

Academic Learning and Language (ALL)

December 2009

Report on Student Evaluation of ALL Writing Centre: Semester 2, 2009.

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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 (16th March) until the end of Swotvac (19th 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 following survey was identical to a survey administered in Semester 1, which 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 Swotvac to all students who had attended the WC. On November, 17th, the survey was approved in a meeting of the University of Adelaide Survey Reference Group. Information on responses follows.

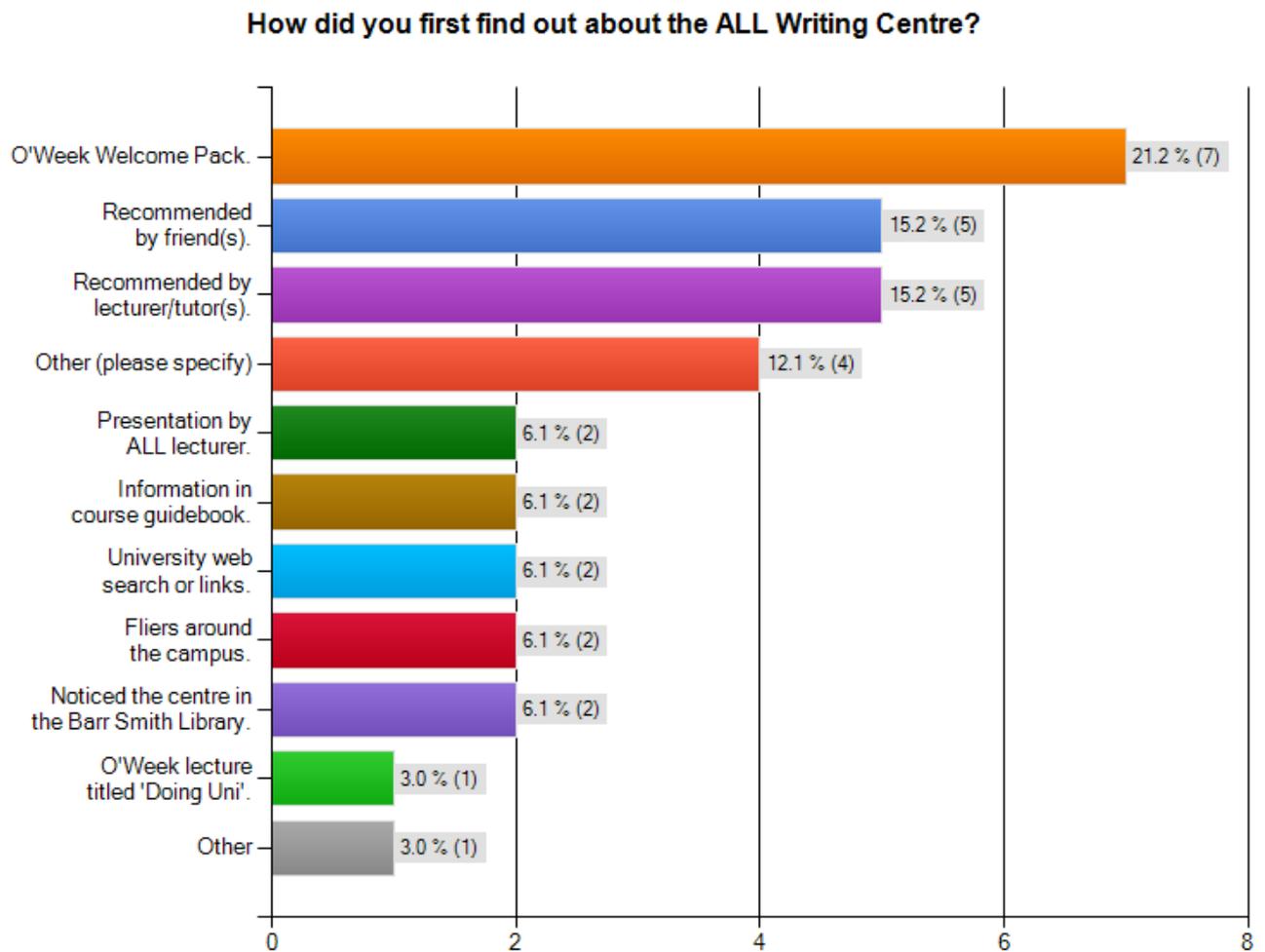
Response data

Total number of students emailed with survey: approx. 165

Number of responses: 34

Response rate: 21%

Effectiveness of Promotion Strategies



Discussion

Responses to this question provide a very interesting contrast to those of Semester 1. Here, the highest number of respondents cited "O'Week Welcome Pack" as their main source of information about the WC. It would be expected that this response would have been much more likely in Semester 1, although then it only accounted for 14.7% of respondents. Nonetheless, these responses confirm that the provision of information during Orientation Week is crucial.

Responses to this question also indicate that personal recommendations (from friends, lecturers and tutors) are an important source of information, which again reinforces the CLPD's approach to developing networks and learning communities throughout the University. Ultimately, as with last semester, these responses support the variety of approaches to promoting the WC which are currently being employed by the CLPD.

Student Satisfaction

Please select the most appropriate option for the following questions:										
	Strongly Agree	Undecided					Strongly Disagree	N/A	Rating Average	Response Count
ALL Writing Centre provides a comfortable learning environment.	23.5% (8)	38.2% (13)	23.5% (8)	8.8% (3)	2.9% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	2.9% (1)	5.73	34
ALL Writing Centre staff are interested in helping students learn.	38.2% (13)	44.1% (15)	11.8% (4)	2.9% (1)	2.9% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	6.12	34
ALL Writing Centre staff gave me opportunities to ask questions.	50.0% (17)	32.4% (11)	14.7% (5)	2.9% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	6.29	34
ALL Writing Centre staff directly addressed my concerns and gave useful feedback.	41.2% (14)	26.5% (9)	17.6% (6)	8.8% (3)	2.9% (1)	2.9% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.85	34
Attending the ALL Writing Centre has improved my confidence in writing.	29.4% (10)	41.2% (14)	17.6% (6)	5.9% (2)	5.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.82	34
Attending the ALL Writing Centre has improved my essay/report writing skills.	23.5% (8)	41.2% (14)	20.6% (7)	2.9% (1)	8.8% (3)	2.9% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.59	34
Attending the ALL Writing Centre has improved my understanding of assessment tasks.	20.6% (7)	32.4% (11)	20.6% (7)	14.7% (5)	5.9% (2)	5.9% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	5.29	34
Attending the ALL Writing Centre has made a difference to my success at university in Semester 2, 2009.	26.5% (9)	29.4% (10)	17.6% (6)	14.7% (5)	5.9% (2)	2.9% (1)	0.0% (0)	2.9% (1)	5.48	34
									<i>answered question</i>	34

As in Semester 1, 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: **85.2%**
- ALL Writing Centre staff are interested in helping students learn: **94.1%**
- ALL Writing Centre staff gave me opportunities to ask questions: **97.1%**
- ALL Writing Centre staff directly addressed my concerns and gave useful feedback: **85.3%**
- Attending the ALL Writing Centre has improved my confidence in writing: **88.2%**
- Attending the ALL Writing Centre has improved my essay/report writing skills: **85.3%**
- Attending the ALL Writing Centre has improved my understanding of assessment tasks: **73.6%**
- Attending the ALL Writing Centre has made a difference to my success at university in Semester 2, 2009: **73.5%**

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 85.4%**. This is, obviously, a very positive result and mirrors anecdotal evidence that students are very happy with the service provided. Both the overall and question-specific results are slightly lower than in Semester 1, although the difference is quite small and may be the result of any number of factors.

Qualitative feedback

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

A total of 25 students responded to this question. Of these, ten expressed their satisfaction with the knowledge, skills and experience of the Learning Advisers they saw, and noted the positive effect of the consultation on their learning. Seven noted in particular the friendly atmosphere and helpfulness of Learning Advisers. An example of this type of response is: "Help is given one-on-one with experienced academics and we can work through problems [sic] together so that i can understand my assignments better and so i am able to approach the assignments in the correct way." Four students noted that the Writing Centre particularly helped them with their grammar and that it was a useful resource for international students: "These are really useful especially for international students (non-English speakers) who really need help in their writing and understanding the materials in another language."

Importantly, however, some comments suggested that the specific strategies being pursued by the ALL team are effective. For instance, four students suggested that the Writing Centre had encouraged them to take more responsibility for their learning, indicating that the student-centred approach of the Writing Centre is effective. Two students explicitly stated that their confidence had increased, and two indicated that the drop-in basis for the consultations was ideal for them. Most encouraging was one student's comment which suggested that the activities of the Writing Centre go far beyond the remedial model which is often resisted by ALL staff:

Having the option to have another pair of eyes view your work and make suggestions is very handy, even to students who are more than capable with their essays. The staff at the writing centre are both thorough and professional, and are able to pick out grammatical mistakes and sentence structure errors more-so than tutors. Consequently, this results in students gaining a higher degree of understanding in the application of the English language, which can only be a good thing for future academia.

This comment, clearly from a high-achieving student, confirms the overall direction of the Writing Centre and the approach of ALL staff in consultations.

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

A total of 26 students responded to this question. The suggestions for improvements to the ALL Writing Centre revolve not so much around the consultations themselves, but the general environment in which they take place. For instance, three students cited waiting times and suggested that an appointment system would be useful (although this directly contradicts the ones who found the drop-in basis ideal in the last question). Four cited the lack of physical space, with one person indicating that "people waiting are too close to those being helped – no privacy". This is certainly an issue which ALL staff have also identified, but which is made redundant by the move to the Schulz building in 2010 due to the Hub Redevelopment. Two students indicated that more time for postgraduates would help.

As in first semester, a significant number (ten) indicated that the Writing Centre should be open for longer, have more staff, or be better-resourced. Again this is potentially a type of inverted commendation in that students may be trying to show their support for the service, but it also reflects somewhat of a disjunction between expectations and reality. Any response to this point needs to be carefully formulated in terms of both pedagogy and practical considerations.

In addition to the above, four students have suggested that they would rather have more content-specific advice. However, this is clearly against the aims and intentions of the Writing Centre, since Learning Advisers do not often have expertise in the content areas that students are working in, and content is usually seen as specifically the domain of faculty-based staff. There are also some comments which are quite vague ("By providing more guidance to students") and express a general sense of dissatisfaction rather than suggesting any specific changes. Some suggestions are quite unrealistic (for instance, the suggestion that the Writing Centre open on some Saturdays), while some do not take account of the other duties that Learning Advisers have (for instance, by suggesting opening on Fridays). By far the most worrying type of comment is the one that flies in the face of the Writing Centre's most explicit aims and goals:

Futhermore [*sic*], greater time could be dedicated to students assignments, rather than a 15 minute 'drop-in', how about a 'drop it in' policy for students who are far too busy? :)

Although the emoticon suggests some informality in the comment, the gist of the suggestion openly advocates a remedial model whereby students drop in their assignment to be fixed by a Learning Adviser, and to be collected ready for submission later. This is clearly against the student-focussed, independent learning model which the Writing Centre operates within, and indicates that some management of expectations is necessary, for some students at least.

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. There may be some need to manage expectations about what the WC can offer, and it might be worthwhile developing the WC as a learning and working space so that students are not simply waiting to see a learning advisor. This evaluation, and future evaluations, will be incorporated into a regular cycle of reflection and planning to inform the future practice of Student Development in the CLPD.

In 2010 the Writing Centre will return to the CLPD (Schulz Building) due to the Hughes Plaza redevelopment, and so there are major forces of change which are not under the control of the CLPD. Nonetheless, the process of evaluation undertaken in 2009 indicates that the broad approach and strategy of the Writing Centre, and its success with students, should carry it through times of uncertainty.