

## Academic Learning and Language (ALL)

August 2010

# Report on Student Evaluation of ALL Writing Centre: Semester 1, 2010.

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### **Summary**

This is a report of the ALL Writing Centre run by the Centre for Learning and Professional Development, as assessed by the Student Evaluation Survey conducted at the end of Semester 1. The survey contained Likert-scale responses and open-ended questions, and focused on student satisfaction, positives and areas for improvement. Overall the results suggested that students were highly satisfied with the Writing Centre, particularly the service of Writing Centre staff and the support provided on their assignments. This suggests that the Writing Centre contributes effectively to the strategic objectives of the CLPD and the University of Adelaide, especially in improving the student experience and providing a high-quality learning environment. There were also some suggestions for improvement, which are either being acted on already or being considered in the light of resources and other practical considerations.

### **Background**

The Writing Centre (WC) is run by Academic Learning and Language (ALL) staff from the Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD). It is one of the core activities of ALL and provides advice and support in all aspects of learning for students from across the university, at all levels and from all backgrounds.

Students attend the WC on a drop-in basis (no appointment is required), and see a lecturer for approximately 15-30 minutes at a time. The WC operated from the beginning of Week 3 (15<sup>th</sup> March) until the end of Swotvac (17<sup>th</sup> June) at the following times:

Mondays & Wednesdays	2:00pm - 4:30pm
Tuesdays & Thursdays	10.00am - 12:30pm

The WC assists students with all aspects of their learning, but consultations usually focus on specific questions around assignments. Common topics of discussion include: analysing and understanding the assignment questions; undertaking internet and library-based research; brainstorming and mindmapping ideas; planning essay and report structure; structural elements such as introductions, conclusions, and paragraphs of the main body; editing and proofreading, and English language expression and grammar. The WC does not do editing or proofreading for students, but can give guidance on the extent and impact of errors in English, and how to address these through an independent learning approach.

The survey was adapted from a similar survey administered to visitors to the CLPD's Maths Learning Service (MLS). The purpose of the survey was to identify the main ways that students find out about the WC, as well as to assess the general satisfaction of students with the service. The survey was conducted online via Survey Monkey, and was emailed during Swot week to all students who had attended the WC. Information on the responses follows.

### **Response Data**

Total number of students emailed with survey: 274

Total number of responses: 51

Response rate: 19%

The response rate as a percentage this semester is on a par with previous semester (20% for both S1 and S2, 2009), but the actual number of responses is much higher (34 for both S1 and S2, 2009). This response rate is on the lower end of barely acceptable, but in the past two semesters incentives for filling out the survey (book vouchers) have had little effect. In addition, this semester students were strongly encouraged to fill out the online survey during Writing Centre consultations, but neither of these strategies seem to have had much effect on response rates. Other strategies clearly need to be explored.

## Effectiveness of promotion strategies

How did you first find out about the ALL Writing Centre? (Tick all that apply to you.)		
	Response Percent	Response Count
Presentation by ALL lecturer.	13.7%	7
Recommended by friend(s).	7.8%	4
Recommended by lecturer/tutor (s).	37.3%	19
Information in course guidebook.	25.5%	13
University web search or links.	19.8%	10
O'Week Welcome Pack.	35.3%	18
O'Week lecture titled 'Doing Uni'.	31.4%	16
Fliers around the campus.	37.3%	19
Promotional materials in the Barr Smith Library.	7.8%	4
Other (please specify)	5.9%	3
<b>answered question</b>		<b>51</b>
<b>skipped question</b>		<b>0</b>

## Discussion

The above data shows a much more even distribution than data from 2009. In comparison, Semester 1, 2009 results suggested that recommendation by lecturers and tutors was the most effective method, whereas Semester 2, 2009 results indicated that the O-Week Welcome pack was the most effective. The current survey found very similar results from lecturer/tutor recommendations and campus fliers, as well as O'Week promotions, course guidebooks, and website information. Results highlighting "course guidebook" and "flier" increased notably from Semester 1, 2009, suggesting that systematic provision of information around the University has been effective. Overall, the results suggest that current strategies for increasing awareness of the Writing Centre are effective.

## Student Satisfaction

Please select the most appropriate option for the following questions:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A	Rating Average	Response Count
The Writing Centre provides a comfortable learning environment.	49.0% (25)	21.6% (11)	25.5% (13)	2.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	6.10	51
The Writing Centre staff are interested in helping students learn.	56.9% (29)	29.4% (15)	9.8% (5)	3.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	6.39	51
The Writing Centre staff gave me opportunities to ask questions.	54.9% (28)	29.4% (15)	7.8% (4)	5.9% (3)	2.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	6.29	51
The Writing Centre staff directly addressed my concerns and gave useful feedback.	41.2% (21)	33.3% (17)	13.7% (7)	3.9% (2)	3.9% (2)	2.0% (1)	6.00	51
Attending the Writing Centre has improved my confidence in writing.	33.3% (17)	27.5% (14)	15.7% (8)	11.8% (6)	3.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	5.71	51
Attending the Writing Centre has improved my essay/report writing skills.	33.3% (17)	33.3% (17)	19.6% (10)	3.9% (2)	2.0% (1)	2.0% (1)	5.82	51
Attending the Writing Centre has improved my understanding of assessment tasks.	29.4% (15)	33.3% (17)	19.6% (10)	5.9% (3)	3.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	5.75	51
Attending the Writing Centre has made a difference to my success at university in Semester 1, 2010.	29.4% (15)	17.6% (9)	31.4% (16)	15.7% (8)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.55	51
<i>answered question</i>								51

The above data suggests that student satisfaction with the Writing Centre is very high. The broad satisfaction for each item is as follows:

- ALL Writing Centre provides a comfortable learning environment: **96%**
- ALL Writing Centre staff are interested in helping students learn: **96.1%**
- ALL Writing Centre staff gave me opportunities to ask questions: **92.1%**
- ALL Writing Centre staff directly addressed my concerns and gave useful feedback: **88.2%**
- Attending the ALL Writing Centre has improved my confidence in writing: **76.5%**
- Attending the ALL Writing Centre has improved my essay/report writing skills: **86.2%**
- Attending the ALL Writing Centre has improved my understanding of assessment tasks: **82.3%**
- Attending the ALL Writing Centre has made a difference to my success at university in Semester 1, 2010: **78.4%**

Based on the above broad agreement, the mean average for all items can be taken as overall satisfaction with the service. Therefore it can be said that student satisfaction with the Writing Centre achieved a **broad agreement of 86.0%**. This is, obviously, a positive result and mirrors anecdotal evidence that students are happy with the service provided.

In comparison with previous results it appears that there is a slight reduction in satisfaction, since overall satisfaction in S1, 2009 was 91.9%. This is, however, a quite small decrease and is largely explained by the increase in students who responded "n/a". There were only up to two or three students who responded in the "disagree" zone for each item, and so any apparent lack of satisfaction is negligible. Even so, it is important to closely monitor student satisfaction with the service, particularly with regards to self-confidence in writing (which showed a drop from 91.2 in S1, 2009 to 88.2 in S2,

2009, to 76.5 in S1, 2010). For instance, in giving feedback, WC staff need to balance the need for honesty with constructive feedback that reinforces the student's sense of self-efficacy. The "difference to my success" measure remains problematic, since it is impossible to compare a student's actual success with a hypothetical achievement outside of the Writing Centre. Nonetheless, the fact that most students subjectively feel that their success has been enhanced is a positive outcome. In any case, small variations such as we observe here (especially with such small samples) may be due to variability within the sample and so further analysis would be required to draw more concrete conclusions.

## Qualitative feedback

### What were the best aspects of the Writing Centre, and why?

Students made a variety of positive comments about their experience in the Writing Centre, but the overwhelming response (34) was in regards to the service provided by staff, and particularly the type of consultations given. Students commented on the specific type of help they received with their assignments and appreciated the helpful and friendly approach of Writing Centre staff. For instance,

Hypothetically, the best aspects would be that students are welcome to get a professional, outside opinion of their work and constructive [sic] criticism of it. It is very nerve-racking doing your first university essay and knowing that there are high expectations of you, yet not being allowed to contact your tutor or lecturer regarding the work. The writing centre provides a place to get the help we, the students, need.

In addition to these generally positive comments, four students appreciated the informal “drop-in” service provided and four commented explicitly on the comfortable and relaxed environment and atmosphere of the Writing Centre. Two commented on the provision of useful resources, and two stated explicitly that they thought attending the Writing Centre had given their work an “extra edge” that they would not have had otherwise.

### In what ways could the Writing Centre be improved in Semester 2, 2009?

As usual, the main comments for improvement were around the opening hours and number of staff. Twenty students commented that they thought the Writing Centre should be open more, at more accessible times, or that there should be more staff available to reduce waiting times. Several stated that the times did not fit in with their attendance at university; however two also indicated that more promotion was required and the concerns with opening times may be to do with lack of knowledge about the actual opening times of the Writing Centre. For instance, one student requested “holding more sessions not just at 1200-1400. I couldn’t make any sessions because I always have lectures at that time.” The problem here is that the Writing Centre is actually open from 10am-12.30pm two days a week, so this concern with opening times may be more an issue of awareness and managing expectations. There is also some evidence that students are aware of the practical constraints the Writing Centre works under: “[The Writing Centre could be improved by] ideally greater time allocation, but I know in a University as big as Adelaide, it isn’t really possible, so I think the Writing Centre works well, and caters to students needs.”

Other comments were more sparse: for instance, five students commented on the location, or that they would prefer an area with more space and privacy, and three students would have liked clearer information on what the Writing Centre can and can’t help with, or had hoped for more help with content-related questions.

## Conclusion

In summary, this evaluation confirms the broad approach and strategic direction of the Writing Centre. The modes of promotion currently being pursued are very effective, and there is strong broad agreement among students regarding their satisfaction with the WC. Taken together, the Likert-scale and open-ended responses indicate that the Writing Centre is effectively contributing to the strategic objectives of the CLPD, particularly “to provide core services in learning skills and support for language and mathematics” ([http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/about/download/CLPD\\_strategic\\_plan.pdf](http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/about/download/CLPD_strategic_plan.pdf)). This in turn supports the strategic objectives of the University of Adelaide to become a “Great Research University” which “recognises the central importance of its students and the responsibility to provide them with a superior educational experience through its teaching excellence” (<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/policies/34/>).

It is, however, important to respond to the concerns students have raised. There may be some need to manage expectations about what the WC can offer, and this is being done through the development of a “What We Do” document which communicates expectations quite clearly. In this document we aim to emphasise the WC as a learning and working space so that students are not simply waiting to see a learning advisor, and that they bring work to do in case some waiting is necessary.

Comments suggesting more staff and more opening hours are difficult to respond to, since the Writing Centre has limited resources and Writing Centre staff have a variety of other tasks (administration, research, semester seminars, faculty-specific sessions) which prevent them from putting more time into the Writing Centre. In particular, student development activities are more effective when they take place in a faculty-specific context, so the Writing Centre is only one of several strategies to provide academic support to students at the University of Adelaide. Nonetheless, student numbers, waiting times, and accessibility are factors that will continue to be monitored in case changes are required and possible.

The final main comment for improvement revolved around the location and provision of space. Although the location of the Writing Centre is not as central as when it was located in the Barr Smith Library, the space itself is much larger and more comfortable. The main change that will occur here is that in Semester 2, 2011, both the Writing Centre and the Maths Drop-In Centre will shift to the new Learning Hub on the Hughes Plaza. This will provide both a more central location and much more space to allow for privacy in consultations, and will hopefully address the concerns around location and space that were raised in the evaluations.

This evaluation, and future evaluations, are incorporated into the regular cycle of reflection and planning that informs the future practice of Student Development in the CLPD.