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# University Women in the Arts Mentoring: "Kicking down doors together" - Exeunt Magazine

## University Women in the Arts Mentoring: "Kicking down doors together"

Jennifer Tucket on the new UK-wide mentoring programme University Women in the Arts from Central Saint Martins.

**Jennifer Tuckett**

We have just closed the submission window for [University Women in the Arts](#), our new scheme through which female students studying arts subjects at Universities across the UK can apply for mentoring from 14 of the women leading the way in the arts in the UK. The number and scale of applications has been extremely surprising: we've received applications from all over the country, from Edinburgh to Cornwall, from Bolton to London, from Birmingham to Norwich, from Salford to Glasgow to Bournemouth to Bristol to Cambridge to Oxford to Chichester to Manchester to Brighton. Why?

I think one of the possible reasons is, if we are going to move towards gender equality in the arts and move towards it more quickly than the 50 – 100 years predicted by various sources, the potential impact of mentoring and the passing on of advice from one generation of women to another cannot be over-estimated.

This is how it began for me. I was on week one of my undergraduate course. I'd just been auditioning for shows as I wanted to be an actress and had come back to college for the Principal's welcome address.

This is what she said: "Every year I see women arrive here, the best and brightest of their generation. Then they get a boyfriend and start helping him and come out with a 2:1."

Fifteen years later I still remember this piece of advice and also that this was the piece of advice she chose to give us, out of all the other possibilities, in 1999. I didn't listen and came out with a 2:1 – as did every other woman studying English at my college in my year.

What I think now is that I wish there had been more of this mentoring during my time, to show me examples to follow and guide me away from making some of the mistakes I've made.

For example, this is what my current student at Central Saint Martins Titilola Dawudu says: "It starts from the top, doesn't it? There are fewer women making the decisions of what writers to work with or what plays to produce, for example. It's the same argument with diversity. My background is television media and it was the same there. But it will change. I have to believe that I live in a world where change is happening, however slow. That is why University Women in the Arts is great. Coming together as women and supporting and guiding our careers, means we'll kick down more doors together. It's when women feel threatened with each other and think we are each other's competition – that nothing will happen. Strength in numbers. Work together, be on the same side and more things will happen. The women who will be mentoring are women who worked their way to the top and more importantly, want to help other women reach similar levels too."



Jennifer Tuckett and Central Saint Martins student Titilola Dawudu

Elizabeth Freestone, one of the mentors for University Women in the Arts and the Artistic Director of Pentabus Theatre, who completed important research in this area with Charlotte Higgins, another mentor, says: "At entry level, the stats show that roughly equal numbers of men and women study the arts. At the emerging stage, when people begin to find work, again, it's roughly equal. But it's the mid-career stage where the drop-off begins and by the time you get to leadership level, men outnumber women two to one. This is for a variety of reasons mostly to do with women not being offered the gigs and breaks their male peers are, and also includes pay and childcare. This terrific scheme is designed to provide mentoring from an early point in an artist's career so they can plan for the long game and be better equipped for the difficult issues and choices the industry is going to throw at them. We all benefit from mentoring and guidance from

peers and superiors at different points in our careers; this scheme formalises that right from the start to help women find their feet, build their careers and then take the world by storm. I've been lucky enough to be supported by a number of brilliant women at various stages when I've been trying to find my feet. As a drama student I remember being completely blown away by Katie Mitchell's *Oresteia* at the National. I had a friend who was an usher so I got to watch the parts many times. Katie was often there, scribbling notes in a corner. I wrote a real fan girl letter and left it at stage door. I got a postcard back saying 'let's meet for coffee.' She was patient and wise and generous (and still is). I think we all need mentors, whatever age or stage in our careers we're at. It's about sharing knowledge, learning from mistakes, laughing at the nonsense, and mostly, knowing other people have got your back. "

Lucy Kerbel, one of the advisory board members of University Women in the Arts, which is being run in association with Tonic Theatre, says: "I think this scheme is a brilliant idea. Young women who are keen to build careers in the arts often have to look harder for role models than their male counterparts. Consequently, a programme such as this which connects female students with trailblazing women is hugely valuable because it makes it all the easier for them to visualise themselves in top roles. Furthermore, hearing in detail how these women have achieved the success they have, and being able to begin to translate that to their own artistic and professional journeys is something that could make all the difference to a young woman when navigating the tricky initial steps into her career in the arts."

The impact of passing on advice from generation to generation, as we look towards gender equality, and learning from each other cannot be over-estimated – it can help us learn from each other's mistakes, each other's successes, understand career trajectories and also understand whether there are issues that women face again and again and, in understanding these, look at how to address them.

The Women of the Future Programme – another of the partners on University Women in the Arts alongside the MA Dramatic Writing at Drama Centre London at Central Saint Martins and Writers at Work Productions – have investigated women's natural talent for collaboration. If this can be harnessed for mentoring, rather than women fighting each other off as potential competitors, this seems an important step towards achieving something.



Two other examples of mentoring stand out from my personal experience:

A card from Sam Mendes sent in response to a letter I sent him asking him for advice about my first Edinburgh show when I was 18: “I don’t have much advice except that, if you want to do something, do it and think of the consequences later. Not sensible advice, I know, but it has stood me in good stead”. For a woman from a single parent family which had never been associated with the arts, it was an important piece of advice and understanding about being bold and not shying away from the career I wanted to pursue. Although the card was lost/stolen in a move, I’ve never forgotten that advice.

Similarly, my mentor Kate Rowland, the founder of BBC Writersroom and the former Creative Director of New Writing at the BBC. Working with my students at Salford University, where I worked at the time, on a project called Write by the Quays which was to celebrate the opening of MediaCityUK, many of them wrote that they would never forget her advice that “determination, resilience and a passion for something shine through”. Since then, several have written to me that the experience of Write by the Quays and seeing their work produced by the BBC inspired them not to give up on their aspirations to be writers and one even has his own theatre company now, with his show produced at the Imperial War Museum for the centenary of World War 1.

For me as a woman, Kate Rowland has also been a mentor for both professional and private issues – seeing Kate write about her experience of domestic abuse was extremely important when I was in my own abusive relationship – to raise awareness that other successful women who you admire have gone through this and come out of the other side had a massive impact.

Perhaps the final word belongs to an email just sent in to University Women in the Arts as I write this article:

*“I have only just seen this fantastic opportunity and I was wondering if there is any way you would consider my application if I emailed it today? I understand you work to deadlines, but I have to ask, can’t let such an*

*amazing opportunity pass without trying.”*

We hope University Women in the Arts will only be the start of using mentoring as a tool for gender equality and to address what is happening in the talent pipeline, where currently more women study arts course but less women work in the arts, and that the above applicant can find this scheme or another scheme to harness her talent in future years.

Public events for University Women in the Arts will be running from 2016 – 2017 and the mentors are:

- Vicky Featherstone, Artistic Director of the Royal Court Theatre
- Amanda Foreman, historian, columnist and presenter including of the recent BBC series The Ascent of Women
- Jude Kelly, Artistic Director of the Southbank Centre and founder of the WOW Festivals
- Lucy Kerbel, founder and Director of Tonic Theatre
- Joanna Prior, Managing Director of Penguin General Books, President of the Publishers Association and Chair of the Board of the Baileys Women’s Prize for Fiction
- Tamara Rojo, Artistic Director of the English National Ballet
- Charlotte Higgins, Chief Culture Writer at The Guardian
- Elizabeth Freestone, Artistic Director of Pentabus Theatre
- Tanya Seghatchian, film producer of films including the Harry Potter series and My Summer of Love and former Head of the Film Fund at the UK Film Council
- Kate Bryan, former Director of Art16 and The Fine Art Society, presenter, art historian and winner of the Women of the Future Arts and Culture Award
- Kate Rowland, founder of BBC Writersroom, the BBC’s new writing department, and the former Creative Director of New Writing at the BBC, Head of BBC Radio Drama and Commissioner of Radio 3’s The Wire
- Jennifer Tuckett, Course Leader of the new MA Dramatic Writing at Drama Centre London at Central Saint Martins and founder of the UK’s first formally industry partnered MA in Playwriting, and Director of Writers at Work Productions, which manages London Writers Week and The Student Guide to Writing amongst other initiatives and works with the industry to help increase access and diversity in writing.
- Anne Edyvean, Head of BBC Writersroom
- Pinky Lilani, founder of the Women of the Future Programme

*Sign up for the mailing list at [www.universitywomeninthearts.com](http://www.universitywomeninthearts.com) to be kept informed of these public events and to find out which students are chosen for the mentoring part of the project as well.*