# The History of Writing Centres in Kuwait: A Critical Perspective

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of a writing centre (WC) is to grant students the opportunity to get assistance with their writing from a tutor. Much of the time, professors are too busy to provide detailed formative feedback on students' papers. WCs are often used to support students with qualified tutors to review, edit, and comment on their writings. The staff within WCs are expected to be able to guide all students regardless of the class in which they are writing the paper for or their skill level as a writer. WC staff must be qualified and knowledgeable in many different disciplines to have some familiarity with what students are writing. The recruitment and continual

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development of professional staff are critical for there to be a constant growth of the knowledge and skills necessary to support all students.

The need for WCs within universities is evident to the casual observer. WCs are beneficial for native English speakers and English as a second language/English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners alike. WCs help students improve their ability to research, as well as the overall structure and flow of their written papers, in addition to supporting them with technical matters such as grammar, punctuation, citations, and spelling. Moreover, when students go to WCs, they are often looking to improve their skills, so their receptivity to learning is higher than a student who sits in class and is compelled to receive instruction whether he/she is interested or not. The skills that students learn in WCs can be applied to future assignments as well. Students may learn certain writing fundamentals at a WC that they missed or never learned in class. Also, the WC environment is much less threatening than a classroom setting. Often students may feel intimidated to ask a question in class for fear of revealing their ignorance, ridicule from other students, and an adverse reaction from the teacher or some other apprehension that causes them to hold back on their full effort. Working one-on-one with a tutor is a personalized experience that can increase the student's level of comfort and interaction. The tutor's ability to offer personalized feedback on a student's writing can help the student understand what error was made and how to correct those mistakes in the future.

The ordinary observer can attest to the effectiveness of WCs. However, empirical evidence has not been able to prove that WCs improve the quality of students' writing. Much of the difficulty lies in the fact that longitudinal quantitative data demonstrating the improvement of students' writing skills is not easy to measure due to the challenge of data collection and control (Jones, 2001). Also, any study taking on this topic must factor in the wide range of variability between different WCs, and the difference that exists between tutors and individual tutoring sessions. Finally, writing ability is a construct that scholars have not agreed upon in regards to its definition. J. D. Williams, Takaku, and Bauman (2006) conducted a rigorous study in attempts to remedy this problem and fill the gap. They conducted a four-year study wherein they sought to determine the effect of frequent WC visitation on students' writing performance as measured through grades. Participants were 256 international ESL students, primarily from Japan. They found that students who were more frequent with visiting the WC had better grades, regardless of their instructor or the

quality of their instruction. This study proves that when ESL students have the motivation to seek out help through WCs, they will improve their academic performance. Intuition tells us that WCs can impact other measures such as writing ability, self-esteem, critical thinking, and other soft skills which are much harder to measure but are undoubtedly essential life skills.

The small Gulf Country of Kuwait is a high-income country that is looking for alternative ways to generate employment in private sectors of the society. To accomplish this, prospective employees of the private sector must possess a broad range of skills with which they can create entrepreneurial alternatives. Therefore, reforming education at all levels has become a high priority within the government. Kuwait has four institutes of higher education that are supported by the state, including the most well-known Kuwait University, in addition to several other private institutions in operation, such as the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST), the American University of the Middle East (AUM), and the American University of Kuwait (AUK). As of now, only two private universities contain a WC to help their students.

The purpose of this chapter is to better understand the history of the WCs in the non-English-speaking country of Kuwait and to determine when they were first established and what purposes they are serving within the context of the university and the larger society. This information may help educational leaders and academics identify the weaknesses in Kuwaiti universities and what needs to be done to improve them. The data for this study was extracted from the most updated version of the universities' websites, an article that contains detailed information about the WCs within the Kuwaiti universities (Aljuhail & Ahmadi, 2011; AUK: Academics, 2016; The Writing Lab | GUST, 2017), and personal observations. The theoretical framework used for qualitative data extraction is called "document analysis." This framework is a systematic process of finding, evaluating, and synthesizing data that is contained in all forms of documents (Bowen, 2009).

This study will begin with a history of WCs starting in North America, then in other parts of the world. Then we will provide a general overview of Kuwait and its educational evolution. Afterwards, we will analyse English language teaching in the Kuwaiti higher education context. Next, we will critically analyse the WCs in Kuwait based on their stated mission, vision, goals, and objectives. Finally, we will conclude with some insights and pedagogical implications.

## Literature Review

### *Writing Centres: Background*

WCs were born in the United States during the 1930s (Lerner, 2009). For decades, they were small in number until the 1960s, when WCs were established in many American colleges and universities. During that time, WCs acted as mere extensions of the school's administration. Tutors were restricted to follow strict pedagogical practices in which they were professionally and socially disconnected from the students they served. Tutors served as useful cogs in the rigid, hierarchal system in which their duties were to instil students with specific knowledge and information. In the 1980s, American WCs began to dismantle the strict power dynamics and transition into a more collaborative peer-based support centre. Landmark essays such as "The Idea of a Writing Centre" (North, 1984) and "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" helped spawn this evolution towards a more humanistic approach. These essays helped spread awareness of the need for a collaborative learning environment in which both the tutors and the students grow and develop. Afterwards, the dynamics of WCs began to evolve into a more community-based approach.

In recent years, WCs have been established in post-secondary institutions throughout the world. For instance, the International Writing Centres Association has affiliates and centres in various locations throughout the world. Higher education is expanding globally. University enrolment is on the rise, and higher education is becoming almost a necessity for those looking to enter the professional class. WCs are being used as a support for students who face challenges in writing or ESL. As global demand for high-quality university education goes up, the creation of WCs will likely follow.

Over the years, the quality of services offered in WCs has improved. For instance, tutors are granted training manuals which guide them to have natural conversations with students. This practice helps them build rapport (Gillespie & Lerner, 2008; Ryan & Zimmerelli, 2009; Singh-Corcoran, Fitzgerald, & Lanetta, 2015). This relationship-building process reinforces the concept that a writing tutor differs from a teacher in various ways. Classroom experiences may produce a particular type of psychosis in a student who struggles, and the WC environment is meant to alleviate that anxiety by providing a comfortable setting in which there is a balance

between revision, editing and proofreading, and conversational dialogue. When tutors are better able to understand the student they are supporting through careful listening, questioning, and discussion, they will be more able to develop the writer based on their personalities and unique experiences. These guides are being offered to tutors at WCs throughout the world to improve the professional practices of tutors.

### *General Overview of Kuwait: Educational Context*

The State of Kuwait is a small Persian Gulf country that has been an independent state for over 250 years. Its educational evolution went through various stages as Kuwait emerges as a nation recognized on the world scene. In the early twentieth century, there were no formal education systems in place. Wealthy private citizens often funded Quranic schools, Al-Kataib, wherein the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic were taught. In 1912, Kuwait established their first modern educational institution, Al Mubarakiya. The school was created to educate supply clerks that. The school curriculum offered training in Quranic studies and arithmetic, history, geography, and drawing. In 1921, the Al Ahmadiya School for boys was established offering courses in English. An all-girls school followed this school in 1927. The 1930s was the birth of Kuwait's modern period. Between the years 1936 and 1937, four primary schools were established. Due to the undersupply of qualified talent among the Kuwaitis, teachers from different parts of the Arab world were recruited to teach in these schools (Nyrop, 2008).

In 1938, oil was discovered in Kuwait. Shortly after the Second World War, Kuwait began exporting oil. Abdullah Al-Salim Al-Sabah, the first emir of Kuwait, used the newfound wealth to create a comprehensive welfare state which helped establish many education facilities among other social service projects. Until this day, the state offers essential social services such as healthcare and education to its citizens for free. Between the years of 1954 and 1955, the first kindergartens and the first technical college were established. In the following year, a special education institute was established. In 1958, an adult education institute for men was created, along with an institute for women in 1963. To accommodate the rapid rise of responsibility, the state's education department upgraded to a ministry in 1962. The apex of these accomplishments came in 1973 when the Kuwaiti government established their first university (Nyrop, 2008). Educational growth has steadily increased in Kuwait since then.

Today, the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education is implementing a long-term education strategy that focuses on modernizing education teaching and practices for its citizens. The Kuwaiti state vision for 2035 is aiming at reforming and developing the country economically via the fulfilment of six strategic goals, one of which is to support human and social development (Ertl, 2014). A wide range of skills will be required to meet the country's economic needs. However, a vital aspect of improving the country is through developing their English language proficiency. This is mandatory for future workers to be competitive in a global economy.

### *English Learning in Kuwait*

English is the second most spoken language in Kuwait. As the majority of the nations in the world, the Kuwaiti people acknowledge that English is the global lingua franca and learning it is a necessary component in preparation for work and travel in a global marketplace. In Kuwaiti schools, English is taught alongside Arabic. There are a large number of private schools and English language schools which offer courses to both the young and old. Both Kuwaitis and expatriates invest in quality education for their children. Kuwaiti primary and secondary schools are expected to equip students with the English language skills to attend university courses in English.

The country's emphasis on English is made clear after examining Kuwaiti university websites. Each university has an English language department, or offer courses in English according to their websites. Kuwait's public undergraduate schools are Kuwait University (KU) and the technical college Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET). PAAET offers two-year technical and vocational training courses that prepare graduates to enter the workforce and other post-secondary programmes. KU was unable to absorb the large number of qualified students seeking entry into the University, despite having several campuses and a large number of college offerings and programmes. In 2002, a law was passed by the Kuwait Ministry of Higher Education allowing for private universities to operate in Kuwait. An independent council called the Private University Council (PUC) was created to oversee the establishment, management, and closure of private institutions. PUC requires these universities to be accredited so that they may "contribute to achieving the goals of higher education and applied education in the coun-

try in a manner that provides research service and serves the goals and the need of the developing society" (Al-Atiqi & Alharbi, 2009, p. 6).

To meet this mission of developing the country's human capital, each of the private universities formed partnerships with foreign partners. These universities are intended to help transform the country from the finite resource of oil, into a knowledge-based economy. The eight for-profit, private universities include the GUST, the AUK, the Arab Open University (AOU), the Australian College of Kuwait (ACK), the AUM, the Kuwait-Maastricht Business School, Algonquin College, and Box Hill College of Kuwait. According to the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education, approximately half of the student population are learning in the private universities (Faek & Lynch, 2015). English is the medium of instruction in nearly all programmes within each university. However, only two of the eight private Kuwaiti universities offer a WC to support their students.

## ANALYSIS OF KUWAITI WCS

To better understand the operational role of the WCs in Kuwait, we employ a qualitative document analysis approach (Bowen, 2009). The materials that have been extracted for this study were taken directly from the university's website and a presentation regarding the WC found through a basic Google search (Aljuhail & Ahmadi, 2011; AUK: Academics, 2016; The Writing Lab | GUST, 2017). Our goal is to discover more about this WC to determine the gaps. Specifically, we would like to know:

1. How is this WC supporting students?
2. Is their aim aligned with university standards?

Extracting detailed evidence is hard due to the lack of available information. The Middle East–North Africa Writing Centre Alliance, MENAWCA, lists only one link for a WC in Kuwait. The link is to the American University of Kuwait Writing Centre (WRC) page. It is a subpage found within the Academics section. Although they do not have any links to MENAWCA, another private university, GUST, has a fully functioning writing lab. The remaining Kuwaiti universities offer different forms of student support in writing, but none offer a WC.

### *Writing Centre at AUK*

AUK is a liberal arts college that has formed a partnership with Dartmouth College in the United States. The WRC has been in operation since October 10, 2005. The website claims that it has evolved into a location that is popular on campus. It is unique due to the academic assistance that they are known to offer to students and the support they provide to faculty. They have recently expanded to accommodate writing support for Arabic, French, Spanish, and Italian (AUK: Academics, 2016; AUK: About AUK, 2016).

WRC's web page claims to offer a relaxed environment to support students, faculty, and staff seeking help with their writing or presentations. They offer writing workshops and private consultations where clients are free to exchange ideas to produce a well-developed piece of writing. Students are welcome to go to the WC during their free time or to reserve sessions online through a separate link. They offer 30-minute sessions and students are free to attend a maximum of two sessions per week. The site states that they look forward to meeting students and are enthusiastic about assisting them in the process.

WRC's stated mission is to promote "an understanding of writing as a way of thinking, learning, and communicating." Following the mission statement are six objectives:

- Cultivate an environment of collaborative inquiry with students seeking help with various writing and reading needs, concerns, and goals;
- Develop students' understanding of the various writing purposes, audiences, genres, and styles;
- Develop student' strategies for critical reading and engaging with a variety of texts;
- Support students' efforts in all stages of their writing processes by offering thoughtful and constructive feedback;
- Support faculty efforts to develop and integrate a variety of writing assignments into their courses;
- Provide resources on writing for the entire university community (AUK: Academics, 2016).

AUK's mission statement and objectives provide guidance as to how the centre must operate to obtain the high standards in which they have established for themselves. Their emphasis on a collaborative inquiry environment shows that they understand that learning comes about when we

challenge ideas through dialogue. Collaboration is a strategy that shifts the focus away from one individual who possesses the final authority, towards both parties who will each benefit from the learning experience. The following three bullets address the technical writing supports that students will need to improve their writing. The fifth bullet shifts the focus towards university faculty. This point shows that the WRC staff may also act as aids to professors looking to improve a writing aspect of their course. The final bullet indicates that the WRC also offers support on a macro-level, that is, the entire university community.

The WRC staff calls themselves "consultants" (AUK: Academics, 2016). This title connotes an impression of analysis via dialogue. Consultation is a flexible and fluid process, while terms such as "reviewer" and "editor" can evoke an impression that the department is highly technical in its delivery. The consultants who work at the department are qualified and active in their promotion of the centre and the ideals on which it stands. For instance, two of the WRC's consultants presented at an MENAWCA conference in 2011 a lecture titled the "Redefining the Visibility of a Writing Centre" (Aljuhail & Ahmadi). Today, there are three active consultants at the WRC. Two of whom are bachelor's degree holders and the third is a PhD holder. The biographies of each consultant are included. They consisted of both professional and personal narratives that appear to align with each consultant's unique personality and interests. This merger of scholastic and personal story helps to put a human dynamic to a department that may appear to be academic and intimidating to some.

The online resources are links to external sites which contain supports such as a handbook, citation and documentation guides, grammar books, and links to other supports. Navigation throughout the AUK tab is simple in design and accommodating enough for an English language learner of all levels to use. However, there are no pictures of the staff within the WC, nor are there pictures or videos of the centre itself. Visitors to the site would have been able to get a better impression as to what the WRC environment is like if they had been provided more visuals.

This mission and practices at the WRC align with AUK's mission of being an institution which "provides students with the knowledge and skills necessary for lifelong learning and professional success" (AUK: Academics, 2016). Effective writing is a skill which students need for success in nearly all areas of working life. The quality of writing is how one's intellect is judged in professional settings, for it is one of the primary ways

in which one's thinking becomes visible to others. It appears that the WRC in AUK is a much-needed asset for both the university and, subsequently, the Kuwaiti society as a whole.

### Writing Lab at GUST

GUST is a university that partnered with the University of Missouri at St. Louis to create and organize and develop their polytechnic academic programmes and curriculum. In 2016, GUST was ranked by QSnews as one of the top 100 universities in the Arab region out of over 900 (QS University Rankings: Arab Region, 2016). Moreover, 90% of GUST's faculty hold PhDs and are educated in the North America or the UK.

Information related to the Writing Lab can be found on the GUST website under the Academic Services tab. There are much fewer details found on this link in comparison to the WRC. For instance, there are no details related to when they were established or great detail about the type of atmosphere they provide as expressed via pictures or highly descriptive words. Moreover, they do not offer writing support for foreign languages outside of English.

GUST's mission statement claims that they have adopted a "We Care" approach to meet each student's unique needs (The Writing Lab | GUST, 2017). The environment is open, and students can seek help through a collaborative inquiry process. Like the WRC, the link claims to offer personalized services depending on each student's personal writing concerns. The mission statement is more of a paragraph than a statement. It seems unlikely that students or staff will remember the statement. However, most will understand what they do.

Students at GUST can receive support through the help of the English department's teaching assistant Ms. Rawan Kandari. Also, students will be able to receive one-on-one support through peer tutors. However, the website does not mention how many tutors are available. Unlike the WRC, GUST explicitly states that their services are for students, as opposed to offering services for all faculty and staff. However, instructors and students can make a request for special workshops on topics such as "essay writing, research papers, business writing, and grammar editorials."

The Writing Lab services section of the link offers a detailed outline of the provided services. The services are comprehensive and detailed enough to accommodate students at any stage in their writing or any skill level. The working hours and location of the Writing Lab are available on the website, in addition to the instructions as to how students can book their appointments.

Chapter 10 of this book is dedicated to a SWOT analysis of the Writing Lab at Gulf University for Science and Technology, and more detailed information could be found in this chapter.

## Conclusion

Outside of AUK and GUST, we were unable to find any other examples of a WC in any other Kuwaiti university. However, there are many other examples of student services which are providing opportunities for students to reach other measures of success. The WRC and GUST efforts are praiseworthy and should be emulated by other Kuwaiti universities for them to establish WCs within their schools, each of which should align with their university's unique mission and vision.

Both AUK's WRC and GUST Writing Lab appear to be a significant component in helping students within both universities enact their mission on a daily basis and reach their visions sometime in the future. The WRC's emphasis on the term "consultants" and their focus on their personalities in their biographies evoke an impression that they have a flexible approach to aiding those in need of writing support. Also, the website offers an easily accessible menu for clients to find the help that they may require. Finally, the website provides help to clients on all levels of the institution. This non-discriminatory approach to guiding all in need reinforces the concept that the WRC is meant to be a comfortable environment. The Writing Lab at GUST appears to operate on a much smaller scale, but it is likewise a much-needed support for students working to improve their English proficiency skills.

Researchers and institutional leaders can benefit from this research by adopting some of these best practices to be implemented by another university in or outside of Kuwait.

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