requirements here are for a minimum of a lower second-class honours (2:2) degree; unlike the other two courses, however, this is specified as including either French, German, Italian, Portuguese, or Spanish. This linguistic stipulation is also mirrored in the language pairs available on the course. In addition to mandatory English, candidates must also offer either one of the preceding five European languages, Arabic, or Japanese. Noting the degree's dual focus, the compulsory modules include 15 credit (7.5 ECTS) modules in 'Audiovisual translation' and 'Subtitling: Principles and practice', with the necessary literary translation input provided by a module entitled 'Crossing the Boundaries: Literature and Translation in Global Context'. This is supplemented by two additional optional core modules, also both of 15 credits (7.5 ECTS), which are based on the creation of a portfolio of translations in a specific language pair. Further scope for options within the degree include the selection of two 20-credit (10 ECTS) modules focusing on literary and cultural studies, chosen from a broad range with titles such as Critical 'Moments in the History and Theory of Film', 'Shakespeare and the Early/Modern', and 'Memory Maps: Practices in Psychogeography', as well as creative writing options. Finally, this class-based component is supplemented by a 60-credit (30 ECTS) 16,000-word dissertation on a relevant topic (University of Essex 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

This overview has demonstrated that at present there appear to be three specific named taught postgraduate courses in literary translation offered in the British context – the MA programmes at the universities of East Anglia, Warwick, and Essex. The courses share a number of common characteristics, including a similar structure of 180 credits (90 ECTS), 1-year full-time or 2-year part-time attendance options, as well as a mixture between taught coursework and an independent dissertation project focused either on a literary translation with commentary or a research dissertation within Translation Studies. At Essex, the focus appears to be practical language-based work in specific language pairs, with the dual aim of gaining a good grounding in both audiovisual and literary translation. As such, a key objective seems to be the development of literary translation competencies within a portfolio of broader translational skills. At UEA and Warwick, however, given that candidates from all languages are accepted and that those courses focus exclusively on literary translation, the workshop-based focus appears to foreground the quality of the translation in the

target language – i.e., in English. An interesting aspect of all three of the postgraduate programmes profiled here is the optional inclusion of relevant coursework from creative writing. This focus on the craft of writing is particularly pronounced at UEA and Warwick, and mirrors conversations within translation studies on the interlinkage of translation and creative writing (see, among others, e.g., Fang 2021), as well as, more generally, on theoretical and applied discussions regarding the interface between translation and creativity (see e.g. Malmkjær 2019).

It is clear that all three of the degree courses profiled here are professionally focused, yet, as the above overview has illustrated, this takes place in different forms. In addition, noting that this is a preliminary analysis, more wide-ranging qualitative research would be needed to gain insights into several of the questions that have arisen. For example, these could incorporate interviews, surveys, and focus groups conducted with staff, students, and alumni of the three degree programmes discussed here, as well as further analysis of the input and experiences of other relevant stakeholders in the broader literary translation industry such as publishers, agents, and authors. In addition, comparative work could be done with other similar literary translation postgraduate degree programmes in other countries, thus expanding the scope of this overview beyond the British context.

By way of conclusion, this brief survey of university-based training courses for literary translators in the United Kingdom has provided several options for further exploration. As is being mentioned more and more frequently, in the past few years machine translation has made growing inroads in literary translation, a domain formerly considered somewhat less vulnerable than other areas of specialised translation. Accordingly, studies uncovering its current and future influence on literary translator training could prove useful (see e.g., Omar & Gomaa 2020), and it will certainly be of interest to observe how technological progress will impact the structure, content, and objectives of literary translator training programmes in the coming years. In addition, though much scholarship has appeared about the shift to virtual translator and interpreter training mandated by the coronavirus lockdowns (see e.g., Hodáková & Perez 2022), it appears that not so much has focused specifically on the impact of the pandemic on the training of literary translators. This too, therefore, could lead to possible areas for further inquiry. As such, it is clear that there is significant food for thought on how developments in technology will impact literary translator training – and by extension, the literary translation profession – as the twenty-first century progresses, thereby providing rich possibilities for further research.

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