

An Academic Writing Centre

Helping students develop their full potential

Lijst Calimero, January 2017, revised version
University of Groningen

Abstract

The University of Groningen aims to create an academic and social environment in which students are actively involved in their own education process and in which learning and personal talent development take centre stage. With regards to the development of academic writing skills, students, staff, and the University of Groningen Language Centre see a need for more individual tutoring to increase student's level of academic writing. The attention that can be paid to individual student's needs in regular courses is limited. Therefore, Lijst Calimero proposes to establish an Academic Writing Centre as a subdivision of the Language Centre. This centre can provide interactive, one-on-one tutoring to students to help them develop their academic writing skills. The centre could also organise workshops related to academic literacy. The academic writing centre can be set up as a new facility, as a subdivision of the Language Centre or embedded in another existing organisation. This proposal is strongly supported by the Language Centre, Prof. Dr. Kees de Glopper, Prof. Dr. Carel Jansen and students from the University of Groningen.

Students are not great writers

Waiter, could you bring me some kidnaps, please? According to Anje Dijk from the Language Centre, many teachers at the University of Groningen complain that the academic writing skills of students are not sufficient. The students themselves explain that this is because the attention devoted to the development of academic language proficiency is minimal throughout their entire education. Upon university graduation, students are expected to have a certain level of academic language proficiency. The University is responsible to support students in developing a wide range of academic skills, including academic writing. When students do not reach the required level, and fail (a part of) their studies because of it or have a study delay, this is not only a problem for those students, but also for the University.

Lijst Calimero believes that from the first year onwards, the development of writing skills should be integrated in all study programmes. For this to be successful, teachers have to be able to incorporate writing assignments successfully into their courses. The Language Centre already provides services to teachers from several faculties in which they can learn how to formulate and assess written assignments adequately. We believe that those services can and should be extended to most study programs.

However, some students need more tutoring than others and teaching and support possibilities within the classroom setting are limited. Teachers need to consider the whole group when deciding how to spend classroom time. Even if the University of Groningen were to hire much more academic staff, the type of individual tutoring that is necessary to develop writing skills could not be provided. In general, teachers are not specialised in supporting students in the development of academic writing skills. Also, they have other teaching and research responsibilities.

Academic writing is one of those skills that does not differ significantly across different disciplines. It is related to for example structuring thoughts and argumentation, critical thinking, and consistency in style. Teaching and tutoring in academic writing can therefore be organised from a central centre of expertise. This is not only cost-efficient, but could also alleviate some of the workload of faculty staff.

Therefore, Lijst Calimero proposes to the Academic Writing Centre as a new facility, as a subdivision of the Language Centre or embedded in another existing organisation. This centre would provide free, interactive one-on-one tutoring by writing coaches and offer workshops on common issues with academic writing. Both students and staff members see the need for additional tutoring in academic writing. This proposal was discussed with the College van Assesoren and most faculty council student factions, who all support this memo (see Appendix 2).

In the past, Lijst Calimero has pled for the establishment of an academic writing centre at the University (for example during the education and research committee meeting of 5 December 2013). The attention devoted to the development of academic writing skills is still not sufficient, as this proposal has found support from students throughout the University of Groningen. Furthermore, it might not even be possible to provide adequate teaching in academic writing within study programs for all students, as we explain in this memo. We continue to work towards the opening of a writing centre at the University of Groningen, because the proposal is widely supported by students and we believe in its added value for both students and staff members.

This memo was written in close collaboration with Prof. Dr. Kees de Glopper and Prof. Dr. Carel Jansen from the Faculty of Arts. In their research and education, they pay special attention to the development of language skills and both professors are experienced with setting up academic writing centres similar to the one we propose. They look forward to helping with the establishment of an academic writing centre at the University of Groningen. Furthermore, the Language Centre is also enthusiastic about our proposal. Specifically, Drs. Anje Dijk and Dr. Ronald Ohlsen from the Language Centre emphasise that there is a need for more tutoring in academic writing for students throughout the University and that an academic writing centre is a great solution. Both have expressed their willingness to help with setting up the writing centre, when it would be organised as a subdivision of the Language Centre. Considering that people with a lot of experience support this initiative to establish an academic writing centre at the University of Groningen, we are confident that it will be a success and add value for both students and staff.

An effective, cost-efficient solution

Vision

We envision an academic writing centre that is complementary to the study programmes by providing writing assistance for regular courses. The centre is an informal meeting place, where practicing, experimenting, and revising in academic writing is encouraged. Students seek help at the centre when they want to further improve their academic writing skills or when it is recommended by a teacher¹.

Writing coaches, or tutors, at the writing centre would be employed as student assistants. Their role is to work together with students to improve their writing process. They engage with students in discussions about their topic, so that students develop their ideas and practice the phrasing and vocabulary of academic texts. Furthermore, the coaches offer feedback on drafts, suggest writing strategies, diagnose writing problems, ask questions,

¹ International Writing Centres Association (2006). *Writing Centre Concept*. [online] available at: <http://writingcenters.org/resources/starting-a-writing-cente/writing-center-concept/> [Accessed 15-10-2016]

review information, and help students gain perspective on their writing. Students are tutored in a face-to-face setting, where tutorials are adapted to the individual student's needs.

Around the globe, students benefit from the services provided by academic writing centres. Top universities such as the California Institute of Technology, the University of Oxford and Stanford University have academic writing centres. Dutch examples are the Radboud University, the University of Amsterdam, and Wageningen University. The University of Groningen could draw from the experiences from other universities when establishing an academic writing centre². Empirical research underscores the importance of interactive learning in the development of academic skills and the positive effect that academic writing centres can have in this respect. Appendix 1 gives a more elaborate account of empirical research on this topic.

Provided services

The services of the academic writing centre should be offered in Dutch and English, both open for native and non-native speakers. The writing coaches focus on the writing process of students and not on the content of texts. The latter should always be in the hands of teachers. The centre alleviates the workload of teachers because it provides writing related feedback, so that teachers can focus on providing content-related feedback.

Besides one-on-one coaching sessions, the academic writing centre would also offer a range of workshops that will help students and staff members to improve their general academic writing proficiency. Such workshops aim to prepare students for writing a thesis or research or they could help to develop academic writing skills in a different language (Dutch or English). Analytical courses that train students in dealing with academic written texts would further promote critical thinking and academic literacy.

Currently, the Language Centre is already involved in various courses within degree programmes, which focus on the development of academic writing skills. Moreover the Language Centre offers paid writing courses and online support. If a Writing Centre would be established, all students (those that have had academic writing courses within their degree program, and those that have not had this opportunity) have three possibilities to improve their academic writing skills, complementary or additional to writing within their degree programs. First, students can consult a writing coach at the academic writing centre or attend one or more workshops, which are both free of charge. Second, they can follow a paid course at the Language Centre that will develop their skills in depth. Third, students can combine both options, which are complementary and enhance each other.

² See for example <https://sites.google.com/site/netwerkacv/denktanks> and <http://writingcenters.org/>

Organisation

The academic writing centre could be organised as a new facility, as a subdivision of the Language Centre or embedded in another existing organisation. As mentioned before, Prof. Dr. Kees de Glopper, Prof. Dr. Carel Jansen and Drs. Anje Dijk and Dr. Ronald Ohlsen from the Language Centre are willing to provide support in establishing the academic writing centre.

Ideally, the centre would be situated on a visible location in the city centre, possibly with a branch office at the Zernike campus. The centre should have broad opening hours, every weekday from 9am to 6pm. The centre should be large enough to host several students and tutors working together at a given time, but small enough to maintain an informal atmosphere.

The writing coaches should be students in a later stage of their studies, mostly Master or PhD students. Employing students as writing coaches lowers the barriers for students to seek help at the writing centre and it decreases the costs for the University significantly. The coaches should participate in further training themselves, while working at the academic writing centre. Based on the experience of other Dutch universities, the academic writing centre can be expected to employ between 10 and 15 coaches at a given time. They will have a zero-hour contract and work on average 8 hours per week. Furthermore, the centre would employ about 1.5 fte in total for a manager and an organisational coordinator.

The centre should have its own website or a section on the website of the University of Groningen. Information about the academic writing centre and the services provided must be available online. Students need to have the possibility to make an appointment or sign up for a workshop on the website of the academic writing centre. The website would also be the right place to post open vacancies and search for new writing coaches. Furthermore, there should be an online database with information on academic writing. A Facebook page would thereby be a good way to increase the visibility of the academic service centre and promote its services to students.

Conclusion

In this memo, Lijst Calimero pleads for the establishment of the Academic Writing Centre at the University of Groningen. At the centre, writing coaches work together with students to improve student's writing process. Furthermore, the centre offers various workshops on common issues that students have with academic writing. The services are provided in English and Dutch, for native and non-native speakers and are free of charge for students. The academic writing centre can alleviate the workload of teachers by taking over the task of providing individual feedback on written assignments.

We are confident that the academic writing centre that we propose will add value for both students and staff. Therefore, we ask the Board of the University:

- Whether they share our vision;
- Whether they can commit themselves to the establishment of the Academic Writing Centre with regard to organisation and financing of the start-up phase;
- To investigate how the centre can be organised in the long run.

We are looking forward to staying involved in the process and to provide additional student's input.

P.S.: With this advice, we hope to convince the Board of the University that an academic writing centre would be a valuable addition to the University of Groningen. If we did not convince them that might be due to a lack of academic literacy and writing proficiency so that we were unable to adequately express our proposal. In that case, an academic writing centre would definitely be necessary.

Appendix 1: Empirical Evidence

Empirically a lot of research has been conducted on both academic writing in relation to academic performance and on the effects that formative feedback provided by a writing centre adds to a student's writing proficiency.

A study by Shrestha et al (2012), researched the relationship between dynamic assessment, tutor mediation and academic writing development. The basis of their research was that in higher education academic knowledge is usually constructed and available in written texts. Students generally study a discipline by reading textbooks, papers, and articles. Therefore, students are required to be able to understand and interpret knowledge from written text. After all, their competence is generally assessed on the basis of written assignments and exams. Academic reading and writing are therefore key factors in determining academic performance and success³.

However, academic writing proficiency is not the only determinant of academic success. George Braine (2002) conducted research on academic literacy of non-native speaking graduate students. He states that academic literacy goes beyond the ability to read and write on an academic level. Academic literacy also includes building interactive relations with teachers and peers, as well as the ability to adapt to the linguistic and social milieu and the culture of the academic department and institution. A main part of this adaptation is the interpretation of written tasks and instructions. In order to successfully complete an assignment, students need to be able to interpret their teacher's instructions correctly. Braine also found that students are much more inclined to seek for help and feedback from peers than they are for contacting a hierarchically higher authority such as their supervisor. His research suggests, that more face-to-face interaction between a tutor and a learner is necessary in order focus on individual differences and give students optimal and individual support. Furthermore, involvement of peers would help to mediate the feedback and learning process. This could be done by for instance involving student assistants that are in a later phase of their study already⁴.

Personal interaction of tutors and learners would furthermore make the formative feedback process more dynamic. It would be a valuable addition to classical feedback moments. Dynamic assessment as introduced by Shrestha et al (2012), helps to reveal a learner's current abilities and helps to realise his or her full potential. Interaction between a tutor and a student mediates the learning process by focussing on individual differences and a

³ Shrestha, Prithvi and Coffin, Caroline (2012). Dynamic assessment, tutor mediation and academic writing development. *Assessing Writing*, 17(1), pp. 55-70.

⁴ Braine, G. (2002). Academic literacy and the nonnative speaker graduate student. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 1, pp. 59-68.

student's individual abilities. In that way, also international students with different backgrounds would perceive better guidance in adapting to their new academic environment.

One way of implementing dynamic formative feedback on academic writing at a university level is the establishment of a writing centre. The research by Agnieszka Bielinska-Kwapisz (2015) found a positive relation between students visiting a writing centre and their academic performance on written assignments. She also found that both, a student's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation enhances the likelihood for seeking help and support at a writing centre⁵. Also Archer (2008) found that academic performance increased when students made use of the services offered by a writing centre. An even more important finding, however, is that the writing centre did not only improve writing skills of students but also enhanced critical thinking and the meta-understanding of how knowledge is linked to appropriate form. An academic writing centre thereby not only supports students with academic writing but also increases their academic literacy. In that way a student's overall academic performance will be enhanced over time by mere support by the writing centre⁶.

⁵ Bielinska-Kwapisz, A. (2015). Impact of writing proficiency and writing centre participation on academic performance. *International Journal of Educational Management*. 29(4), pp. 382-394.

⁶ Archer, A. (2008). Investigating the effect of writing centre intervention on student writing. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. 22(2), pp. 210-226.

Appendix 2: Support from students

This proposal is supported by students throughout the University of Groningen. More specifically, it is supported by:

This proposal was discussed and is supported by the College van Assessoren.

Student representation

Willeke van Leeuwen

On behalf of the faction Progressief Rechten of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Law

Merel van Straten

On behalf of the faction Ten Behoeve van Rechtenstudenten of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Law

Stefan Takman

On behalf of the student faction of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Economics and Business

Fleur Albers

On behalf of the faction Letteren Vooruit of the Faculty Council of Faculty of Arts

Simon van der Pol

On behalf of the student faction of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences

Marijke Rommelse

On behalf of Pro Geo, student faction of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences

Judith den Boer

On behalf of the student faction of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences

Hilde Wolters

On behalf of Prodent of the Faculty of Medical Sciences

Study Associations

Audrey van Erp

TMFV Archigenes

Gijs van der Veen

TBV Lugus

Richard Scholten

ASCI

Victor Bouwmeester

Mesa

Sander van der Veen

GTD Bernoulli

Geertje Bruijn

Odiom

Mark van der Meijs

Civielrechtelijke Vereniging Diephuis

Jorino Luimes

Pro Memorie

Joeri ten Kate
De Chemische Binding

Marloes Broekma
Esperia

Anna Dantuma
Financiële Studievereniging Risk

Maret van Straten
Frederik van der Marck

Michael Susan
Honours College Study Association

Elroy van Ostheim
IBN Battuta

Merel Couperus
IK

Pepijn Tielens
Juridische Faculteitsvereniging Groningen

Max Landkroon
LISA Groningen

Jasper Zwaagstra
Simon van der Aa

Minke de Vries
Sociëtas

Leon van der Boom
S.G.O.R.

Carmen Hoormann
TeMa

Anne van Boven
GHD Ubbo Emmius

Dennis Kant
VESTING

Justine Pronk
VINTRES Groningen

Mayke Hazelaar
VIP

Eva Gelvort
ZaZa