HCA Writing Centre

End of Year Report, April 2020

**Background**

The HCA Writing Centre officially launched in October 2019. Previously, a Principal’s Teaching Award Scheme (PTAS) had been granted to fund a two-year pilot programme for the Writing Centre. With contributing funds from HCA, the pilot version of the Centre was aimed to get the institutional and pedagogical experience—and evaluative data—over the two years, toward the goal of then scaling up the Centre. The long-term goal is to have a full version of the Writing Centre where every HCA student can have at least one writing tutorial per semester.

Currently, the scaled-down pilot programme has the following characteristics:

* Operates twice a week (Wed+Thurs), from 13h to 16h.
* 100 students volunteered to participate in the pilot; these students were recruited through several rounds of emailing, beginning in May 2019 and continuing through September 2019. The breakdown by subject area of the participating students is:
  + 56 history
  + 24 classics
  + 20 archaeology
* Given the number of tutorials we could offer, the guidelines were set that history students were eligible for one tutorial per semester, and classics and archaeology two per semester.
* The majority (62%) of students are in their second-year. Though as the initial recruitment prompts were underwhelming from non-history students, we widened the call for third-years in classics as well, and also first- and third-years in archaeology. Additionally, on an ad-hoc basis, a few more students joined, in instances when their tutor contacted the Centre directly to ask if the student could participate.
* To meet the scheduling needs and deadlines of the semester—and within the budgetary scope of the Centre—the tutorials started in Week 4 of the semester.
  + Additionally, at the start of the semester, once students had their course assignments, we surveyed all participating students to ask when they would like their tutorials. From this, we set the session availability accordingly, with most of the tutorials in weeks 4 and 5, prior to what seemed to be the main mid-semester deadlines.

And in terms of staffing, we hired and trained seven current PhD students in HCA, two from Classics and Archaeology, and three from History (one of the history students was on research in semester two, so we brought in a replacement, to maintain two per subject). The tutors were given an induction training, where we discussed best practices and approaches for the tutorials, how to handle various aspects of the position, and what scheduling would be processed.

For reference, the Writing Centre website (just a front-end site, to give guidelines and link to the booking tool) can be found here:

<https://uoe.sharepoint.com/sites/hss/hca/writing-centre>

**Data on Tutorials**

Our data on tutorials come from two sources: the tutor evaluations and student evaluations. For the former, our tutors spend 10-15 minutes immediately following the tutorial, filling out a form reflecting on the writing session. And for the former, students are sent electronically a link to fill out the evaluation form, that covers similar questions. It is useful to mention that our response rate was fairly high for the student evaluations, with 58 of the 87 tutorials filling out the form, almost a 70% response rate.

This year there were 87 total writing tutorials: 67 in semester 1 and 20 in semester 2. (As further explained at the end of this report, the drop-off was due to industrial action and COVID-19.)

The breakdown by subject:

* Classics 36 (41%)
* History, 31 (36%)
* Archaeology, 20 (23%)

The breakdown by student year:

Student Year

* First-year, 8
* Second-year, 65
* Third-year, 14

Student responses (n=58, or 67% response rate)

Of the respondents:

* 20 history (65% response rate)
* 23 classics (64%)
* 15 archaeology (75%)

The busiest week (from across both semesters) was Week 4, when we held 16 tutorials across both days.

The most common courses for which students brought in assignments:

* Ancient History (2A and 2B)
* Archaeology 1A and 2B
* Intro to Historiography
* Themes in Scottish History

1. **Overall Experience**

* Rating from tutor’s perspective (how would you rate the overall quality of the tutorial)?
  + 3.98
* Rating from student’s perspective (how would you rate the overall quality of the tutorial)?
  + 4.71

*NB: from the above question (perceived overall quality), the discrepancy between the tutor (3.98) and the student (4.71) average is very encouraging: it indicates that our tutors see room for improvement while the students tend to have had an almost perfect experience. We read this as a sign that, institutionally, we are able to identify how to make the tutorials more efficient, while at the same time the service we are providing is nonetheless productive and beneficial for students.*

*The above question (experience) can also be broken down further:*

How was your overall experience?

* 4.71
* 5-rating, 42 times, 4-rating=15 times, 3-rating 1 time. Nothing below a 3.

How helpful was the tutorial in improving your essay?

* 4.55
* 5-rating=34 times, 4-rating 22 times, 3-rating 2 times, Nothing below a 3.

*NB: here, the relatively small discrepancy (4.71 v 4.55) is likely due to the perception of the ‘overall experience’ of the tutorial rather than ‘improving your essay’ specifically, the former implying perhaps a concrete improvement during the 45-minute tutorial that may not always be possible.*

**2. Session Goals**

Which of the following aspects of your essay did you most want to work on?

* Paragraph structure, 23 (40%)
* Use of evidence, 12 (21%)
* Language or narrative, 6 (10%)
* Thesis statements, 5 (8%)
* Other, 12 (21%)
  + *NB: from the tutor evaluations and long-form comments, this ‘other’ category included: time management, writing strategies, literature reviews, being more analytical*

Was the aspect above covered in your tutorial?

* 57 yes, 1 no

Did the tutor clearly explain some of your essay’s main strengths and limitations?

* All 58 replied yes

**3. Long-form comments from students**

Best parts of the tutorial?

*These answers tended to trend into two main categories, which we give examples of below*.

1. Having somebody to sit and go through an essay with carefully:

* being able to look at the essay and get pointers towards certain issues, and having the opportunity to ask questions about specific sections.
* The tutorial was really helpful in giving me constructive advice that would help improve my essay. She also helped with the structure of my essay which was beneficial. She told me some key points to note when writing and planning essays. To have tutorials like these is really beneficial as it’s good to have someone look over your essay and see any problems with it.
* Direct analysis of an essay really showed me where I was going wrong and showed me where I could’ve added more to boost my grade
* The overall explanation of what an essay should be. How to use evidence, sentence structure etc. The discussion really helped me see clearly and know what I was doing.
* Being able to freely discuss any areas of concern and feedback I had received on earlier essays in order to hopefully implement these changes and improve future essays.
* To have someone evaluating your process and thoughts in a very constructive manner, giving me more confidence in my general ability to write essays

1. The tutor themselves:

* The tutor was very approachable and friendly
* The fact that the tutor was so ready, and willing, to help
* [x] was so helpful. She put me at ease and made clear the couple of points she thought I needed to go back to. She made me feel so at ease and calm after feeling I was growing in the course reading.
* He was honest, have helpful, constructive advice and helped me really understand what a marker is looking for
* Friendly tutor and excellent practical advice given
* my tutor was very encouraging.

*Here is an additional comment that nicely reflects both of the above trends:*

The tutor was incredibly helpful when answering basic questions and giving advice. I immensely appreciate the fact that [x] was willing to go over an old essay and help me figure out what I could have done better, before then helping me figure out how to use those suggestions in my new essay. [x] was kind and understanding the entire time, showed me tips and tricks on how to get the best out of my essay, and enforced all his suggestions with positive and constructive feedback. [x] gave me much sorely needed advice and I feel far more confident and prepared to finish this assignment now.

We also asked students ‘What could be improved in the tutorial?’

*NB: only 20 of the 58 students provided a specific answer to this question, a strong indication of how students had, on the whole, a thoroughly positive experience. Of those that provided suggestions on how the tutorials can improve:*

Room/space constraints, 10 in total (*as noted at the end of this report, space constraints relate to the tutorials being held in a tutorial room*)

Offer more tutorials per student, 6

Other feedback included: models/templates to share, ability to send papers to tutors in advance,

Any other comments?

* 18 responses, all extremely positive, thankful, and noting a boost in confidence

Examples:

* It was extremely helpful as it gave me more confidence and made me less anxious about the assignments. Overall it was a great experience and I am looking forward to the next session.
* My tutor was very helpful and I feel more confident in how I will approach my assignments.
* Thank you for organising this scheme, it's really incredibly helpful and well-organised!
* A splendid programme and I hope it will continue in subsequent years as well. It helped me a lot. Not only with the writing itself, but also made me more confident and feel that I am not alone and can ask for help if need be.
* I have really benefitted from the writing tutorials so far and appreciate all the work that has gone into making them available. Thank you!

**4. Long-form comments from tutors**

*The tutor evaluation also had an open-ended comment section, where they provided a more general sense of how the tutorial went, what exactly was worked on, and possible areas for improvement.*

A few indicative examples include:

1. [x] wanted to talk briefly about the assignment for Intro to Historiography, then we spoke more in depth about her essay plan for Themes in Scottish History. She specifically wanted to talk about how to include historians within the essay, and how to balance evidence and analysis within the body paragraphs of an essay. I looked over the plan and answered her questions, then suggested how she could strengthen the argument and the topic sentences in order to make the best use of her evidence.
2. [x] comes from a STEM background and wanted help with his first essay (he might actually be a first year student? The course is technically a Classics one). He mentioned that he was unsure which details to include, so we talked about how to connect evidence to specific arguments to make the overall paper more interpretative/analytical rather than summative.
3. Last week we discussed approaches and this week she wanted to talk about the written piece having used these approaches we discussed
4. [x] was still at the early stages of her paper planning and was unsure whether to keep her topic open as she read or to read specifically with her working thesis statement in mind. We started by creating a general timeline of her work on the paper from now until submission on Monday, and then we moved into discussing techniques that would be useful in focusing her work and eliminating extraneous elements (graveyard document, reverse outline).
5. We talked over a previous essay the student had done and identified areas to work on including paragraph length, use of evidence in points, and references. We discussed how to break down points into more appropriate chunks, and to not be too overambitious in our goals. We then started to talk through and plan out a point for the above essay, discussing how to break it down, and how the evidence identified can be used to illustrate a wider point.
6. Worried about stucturing argument as a non-native speaker. Discussed argument for essay, approach, suggestions on ways of managing time management. Was concerned about procrastinating, suggested speaking to SSO and IAD to help with activities for this, as well as giving some advice and support from my own experience.
7. [x] brought two essay plans to talk about. For the first one (Intro to Historiography) we focussed on understanding the assignment, and how he could structure the essay so he could fit in everything he wanted to say in 1000 words. We also talked about his argument, and whether or not it answered the question. For his Global Connections essay his plan wasn't quite as far along (that essay is due later) so we talked about the argument he's been working towards and how best to structure the essay so that his evidence best supports the argument he wants to make. He also asked about the best language to use to communicate his argument, so we discussed that too.
8. [x] came with doubts regarding which essay question to choose for her Conflict Archaeology course. We looked at two different questions (ritual violence and archaeology's contributions to modern conflict), breaking their content down, pinpointing definitions, examples and approaches. We also explored some possible readings and sources. Finally, we discussed the possibility of her developing her own essay question, considering which topics she was most interested in (bioarchaeology and interpersonal violence).
9. We looked at a series of notes that [x] had produced for her essay and how best to structure it in a way that flowed from point to point. I asked questions about her response to the question and we used those answers to help formulate how to arrange these issues. We also looked over their intended dissertation topic submission and her ideas for it.
10. [x] came unsure of how to structure her essay and how to include her funerary art examples in the essay. We talked about including images in the text, how to present them, describe them, analyse them and cite them bibliographically. We also read through her essay pointing out places where she could include the examples and how to relate them to her essays topics.

**Reflections and Next Steps**

As evident in the above data, we are thrilled with how the first year went. Beyond the numbers (though 87 tutorials is wonderful), we are most encouraged by the enthusiasm shown by both the students and also the writing tutors. And anecdotally, we have received strong feedback from other colleagues in HCA, who have heard their students speak highly of the Centre; as noted, several colleagues have also asked, mid-semester, if their students and personal tutees can join. These encouraging trends suggest that as the pilot programme continues, awareness of the Centre will continue to spread by word of mouth, and hopefully there will be a steady increase in demand.

First, a few items this year kept the Centre from running at full capacity. There were two waves of industrial action (one in each semester) and then the COVID-19 campus closure. For the former, not all tutorials were held as scheduled, and for the latter, we moved to a virtual platform, though understandably not all students chose to keep their appointments, given the tumultuous circumstances at the end of the semester. These two items (strikes and pandemic) meant that the total number of tutorials held would have been closer to the 130-140 range, rather than the final total of 87. In semester one, for example, we had 67 tutorials, yet only 20 in semester two – a direct fallout from the three-weeks of strike plus COVID-19.

Second, and related to the above, we are very fortunate that IAD has agreed to let us rollover the unused budget from Year 1 toward Year 2 of the pilot. Because we did not end of offering the full allotted number of tutorials, we will now be able to offer more than planned next year. This should hopefully give us the full body of data and experience over the two years as originally planned.

And third, In terms of ways to keep improving we can highlight several areas.

1. Space. This is the most pressing but also least-feasible problem to tackle. Currently, we are holding the sessions in a tutorial room. As noted in the comments, this is not ideal and can often make the one-on-one tutorial feel un-private, and also loud, when there are up to six people sitting around a tutorial table talking at the same time. The space issue will persist until we get our own dedicated room, that can then be outfitted with several small desks for individual discussions, thereby providing a more personal space.
2. No-shows. In total, we counted fifteen students who had signed up for a tutorial but then failed to actually show up. We make it very clear in our guidelines that failing to show up (without at least 24 hours advance notice) can be penalized by forfeiting their right to a tutorial the following semester. As we are still in the early stages, we opted not to enforce this penalty, and instead wrote to each no-show student explaining why they need to be more punctual and respectful of the Centre’s policies.
3. Non-participants. Although 100 students signed up for the pilot programme, only half of them signed up for a tutorial this year. We sent several rounds of follow-up emails though only a small handful replied that yes, they are still interested, it was just that the year got busier than they anticipated. For the others, we have simply not heard back from them. In those cases, we may need to consider dropping them from the pilot programme; though this will entail a likely follow-up to recruit another batch of participants. The alternative would be to just allow those active in the pilot an extra tutorial per year. We will keep these options in mind and reevaluate at the end of next semester.
4. Response rates on the evaluations. Although we are happy with the 70% response rate from students, we would like that number to be even higher. The link to the evaluation is included in the appointment confirmation and again in the reminder email the day before the tutorial. An option is for our tutors to remind students at the end of each session to fill out the evaluation; most already do this, though it is still on the students to go back to their emails to find the link.