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Exchanging notes: regional writing tutors and instructors share ideas

DOHA, Qatar — More than 50 educators from across the region convened in Doha Oct. 26–27 for the Middle East-North Africa Writing Centers Symposium to collaborate on how to develop students' writing and language skills.

With the focus on ways educators can help each other by sharing ways to enhance students' communications skills, participants discussed a range of topics from setting up a writing center, to working with students as peer tutors, to conducting research.

Ways to do this were discussed in a series of interactive workshops led by Dr. Michele Eodice, director of the writing center at the University of Oklahoma in the US and president-elect of the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA). Eodice, who has many years' experience in writing centers in large US universities, said writing centers must be a place for "informal education" rather than an extracurricular or co-curricular academic service.

The delegates were brought together by the Qatar Writing Centers Network, an informal group based in Qatar Foundation's Education City. The network comprises directors of the centers in Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Texas A&M University at Qatar (TAMUQ), Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar (WCMC-Q) and the College of the North Atlantic-Qatar. All of these institutions helped sponsor the symposium.

Spearheading the event was Cecelia Hawkins, director of TAMUQ's Technical Communications Center. "The idea was to do the networking, get support and find out what other people in writing centers are doing," Hawkins said.

Several of the institutions represented at the event, including the University of Bahrain and the universities in Education City, already have writing centers. Others, such as Qatar University, have Web-based writing communities.

However, many delegates learned best practices for setting up such centers in their institutions, notably a group from the Higher Colleges of Technology in Oman. Laila Al Hijri, from Ibra in Oman, said the sessions gave important guidance. "Now I know exactly how a writing center is going to help the students," she said. "Because I

have talked with so many people I know the kind of benefits it will bring to the students, the teachers and the administration.”

Delegates noted that introducing writing centers into high schools—before students reach the level of higher education—would be beneficial; they also discussed the applicability of the writing center model across languages.

Another important outcome from the symposium was participants’ proposal to form a new regional network connecting writing center professionals on campuses that are distributed across a wide geographical area yet share a common interest in promoting effective use of language.

Autumn Watts, a member of the board of the planned regional organization and coordinator of the writing center at WCMC-Q, said: “Writing centers are gaining increasing attention for their innovative possibilities within education, and the new Middle East and North Africa network will facilitate dialogue and collaboration among universities in this region. The symposium is just the beginning.”

The IWCA will provide a central point of reference for them, Dr. Eodice said: “The organization can lend credibility to their work, help them build professional identity and give them a real support network here.”

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