"We make the invisible visible": Investigating and evaluating the one-to-one consultation service at a UK higher education institution

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Abstract

One-to-one consultation services comprise key forms of student academic writing support at higher education institutions across the globe. Evaluations of these services are central to sustaining provision and for supporting effective pedagogy and service development (Bell, 2000; Stevenson and Kokkinn, 2007). In line with such evaluation goals and to supplement previous consultations research (e.g. Ma, 2019; Pfrenger *et al.,* 2017; Tiruchittampalam *et al.,* 2017), this paper presents a mixed-methods evaluation of a consultation service operating at a UK university. This study, in contrast to the range of previous consultation evaluation research, investigates perceptions and impact of consultations delivered by professional EAP practitioners across multiple student disciplines and degree levels. Evaluation data was gathered through student focus groups, consultation feedback and impact questionnaires, and through consultant interviews and observations. These multiple sources evidenced positive perceptions of the consultation service by students and consultants and pointed to positive impact on degree performance. Characteristics of effective consultations and consultants were identified, including partnership and engagement, focus on student need, consultant expertise and flexibility, consultation preparation, listening to students, being polite and respectful, and providing something concrete for students to take away. Recommendations are made to support the development of effective consultation services.

Keywords: consultations, academic writing, evaluation, EAP

1. Introduction

First developed in the 1930s, one-to-one consultation services, also known as one-to-one conferences or tutorials, originated in the context of US writing centre support for students (Murphy and Law, 1995). Operationally defined in this paper as formal, institutionally mandated one-to-one consultant-student teaching and learning interactions focusing on the development of written language or other key academic language and literacy or study skills, consultation services are found with increasing prevalence at higher education institutions across the globe (Hyland, 2018; Raforth, 2014). These services are delivered through writing centres (Harris, 2004, cited in Hoon, 2009; Tiruchittampalam *et al.,* 2017), university Academic Skills Centres (Berry et al, 2012), Learning Skills Units (Ma, 2019), within faculties and departments (Ma, 2019; O'Mahony, 2013) and through English Language Centres and other units (Author, 2019 unpublished survey).

The increasing prevalence of these one-to-one consultation services would indicate that such services are perceived as of value and successful. Nevertheless, while some published one-to-one service evaluations have provided substantially positive evaluations (e.g. Bell, 2000; Tiruchittampalam et al., 2017), other researchers have demonstrated more mixed evaluation results (e.g. Pfrenger et al., 2017; Pleasant et al., 2016). The presence of such varied results is nevertheless consistent with the complexity and challenges of educational evaluation, in particular the need for multiple evaluation measures (Brown, 1995), with varying contexts potentially influencing research results.

Recognising the difficulties involved in such educational evaluations and following a range of positive feedback on the consultation service at the UK university serving as the target institution in this research, with the goal of generating a wide-ranging consultation service

evaluation, this research adopted a mixed methods approach to service evaluation with the aim of establishing more concrete evaluative data, and providing insights into and identifying recommendations to support successful consultations and consultation services within the target institution and more broadly.

This mixed method approach involved triangulation of data using a range of methods and sources, namely student-completed feedback and impact questionnaires, student focus groups, interviews with consultants, and consultation observations. Tied to this overall service evaluation, the research also focused on identifying elements contributing to effective consultations, aiming to supplement previous research in this area (e.g. Thonus, 2002; Weigle and Nelson, 2004; Wingate, 2019) and support the identification of qualities of effective consultations.

2. Consultation Service Evaluations

2.1 Evaluation through analysis of consultation attendance and course outcomes

A number of studies in the context of consultations delivered by US writing centres have pointed to a positive relationship between consultation attendance and course outcomes. Research by both Sutton and Arnold (1974) and Pfrenger et al., (2017) examined the relationship between required consultation attendance and course outcomes for students on 'remedial' courses at US universities, in the former case a remedial English course, in the latter a remedial or developmental writing course. Sutton and Arnold found that remedial class students receiving writing centre consultations outperformed those receiving remedial classes but no consultations at a statistically significant level in terms of GPA scores after two years.

Similar to the Sutton and Arnold study, but examining pass rates rather than GPA, Pfrenger et al,. found that developmental course students who were required to attend consultations in early semesters and did attend, showed higher course pass rates at a statistically significant level compared to those who were required to attend but did not. Further, while consultation attendance did not predict first term pass rates for these students, requiring students to attend consultations did result in improved second semester outcomes. Notably, however, for a wider cohort of students attending a range of courses, although course performance improvements were observed tied to consultation attendance, these data did not attain statistical significance.

Examining assignment scores achieved by US university business college undergraduates, Bielinska-Kwapisz (2016) found students self-selecting to attend business writing consultations showed 9% higher assignment scores than non-attendees, although this data did not attain statistical significance. However, students scoring at the top of the grade distribution did benefit at statistically significant levels from consultations. The fact that attending consultations was optional for students in this study introduces the possibility that confounding factors such as greater motivation, engagement and enthusiasm influenced the observed outcomes.

Bielisnka-Kwapisz (2016) and Sutton and Arnold (1974) also examined the link between student retention and consultation attendance. Bielinska-Kwapisz found that students attending consultations were retained in higher numbers and attended more classes, while Sutton and Arnold found no effects of consultation attendance on student retention.

2.2 Evaluation through comparison of text quality between consultation attendees and non-attendees

Studies comparing texts produced by those receiving consultations and those who did not, have been conducted by Tritchuttapalam *et al.,* (2018) in the context of a United Arab Emirates Foundation programme, and Pleasant *et al.,* (2016) operating in a US writing centre with subjects being first year university students. Both studies used experimental groups of consultation attendees who were required to attend consultations and control groups of students who were not.

Examining the development of essay writing skills across a 16-week semester where consultation attendees received consultations focusing on essay drafts, by using an essay post-test, Tritchuttapalam et al. (2018) found that while both experimental and control groups improved essay scores, students attending consultations scored statistically significant higher overall essay writing scores, as well as scoring higher on two assignment traits, task fulfilment, and text organisation and coherence.

By contrast, on analysing drafts and final versions of researcher papers produced by a no-consultation control group and an experimental group of students who received feedback on their drafts through a writing centre consultation, surprisingly, Pleasant et al., (2017) found that the no-consultation control group showed statistically significant improvement on a range of measures compared to the consultation-attending group. Importantly, however, those required to attend consultations produced substantially higher rated texts both pre- and post-consultation. It was hypothesised in explanation that, as experimental group students knew a consultant would be discussing their draft with them, this group produced higher quality drafts and therefore achieved lower levels of improvement when moving from drafts to final versions.

2.3 Evaluation through analysis of student and tutor perceptions of consultations and consultation services

Published studies in which student perceptions and evaluations have been gathered through questionnaires have reported highly positive student perceptions of consultation services. Bell (2000) administered evaluation questionnaires to different cohorts of students attending consultations at a US university, finding all cohorts showed very high levels of satisfaction, with students agreeing their consultation would help them in their future as a student. Similarly, Berry et al., (2012), through a questionnaire, found highly positive attendee perceptions of consultations, respondents stating that consultations helped them perform the same and similar tasks better, that their learning needs had been identified and addressed and that the consultant had been easy to understand and talk to.

Interviews with consultation attendees have also demonstrated positive perceptions of consultations. In interviews conducted at an Australian university, O'Mahony (2013) found positive perceptions amongst doctoral students, doctoral supervisors and faculty. Also interviewing doctoral students attending consultations, Ma (2019) identified perceptions of several positive impacts of consultations on thesis writing, in particular the identification of areas where the thesis could be improved, English language improvements, and also psychological benefits such as reducing student anxiety. Pfrenger et al's (2017) US study, included interviews with ten undergraduate students who had been required to attend consultations. It was found that, having experienced the service, a number of students had become regular attendees, seeing consultations as of value, with a perception identified that consultations supported not just specific assignments but longer-term achievement across courses.

3. Qualities and Characteristics of Effective Consultations

Aiming to support effective consultations, consultation services have tended to promote the implementation of non-directive, non-interventionist, student-centred, collaborative and cooperative approaches to teaching and learning (Clark, 2001; Eleftheriou, 2011; Ewert, 2009; North, 1984; Thonus, 2002; Wilson et al., 2011) with tutors "acting as peers vis-à-vis their tutees - supported, interested readers – rather than authoritative instructors" (Weigle and Nelson, 2004, p.204).

As a consequence, to support effective consultations, tutors are often encouraged to help students find their own solutions to the problems they face (Williams, 2005), with promotion of student autonomy as a consultation goal (Weissberg, 2006). Non-directive strategies include asking tutees questions to encourage reflection and to identify concerns, encouraging self-correction, summarising and paraphrasing student words, and promoting independent writing to develop confidence (Elefteriou, 2011; Nystrand, 1997; Weissberg, 2006)

Non-interventionist approaches however, as Park, (2014) points out, have been challenged on grounds including ensuring the effectiveness of consultations and meeting student needs. Moreover, as both Wingate (2019) and Williams (2005) argue, students come to consultations expecting to receive advice, failure to do this likely resulting in an unsuccessful consultation. For NNS students, it has been argued that peer-to-peer roles may be culturally inappropriate (Harris and Silva, 1993), while Weigle and Nelson (2004) report ethnographic research showing tutors adopting multiple roles from authoritative to less authoritative, and point out that there is in fact no evidenced link between tutors adopting peer-to-peer roles and consultation outcomes.

Due to its identity as an institutional service, the reality is that tutors often dominate in consultation interaction (Thonus, 1999b, 2002, Williams, 2005; Wingate, 2019), this taking the form of greater direction and longer speaking turns from tutors and lower levels of negotiation (Thonus, 2004). Haneda (2004), arguing in the context of first language classrooms, believes this means the potential of writing consultations is not realised and points to an emphasis on mechanical aspects of writing such as grammar, as detrimental to consultation success.

Thonus (2002) analysed consultations dialogue in peer-to-peer consultations, conducting follow up interviews with tutors and tutees, aimed at identifying aspects of consultation interaction and participant behaviours linked to tutorial success. This led to the identification of what Thonus describes as ten necessary but not sufficient features for success, namely: the tutor being a student actively engaged in disciplinary academic writing; the tutor not behaving as an instructor; authority and expertise not being openly negotiated; early agreement about diagnoses; conversation-like interaction; high rates of interactional features; solidarity interactions including simultaneous laughter and overlapping speech; frequent mitigation of tutor directives; negotiation of acceptance and rejection of tutor evaluations; symmetrical interpretations of discourse phases and directive forcefulness which indicate understanding of the other's intent.

A range of other aspects of successful consultations have been proposed including the need to focus on emotional aspects of consultation discourse through building appropriate affective relationships and expressing affiliation and empathy (Shvidko, 2018), enabling students to express agency (Eodice, 1998; Newkirk, 1995), being task-focused and allowing students to explore issues and ask for clarification (Martin and Mottet, 2011), politeness (Thonus, 1999a),

consultants having academic writing expertise and capacity to deal with the range of disciplines, and the need for consultants to act as critical readers (Ma, 2019).

Overall, the various evaluative approaches to consultation evaluation reported in the literature provide mixed results, though with evidence identified of higher assignment scores, stronger course achievement and course retention, text improvement as a consequence of consultation attendance, and positive perceptions of consultation services.

The research in this paper aimed to evaluate a consultation service staffed not by student peers, or tutors from the consultees' disciplines, but by professional, qualified and experienced EAP tutors. These tutors deliver consultations to students from across the disciplines, as opposed to the narrower range of contexts often present in other studies (e.g. the studies reported above by Bielisnka-Kwapisz, Sutton and Arnold, Pfrenger et al.,). This study also aimed to identify the qualities of effective consultations in this context. Key research questions addressed in this study were:

(1) How were consultations and the consultation service perceived by students attending the service and consultants delivering the service?

(2) How did consultations impact on consultee degree performance?

(3) What did consultation attendees and consultants consider to be key qualities and characteristics of effective consultations?

(4) How did consultants and consultees view the use of non-discipline-based EAP tutors as opposed to disciplinary tutors for consultation delivery?

4. Research context

The current research was carried out at a UK Russell Group university. While one-to-one consultations had been offered for many years, the formal, organised consultation service,

currently located in a Centre for Academic Development, has existed for more than 10 years, for much of which being situated in an English Language Centre, being funded through in-sessional support budgets.

The service has developed to deliver approximately 1000 consultations each academic year, historically largely face-to-face but with online provision to support distance students and students with disabilities unable to attend in person. The service is, in the main, an academic writing consultation service, though other issues are dealt with dependent on consultee requirements. By contrast with US writing centres, where graduates and peers often act as consultants, consultations are delivered by highly qualified EAP tutors, holding relevant Masters in EFL or Applied Linguistics, in some cases with DELTA qualifications, and with substantial academic literacy teaching experience on EAP and academic writing programmes. Consultations last for approximately 45 minutes with tutors allocated preparation time to examine student texts.

Consultants are made aware through a consultation handbook, development sessions and materials, that consultation objectives are educational, involving discussion of student-provided texts, but also focusing on longer-term learning outcomes. Thus, student texts serve as vehicles for the situated, focused teaching of broader academic writing principles, with the intention these principles are applied in future assignments.

Through the handbook and training materials, consultants are advised to work collaboratively and in partnership with students, recognising student disciplinary expertise and supporting them in communicating the meanings they wish to convey. Importantly, consultants are advised

that the service is not an editing or proofreading service[1]. The handbook points consultants to focusing on big picture issues such as argument and logic, assignment structure, task fulfilment, criticality, citation and effective use of sources, and to avoid over-focus on minor grammatical issues.

5. Methods

The methods adopted in the current study aimed to elicit perceptions of both consultation staff and student consultees to support evaluation of the consultation service in line with the stated research questions. Specific areas focused on included the impact of consultations and the non-disciplinary nature of the consultants, with a range of topics arising organically through the methods adopted. Experimental procedures were judged impractical and unworkable for evaluating such a multi-discipline, multi-level consultation service. Due to the need to elicit perceptions of consultants and consultees, a mixed methods approach (fig.1) was implemented, gathering qualitative and quantitative data for service evaluation based on student focus groups, individual interviews with consultants, observation of consultations, as well as using data from questionnaires (Stevenson and Kokhinn, 2010).

Two focus groups were established in order to gather in-depth information on students' perceptions of their consultations and the consultation service, with consultation attendees invited to participate via email lists. Focus groups, through their social element, were considered likely to encourage student attendance, comment and contribution, and would provide opportunities to identify areas of agreement (Bryman, 2008). These interviews were semi-structured (appendix A). Ten students attended two focus groups which were audio-recorded.

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[1] A separate proofreading service is provided to researchers at the university.

Additionally, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (appendix B) were conducted and audio-recorded with five consultants to similarly establish their perceptions of consultations and the consultation service. Those interviewed were provided with transcripts post-interview and asked to verify content, providing further comment as needed, with findings from these interviews circulated post-interview to further determine areas of agreement and consensus. A total of five consultations, given by two senior consultants, were observed to deepen understanding of the nature of the consultations. Field notes were made as opposed to digital records as there was no intention to perform discourse or transcript analysis, to encourage participant consent and to avoid potential effects of recording on consultation interaction (Nordstrom, 2015).

Data from focus groups, interviews and observations was coded using the approach of Harding (2013) in which, following initial reading of transcripts and notes, and labelling with initial descriptive codes, codes were revised and overarching themes identified. NVivo12 was used as coding platform. Inter-coder reliability was implemented through an independent evaluator engaged in post-coding evaluation and discursive feedback (King and Horrocks, 2010). Supporting intra-coder reliability, the researcher re-read transcripts and reviewed coding six months after completion of initial coding.

In addition to the focus groups and consultant interviews, a short questionnaire (appendix C), developed through several iterations, as a result of which the survey was significantly shortened, was implemented. This comprised both Likert items and open questions designed to enable rich responses less constrained by consultation service priorities, and was provided in paper form post-consultation or emailed to students post-consultation to obtain feedback on

consultation experiences. 216 responses were gathered. This feedback data was supplemented by an online impact survey (appendix D), administered at different times in the academic year, producing 253 responses, which asked students whether they believed their consultations had influenced their programme performance, and requested evidence for any stated improvement.

6. Results

6.1 Demographic data

Students attended the service from all university disciplines, a significant proportion (18%) from the university Business School, from all university levels (approximately 35% PGT, 55% UG, 10% PGR), attendees comprising home (23%) and international students (77%). Approximately 10% of consultations were delivered to students registered with the university disability service. Notably, 79% of consultation attendees were female, compared to 54% of the university population in the study period.

6.2 Motivations for consultation attendance: Writing problems and consultation focus

Analysis of pre-consultation information forms indicated that 98% of students wished for support with academic writing assignments, these including essays, case analyses, Master's dissertations and Doctoral theses. Similar to the findings of Berry et al., (2012), many students, particularly international students, mentioned grammar issues as an area of concern, while other students simply said they wished to have their work checked without specifying elements they wished to be targeted. By contrast with Berry et al., there were also frequent requests for explanation of departmental feedback relating to issues of criticality and argument.

Focus group students and consultants mentioned a range of difficulties in student writing, including citation and referencing, dealing with reading lists, achieving logical connection in

their writing, notetaking, cohesion and coherence, paragraphing, structure and organisation of writing, answering the specific question and doing so with sufficient directness, writing for the wrong audience, language formality, writing persuasively, quality of introductions and conclusions, and grammar. Being too close to or becoming 'lost' in essays or other extensive texts was mentioned as a further problem.

Focus group data indicated that international students often felt they needed help because of challenges arising from the unfamiliar nature of academic writing in the UK context, and in terms of language. For example, B2[2] stated *I'm an international student…the way the British people write is kind of different…to my system*, with C2 stating *…. I'm not very confident because English is not my first language*.

Consultants, by contrast, identified positive advantages that international students possessed, R4 drawing attention to international students' greater understanding of grammatical ideas and R1 stating:

> *…when it comes…to structure, organisation, keeping an argument, linking to that argument…quite often, the home students might be worse than an international student who's done a pre-sessional* (R1)

Nevertheless, consultants acknowledged the service was somewhere that students of different nationalities and cultures could attend to learn about expectations and realisations required within a different higher education culture.

6.3 Perceptions of service quality

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[2] Focus group participants are designated by letter (A-E) and focus group (1 or 2). Consultants interviewed are designated R1 to R5.

Consistent with the positive perceptions of consultations services reported in previous research (Bell, 2000; Berry et al., 2012; O'Mahony et al., 2013), data gathered in this study pointed to highly positive perceptions of the consultations service. Questionnaire data showed 99% of 216 respondents stating they would recommend the service, while 95% of respondents said their consultation was either extremely helpful or very helpful, for a range of reasons including the sympathetic and knowledgeable nature of consultants. Free comments were almost without exception, highly positive: *a wonderful tool* (S3619); *invaluable* (S2918); *really appreciated* (S2418); *a brilliant service* (S2430).

Focus group participants expressed enthusiasm, making comments such as *I found it very helpful* (D1), *really helpful* (A2) and *very good* (B1) while consultants were also effusive about the service. R1 stated *I think it's great…there should be more of it,* R3 said *I think it's a great service,* with R5 stating that the service *is very valuable to the students.*

A key reason accounting for the positive student perception of the service, and also motivating attendance was its provision of an opportunity for students to have personalised individual engagement, something contrasted with a perceived lack of interaction on larger courses:

> *…it's very personalised to them…I think that's what's important to them, it's not just general here's how you write an introduction … it's actually here's how YOU could write YOUR introduction* (R3)

> *… the opportunities for students to have…personal one-to-one engagement with a human being rather than an online platform… seems to be very important to students…they value that enormously.* (R2)

The expertise and overall teaching qualities of consultants were also mentioned by focus group attendees and agreed by consultants as a reason for such positive student perceptions and the service's popularity:

> *…you have chosen really good consultants.* (B1)

> *what they like about us is ... the fact that sometimes...we make visible the invisible ...we make visible...how a piece of writing can flow better* (R4)

6.4 Impact of the consultations on student performance

Of the 253 impact survey respondents. 91% perceived their mark had improved on account of their consultations. Of these, 31% stated their assignments had achieved substantially higher marks, while 47% reported somewhat higher marks. Respondents were asked to provide evidence of their improvement. Representative responses received included the following:

> *without consultation 2.1 grades, with consultations firsts (ImQ17)*

> *Before consultations ... 60-67...after consultations I graduated with a distinction...in my masters. (ImQ77)*

> *My average mark went up 10 points between term 1 and term 2 (ImQ.12)*

A wide range of comments from focus groups supported impactful consequences of consultations, with some participants placing particular emphasis on the longer-term effects of their consultation:

> *It was very helpful, it's really improved my mark...*(D1)

> *... the advice or guidance ... it wasn't always specific to that particular assignment it was more generic helpful across the board.* (C1)

> *It's very useful ... not just for one essay but for future essays as well.* (B2)

Consultants also evidenced the impact and throughput of their consultations.

> *...it's usually my experience that students get higher marks after they've [had a] consultation...*(R2)

> *...the feedback is...that students say you know this was so helpful...this helped me to see the kinds of things I can do differently* (R5)

6.5 Characteristics of effective consultations

Basing consultations in student needs

Effective consultations according to focus group students needed to be based on student needs:

> *[the effective consultation involves]…tackling the specific problem that the student is facing (*D2*)*

> *I like them to critique my work point out exactly where I'm wrong so I can go and correct it. (B2)*

Consultants mentioned the importance of *tailoring it* [the consultation] *to student needs* (R5), and aiming *to help them in…getting what they need* (R3), but also considered it important to identify and engage with the students' perceptions of needs:

> *I think it's important to… find out what their need or their perceived needs are, what they're hoping to get out of the consultation* (R5)

> y*ou have to address what they feel the issues are first* (R1)

As a consequence, aside from pre-consultation analysis of sent texts and tasks, consultants aimed to establish perceived needs early in the consultation, starting consultations with questions such as *How can we help you today?* (Obs5) and *Is there any section you want to focus on?* (Obs3), with session content negotiated between the participants.

Consultant preparation

Preparation by consultants through examining pre-sent texts was clearly important to focus group participants, with disappointment expressed where students felt consultants had not done this preparation:

> *There was one occasion where I had sent something in advance and I felt that there perhaps hadn't been quite enough…preparation done* (C1)

All consultants mentioned examining student texts prior to the consultations, but also said this was sometimes not possible as texts were not submitted the one week requested prior to the consultation[3]. In some cases, consultants saw texts for the first time when the student walked

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[3] The quoted student, C1 acknowledged late submission of her essay text.

into the consultation. In all five observed consultations, however, consultants had had time to examine student texts prior to the sessions.

The importance of listening to students

Tied to establishing needs, but also supporting effective teaching in other ways, all consultants felt listening to the students comprised a key element of an effective consultation,

>*…that's the main thing I think listening to them…* (R3)

>*I think you have to be able to listen.* (R5)

Student appreciation of feeling listened to is reflected in some of the quotations given below in relation to politeness and respect.

Partnership and engagement

Reflecting the ideas of collaborative and cooperative teaching and learning in consultations, (Clark, 2001; Eleftheriou, 2011; Ewert, 2009; North, 1984; Thonus, 2002; Wilson *et al.,* 2011) all consultants at the target institution agreed effective consultations require partnership between consultant and student. R1 emphasised the effective consultation involving student and consultant engaging in a two-way process:

>*you might be giving them advice…then they will be saying "oh that's why I wrote this"…"that's why I put it in this place" and you can work together and to me that makes a good consultation…it is not the consultant sitting there dictating you should do this…* (R1)

However, the importance of students being engaged in their subject was also noted:

>*The worst consultations are where the student…simply has not engaged with the academic work...they have to have done* [the preparation work] (R3)

Politeness and respect for students and their work

Reflecting the research of Thonus (1999), several focus group participants commented on the respectful and polite approach of their consultants which they were highly positive about:

> *she was really polite…I really… felt…understood…not judged and it was really…helpful* (B1)

According to focus group participants, consultants communicated this sense of respect through in particular, understanding their attachment to their work:

> *…[I] like the politeness and respect for our work even if a sentence was totally wrong…It was…really polite, it was like "It's not your fault, it's normal …* (B1)

> *I agree because when you're working on an essay you know you have attachment to the essay…*(D1)

Reflecting these comments, when emphasising the need for consultants to have patience consultant R1 said:

> *…people can get very possessive of their work, particularly the higher-level students.* (R1)

The value of encouragement

Reflecting the affective element of consultations as pointed out by Shvidko (2018), several focus group participants signalled tutor encouragement as important to them:

> *I really like… how he…encourage me because I'm not very confident because English is not my first language…*(C2)

> *I think maybe when the tutor told me…I think you are off to go, it's just some fine tuning …it's really comforting to me.* (E2)

Also mentioning encouragement, but drawing attention to the potentially destructive, demoralising comments that could be but weren't made, focus group participant B2 said:

> *…What I'm trying to say is … they're not like 'this is horrible, …you've failed in this' they're not like that…they don't beat about the bush either like straight to the point, but at the same time they are encouraging and you need that.* (B2)

While no consultants explicitly mentioned being encouraging to the students, encouragement in one form of another occurred in all observed consultations, with tutors for example commenting reassuringly *I'm sure it'll be fine* and *It just needs a few tweaks* (Obs5) and *It's well-written* (Obs4).

Serving to avoid discouragement, in consultant observations, critical comments were sometimes phrased using softeners, through phrasings such as *I'm not sure about..,*(Obs1), *I was just concerned about…*(Obs3)*, I was wondering about…*(Obs3). However, both observed consultants also used direct statements such as *you need to clarify that* (Obs1) and even more directly *You simply haven't answered the question* (Obs4). While wishing to be encouraging, and generally being encouraging overall, as Wingate (2019) has argued, students do anticipate receiving advice from consultants.

Giving students something to take away

The provision of a written record following the consultation was of significant value to focus group students. To general agreement, focus group participant D1 stated:

> *…the other important point is she send me back the things we go through…I think it's really helpful.* (D1)

Recognising the importance of this takeaway element consultant R4 said:

> *a good consultation would be where the student is able to…walk away with something they can really use.* (R4)

In all observed consultations, consultants provided students with a written record of key points discussed, with original texts returned to students with corrections, annotations and broader comments.

Questioning and challenging students

All consultants interviewed agreed questioning and challenging students comprised an element of effective consultations. In addition to serving to identify student perceived needs, and points of focus at the consultation outset, questions served pedagogical functions linked to engaging and empowering students, encouraging them to find their own solutions to problems:

> *if there's something not clear in the text you're having to ask questions that a reader would ask…that can help them clarify in their own minds what explanation they wanted to give or what they wanted to say…* (R5)

Emphasising this point, in the observed consultations, tutors asked questions such as *How will you fix this?* (Obs4) and *What do you think the problem is?* (Obs.5)

Question forms were also used as a guise for making suggestions and recommendations as seen in the observed consultations:

> *Have you done enough to convince your reader that you've read enough through the literature?* (Obs1)

> *How much of this is really relevant to answering the question?* (Obs3)

These question functions align with those summarised by Elefteriou (2011).

In terms of challenging students, R2 stated:

> *I will be challenging them and questioning them…pushing them to explore more than they currently have. Very frequently it's about challenging them on why does that matter, why is that important?* (R2)

6.6 Qualities and characteristics of effective consultants

There was consensus amongst consultants that effective consultants needed calmness, flexibility, patience, the ability to empathise with students, to demonstrate professionalism, and show politeness and respect. Unsurprisingly, both consultants and focus group students emphasised that consultants need to be knowledgeable, with consultants mentioning the importance of EAP and academic writing knowledge as well as text analysis skills. Consultants also referred to the importance of possessing an MA or other academic degree and experience of essay and dissertation writing, alongside having substantial EAP and academic writing teaching experience.

For focus group participant B2, consultants should be *calm, patient, direct, professional at the same time, very open* while B1 pointed to consultants needing to be good researchers and good writers. E1 felt consultants must have skills for giving good feedback and guidance.

6.7 Consultant and student roles

The role of consultants was not seen as that of a traditional teacher, something stated explicitly by both a consultant and focus group participant,

> *it is not for me the normal teacher-student situation* (R1)

> *It's not like a teacher–student relationship* (B2)

with the range of relevant comments pointing to consultants working in partnership with students (see above quotations on partnership and engagement) and adopting a guiding or mentoring role:

> *she pointed out there's a problem…then we kind of worked together to solved it…*
> (E1*)*
> *[the tutor] had a very human side to her and was able to kind of just have a discussion about the topic…which… helped me come up with my own ideas.* (B1)

Nevertheless, consultant R1 also stated, in line with the comments of Wingate (2019):

> *…irregardless of how you try to frame that consultation you are still sitting there as an authority figure and if you weren't, they wouldn't come.* (R1)

Clearly, through consultants having, for example, postgraduate qualifications and many years' academic writing teaching experience, and being professional institutional representatives, these are not the peer-to-peer relationship reported in other consultation services (e.g. Wingate, 2019). Nevertheless, there is a sense of equality in the target consultations with consultations observations, supported by interview data, for example, showing the consultation agenda is jointly negotiated, with consultees having the opportunity to express preferred areas of focus and areas of concern in their writing.

Nevertheless, following such initial agenda negotiation, within a guidance framework, the consultants generally led the consultations, for example making evaluative statements about text under discussion, asking questions addressing the rationale for student choices, and encouraging students to reflect on and identify solutions to identified problems. Students asked questions, requested clarification, expressed interpretations of consultant comments, stated agreement with or sometimes challenged advice (often on the basis of disciplinary and local knowledge or additional task-related information), and sometimes directed the consultation through their questions or expressed preferences.

In the context of this guiding relationship, consultants recognise and sometimes explicitly emphasised student's choice or agency (Eodice, 1998; Newkirk, 1995) in accepting or rejecting their advice; as observed in a consultation (Obs.1), C1 noted her tutor had told her in regard to advice offered *You can take it or leave it*.

Within that guiding and equal relationship, however, there are clearly areas of expertise with, in general, the consultee taking the role of expert in relation to task content, providing disciplinary and task insights, with the consultant acting as academic writing, literacy and language expert. The presence of these different areas of expertise emphasises the importance of mutual recognition of expertise and hence partnership, alongside a sense of respect and equality within effective consultations. Illustrating this, R5 when faced with unfamiliar disciplinary topics would say *that's not my area…that's a good question I can't help you with that,* expressing limitations to expertise and also illustrating the acceptability of admitting not knowing.

Notably, in observed consultations, consultants sometimes positioned themselves as part of an academic writing community, communicating disciplinary authority, through making

statements such as *we wouldn't use that word…* (Obs1). They also explicitly identified their institutional identity and authority through statements such as *How can we help you?* (Obs5), with the use of *we* also emphasising collaboration and partnership: *I think it's the structure we need to look at.* (Obs2).

Whatever the level of equality, within the context of friendly consultations, as already reported, guidance was sometimes given through imperative language forms such as *Get your key sources in there* (Obs2) and *No! Set the topic first*! (Obs 4). Yet, within this friendly, mutually respectful context, students could also be assertive, one saying laughingly in response to a consultant comment *No, no, no!* (Obs1). Through the relationship building, the professional but informal atmosphere, the communication of respect, with areas of specialism and expertise accepted, these directive statements become non-threatening and part of the natural flow of cooperative and collaborative discourse.

6.8 Disciplinary or non-disciplinary consultants?

The consultation service policy is for consultants to deal with students from all disciplines, with students only being referred to a consultant with a particular disciplinary background in exceptional circumstances.

Both focus group participants and consultants expressed agreement it was beneficial to have someone from outside their discipline commenting on their writing. Participant D1 stated that the consultant role was to help with essay writing while the lecturer's dealt with issues of content and theory. There was agreement in focus group B that having non-disciplinary consultants means that students are required to more clearly articulate their thinking and

rationales about what they have done and why. Recognising the value of the consultants' academic writing specialism, focus group participant D2 stated:

> *the…lecturers...only focus on what the theory you use is good or not but they never tell you…what's a introduction or conclusion…after this I know…how to make a good introduction conclusion and use it in the future.*

Notably, participant B2 stated that comment*s* from both outside and from within the discipline were of value and, reflecting the mixed views expressed by doctoral students in O'Mahony et al's (2013) study, a number of focus group participants felt subject expertise was useful with participant D2 stating:

> *I think it* [disciplinary knowledge] *would be immensely helpful because until you know exactly the nature of the problem…the context of the department or the discipline you can only operate at the general level…*(D2)

Consultants were highly positive about the value of their coming from outside of students' disciplines. For example, tutor R2 stated:

> *I think it's a strength that we don't have disciplinary knowledge…it can make the consultation…*(R2)

seemingly tying this strength to resulting enhanced focus on academic writing issues and away from disciplinary issues, while R5 said:

> *…if you don't know a lot about the discipline that can be good for the student.* (R5)

arguing that such a lack of disciplinary knowledge required the student to more clearly articulate their own thinking, something which might not be needed to the same degree for a disciplinary tutor.

R1 added a point echoed by a number of consultants, noting that being from outside the discipline meant that the consultant was seen as neutral:

> *You're not a threat. You're not their supervisor…it also makes them…comfortable or to feel good when they're explaining things to you, they're almost like doing some teaching themselves…they don't feel threatened and it makes for a nice atmosphere* (R1)

Similarly, in the view of R2, this lack of connection to the department meant the students felt safe to talk about their writing, in a way they would not feel able to do in their department.

7. Other issues

Consultations that went wrong

All consultants reported on occasion a consultation had gone wrong. These events were attributed to students not bringing anything to the session, reacting unexpectedly badly to critical comments or the consultant perhaps being too critical of a student's work, students refusing to accept any advice, and student attendance for consultations immediately before assignment hand-in dates.

Improving the consultation service

Focus group students referred to problems with booking consultations, as the service was in high demand, and wished for more appointments to be available. Consultant comments included the need for more technical support for online consultations as well as further development opportunities, mentioning in particular more systematic observations of and exchanging of experiences with other consultants.

8. Conclusions

Focusing on evaluation of a wide-ranging consultation service covering the range of disciplines and staffed by professional EAP and academic writing tutors, this study collected evidence through student focus groups, feedback questionnaires, an impact survey, interviews with consultants, as well as from consultation observations, with the aim of informing both institutional and broader consultation practice.

The data gathered evidences a positive evaluation of the target service with both consultants and students providing highly supportive feedback on the service. This positive evaluation is consistent with other interview and questionnaire-based research in this area (Bell, 2000; Ma, 2019; O'Mahony et al., 2013; Pfrenger et al., 2017). The impact data gathered supports long-term effects of consultations on student learning and this aligns with the findings of Bielinska-Kwapisz (2016), Sutton and Arnold (1974) and Pfrenger et al., (2017).

Data gathered identified a range of characteristics of effective consultations that substantially contrast with the ten features identified by Thonus (2002) (see literature review). These differences relate in part to the practical, programme development perspective of the current research, but are also attributable to tutors in the current research being experienced, qualified EAP and academic writing tutors, rather than peers of consultees as in Thonus' research.

The elements of effective consultations identified in this paper suggest a range of recommendations to support effective consultations and consultation service development. In particular, it would seem useful that through professional consultant training programmes, there is emphasis on the effective consultation as requiring a partnership between professional consultant and consultee, in which professional academic writing consultants eschew the traditional teacher or instructor role, taking on the role of a professional academic writing guide and expert, supporting situated student learning development cooperatively and collaboratively, promoting student reflection and problem solving, but where necessary being directive, engaging in teaching and the provision of advice, at times adopting 'a teacherly role' (Thonus, 2001:61).

Such an approach requires politeness, respect for students and their work and collaborative identification of student needs, with professional consultant training programmes needing to discuss modes of student guidance including questioning, challenging, supporting and empowering students in developing their own solutions, for example through emphasising their choice over proffered advice, but also referring to the need for directive guidance and advice as required in the particular consultation. Emphasis should also be placed on consultation preparation including text analysis, consultants being effective listeners, the need for giving students something written to take away from the consultation, the need for consultant awareness of disciplinary variability and the importance of consultant patience, flexibility and adaptability, especially considering the individual nature of each consultation (Thonus, 2001).

This research reports significant consensus among students and consultants regarding the significant value of having knowledgeable, experienced academic writing consultants with relevant academic qualifications, from outside the student discipline, resulting in consultations being seen as providing a safe, non-threatening environment for students and providing perspectives on student writing informed by academic writing principles, contrasting with the potentially more content-based approaches of tutors with disciplinary subject expertise. That being said, the comments of focus group participants showed that a number saw value in tutors having subject-based expertise.

Importantly, this research does not provide comparative data about the performance of disciplinary peer tutors in relation to academic writing professionals. It is worth noting that in Wingate's (2019) research on academic writing focused consultations delivered by peers with disciplinary knowledge, as with the current research, positive feedback was reported for many, though not all consultations.

Given the absence of comparative data and the findings presented in this study, it seems reasonable to suggest that centres delivering consultation services need to consider the type or types of consultant used in the light of consultation service goals, with particular reference to the perceived importance of academic writing, teaching expertise and subject-based knowledge. Notably the non-discipline based consultants interviewed in this study, had often acquired significant knowledge of disciplinary requirements and indeed subject knowledge, through their experience in teaching academic writing in the disciplines and through their varied consultations.

Notably, a substantial majority of consultation attendees were female (79%), a figure substantially contrasting with the gender balance at the target institution. Whether this is more broadly the case across institutions offering consultation services would provide a useful focus for further investigation. Certainly, at the site of the current study, efforts to investigate this would be beneficial.

There are some limitations in this research. Notably, as is typical with online surveys (Bryman, 2008) the raw response rate for the consultation evaluation questionnaire achieved an estimated 20% response rate, with a lower 11% raw response rate estimated for the impact survey, this latter rate perhaps in part because many students including doctoral students, may have had insufficient time post-consultation to acquire formal evidence supporting a response, but also, potentially, due to students being unwilling to respond negatively to the survey. Thus, real response rates could not be calculated. It cannot be claimed therefore that survey responses represent the views of all consultees. However, the survey data, at the minimum, indicates substantial numbers of students reporting significant benefits from their consultations.

Interviews and focus groups report 'perceptions' of the consultation service. Therefore, although both consultants and consultees were highly positive about the service, it might be argued that those with positive perceptions were more likely to attend a focus group, and also that consultants might be highly disposed towards expressing positive attitudes to the consultations. Nevertheless, professional consultants would surely be inclined to present judgments with integrity, while those students unhappy with the service might also be judged more likely than satisfied students to feedback with negative evaluations. Finally, with regard to the impact survey, while respondents attributed performance improvement to the consultation service, other factors may also have contributed.

Despite such possible limitations, the positive nature of the data and its triangulation from the range of sources support a positive evaluation of the service. Even if avoiding generalisation and applied simply to the actual respondents and focus group attendees, the data gathered is still seen as representing highly positive and significant evaluation and impact.

The continuing success of the consultation service at the target institution, and the range of research into consultation services, including the consistently reported positive feedback for such services, points to the substantial value for institutions in providing one-to-one consultation services. The findings in this article, derived from a context where consultations are delivered by professional academic writing consultants rather than peer tutors, add to the positive evaluations of consultation services reported in the literature and point to ways in which the effectiveness of consultations and consultation services can be further supported.

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Appendix A: Focus group semi-structured interview core questions:

(1)   How did you feel about your consultation? What did you like about your consultation?
(2)   What was good about your consultation?
(3)   What would you say makes a good consultation?
(4)   What did you think about your consultant? What qualities did he/she show? What did you like about them?
(5)   So, what do you think makes a good consultant?
(6)   What impact did your consultation have on your writing?
(7)   How far has what you learned had an impact on your other writing?
(8)   Did your consultant make any mistakes in your consultation e.g. was there conflict with your department/disciplinary advice?
(9)   What did you not like about your consultation, if anything?
(10) Did anything go wrong?
(11) How do you think the service can be developed and improved?

Appendix B: Consultant semi-structured interview core questions

(1)   What is your experience of giving consultations?
(2)   The consultation service receives very positive feedback. Why do you think that is?
(3)   What do you think makes a good consultation?

(4)   Do you have any particular strategies and approaches you adopt for your consultations?

(5)   How do you approach giving a consultation? What preparation would you normally do?

(6)   What do you think makes a good consultant?

(7)   Have you ever had a consultation which didn't work well? What happened?

(8)   What training have you had as a consultant? What qualifications would you think are needed?

(9)   Do you think a consultant needs knowledge of the students' discipline?

(10)   If you had to advise a consultant on how to do consultations, what three things would you say to them?

(11)   How do you think the service can be developed and improved?

Appendix C: Feedback questionnaire items

(1)   How helpful did you find your in-sessional consultation(s)? *(extremely helpful/very helpful/somewhat helpful/not helpful)*

(2)   What did you find most helpful?

(3)   If not helpful, why was this?

(4)   Would you recommend the service to other students? (Yes/No)

(5)   How could the service be improved?

(6)   How did you hear about the consultation service?

(7)   Additional comments

Appendix D: Impact survey questions

(1)   In your judgment, did your consultation help you improve your mark/marks or performance on your academic assignments? (Yes/No)

(2)   If yes is the answer to question 1 to what extent did your consultation(s) influence your mark/performance? (substantially/somewhat/to a small extent)

(3)   Which of the following statements is true for you?

- My one-to-one consultation(s) helped me achieve significantly higher grades and marks/performance on my course
- My one-to-one consultation(s) helped me achieve somewhat higher grades and marks/performance on my course
- My one-to-one consultation(s) was/were helpful but did not affect my grades and marks/performance on my course
- My one-to-one consultation(s) was/were not helpful and did not influence my grades and marks on my course

(4)   If you feel that your consultation(s) helped you achieve higher marks/supported improved performance on your degree or other programme, can you provide any evidence?

(5)   Please add any further comments you have about the consultation service.