

# A Cross-National View on the Organisational Perspective of Writing Centre Work: the Writing Centre Exchange Project (WCEP)

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## Abstract

This paper gives insights into research conducted within the Writing Centre Exchange Project (WCEP), a research collaboration among three university writing centres in Sweden, Germany and Ireland, which focuses on organisational perspectives on writing centre work. WCEP rests on the theoretical framework of institutional work. Previous research, conducted in US writing centres, developed a model of institutional work in writing centres that includes specific Strategic Action Fields (SAFs) and collaborative learning as a means to interact with stakeholders. By using this model, WCEP has targeted ongoing institutional work intended to establish and sustain missions, goals and activities in and around writing centres. Drawing on participatory action research, WCEP explores the extent to which the institutional work at the three European writing centres correlates with the model. The main findings show that indeed the same strategic action fields are relevant, but furthermore, different subcategories emerge depending on the local context. This paper explores some of the subcategories that differ and draws conclusions for the institutional work of writing centre directors.

## Introduction

Writing centres are well researched when it comes to tutoring and writing instruction (Babcock et al., 2012). Although in the early days of US writing centres, writing centre research often referred to administrative matters (Babcock & Thonus, 2012, pp. 60-69); questions of writing centre leadership are less present in writing centre research in general. They often seem to be answered by lore (for example, Mattison, 2008; Whalen, 2011) or by quantitative data collection (for example, Balester & McDonald, 2001; Purdue Writing Lab, n.d.). Recently, however, there has been a growing interest in an organisational perspective on writing centres from within the field, exploring the way in which writing centre professionals create structures, processes and practices, and examining how these factors influence the organisation and its actors (for example, Carter, 2009; Isaacs & Knight, 2014; Monty, 2016). Yet, writing centre scholarship has often focused on well-developed settings with long traditions in writing at university contexts as in the USA. In Europe, writing centres have developed in a different context, where writing instruction is often less present at higher education level and where writing centres are often the only form of writing support (Kruse et al., 2016; Scott 2017). Therefore, the Writing Centre

Exchange Project (WCEP)<sup>1</sup> attempts to add a European perspective by investigating ongoing institutional work in three European writing centres at different development stages, within different institutional contexts.

Theoretically, WCEP follows a neo-institutional direction within organisational studies (Greenwood et al., 2008) and uses the concept of institutional work, which is defined as “purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). Previous research in this particular area has found that institutional work in writing centres in the US includes specific Strategic Action Fields and collaborative learning as a means to interact with stakeholders (Girgensohn, 2017b).

Methodologically, WCEP is conducted within the framework of participatory action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and takes a grounded theory approach, also drawing on institutional ethnography to inform its method (LaFrance & Nicolas, 2012). Data consists of observations, semi-structured interviews with centre staff, directors and key stakeholder roles, plus video-recorded focus-group activities. The focus on participation and action ensures that writing centre directors and key stakeholders play a central role in this research. The analytical work rests on qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014, 2019) and video-based interaction analysis (Heath et al., 2010).

The three participating European writing centres were selected because the main researchers of the WCEP share a deep interest in understanding the organisational perspective of writing centres and in exploring the institutional work of writing centre directors. Researching their respective institutions comprehensively, as well as the institutions of the other participating writing centres, allowed them to explore and to learn from each other. More importantly, however, it allowed them to gain outsiders’ perspectives on the institutional work of their writing centres. This was facilitated through site visits to each of the participating institutions. The triangulation of perspectives and participatory action research allowed the research to be followed in a structured, empirical way.

## Theoretical Framing

Theoretically, the framework for this research project is the concept of institutional work, defined by Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) as the “purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (p. 215). Institutional work always points in two different directions: institutional work that is directed towards the inside of an institution with the aim of stabilisation, and institutional work that points towards the outside of an institution with the aim of gaining legitimacy. In this instance, the institution is the writing centre, and institutional work refers to the work directed towards the inside and outside of the writing centre in order to gain stability and legitimacy. Institutional work is fundamentally interactional in character, which involves writing centres and its staff as well as stakeholders in the surrounding institutional landscape and requires certain tools and competences. Writing centres are an interesting example for this type of “purposive action” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215) as they struggle to become stable and remain legitimate institutions.

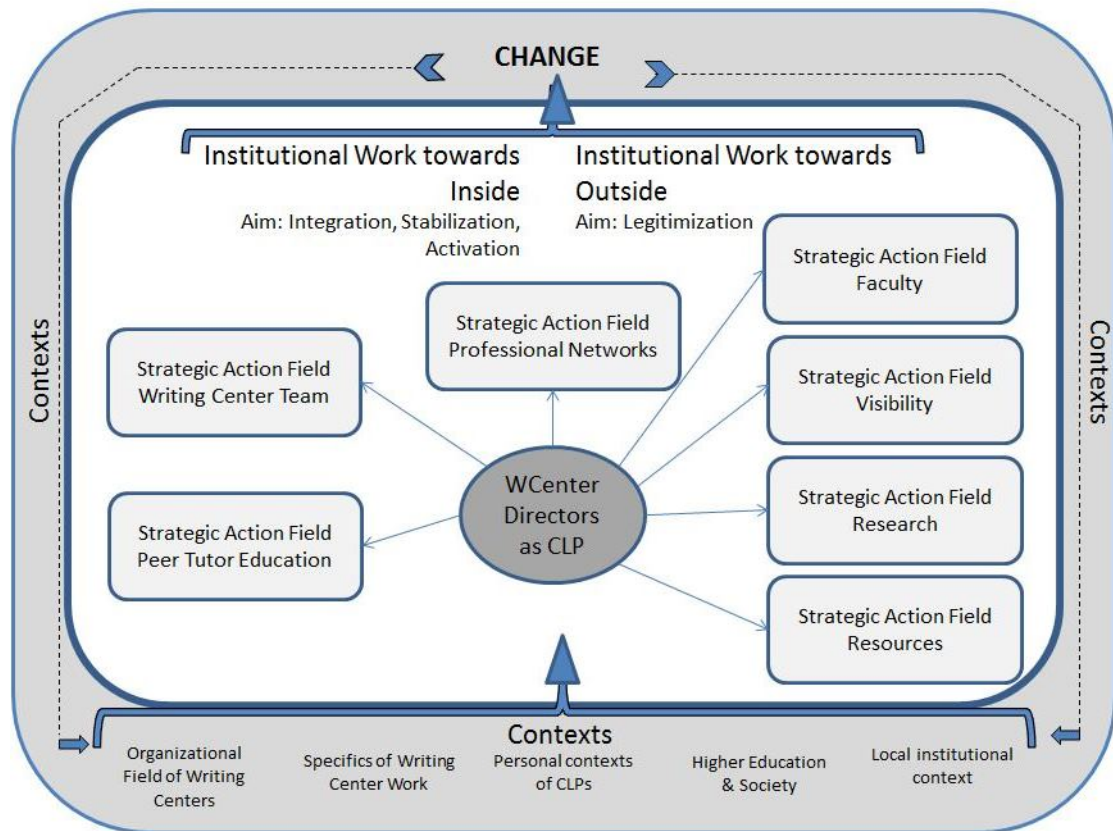
Girgensohn’s (2018) empirically developed model of writing centre directors’ institutional work uses this concept to identify Strategic Action Fields within writing centres (WCSAFs) (see Figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup> The funding for the visits was made available through EU funding by COST Action 15221 WeReLaTe, *Advancing effective institutional models towards cohesive teaching, learning, research and writing development*. This COST action “addresses the challenge of creating synergy among the increasingly more specialised and centralised supports for four key higher education activities – research, writing, teaching and learning” (COST European Cooperation in Science & Technology, 2016).

Figure 1

Model of Writing Center Strategic Action Fields (WCSAFs)



Note: From Girgensohn (2018, p. 16). CLP means Collaborative Learning Practitioners.

The WCSAFs point either towards the inside of the writing centre or towards the institutional context of the writing centre, or both, aiming at gaining stabilisation and legitimisation for the centres. The WCSAFs *Writing Centre Team* and *Peer Tutor Education* direct towards the inside of the writing centre and aim at stabilisation. The WCSAFs *Faculty*, *Visibility*, *Research* and *Resources* direct towards the outside of the writing centre and aim at legitimisation. The WCSAF *Professional Networks* directs towards the inside and towards the outside of the centre. All of the institutional work that occurs is embedded in contextual conditions that are listed under the heading *Contexts*. The model shows that the writing centre director conducts institutional work as a collaborative learning practitioner (CLP), using collaborative learning as a tool for the necessary interactions within the WCSAFs. WCEP used this model as a heuristic for structuring and systematising this research project.

## Research design<sup>2</sup>

A very broad, overarching research question was to uncover whether the institutional work in the researched European centres is conducted within the same SAFs identified in Girgensohn's (2018) previous model, which is based on research in the USA. This research question was considered the starting point to explore the similarities and difference that may emerge between

<sup>2</sup> This research project resulted from the EATAW conference 2017, during which a keynote plenary talk focused on the institutional work conducted within writing centres (Girgensohn, 2017a). Convinced of the importance of organisational perspectives on writing centre work, it the co-authors initiated the Writing Centre Exchange Project.

the different contexts. Consequently, this research project consisted of three week-long mutual visits for data-gathering to each of the three participating institutions over the course of 18 months, with extended periods of data analysis in between and afterwards to identify the WCSAFs and uncover the different contexts.

Methodologically, the qualitative research design can be framed as grounded-theory-oriented. The data gathering and data analysis took place in a recursive process, in which each visit informed and influenced the next (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Participatory Action Research was considered appropriate as it implies research where “communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 1). The researchers are, in this instance, members of the examined organisations, and other stakeholders were invited to become actively involved not only as participants but also as researchers in the initial discussion and elaboration of the findings (see below).

### ***Empirical settings and design of visits***

All three visits were conducted by small research teams including the co-authors. Each visit started with a detailed introduction to the particular university context and to the organisational structures for the unit, incorporating presentations from relevant members of the host institution and consultation of appropriate documentation to help in understanding the institutional context. Starting from visit two, the first day was also dedicated to discussing the findings and data analyses resulting from the previous site visit(s). Afterwards, the visitors got to know the writing centre teams through presentations, conversations and observations. Furthermore, the visitors conducted semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and co-workers of the particular centre.

Research participants in all three sites were informed about the research project before signing consent forms following the steps outlined in the ethical approval granted by the University of Limerick Research Ethics Committee. While the interviews were not audio-recorded, the visitors took intensive notes, which were inserted into a common etherpad on a daily basis. Towards the end of each visit, the visiting research team revisited those notes, discussed them and documented additional observations. This was the first step of a qualitative text analysis that Kuckartz (2012, p. 79) calls initial text work (“initiierende Textarbeit”). These findings were subsumed under three to four thematic categories for each visit, which were phrased as initial findings on flip charts.

Towards the end of the site visit, these initial findings were presented to the local interviewees and writing centre teams in a specific form of panel discussion, a group activity named *fishbowl*, a concept previously used in didactical contexts (see e.g. Ponzio & Matthusen, 2018). It is designed to structure and enhance discussion in groups and has been used as a way to enhance discussion on sensitive topics and for deliberative purposes. Practically, a group of participants is placed within the fishbowl, which is a panel discussion arrangement. The panellists, however, leave one or two chairs vacant and invite the audience to come into the fishbowl and join the panel discussion whenever they want. In best case scenarios, a fishbowl discussion becomes so lively that panellists and audience exchange places completely. This setting was used as a research tool in this context to allow the visiting researchers an opportunity to present their initial findings and invite all research participants to discuss them with them. This way, team members, writing centre staff and other stakeholders had the chance to participate in the research directly and comment on or verify the impressions the visiting research teams had constructed. The fishbowls were video-recorded and written consent was obtained from all participants in line with the documentation approved in the ethical approval.

The data analysis followed the steps of qualitative text analysis described by Kuckartz (2014, for terminology also see Kuckartz, 2019), using coding software (MaxQDA and NVivo12). The initial data analysis of the interview notes, performed towards the end of each site visit, took an inductive approach by coding whatever seemed interesting and allowed the visiting researchers to present their initial findings at the fishbowl activity described above. Following the visit, the interview data was analysed in greater detail, the findings of which are reported herein. While the initial text work took a deductive approach, an inductive approach ensued in a second

phase. Following a deductive approach, using Girgensohn's model (2018) as a heuristic to term main categories in the interview data, the WCSAFs, context factors and tools identified in the original model were defined in a codebook and exemplified by anchor-examples taken out of the interview material. Subsequently, the material was analysed repeatedly and coded accordingly. This approach to coding allowed for direct comparison in order to establish if the model applies in the European context. Furthermore, moving beyond the original categories to code supplementary items that appeared interesting revealed additional subcategories that emerged inductively. The new subcategories were defined and exemplified in the codebook and the same coding system was used and enlarged with each visit. This allowed us to explore differences among the centres and to name findings about the institutional work of the specific centres.

## Findings

While using a previous model as a heuristic of course implies certain findings, this method also allows a starting point to begin an investigation. Overall, reusing the model confirmed that previous WCSAFs, contextual factors and collaborative learning apply in relevant ways to European settings. However, using the model as a heuristic across the three research sites in this project allowed for identifying important differences and similarities and to compare them. As will be shown, analysing SAFs helped reveal local aspects of importance at each specific institution. For each empirical site, an overview of the roles of the interviewees will be provided in the first instance in order to give insight into the variety of people interviewed and their respective roles. For each site, findings of those WCSAFs that stood out in the analysis will be presented briefly.

### Step 1 / Empirical site 1

#### Interview partners

<b>Inside</b>	Director and six co-workers
<b>Outside</b>	Nine stakeholders including university senior management, representatives of the advisory board, other units which work closely with the writing centre as well as external representation for a National Network.

In the interview data of the University of Gothenburg, all original WCSAFs are present except the WCSAF *Peer Tutor Education*, which is not surprising given that the centre does not employ peer tutors. Nevertheless, the idea of working with peer tutors in future was mentioned in several of the interviews as desirable. Similarly, *research*, while not part of the job description of the centre's staff, was mentioned as important and wanted and, therefore, appeared as a WCSAF.

The WCSAF *Writing Centre Team* seemed to be especially important. The team appeared energetic and motivated. It became obvious that the team participates in the institutional work and the director does this as a collaborator. There is a steady growth of the team and a perceived need for even more growth. This leads to many considerations about the centre's mission and discussions about future directions.

With regard to the WCSAF *Visibility*, it became clear from the data that the *Enheten för akademiskt språk* (ASK, Academic Language Center) is very visible in the institution. This was surprising for the visitors because certain aspects of visibility were not apparent in the way that they expected them to be. For example, there was no location within the university visible as a centre for the students to approach. Writing consultations and workshops were held in different rooms around campus and in the library, while the staff was located in an office tract. Also, the website was hard to find, promotional material was not very present and even the name of the unit, ASK, did not create visibility for the topic of writing. However, the visitors, as well as the interviewed stakeholders, perceived no lack of visibility. The institutional work of the writing



centre director included the SAF Visibility in different ways, mainly through meetings, conversations and also through collaboration with the Board of Education and through a very active role in an Advisory board with members from different faculties and units.

One emerging new subcategory within the category *contextual conditions* is the top-down-approach that the university took to establish the writing centre. The deliberate design of an organisational structure within the university's construction highly impacts the legitimacy and the stability of the centre and includes an important financial commitment to the centre. From this context derives a duty for the director to spend an important part of her time to serve these structures that were set up by the university, like sounding board meetings, reports and even retreats for strategic planning – a work far beyond working with writers or academic language.

**Step 2 / Empirical site 2**

*Interview partners*

<b>Inside</b>	Director and seven co-workers, including academic staff, peer tutors and writing fellows
<b>Outside</b>	Seven stakeholders, including senior management, representatives of co-workers in the umbrella-organisation of the writing centre (organisational location of the centre), and of different service institutions within the university and faculty.

In the interview data of the European University Viadrina (EUV), Germany, all original WCSAFs are present. Not surprisingly, peer tutoring is an important category in EUV, with many references to the WCSAF *Peer Tutor Education*. The EUV has a national reputation of pioneering in peer tutoring, including a leading role in writing the first peer tutoring guidebook, hosting the first national and the first European peer tutoring conferences, and in including peer tutors in institutional work in the centre and in professional organisations.

The WCSAF *Team* plays an important role for the institutional work in EUV. This might, like at site 1, be related to the enormous growth of the team over the last years and its integration into an even larger team within the umbrella institution. Challenges of teamwork were added as a new subcategory within this WCSAF.

Working with *faculty* seemed to be an especially important WCSAF, and writing fellows – as a special form of peer tutoring work – were added as a new subcategory. Writing fellows are integrated into university classes and they give feedback to peers as well as to teachers. Within the WCSAF *Visibility*, a special emphasis at this centre was on the physical space of the centre. The centre had been located at a distant building for the eleven years of its existence and just recently moved to a very visible space in a main building. This was perceived as a major success of institutional work, especially because there seemed to be concerns about the local reputation of the writing centre and its umbrella institution, a centre for key competences and research-oriented learning.

The WCSAF *Resources* seemed to be very dominant, which was not very surprising given that the centre is dependent on governmental funding that was going to run out two years later. Thus, this WCSAF was highly influenced by the contextual condition of higher education and society. Equally, within this contextual condition, another subcategory emerged: The Bologna Process. The awareness for the impact of this process was striking for the visitors, as it was mentioned even by students several times.

### Step 3 / Empirical site 3

#### Interview partners

<b>Inside</b>	Eleven co-workers, including peer tutors and leadership positions
<b>Outside</b>	Eleven stakeholders, including senior management, representative of umbrella institution (organisational location of the centre), representatives of support units and different faculty representatives.

All original WCSAFs were represented in the interview data from the Regional Writing Centre (RWC) at the University of Limerick as well. However, the analyses of this data show a strong emphasis on *contextual factors*. Specifics of Writing Centre Work, Local Institutional Context and the Organisational Field of Writing Centres are addressed in a majority of instances. Stakeholders express a positive attitude to the RWC and often articulate this in terms of contextual features. The RWC was talked about in terms like “flexible”, “accommodating”, “encouraging” and “passionate” about creating and maintaining relationships with the University, as well as nationally and internationally. The data show that stakeholder interests and needs are experienced as being catered for, which is relayed through positive experiences of the centre being open to tailor interventions to serve the needs of others, i.e. meeting stakeholder interests. Curiosity is mentioned as a positive and necessary attribute. Stakeholders tie effectiveness to flexibility in the way that the RWC works with people for a while to find out what the needs are and then responds in accurate ways. The RWC can also step back and take a different role than the driver’s role. Within this category, stakeholders also address changes over time and how the centre was initially developed. The present situation is highlighted in terms of an experienced organisational divide between teaching and writing centre work

Within the WCSAF *Peer Tutor Education*, the adopted peer tutor model is experienced as positive. Peer tutors are very happy about their work and see it as rewarding for others as well as for themselves. Several stakeholders reported noting that peer tutors’ professional development is well taken care of and in itself an important factor for the success and legitimisation of peer tutoring as a university activity.

The WCSAF *Resources* seemed to be especially important and was addressed in several ways. Institutional stakeholders addressed the fact that they experienced the centre as achieving very much from limited resources especially in terms of staffing. Brilliant organising of the resources available was highlighted as an important factor for the experienced success. Funding was raised as a concern from both outside and inside the centre.

The WCSAF *Faculty* highlighted that a combination of different forms of support for faculty and for faculty to use with their students was experienced as important and valuable. This WCSAF also shows that the centre’s openness and willingness to work alongside programmes and contribute to curricular design and enhancement of writing in content areas seems to be an important factor for the perceived achievement of the centre.

The WCSAF *Visibility* captured a series of different ways that visibility was experienced by outsiders but also an experience from inside the centre that the services were not so visible. From the outside, the centre was experienced as excellent at advertising their services, good at promoting their services through digital material and good at spreading information directly to students. However, visibility through physical space was seen as an area for improvement. At the RWC, the WCSAF *Writing Centre Team* was addressed by co-workers of the centre as well as by stakeholders. The results show that stakeholders repeatedly express appreciation of the services as well as of the positive attitude and service mindedness that they say characterise the centre staff. However, there are also concerns relating to the size of the services (that the centre is too small) and concerns about the ways in which the centre can maintain continuity in terms of peer tutoring. On the other hand, interviews also show that the centre benefits from having a mix of disciplines represented among staff. What is more, the

analysis of the data shows that tutoring is experienced as very satisfying. The training and continuous professional development for tutors stands out as an important factor for meeting expectations.

## Discussion

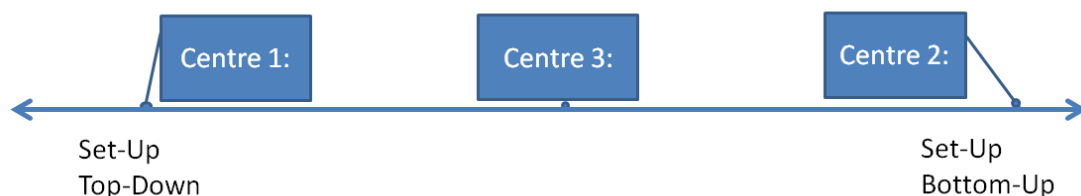
On basis of these results, the Model of Writing Center Strategic Action Fields proved to be valid in European contexts, too. Of course, the WCSAFs might have different importance in different institutions, and new WCSAFs might have emerged. For example, the researchers had emphatically discussed how often they coded *working with students* and if this might be a new WCSAF. In the end, it was decided to subsume those codings under the contextual condition of *specifics of writing centre work*, because this is where those kinds of comments were put in in the original model. Overall, we were surprised that all the seemingly new categories that appeared during the analysis, in the end, could be subsumed under the categories of the existing model.

The model might, therefore, be used as a heuristic to start thinking about what the WCSAFs mean in any local context. This way, writing centre directors can develop their own subcategories and decide on their importance. The model can also help writing centre directors to oversee the range of tasks for which they are responsible and to argue for appropriate job descriptions and resources.

Comparing the three centres, one factor that stands out is the importance of the contextual conditions. In Girgensohn's model, the *local institutional context* is mentioned as one contextual condition among four others that influence the institutional work of writing centre directors. However, the importance of these contextual conditions surprised us because, initially, we focused mainly on the different strategic action fields of the institutional work. To illustrate what we mean by this, we would like to explore the subcategory *top-down* versus *bottom-up* approaches for setting up the writing centre, which emerged within the category *local institutional context*. On the spectrum between these two poles, we can see in the data that one centre is very far on one side and a second very much on the other, while the third one can be seen as placed in between:

**Figure 2**

*Approaches for Setting up a Writing Centre*



Centre 1 was initiated at university government level and opened in response to an expressed need for more organised forms of writing support for students. The idea was discussed at several levels, needs analyses were performed, and a preliminary budget was dedicated to it. Thus, the structure, responsibilities, organisational placement, desired tasks of the centre and the desired form of leadership were designed before staffing was attended to. The second centre was built in a bottom-up approach, in a grassroots-like manner, by its first director. She had the idea and brought it to the university president. The president agreed that the idea was good, but that the university did not have the funding for a writing centre. The university would, however, support any efforts made to gain funding for a writing centre and would make infrastructure available, if possible. Thus, the writing centre grew out of personal engagement



and depended on external funding. The third centre is an example of a combination of top-down decisions with bottom-up approaches that depended very much on the personal engagement of the founding directors. Initial probing from the bottom up led to the establishment of the writing centre under external strategic funding; however, following this initial funding period, central administration brought the writing centre into the university's core budget.

Our research revealed how much influence these different settings have on the institutional work of the writing centre directors. We could see the advantages, as well as the disadvantages, of the different approaches with regard to institutional work. In the first centre, the top-down decision led to a secure standing within the university. It was very obvious from the interview material that the centre has a high status and high legitimacy. This became especially obvious for the strategic action field of visibility. As shown above, while visibility appeared to be problematic for the visiting researchers, the centre was very well known by faculty and by students. The strategic action field of visibility might not be as important for a centre where the legitimacy is high in itself. It is also striking that this writing centre did not have a strong connection to the national nor European writing centre community, because it was designed by stakeholders not familiar with it. Later on, however, a deliberate turn to this community included taking all of the staff to the EATAW conference in London in 2017. In this case, the professional field supported the stabilisation; it helped with the institutional work aimed towards the inside of the centre.

In the second centre, the grassroots approach created much freedom with regard to choices. This has a high impact especially towards the inside of the writing centre, where the aim of institutional work is stabilisation and motivation. Here, the director has the freedom to involve staff and peer tutors in designing programs, in following certain approaches and in expanding the job descriptions. Staff could easily decide to conduct smaller research projects or to experiment with new ideas. This became visible in a high output of innovations, well recognised by the national writing centre community. On the other hand, this context led to problems regarding the institutional work towards the outside of the writing centre, which aims at legitimisation. The structure of the unit and its responsibilities are not always clear to the university, as several stakeholders noted. Furthermore, even after eleven years of existence, the centre was not part of the university budget and still dependent on external funding, which was also very present in the interviews. The centre still seemed to lack the authority that a top-down-structure would have given it and an enormous amount of the institutional work had to be dedicated to gain legitimacy at the time of the visit, because the current funding was meant to run out two years later. The lack of a feeling of belonging at the home institution might be one reason for the strong connection of this writing centre to the national writing centre community. Here, the professional field presumably helps to balance the desire for legitimisation.

In comparing the centres, it becomes clear that, like in the original model, the SAF *Professional Field* is directed towards the inside as well as towards the outside of the centres. This makes this SAF an especially important SAF. Its relevance should not be underestimated and writing centre professionals would be well advised to declare this part of their work explicitly relevant and part of job descriptions.

In the third centre, the combination of a top-down and bottom-up approach manifests in a number of ways. In the initial years of external funding, the founding directors had the freedom to shape the direction of the centre based on researched best practice. The centre quickly became embedded in the institution. When the external funding ceased, and the institution was faced with the decision about the future of the centre, the academic and business case put forth by the directors was so compelling, the centre was mainstreamed and brought into the core budget of the university, thus securing the future of the centre. Its core position within the institution and alignment with institutional strategic goals provide a clear focus and visibility for the centre; yet, its core connections at grass-roots level with the schools and faculties ensures collaboration and support from within the faculties.

The comparison between the centres with regard to those set-up-conditions might be a bit schematic. Clearly, there are no pure top-down or bottom-up processes, and even with top-down decisions there is always much grassroots work left to do. However, the comparison was

helpful for us as practitioners, because it helped us realise where some of the encounters we experience in our everyday work as directors come from. Seeing how the different contextual conditions led to different challenges as well as to different benefits helped us not to see those experiences as coincidental or to take them personally. Instead, comparing the set-ups helped us to gain new ideas for retouching the ways our centres work. In the case of Site 2, for example, experiencing the benefits of the top-down approach at Site 1 has led to demands for a more explicit commitment of the university government and its help in setting up organisational structures, whereas at Site 1, the visit has later on influenced and made possible the centre's work towards integrating some form of research component.

Another example of the importance of the local context might show in the WCSAF *Peer Tutor Education*. This WCSAF was absent at Site 1, because the centre was designed to work with professional staff. Nevertheless, ongoing education or training for staff was still relevant for the writing centre team. Furthermore, peer tutoring was mentioned as desirable. However, within the national context, this feature is uncommon. The interview material includes explanations such as concerns about strong worker protection laws, and hesitancy towards working with students instead of professional staff. In the other two centres, though, the work of the centres would not have been possible without student workers. In these national contexts, employing students for some forms of academic work is considered normal. The exploitative aspects that might come with this were, in the two other national contexts, started to be discussed only recently.

## **Conclusion**

Using the existing model turned out to be useful since it allowed a systematic way for the research team to explore each other's institutional work. However, this does not mean that we suggest nor promote using the model as a template. However, it might be used to structure and deepen reflective and collaborative thinking processes. In our case, it made us aware of how important it is to consider the contextual conditions that embed the WCSAFs. These conditions make it difficult to transfer ideas from one context to another. On the other hand, uncovering these ideas through structured research visits helped us to develop ideas for local adaptations. Collaboration among writing centres in the form of visiting and observing each other's institutions and sharing materials and ideas is, luckily, a common practice within the professional field. WCEP, however, was more than this. WCEP showed us the value of taking an organisational perspective on writing centre work. Using a theoretical model and conducting structured empirical research turned this project into much more than a mutual visiting experience – which, of course, would also have been a valuable experience.

Coming with a research agenda helped us to focus: it granted the visitors a special awareness and gave them permission to meet important stakeholders and to legitimately ask and present even inconvenient questions. This made us realise that WCEP is institutional work in itself. It fostered stabilisation and legitimisation in all three participating institutions. With "research" and "professional networks" being strategic action fields within the model of institutional work of writing centres, this might not be entirely surprising. Nevertheless, WCEP illustrates and exemplifies a way to practically integrate these important strategic action fields into our everyday work as writing centre professionals. Furthermore, it opened doors that we did not expect to be open. For example, in one of the institutions a new Vice President had just started when the visiting research team came. It seems unlikely that the University's writing centre would have been one of the first units she would have granted a longer time slot in her busy agenda. An international research delegation, however, was recognised as important enough and a very good conversation ensued that later influenced an important role that the writing centre took over in curriculum design. At another institution, the need to be recognised as an academic unit that is allowed to conduct research was discussed during the fishbowl activity. It proved beneficial that this need was stated from an outsider perspective and helped the centre later in negotiations around staffing and collaboration with academic departments. A third example is that the writing centre of one institution was, for the first time ever, mentioned as an example for international research collaboration within its academic council. We would, therefore, like to stress how valuable this kind of collaborative research is, not only in terms of

what we learned from the outsider perspectives on our institutions, but also as institutional work in itself.

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