

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION (STSM) – SCIENTIFIC REPORT

The STSM applicant submits this report for approval to the STSM coordinator

Action number: COST Action 15221 – We ReLate -- Advancing effective institutional models towards cohesive teaching, learning, research and writing development

STSM title: Writing Centre Exchange Project

STSM start and end date: 26/11/2018 to 01/12/2018

Grantee name: Dr. Íde O’Sullivan

PURPOSE OF THE STSM

One of the goals of the COST Action We ReLaTe is to start and foster a global conversation around new models for the centralised support of teaching, learning, research and writing, for both staff and students. Those conversations should be based on shared reported findings on what leads to effectiveness, success and productivity of such centralised support units. Therefore, the aim of this STSM was to structure this conversation between participating European institutions in order to uncover what leads to the effectiveness and success of such centralised supports.

This STSM provided an organised platform to structure the conversation between three European institutions about their centralised support models, in particular, for writing. The University of Gothenburg in Sweden, the University of Limerick in Ireland and the European University Viadrina in Germany all offer support for writing, teaching, learning and research within their writing centres. This visit was the second of three conversations between the three participating institutions. During this second visit, Íde O’Sullivan of the University of Limerick, and Ann-Marie Eriksson of University of Gothenburg visited Dr Katrin Girgensohn and Gina Henry of the Schreibzentrum at the European University Viadrina.

Through three mutual visits and a collaborative, exploratory research approach, we strive to find out what leads to effectiveness, success and productivity of the centres. Furthermore, we endeavour to find out which challenges the centres face and how they deal with them. The goals of the research collaboration are to get outside perspectives on the work of each centre, to learn from each other, and to develop more knowledge on the institutional work of central support units. Equally, it is intended to share the outcomes of this research with interested parties within the European higher education context.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSM

Background

Based on a model of institutional work of writing centre directors (Girgensohn 2017), this collaboration examines how writing centre teams in Sweden (Gothenburg University), Ireland (University of Limerick) and Germany (European University Viadrina) conduct institutional work in their writing centres. Institutional work is defined as “purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006, 215). According to Girgensohn’s research, institutional work in writing centres includes specific strategic action fields and uses collaborative learning as a tool to interact with stakeholders.

Research questions

The research collaboration asks how the local actors interact in their writing centres, with whom they interact and in which strategic action fields, related to teaching, learning, research and writing.

Methods

Actors of all three universities visit each other’s centres to learn more about them and gain insights about strategic action fields and the ways of interacting with stakeholders. One method of data gathering and analysing is a kind of “fishbowl” as a special form of focus group (cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishbowl_\(conversation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fishbowl_(conversation))). The overall approach is explorative, oriented towards grounded theory methodology in the way that the first findings will influence the data gathering of the next visits.

Visit to the Schreibzentrum, European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder), German

On Day 1 of the visit, the research objectives were reviewed, clarified and refined:

- How is the institutional work of three European institutions carried out and what similarities and differences emerge in terms of the Girgensohn’s (2017) model of Institutional work of writing centre directors?

- Girgensohn identified a stance of collaborative learning as a tool for institutional work in her research. Is this also true in the European Universität Viadrina, or do we identify other tools?
- The two general directions of institutional work are stabilization (of the centre) and legitimization (of the centre's work towards the outside). Those directions might help us to categorize what we observe.

Equally, the schedule for the visit was finalised and the questions for each of the interviews with stakeholders were agreed. See Appendix I for an overview of the schedule.

During the five-day visit, the participants from the University of Limerick and the European University met with key stakeholder in the institutions. Interview were conducted with the following key stakeholders

1. The Vice-President for Teaching
2. Co-worker from the centre for digital learning and teaching
3. Co-worker from the centre for intercultural learning
4. The Head of the academic language centre
5. Interviews (2) with peer tutors
6. Interviews (2) with writing fellows
7. Interviews (3) with academic staff of the writing centre
8. Interview with the academic staff in the International Office, responsible for the Viadrina Fast Track
9. Interview with Vice-President for Organizational Development
10. Interview with the Director of the Zentrum für Schlüsselkompetenzen und Forschendes Lernen (Centre for key competences and research oriented learning)
11. Interview with the director of the Schreibzentrum

The following was established during the interviews:

Questions for stakeholders:

1. What is the mission of the Schreibzentrum?
2. What is the Schreibzentrum doing well?
3. Why does it work well?
4. How does the Schreibzentrum work (with you)?
5. What challenges do you see?

Questions for co-workers:

1. What is the mission the Schreibzentrum?
2. What is functioning well?
3. Why are things functioning well?
4. How is it to work in the Schreibzentrum? Are there any challenges?

5. Where do you see the Schreibzentrum in ten years? And how did you get there when you look back in ten years? What needs to happen?

Apart from gathering this data, University of Limerick and University of Gothenburg presented their work in several different ways.

Each evening, Íde and Ann-Marie transcribed the interviews with the stakeholders and the co-workers in the unit. The interviews were initially analysed thematically to establish the main themes emerging in relation to the questions posed. These notes were then used to establish the primary themes for discussion during the fishbowl activity. The fishbowl was recorded and will be used as further input into the data from the interviews that will be closely analysed following the visit.

The last day was used for revisiting the research questions in light of the initial findings and in order to establish the strategic action field apparent in the working of the Schreibzentrum at Universität Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder).

DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN RESULTS OBTAINED

The main results will derive from all three visits and the research activities in between (data analysis using qualitative content analysis). They will be described in a scientific article that we will submit for publication after presenting and discussing the collected results at the CCCC international conference in Pitsburg, USA and EATAW conference 2019. As preliminary first findings, that were discussed during this fishbowl activity, we explored three categories that subsumed the impressions that were most interesting from our outsider perspective: 1) Peer tutoring and writing fellows 2) Relationships within the writing centre and with the rest of the university 3) Sustainability of the writing centre.

FUTURE COLLABORATIONS (if applicable)

This STSM consisted of the second out of three visits amongst the participating institutions. The first one was a visit to University of Gothenburg. The final visit is to take place at the University of Limerick in April 2019.

This STSM contributes to the COST Action by generating results that directly contribute to the action's goals, giving greater insight into the centralised supports for teaching, learning research and writing in three European institutions of higher education. Once all three visits have been

completed, dissemination will be in the form of a presentation at the EATAW 2019 conference. Another practical outcome will be a collaborative article that publishes the main findings of the collaborative research project. The article will be written in a “book sprint”. Other publications are planned as follows:

Paper 1: EATAW comparative paper (EATAW symposium in 2019, followed by submission to Journal of Academic Writing)

Paper 2: Methodological paper (Journal yet to be decided on in 2019)

Paper 3: Extended article of findings and case study (Journal: Studies in Higher Education in 2020)

Paper 4, 5 and 6: Articles covering specific parts/elements of the research project and their sub-results

Appendix I

Working schedule for visit to Schriebzentrum at Universität Viadrina (26 November to 1 December 2018)

Monday

10:00: Arrival in Berlin Schönefeld Airport, taking regional train to Berlin Ostbahnhof and change into regional train to Frankfurt (Oder)

14.00: Arrival in Frankfurt (Oder), Hotel Check-in, Snacks and Catching up at European University Viadrina

15.30: Review of Data from visit to the University of Gothenburg (Qualitative analysis done by Katrin Girgensohn and Gina Henry, based on first findings discussed in Gothenburg), revisiting schedule and fine planning

17.30 Introduction to German university system and the center's organizational context

19:00: Evening walk from Frankfurt to Slubice (Poland) and dinner

Tuesday

9:00 to 12:30: Meeting with the Frankfurt (Oder) ZSFL Unit

Ann-Marie, Lina and Emma and Íde present their writing centres (10 to 15 minutes) to staff at the Frankfurt (Oder) unit

Short thematic presentation (colleagues at the European University Viadrina, approx. 10 minutes each)

Identify obvious differences and commonalities between centres

14.00 Review research design (project group)

16.00 Observing regular class for academic writing and peer tutor education

18.00 Dinner

20.00 Writing down observations of the day

Wednesday:

9.00 Observations: Writing centre peer tutor team meeting

11.00 Meeting/Interviewing writing centre peer tutors and academic staff

12:30 Lunch (Mensa)

13:00 Observations of regular peer tutor sessions

14:00 Interviews with Vice president for teaching, staff from international office (efforts for foreign students), staff from language centre (German/English for academic purposes)

18:00 Dinner

20:00 Writing down observations of the day

Thursday:

Morning: Visitors analyse and discuss what they have learned from interviews, presentations, etc.

Elaborate research design: developing research questions for fishbowl activity

13:00 -14:30 Fishbowl with writing centre team (videotaped)

Afternoon

Meetings with key stakeholders (some onsite or follow up following the meeting)

Observing regular classes

Friday:

Morning

Discussion with all research collaborators about findings

Planning ahead for next site visit (Limerick) and publications

Afternoon



Preparation of papers for EATAW 2019 and CCCC 2019

Evening

Dinner in Berlin

Saturday

Writing session in Berlin and final planning