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## PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

**Project Title:**

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**Project type** (delete as appropriate) :

**B Innovation Project** (introduction and evaluation of an educational innovation, usually taking a practical approach)

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**Principal Investigator** : Jacob Blanc 2019-20, Louise Blanke 2020-2022

**Schools/department** : School of History, Classics and Archaeology

**Team members (including Schools and Departments)** : N/A

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Project teams must submit a report within 4 months of the conclusion of their project.

Copies of dissemination material (eg journals/newsletter articles, conference papers, posters should be listed and attached (separate to the word count). The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

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### Report (maximum 1500 words)

The HCA Writing Centre launched in October 2019, funded largely by a Principal's Teaching Award Scheme (PTAS) for a two-year pilot programme, 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, towards the goal of scaling up the Centre. The long-term goal was to have a full version of the Writing Centre where every HCA student can have at least one writing tutorial per semester. Due to COVID-19 and the industrial action, IAD kindly permitted us to spend the PTAS funding over three academic years (2019/20 – 2021/22).

**The first year of the pilot project (2019-20)** had the following characteristics (for a full report, see HCA Writing Centre, End of Year Report, April 2020):

- Operated twice a week (Wed+Thurs), from 13h to 16h;
- 100 students participated in the pilot project (History: 56; Classics: 24; Archaeology: 20);
- History students were eligible for one tutorial per semester, while classics and archaeology students could book two tutorials per semester;
- Tutorials were held from Week 4 through to Week 11 with a peak in tutorials offered in Weeks 4 and 5, which corresponded to the main mid-semester deadlines;
- Seven PhD students (History: 3; Classics: 2; Archaeology: 2) were hired and trained to perform the role of tutors;
- A SharePoint website was set up for managing the bookings:  
<https://uoesharepoint.com/sites/hss/hca/writing-centre>



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Due to the restrictions on in-person meetings caused by COVID-19, **the second year (2020-21)** saw a transition to an online Writing Centre, which was managed via Microsoft Bookings with meetings held on Blackboard Collaborate. Semester 1 maintained the characteristics outlined above. In Semester 2, participation was widened to include all HCA UG students.

**The third year (2021-22)** saw the completion of the PTAS funding and the transition from a pilot project to an integral part of the HCA Student Support and an incorporation of the Writing Centre into HCA's five-year financial plan. The online format was continued throughout the academic year.

### Data on Tutorials

Our data on tutorials come from three sources: data extracted from the Microsoft Bookings site, tutor evaluations, and student evaluations. The tutors spend 10-15 minutes immediately following the tutorial, filling out a form reflecting on the writing session. The students are sent a link via email to fill out an evaluation form, that covers similar questions. The student response rate was fairly high in Year 1, with almost a 70% response rate. In Year 2, the response rate dropped to 32%, and in Year 3 to 25.5%.

#### Breakdown of tutorials by year of the pilot project

- Year 1: 87 total writing tutorials, 67 in Semester 1 and 20 in Semester 2;
- Year 2: 161 total writing tutorials, 73 in Semester 1 and 88 in Semester 2;
- Year 3: 200 total writing tutorials, 90 in Semester 1 and 110 in Semester 2.

In total HCA Writing Centre has offered **448 tutorials** and has been utilised by **254 UG students**.

The overall breakdown of tutorials by subject:

- History, 238 (Y1, 36; Y2, 73; Y3, 129)
- Classics, 144 (Y1, 31; Y2, 60; Y3, 53)
- Archaeology, 66 (Y1, 20; Y2, 28; Y3, 18)

**Data based on the student evaluation forms** (please note that the low percentage of respondents in Year 2-3 means that it is only partially representative)

The breakdown of tutorial by student year:

- First-year, 35
- Second-year, 80
- Third-year, 61
- Fourth-year, 15

The most common courses for which students brought in assignments:

- Ancient History 2A and 2B



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- Archaeology 1A and 2B
  - Introduction to Historiography
  - Historical Skills and Methods

## Data extracted from student and tutor evaluation forms

### 1. Overall Experience

Rating from tutor's perspective (how would you rate the overall quality of the tutorial)?

- Year 1: 3.98
- Year 2-3: 4.15

Rating from student's perspective (how would you rate the overall quality of the tutorial)?

- Year 1: 4.71
- Year 2-3: 4.80

The improvement in the overall tutor ratings from Year 1 to Year 2-3 may result from the tutors becoming more experienced and having gained confidence in their abilities. New tutors generally rate the quality of their tutorials lower than those who have worked for the Writing Centre for a longer period of time.

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

#### ***How was your overall experience?***

Year 1: 4.71

5-rating, 42 times; 4-rating, 15 times; 3-rating, 1 time. Nothing below a 3.

Year 2-3: 4.80

5-rating, 85 times; 4-rating, 16 times; 3-rating, 1 time; 2-rating, 1 time. Nothing below a 2.

#### ***How helpful was the tutorial in improving your essay?***

Year 1: 4.55

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

Year 2-3: 4.63

5-rating, 70 times; 4-rating, 27 times; 3-rating, 4 times; 2-rating, 1 time. Nothing below a 2.

Here, the relatively small discrepancy (4.71 v 4.55/ 4.80 v 4.63) 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?***

The students' priorities remained consistent from Year 1-3 and have been ranked from the top (highest scoring) to the bottom (lowest scoring)

- Paragraph structure;



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- Use of evidence;
  - Other;
  - Language or narrative;
  - Thesis statements.

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?***

Year 1: 57 yes, 1 no

Year 2-3: 101 yes, 3 no

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

Year 1: All 58 replied yes

Year 2-3: 96 yes, 8 no

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

See HCA Writing Centre, End of Year Report, April 2020 for Year 1 comments. The following includes a selection of student comments made in Year 2-3.

***Best parts of the tutorial?***

Common traits of the feedback include students expressing how 1) the tutor helped solve a specific problem; 2) the tutorial has given them more confidence in their writing skills; 3) the space provided by the tutors is welcoming and non-judgemental.

- Clear feedback without jargon, suggestions of techniques to use in the future, giving me confidence about what was good in my writing, helping me to understand how to make the biggest impact on my essay writing rather than just looking at what I thought I was struggling with
- XXX was amazing! When I expressed my anxieties over evidence use, xxx even took the time to go over past essays where I had struggled with this to really help me see where I had improved and how I could continue to improve, so that I definitely have the skills more so than if we were just editing the one essay in particular. xxx is just a fantastic tutor who is so easy and comfortable to work with and helped me with other aspects of my essay that I had not thought of as well.
- Really efficient use of time! I wanted to cover two essays, and I felt like the strengths and limitations, and exact ways I could be improved on were talked about really thoroughly

***We also asked students 'What could be improved in the tutorial?'***

Only 32 of the 104 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:



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The most common comments include:

- in person/ internet connection issues
- more time/ more tutorials per student
- ability to send papers to tutors in advance

### ***Any other comments?***

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

Examples:

- I would like to thank the HCA school for taking the time and effort to organise the Writing Centre. I find this form of teaching/interaction especially useful and would like for it to remain a regular feature of the school.
- I definitely feel more confident in my essay writing skills now than prior to the tutorial.
- XXX is an exceptionally lovely tutor and really instilled confidence in myself, and my capabilities. The whole experience was very helpful and I hope to benefit from it again in Semester 2.

### **Reflections and Next Steps**

The past three years have seen the implementation of HCA Writing Centre, first as a PTAS funded pilot project and now as an integral part of HCA student support. The feedback from students and tutors has been very positive and the Centre has received considerable support from colleagues as well as from the School management expressed through general enthusiasm as well as a generous budget post in SHCA's five year financial plan.

The coming academic year will see a return to in-person tutorials, while we will continue to also offer online tutorials. Some tutors prefer the pedagogical advantages offered by the online setting, and some students – especially those with physical disabilities – find it easier to join a tutorial online. The budget provided by SHCA enables us to scale up the Centre by employing more tutors across all subject areas and offering further tutorials to HCA's UG students.

We are continuously improving the setup of the Writing Centre. Some of the key issues addressed in Year 2-3 concerned how to effectively communicate the existence of the Centre to our students. Year 1 operated by email invitations and by word of mouth, but as we widened our participation, it proved challenging to get students to book tutorials with the Centre. To counter this issue:

- HCA Writing Centre is now advertised on digital boards within the school
- Invitations to book tutorials are disseminated via the Student Support Office's weekly newsletter as well as through subject specific mailing lists
- Tutors as well as the Centre's director participate in the annual Flexible Learning Week, introducing the Centre and providing mock tutorials
- An advisory board has been formed comprising all HCA UG teaching directors.



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- The Centre director has been liaising with SSO and CASSHH to discuss how best to attract widening participation students
  - Next academic year (2022/23), all HCA UG courses will have a notice in Learn Ultra providing basic information about the Centre and directing the students to the booking site.

Some improvements to consider for the future:

- Our web-presence is still presenting a problem. Most colleagues and students use Google rather than HCA's internal search engine. The top hit on a search on HCA Writing Centre leads to the IAD's website and our PTAS funded pilot project rather than our current booking site. We have, so far, been unable to establish an independent online presence.
  - The response rates on the evaluations have dropped considerably since Year 1. The link to the evaluation is included in the appointment confirmation email and again in the reminder email, and the tutors are reminding the students at the end of each session to fill out the evaluation. Our only remaining option is to send out individual reminder emails a day or two after the tutorial. However, Microsoft Bookings does not offer this option and it would be too onerous for the Centre Director to take on this task. A conversation with PPLS's Skills Centre Director, James Donaldson, suggests that our evaluation response rates are very much in line with theirs and should therefore be considered normal and acceptable.
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**Financial statement (please delete as appropriate):**

This project has utilised the funding awarded to it by the PTAS adjudication committee and the Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

**Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:**

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