Institutional Writing Support in Romania: Setting Up a Writing Center at the West University of Timișoara

Claudia Ioana Doroholschi

Abstract The chapter examines the current types of writing support provided in Romania and presents an attempt to establish a writing center at the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, West University of Timișoara, as a result of the SCOPES-funded project entitled LIDHUM (Literacy Development in the Humanities). It addresses some of the challenges encountered in setting up a writing center in the specific context of tertiary education in Romania and outlines some of the ways in which these have been dealt with, arguing that existing writing center models can only be adopted partially and need to be adapted to local conditions.

Keywords Academic writing · Writing support · Writing center

1 Introduction

The need for the adaptation of writing center work to local needs and to local contexts has been stated repeatedly in the literature. Bräuer (2002) notes that American-style writing centers cannot be transplanted as such to another context but should "grow directly out of existing structures and their cultural contexts" (p. 62). Harris' (1985) well-known "ideal" writing center is not an iteration of an established model but a local version characterized by variety and flexibility; "no two ideal writing labs function in exactly the same way" (p. 8). Even without this advice from more experienced colleagues, our own attempt at starting a writing center at the West University of Timișoara could only have been an attempt at reinventing the idea of a writing center, given the specific institutional, social, political, and economic background of a Romanian institution in the post-communist period. In what follows, I will try to outline this attempt, alongside some of the challenges and

C. I. Doroholschi (✉)
Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, West University of Timișoara, Timișoara, Timiș, Romania
e-mail: claudia.doroholschi@e-uvt.ro

questions that have arisen from it, in the hope that these will stimulate discussion on how such a unit can be established in the context of Eastern European institutions.

2   Academic Writing Provision in Romanian Universities

Since 1989, the Romanian higher education system has been in a process of redefinition, modernization, and dynamic transformation from the Soviet-inspired educational model imposed after 1945 to a more market-oriented model (Dobbins and Knill 2009). It has also gone from a centralized state-controlled university system to one that recognizes the autonomy of universities and from isolation to integration and exchange with the rest of Europe. In what concerns academic writing, this has resulted in a highly dynamic landscape in which several different traditions coexist (see chapters "Introduction: Understanding Academic Writing in the Context of Central and Eastern European Higher Education" and "A European Model for Writing Support" for context description). Romanian academic writing conventions have crystallized in the last two centuries under French (and to a lesser extent German) influences. The French model held particular appeal as part of Romania's attempt to assert itself as a Romance culture, which is a strong component of the Romanian national identity. Grammar and citation norms were centrally elaborated by the Romanian Academy and made unitary throughout the country. This has changed radically in the years after 1989, with the institutional, social, and political transformations that took place in the country. A significant factor has been the increasing impact of English, which in Romania is not only due to the general tendency of using English for communication in academia worldwide, but also because it is perceived as a means for modernization and integration. The normative role of the Academy has weakened, with individual instructors or faculties now often preferring the international writing conventions of their discipline to the Academy norms.

Simplifying the picture, before 1989, in Romanian higher education, student writing was used mainly for assessment and to demonstrate knowledge and was not strongly linked to research and thinking, particularly at the undergraduate level. Written tasks were often restricted to written examinations or to compilation of sources. The pre-1989 writing culture, still strong today in some disciplines (such as history or Romanian, inherently more connected to the Romanian tradition), focuses on writing as a product rather than a process. The teaching of writing is usually implicit, with the exception of formal aspects such as citation norms. Good writing is seen as grammatical correctness and compliance with norms. Beyond these persists the largely Romantic view of writing as inspiration rather than skill; students are, rather than become, good at writing. Overall, there is less writing in Romanian higher education, especially at the undergraduate level, than in some other traditions (e.g., the German or the English one). There are no general first-year composition courses and there is no tradition of one-on-one tutorials.

In recent years, however, many of these aspects have been changing, particularly under the above-mentioned influence of internationalization and under the impact of English writing conventions and pedagogies. There has been an increasing number of writing courses at universities, and other means of writing support have begun to emerge (e.g., online or print how-to guides for writing different types of theses that are often translations or adaptations of English sources). These are a result of the increasing need for academic writing support for both students and researchers. Following Romania's adoption of the Bologna Process, all undergraduates have to write a bachelor's thesis at the end of their first 3 years of study. In many cases, this is the first longer research work they write, and there is a need to mediate between high school writing (often either reproductive or focusing on informal self-expression) and writing to communicate one's research in a university setting. Students are often required to do much more writing at the postgraduate level and may later do research and/or a PhD, for which they often feel unprepared. Increased student mobility and the fact that academics are now required to publish internationally suggest that students and staff should be able to have some cross-cultural writing skills (for instance, the ability to adapt to different genre conventions than those they are used to in their home environment), and may need support in acquiring them. The need for writing support has therefore emerged as a necessity in many disciplines, and teachers have been quick to respond to this need by creating various forms of support specific to each faculty or discipline, but these are usually not brought together in an institutional writing development strategy.

3   The Idea of a (Timișoara) Writing Center

Our own response to the issues was the result of our joining the LIDHUM[1] project (2011–2014), an institutional partnership project led by the Zurich University of Applied Sciences and involving cooperation among universities in Switzerland, Macedonia, Romania, and Ukraine. At the moment of joining, the five Timișoara project members, coming from the Romanian Studies and the Modern Languages and Literatures departments at the Faculty of Letters, History, and Theology, all had some experience teaching writing, either separately or within our courses or as part of our bachelor's and master's thesis supervision, but there were no writing courses as such in our faculty. We had not undertaken writing research, and, despite the fact that we were very much aware of the need to provide some sort of writing support to our students, we were unaware of the options that we could consider. Throughout the years of the project, we had the opportunity to get involved in writing research, were able to connect to the international writing community, and had the

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opportunity to see a few successful writing center models, all of which gradually crystallized the idea of a writing center at our own university as an attempt to respond to the needs for writing development and writing support we identified within our institution. A writing center would provide support for students whose writing skills needed to be built up gradually beginning with their first study cycle. It would also respond to the demands of staff members who needed support in writing for publication, especially international publication. We could disseminate what we knew in terms of how writing can be used in the classroom and as an effective learning tool. We could then possibly expand to the outside community and provide services to professionals. We would help prepare students for the writing they might do at the workplace after graduation. We would cater to writers in Romanian and to the increasing demand for writing in English, and most importantly we could do research in order to better understand the specific problems of writing in our institution and how best to address them. In short, the idea seemed a powerful one, and one that had the potential to improve teaching, learning, and research in our university in many significant ways. We now had to find out if it could actually be implemented in our context and to come up with a realistic way of setting it in motion.

To start with, we were less bound by some of the issues that confront writing centers worldwide, such as the idea of the writing center as a "fix-it shop" (North 1984, p. 435), which gave us more freedom but also meant that we had no traditions that we could resort to when we tried to explain to others what a writing center does and little we could look at in other people's practice in our own country. Therefore, we drew on some of the models that we got acquainted with during the years of the project in an attempt to create a flexible and sustainable model to suit the needs of our institution: two well-established UK models, the Centre for Academic Writing at Coventry University and the Thinking Writing program at Queen Mary, University of London, as well as two further initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe, the Center for English Academic Writing at the Ivan Franko University of Lviv, Ukraine, and the English wRiting Improvement Center (ERIC) at the University of Łódź, Poland.

A first challenge was finding the position of the writing center within the institution. Creating a new structure at the institutional level tends to be difficult in our university, especially due to financial reasons. It would have been a viable option with a self-financing unit, but we believed it was going to be problematic to guarantee continuous external funding for the center, so we had to find a way to integrate it within existing structures. There was also the related issue of what to call the new writing center: In Romania, a "center" is traditionally a research center, accredited according to a set of well-established criteria by the Ministry of Education. We thought it might be beneficial to preserve this label since, after all, we intended to do research. The disadvantage would be creating a certain amount of confusion as to the actual function of the center, which would have other purposes besides research. Its staff would be researchers, but would also be involved in teaching and counseling. It would also mean entering a strict accreditation process, with demanding requirements especially for center directors, who have to be senior professors with a long activity in the field, and this was not our case. A closer equivalent would

have been a "department," but creating a new department was not a possibility, given the recent trend to fuse existing departments in an attempt to save money. Another option would have been to integrate the center within one of the structures that offered help and counseling to students or within a language development center. However, at the time of our initiative, the university did not have a center for student counseling that matched what we intended to do, and a language development center would have risked blurring the identity of the writing center and deviating it towards English language teaching and editing staff articles for publication.

Our eventual response was to establish our Centre for Professional and Academic Writing within the Faculty of Letters, History, and Theology, and we accredited it at the faculty level in the spring of 2013. We decided to call it a "center" both in the hope that we might obtain Ministry accreditation as a research center in the long run, and because it would make it easier to explain the role of the center by referring to the international writing center movement. We decided to use existing resources in the process, both in terms of material resources (teaching and office space, server space, computers, and furniture, which we obtained with the help of our faculty, who understood the need for writing development and supported us wholeheartedly) and staff positions. Existing staff with an interest in academic writing development—the LIDHUM project team—would allocate part of their existing workload within the faculty to academic writing-related activities such as doing writing research, engaging in writing-related projects, and attempting to include writing courses in the faculty curricula and then teaching them. We felt we had a good mix of backgrounds and expertise to start. Two of us were linguists, three were literature scholars with experience in teaching creative writing (and thus with an interest in writing as a process and as a skill), two were Romanian language scholars, and three brought in experience with English language teaching and pedagogy. We were allocated a room in the main university building, and a website in Romanian was set up on university web servers (http://csap.uvt.ro/) explaining our concept of the writing center and the services we would offer. The center thus acquired an institutional identity and could in the long run develop in several possible ways, e.g., by offering writing courses to other faculties, acquiring external funding for development and research, and developing a peer tutor team.

This formula is probably closest to other Eastern European initiatives such as the Lviv writing center, which also uses existing staff who work on a voluntary basis. Our center, however, tried to avoid relying extensively on voluntary work; therefore, we attempted to make the teaching of writing and research on writing part of our regular workload. Also, unlike the Lviv writing center, which began by providing writing support in English, we wanted to focus on writing in both English and Romanian from the outset, as it would enable us to address more of our institution's needs. We also wanted to address the complex issues of the current impact of English in Romanian academia and give our work a multilingual/multicultural dimension, as we have the belief that students and staff should not merely transition towards English writing but should also be able to write for different communities and negotiate different writing cultures.

We were also inspired by the concept of the writing center as a "hub" for writing development and research (Deane and Ganobcsik-Williams 2012). We believe that our center could serve as a way of bringing together all the efforts for writing improvement scattered around the university. In the long run, as we accumulated expertise, we felt that, given the small number of staff members, we could maximize our impact in the institution if we adopted a model similar to the Thinking Writing program at Queen Mary, University of London (McConlogue et al. 2012). This program would allow us to work together with subject teachers to help them develop writing courses and writing tasks for use with their students. This was also in keeping with Harbord's suggestion that "the introduction of writing into the curriculum of universities in the region can best be achieved by a collaborative effort between retrained teachers of English, refocused teachers of local languages, and faculty in the disciplines" (Harbord 2010, p. 2).

In what concerns support for students, we also considered the possibility of gradually setting up a peer tutor team, which researchers such as Harris (1995) see as one of the defining features of a writing center. Such a team of volunteers functions effectively at the English Writing Improvement Center at the University of Łódź, Poland. This was postponed for a later stage in the development of the center because of the workload it would involve not only in recruiting and training the tutors, but also in running the center and introducing the academic community to the very idea of tutorials, and not least because we would have liked to reward students for their work within the center, and it was difficult to find a way to do so.

All in all, we began with a vague idea of what the center would be and with an awareness of a multitude of possibilities. We thought this was the right way to proceed, given the newness of the enterprise in our institutional context. In any case, we felt that the writing center should take on a double role: that of understanding and diagnosing, especially given the lack of scholarship on academic writing in Romania, and that of effecting change by disseminating expertise and finding solutions to existing problems. This change would be triggered by encouraging reflection rather than by proposing alternatives, by bringing writing into discussion, and by working from within already existing structures.

4   Developing the Writing Center

The first activity of our writing center was the training of the core team, which took place mainly within the LIDHUM project; further training opportunities were also taken. We began to engage in research that would help us understand the specifics of academic writing in our institutional and national context. We held a meeting on writing with colleagues in the faculty to discuss preliminary research results and what opportunities for writing improvement we had at faculty level. Taking advantage of a process of reaccreditation of the faculty's study programs, we managed to introduce several writing courses in the curriculum at both the bachelor's and master's levels in both Romanian and English. In April 2014, we organized the Academic

Writing in Eastern Europe conference as an attempt to initiate discussion on writing in the region and to establish contacts among national and regional researchers. We also organized a number of writing workshops on specific topics for students and staff (in English and Romanian) on topics that were of immediate relevance to them (e.g., teacher feedback, how to avoid plagiarism, and how to write a conference paper).

These activities have proved sustainable, and they have continued after the completion of the LIDHUM project. The center members have since responded to invitations to teach courses on writing within various settings such as writing for research courses to PhD students of the university (in Romanian) and a training course in assessing writing for high school English teachers done in collaboration with the School Inspectorate of Timiș County. The bachelor's and master's level writing courses have continued and in one of the English study paths there is now an attempt at continuous development from an introductory one-year academic writing course (in the second year of the bachelor cycle) to an optional thesis writing course (in the first semester of the third year) to a course focusing on writing research papers (at the master's level).

A number of recent developments may prove to be opportunities for the development of the writing center. As of the 2015–2016 academic year, the university officially recognizes credits obtained by students doing volunteer work, which would make it possible to reward a volunteer peer tutor team of undergraduate and/or postgraduate students for holding tutorials at the center. In 2013, the university introduced transversal elective subjects that students must choose from faculties other than those in which they are studying, which has given us the opportunity to offer an academic writing course. Recently, the rector of the West University of Timișoara stated the university's commitment to improving academic writing by announcing an intention to introduce academic writing courses in all programs at the university, especially in the context of raising the quality of theses and research produced by our students and faculty and of taking a pedagogical approach to eradicating plagiarism, which may prove to be another opportunity for us to disseminate our expertise.

Some limitations and risks have also become apparent in the years since the establishment of the center. One of these is our association with English and the English department, which soon triggered requests for us to do English language training for staff instead of writing development. Given the current need for English language training, editing papers for publication, and even translation, our center faces the choice of either expanding its reach to include a language support unit (which would carry the risk of obscuring the writing support purpose of the center and even taking over the greater part of its activity) or of continually struggling to explain that this is not included in the center's services.

Attempting a bottom-up approach in a university in which most important decisions are implemented from the top down also has its risks, and it involves convincing various stakeholders of the long-term usefulness of one's enterprise. Still, in the absence of dedicated funding, the most challenging aspect has been not so much the day-to-day functioning of the center, which is manageable with existing faculty

resources, but the human resources. Balancing the existing workloads of staff and their pre-existing academic interests with writing center work has proved difficult. Allocating an amount of one's workload to writing center work is a viable strategy, but the share that can be dedicated to this work is vulnerable to external pressures, given our many other research, teaching, or administrative duties. Expanding the number of staff members involved in writing center work would be the logical solution, but this is difficult to accomplish in the absence of dedicated funding, especially since there are as yet no opportunities to specialize in academic writing at our university (e.g., no PhD programs in the field). Some of our initial plans have therefore developed more slowly than intended, such as the desire to work with subject teachers, which has so far only materialized into one pilot collaboration project between our center and our colleagues from the history department.

5   Concluding Remarks

At the outset, our writing center model was, to our knowledge, the first initiative of its kind in Romania. In the meantime, we have learned of another initiative at the Ștefan cel Mare University in Suceava, which has attempted to establish itself using a different model: that of offering paid services to the academic community (tutorials for students, editing services for staff, etc.), and one at Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. It remains to be seen whether one of our models will prove the most effective in the long run or whether we will have to find different formulas for writing support. In any case, our writing center initiatives will have to be flexible and adapt to the transformations that take place in our universities and in our society as well as be open to new opportunities and connections to institutional developments.

So far, we feel that our initiative has proved worthwhile in terms of improving writing support in our institution as well as in creating expertise in academic writing and starting a discussion on academic writing. Given the existence of many different writing-related initiatives scattered throughout higher education institutions in Romania at the moment, establishing a writing center or another type of writing research and/or support unit can be a powerful tool to bring all these initiatives into contact, facilitate exchange of ideas among those who are engaged with writing development, and generate solutions for writing improvement. Lack of institutional funding is a serious limitation, but not an insurmountable one. As has been noted so many times before and has been confirmed by writing centers worldwide, a writing center is not so much a room in an institution as it is a group of people committed to what they are doing.

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