

NEEDS-ASSESSMENT STUDY AND THE SWOT ANALYSIS OF SETTING UP A WRITING CENTRE

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A necessary first step when proposing and setting up Centres for Academic Writing in an academic environment not familiar with this area of research is to have a clear needs-assessment study. On consulting the experience at the international level, the authors have done a swot analysis and have arrived at a set of conclusions on the particularities of teaching Academic Writing in Eastern and Central European Universities that are instrumental in deciding upon the main direction in this venture.

The authors would like to establish from the very beginning the scope of research regarding such an important topic and clearly state that this paper will focus on needs assessment, resource evaluation and principles in setting up Writing Centres in Romanian and Hungarian Universities.

This study has also a very direct and practical application as the Faculty of Economics has decided to create a Writing Centre and it is in the phase where it needs to evaluate the resources and lay down the exact principles of setting up its writing program. While this is going to render a more descriptive character to our paper we will, however, then proceed to analysing the facts discovered and arrive at enlightening conclusions regarding both introducing EAP modules in the curricula and also the timeliness of setting up a Writing Centre in our university.

Why Should We Set up a Writing Centre?

In assessing the new needs of higher education systems our paper does not overlook the profound transformation undergone by higher education systems across Eastern Europe, first as a need to break clear from some of the communist reminiscences and then, more importantly, and most relevant to this paper, the changes implemented according to the Bologna process. A direct outcome of the European Enlargement and of the harmonization going on in the educational systems of all Member States is that there will be a much bigger need for knowledge of foreign languages, as students will freely “navigate” within the Union from one university to another in search of programmes and cultures that have stirred their interest. Thus, it appears necessary for our students to be better prepared and equipped with the skills of writing academic papers, especially in English. Hence the

increased need of setting up condensed modules – drawing on the example of the pioneering work done by CEU's Centre for Academic Writing – as well as designing whole projects regarding setting up Writing Centres in our universities.

Needs assessment, available resources, collaborative solutions

A variety of different academic writing genres (e.g. position papers, research article, research report, book review, CV, letter of motivation, etc.), previously not considered in eastern universities, are becoming a must in Eastern European academia with the alignment to the European higher education systems. Additionally, the European Credit transfer system and European educational commuting/European mobility projects, both for students and for professors have been the catalyst for setting up Writing programmes.

Furthermore, mobility has also contributed to obtaining additional resources both in the form of donations given by the better-off partner university on the programme and by earmarking part of the project money for book allowances.

Last but not least, Europeanization of the higher education systems in eastern Europe prompted collaborative solutions of the type our Faculty has set with the English Department in the University of Alicante and Baeza and also with CEU's Centre for Academic Writing, a constant help and source of teaching materials and inspiration.

The question of resources is a vital one, both in terms of space, academic staff and financing the program. While the experience of American universities can easily be employed being at the tip of our fingers with the help of IT resources, the same cannot be said about solving the thorny financial problems. A solution could be charging small tuition fees for completion of writing modules. This is not unprecedented either if we consider the University of Oradea's educational offer on the methodology and pedagogical modules or CEU's standard practice in the field of teaching Foreign Languages. The downside of charging for writing instruction is that this solution would render the program prohibitive to students who would not be able to benefit from the program, thus defeating the object. Nevertheless, additional sources of financing might be located in time. The important aspect is that the need for establishing WrC, or, as an initial phase of well-designed writing modules in EAP, be recognized by our universities and acted upon according to the urgency of this issue.

Lack of immediate action would lead to isolation and a marginal academic activity when considering ours and our peers activity as an important aspect of research and academic communicative action consists in publishing accurately articulated academic papers. Compliance and inaction in this field when we consider our activity with our students would be even worse. The English knowledge level of our students is excellent with 30% of our student body who come from National Colleges in the Bihor County as well as neighbouring counties and they are stimulated to even seat a Cambridge exam. Many of our students hold a Cambridge Advanced taken with A or B. Not catering for their needs where EAP is concerned would mean depriving them of excellent scholarship opportunities, of entering renowned post-graduate programmes and even future career prospects.

What does a Writing Centre do?

Having established that there is a stringent need for writing intensive courses to be included in the curricula we move now to mentioning some of the activities that could be designed around a full-fledged WrC.

As we already mentioned, a place to look for inspiration are the WrC in American universities. An interesting needs-assessment study could be consulted at <http://www.komed.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/kikou/event/diamondreport.pdf>. It is a well known fact among academia in EAP that all American universities have their own WrC and that it is considered as primary function of their WrC to support the writing curriculum. In some universities the English Departments cater for this need, the composition divisions of English departments. Nevertheless, some writing centers exist independently of English departments. Courses in academic writing curriculum in the U.S. usually consists of one to two mandatory composition courses to be taken by first year college students with more advanced courses available within particular disciplines.

The scope of the paper is not, as mentioned from the beginning, that of exploring to details all the programs and courses in EAP. In U.S. the mandatory composition courses are designed to prepare students in all disciplines for academic writing tasks from essays to research papers. We can see common approaches to all U.S. universities, for instance a two-semester approach is usually divided into one semester focused on short essay composition (from narratives to arguments) and a semester devoted to rhetorical analysis and writing research papers. A one-semester approach combines these goals into a single semester. In each course, students are generally expected to write a minimum of 6,000 words in informal and formal, graded and un-graded writing.

It is important however to mention what exactly are the objectives, the mission statement of WrC. Some of the goals that will be set for our Faculties WrC are:

- Instill the importance of a correct referencing, of avoiding plagiarism and to this end create excellent academic skills of referencing, retrieving information, creating a easily manageable data base in their field; obviously these latter skills have to do also with the newer IT related skills asked of ourselves and our students.
- Instill the importance of continuously improving a piece of writing until it is accurate, concise and has an excellent level of language and content correctness; thus, as Language instructors our task is double-fold and more difficult for that matter as we need to be able to write across the curricula and to know how to relate to a variety of topics.
- Develop our students' complex and logical thinking – CRITICAL THINKING is a notion that to some degree is still unfamiliar to many of our students!
- to use the exact words of our colleague “to develop our students’ resourcefulness and autonomy in writing” [<http://www.komed.c.u-tokyo.ac.jp/kikou/event/diamondreport.pdf>.]
- raise students’ awareness regarding the existence of a range of academic genre and preparing them to successfully handling each of them by approaching the different writing tasks and situations

Regarding the career relating goals of the academic staff active WrC we can mention:

- collect and then write material about Teaching writing, including sample course evaluation tools, methods for reducing the paper load for instructors
- stimulate peer academic activity, organize regional conferences on EAP, collaboration with colleagues across Eastern Europe.
- further research in ESP and EAP

A SWOT Analysis of Setting up a Writing Centre

The table below is a very simple SWOT analysis of setting up a writing centre in a university. As the table below demonstrates, strengths and opportunities outnumber possible weaknesses and threats.

As it is seen, the weaknesses are mostly apparent at the early stages of creating a WrC, when managers, teachers, students and the whole academic environment are still unfamiliar with the missions and the practical activities of the new unit. With training language teachers, supplying information to faculty members and giving successful lessons and consultations to students, these early teething problems are relatively easy to overcome.

Threats, on the other hand, are certainly more problematic, as they are strongly related to financial shortages, which are usually hard to address.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Dramatically improving students' writing skills in academic disciplines → – Improving the quality of their assignments, theses and dissertations → – Improving students' career prospects → – Raising the prestige of the university – Introducing / strengthening the use of written assignments for evaluating student work – Establishing much stronger co-operation within the university between language teachers and faculty by designing, evaluating and marking assignments together with departmental professors – Giving language teachers a new challenge (protecting them from burnout) – Making a new and better use of the Internet (e.g. by using other writing centers' websites and pieces of academic writing available on the web) and communication technologies (e.g. communicating with and helping students via e-mail) – The university with a WrC can set an example to be followed by others – Writing Centers across Europe have strong co-operation and they support each other, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Initial lack of professional experience and material – Initial shortage of good academic writing teachers – Initial worries, uncertainties and mistakes in curriculum and materials design – Initial reluctance on students' part (<i>Why do we need to write?</i>) – Initial resentment and reluctance towards new forms of testing – students' knowledge on the – side of professors in – departments <p><i>(Why should we use term papers rather than multiple choice, which is much</i></p>

supplying materiel, know-how, conferences and an organization (European Association for the teachers of English) – With relatively little investment the returns are considerable	<i>easier to mark?)</i>
Opportunities – Teachers may develop publishable material – Teachers may do research of international standards – Teachers may publish their work locally and internationally – Teachers may train undergraduate students to become writing assistants – The WrC may launch courses on a national scale – The WrC may advertise and sell its services (teacher training, proofreading, translation) to the community	Threats – Lack of continuity in staffing – Brain drain – Lack of funding – Lack of faculty and university management support

Conclusions

As the SWOT analysis clearly shows, a host of challenges and threats are to be overcome when setting up WrC in Eastern European universities but the gains are far too important to not pursue the setting up of these programs.

There are many recommendations that can be made when embarking in such a challenging project. It would be ideal to have the consultancy of a professional, hence the need to establish excellent collaborations with WrC in the region. Relevant would be to conduct a survey of faculty and students to find out exactly what they recognize as being their needs for EAP and by doing so we would raise awareness towards this topic.

Steps have been taken in our language department towards establish a resource library for students and faculty of relevant writing text and reference books, journals, software, and articles in the writing center space as a result of the book allowances obtained and the LEONARDO Project completed last year with Spanish partner universities Alicante and Baeza.

A more sensitive issue is that of training TA's for EAP courses, as resources for tutor training programs have not been, as yet, located. Efforts have been made through collaboration with CEU's WrC and with the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing (EATAW) to attend international conferences.

A phonetic lab has already been set up in our Faculty and this has rendered language instructors' work much more efficient and easier, for that matter, in the recent period.

A good suggestion could be to set a sub-committee for developing writing curriculum and to stimulate colleagues in other Departments to participate in workshops in which faculty can share their views, concerns, techniques. Last but not least, and in connection with the scarcity of resources still so manifest in universities in Eastern Europe, a temporary solution could be creating a virtual writing center, with virtual classrooms where writing modules are taught about writing skills within the general studies core for

Under-graduates and cater more closely, again in the virtual classroom, and in particular for the special needs of our post-graduate students and of our faculty. The virtual class solution is not to be discarded even more so as our Faculty has good distance learning programs and uses Moodle, the electronic platform.

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