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Quantifying Quality: Examining Student Satisfaction and Enjoyment of a Middle Eastern Tutorial Centre

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Abstract: This piece of exploratory research is an attempt to draw parallels between students who attend Tutorial Centre sessions and their experience in and perceptions of the centre. The research involves quantitative analysis of student feedback based on their perceptions and experiences in the Tutorial Centre as they relate to student learning and development, as well as data collected from the online scheduling database, WCONLINE. Participants were 51 Foundation Programme students from the same course who completed a survey, written in Arabic and English, featuring questions about their experiences of Tutorial Centre sessions and perceptions of how these impacted their learning and level of satisfaction. Analysis of participant responses also indicated whether there was any connection between this information and their number of visits to the Tutorial Centre. Student satisfaction is one key indicator of return visits, and understanding the quality of service from the students' point of view provides informative and meaningful feedback to guide future improvements. It was found that the rate of satisfaction did not significantly increase for students attending multiple sessions; however, overall results suggest students overwhelmingly find their sessions enjoyable and valuable. Implications of these findings for similar contexts around the world are discussed.

Keywords: Tutorial Centre, peer tutoring, experiences, perceptions, satisfaction

1. Introduction.

“اعتذر! لا يوجد شاغ” pronounced roughly as, “Aetdhr! La yujad shaghir”, is something often heard in our Tutorial Centre at the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS), Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Oman. It translates as, “I’m sorry, but we are fully booked”. Primarily servicing 4,000 general foundation university students, and having only 10 tutoring tables at any given time, students often have to wait 2-3 weeks for a 30-minute appointment. This is not an altogether unique experience for the region.

While tutorial centres are still a nascent resource in many Middle East and North African (MENA) universities, the Middle East and North African Writing Centre Alliance (MENAWCA), led by board member Jodi Lefort, has been working on ethnography studies to trace the history and evolution of regional writing centres, and the current count is fewer than 40 across the region. Due to the eclectic nature of MENA universities, drawing broad conclusions or assumptions is not easy. However, Eleftheriou (2011, 2015), Eleftheriou and Ramadan (2016), and Ronesi (2009) have published profiles of their centres detailing challenges and opportunities.

Further, MENAWCA, through its biannual regional conferences and meeting with members, has established that regional centres are well attended and in high demand. Most of the regional research has focused on either writing centres or tutorial centres working with bachelor’s and master’s students, so the area of Foundation Programme (FP) students’ relationships with tutorial centres has much room for expansion. In the MENA region, an FP program provides structural language support for students who are not yet proficient enough to succeed in fully-academic English courses at university.

At SQU, Tutorial Centre students overwhelmingly come from the lower levels of the FP. Students enrolled in the FP spend one to four semesters improving their English skills so they can be effective in their college credit-bearing content courses. The high participation rate in the services provided by the Tutorial Centre among FP students is likely due to a strong orientation programme and collaboration with the course leaders of the lower programme levels. However, there is also an aggregate effect in that students who use the centre’s services continue to return semester after semester.

As former coordinators of the centre, we have a particular interest in understanding why students decide to make use of a service that is non-compulsory. Perhaps even more importantly, we are interested in why students continue to attend sessions, with some participating multiple

times a week over the course of a single semester despite the fact that no marks are given for attendance. Of course, such broad questions would have many potential answers, but as educators and directors, pragmatic, actionable data relating to our staff services, students' perceptions of their experience while in the centre, and the impact the sessions have on students' confidence and language learning ability, are especially useful.

Particularly in the MENA region, tutorial and writing centres are still an emergent concept, both in theory and practice, but they are becoming more well defined each year. With this increased clarity in mission and values statements, training, policy, and feedback, comes better services and increased participation by the student body. However, if the services and benefits (real or perceived) are not impactful, measurable, and meaningful, writing and tutorial centres are at risk of declining participation rates and possible closure.

The distinction between a tutorial centre and writing centre is not always obvious. A writing centre can be staffed by students, teachers, or professional writing consultants, and will generally focus on higher order and global concerns over lower order and local concerns. In practice, it means writing centres focus on content and meaning over grammar and mechanics as a general policy. Tutorial centres are staffed by students and offer a wider range of services, generally including discrete skills or systems practice, such as speaking, spelling, and grammar, in addition to the full services of a writing centre. There is a current debate regarding how directive/non-directive tutors should be in sessions. In general terms, being directive involves telling a tutee information, whereas non-directive approaches encourage showing or leading a tutee in a particular direction. In most writing and tutorial centres, a mix of both directive and non-directive approaches are used in a session.

It is the intention of the researchers that this chapter represents a cross-section between theory and practice. Over the past five years, the Tutorial Centre at SQU has continued to expand both services and appointments to the point where there are now nearly 3,000 sessions per semester and maintains a staff of nearly 60 tutors. With the MENA region's increased focus on providing support services to students, it has become increasingly important to highlight the connections between tutorial centres, student satisfaction, and learning.

This study attempts to examine those connections. To do this, 51 students from the same FP course who attended the Tutorial Centre during one semester completed a survey requesting information about their experiences at the centre and their perceptions of what they gained from

these experiences. These students were selected because they comprise the largest number of students from one course on the FP.

2. Literature Review.

Writing and tutorial centres often face challenges that are somewhat unique in academia, in that results are not determined by exit exams, essays, and assignments; rather, the skills and techniques practised function as reinforcement of classroom instruction, and are therefore difficult to quantify. This can, at times, call into question the importance or impact of support centres, particularly when viewed by administrators who often lack experience with those services. Boquet (2002) called for a deviation from the anxiety of administrative requests for quantitative, value-added justification, which she refers to as “bean counting”. However, for many directors, quantitative justification of measurable impact (value-added) services can not only be helpful, but also a requirement. Lape (2012) helps shed light on the challenge by describing two common approaches to satisfying administrative requests. The first is a quantitative appeal, focusing on student numbers, budgetary requirements, and overall usage and popularity. For administrators requiring further convincing, a value-added quantitative appeal, where data and statistics are used to explore qualitative experiences and learning, is appropriate, particularly when support centres are emergent and less well understood by administrations.

Support centres in the Middle East have continued to develop over the past 15 years and, while the localised practices may differ from centre to centre, the core issues of how best to meet students’ expectations remain. Universities such as Texas A&M in Qatar, the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, as well as the American University of Sharjah (AUS) and the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), both in the UAE, are now using structured feedback either at the end of a session, or at the end of a series of sessions, in an attempt to understand students’ impressions of their services and how to best encourage growth and learning. There is consensus that a support centre session is, at its heart, an emotional and experiential process for both the tutor and the tutee – frustration, anger, or joy often manifest themselves. It almost goes without saying that support centres strive to create an environment that not only encourages emotion, but also seeks to capitalise on positivity and use it to enhance language acquisition. However, this type of emotional interaction provides challenges for those interested in quantitative analysis – it is not easy to discern students’ affective experience and perceptions. In other words, the connection between support centres, student learning, and student perceptions is still murky at best.

That being said, there are a few studies from the MENA region which shed some light on the issue AUS has been studied extensively (Eleftheriou 2011, 2015; Eleftheriou & Ramadan 2016), including in terms of various engagement patterns between tutors and tutees to determine whether a directive or non-directive approach is preferred, as well as options for online synchronistic and asynchronistic tutoring. Primarily focusing on tutor methods, training, and reflection, Eleftheriou's work has begun to demystify what constitutes effective practice in a MENA tutorial centre. Ronesi (2009) authored a profile of the AUS tutorial training course and situated MENA tutorial centres in the larger international context. In describing her tutor training course, the author details some of the challenges, noting that "in addition to highlighting linguistic differences, the training course, subsequently, would also need to address the different cultural norms of North America and Sharjah" (p. 78). Ronesi explains an interesting phenomenon in that, while western US-centric models are quite different in terms of student profile, cultural norms, expectations, and linguistic abilities, the student-centred practice and theory advocated by those models can be quite successfully adapted to the AUS context.

A recent study by Tiruchittampalam, Ross, Whitehouse and Nicholson (2018) focused on determining the impact of UAEU writing centre sessions on students' academic writing. The study indicated that students attending sessions in the writing centre showed marked improvement over the control group, particularly in terms of task fulfilment and overall coherence. As these two categories are consistent with 'global' and 'high-order' concerns mentioned earlier, the study functions as an affirmation that writing centre theory is informing practice in the MENA region.

Previous investigations have been carried out in the current research context at SQU on the impact of peer tutoring on the peer tutor, including in terms of personal and academic impacts (Finlay, 2019). From analysis of the interviews conducted, Finlay reports the impacts were overwhelmingly positive; indeed, when specifically asked if the tutors perceived any negative effects of tutoring, the tutors could not recall any. The positive personal impacts tutors discussed included feeling more at ease when in the company of males (at SQU, the vast majority of peer tutors are female, and the majority of tutees are male), widening their social circle (through becoming friends with other peer tutors and with tutees), and the feeling of pride and satisfaction in helping others develop their English language skills. It could be concluded, then, that if these positive impacts are felt by the tutors, then these must also spill over and positively affect the tutees.

Student satisfaction theory has been well explored from the perspective of general education, but less so when considering English language learning (ELL) contexts. The “happy-productive” student theory put forth by Cotton, Dollard and de Jonge (2002) describes a correlation between overall production and several factors, including stress and coping mechanisms. Students engaging in emotionally satisfying educational tasks are more likely to see increased production. It is no surprise that most student support centres have policies, procedures, and training that are centred around this idea. Welch (1993) comments on the way a support centre can transform learners by offering a space to explore, deconstruct, and even subvert traditional academic expectations. In this way, well run support centres can create environments where students not only benefit from the experience, but where they perceive the experience as valuable and important. Both studies lay the groundwork for current MENA practices.

When considering learners’ language development, researchers have also made claims that support centres are well situated to address learners’ specific needs. In particular, the directive/non-directive approach mentioned above can be re-thought to operate within the framework of Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development. As Nordlof (2014) explains:

Vygotsky sees linguistic development as a process that begins with external, socialized communication, only later to be translated to what he terms ‘internal speech’. This points to a concept of how growth happens through the process of interaction with a teacher or tutor (p. 56).

In other words, because a support centre operates on a social, emotional, and individual level, it is particularly well suited to aid in language acquisition.

Student satisfaction is also linked to tangible rewards. In essence, if students feel that attending the support centre is correlated with the achievement of higher marks, they are incentivised to use the service and maximize their benefits. This echoes Rusbult’s (1980) investment theory which, although it can apply to many aspects of life, Hatcher, Kryter, Prus and Fitzgerald (1992) found to hold true in academia as well. Students prefer to be in an environment with reduced constraints and increased options – both categories are specialties of support centres: students can attend sessions at no charge, and tutorial pedagogy encourages learner autonomy and choice. Furthermore, Cropanzano and Wright (2001) identified key components that correlate between happiness and performance: subjectivity – in that the experiences are perceived rather

than prescribed; positivity – which includes not only a high presence of positive emotions, but also an absence of negativity; and totality – in that the experience is looked at as a whole, rather than piecemeal.

While Cropanzano and Wright (2001) were positing theories that directly relate to employment satisfaction, it is reasonable to assume that the concepts would be applicable to learning centres as well. The idea also echoes Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis in that students face a number of emotional barriers that could inhibit language acquisition, and when those barriers are mitigated or removed, more effective learning can take place. These ideas are reflected in the focus of tutor training; namely, the importance of positive emotional support and building strong rapport with the tutee both before and during a session.

Considering students' affect in a support centre seems intuitive. However, it is not something that is well studied. Swain (2013) aptly notes that:

Emotions are like 'the elephant in the room'. Everyone is aware of them but they reflect an unspoken truth: that they have a significant impact on what has happened in the past, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future. In fact, emotions are an integral part of cognition (p. 195).

Imai (2010) argues that emotions are much more complex than simple binaries – positive and negative. Rather, they claim that emotions operate on a spectrum that can facilitate or negate student learning depending on a variety of factors. Through case studies of Japanese learners of English working collaboratively to achieve language learning goals, Imai found that students' emotions played a key role in their cognitive process, and that emotions, even when negative, had the potential to be driving factors in making progress. The implication is that emotions and cognition are more interrelated and complex than most current ELL research demonstrates.

Writing and tutorial centre directors are well aware of the importance of emotion in sessions. Much of tutor training focuses on reducing student stress, making tutees feel comfortable and relaxed, and trying to build rapport at the start of a session. There have been many studies on the physical space of a centre, the ideal staffing models, and appropriate feedback methods – all of which keep the importance of a tutee's emotional well-being at the centre. Some institutions demonstrate this idea in other, more tangible ways as well; for example, by providing sweets for the students as a small way to make them feel welcome and comfortable. These methods mirror

Anderson's (2001) contention that a collaborative, non-threatening, and interactive conference will provide greater results. While Anderson was speaking as a content teacher in the United States working with school children, the practice is sound and has been successfully implemented in support centres globally.

With regard to academic outcomes of peer tutoring support, various studies have been conducted on peer tutoring of content subjects. The American River Project (1993) researched both aspects of maths and science students in the United States, comparing students who were peer-tutored (by trained and paid "learning assistants") in small groups to those who did not receive such tutoring. Pre- and post-tutoring test results showed that those who were tutored performed as well as the control group, despite having started the course with a lower high school GPA. In a post-tutoring survey, 69% of the students reported that the group tutorials were considered to be anywhere between "quite helpful" to "a life-saver".

First-year law students were the focus of a quantitative study conducted in the Netherlands by Moust and Schmidt (1994). The researchers compared those who participated in group tutorials led by student tutors with those led by staff tutors. The subjects completed a pre-course test, an end of course programme evaluation questionnaire, and an achievement test in the form of essay format answers to open questions. Results indicated that the students who were in peer tutor-led tutorial groups performed just as well as those in staff-led tutorial groups. In Hong Kong, Loke and Chow (2007) investigated nursing students who were tutored one-to-one by more senior students for one hour per week. From focus groups and mid- and end-of-semester interviews designed to evaluate the tutees' experiences, these were found to be more positive than negative.

While overall student satisfaction is informative, focusing on specific experiences can provide meaningful insight as well. Carino and Enders (2001) examined the connection between student satisfaction and number of visits per semester. The researchers found the strongest positive correlation was between number of visits and students' confidence in their abilities as writers. This correlation demonstrates the experiential benefits a support centre can have on students. In other words, the experience of discussing writing and sharing ideas in a meaningful way provides students with more confidence about their writing.

Schmidt and Alexander (2012) developed this concept further by exploring the connection between self-efficacy, or the belief that a person can succeed at a given task, and writing centre visits. Their large study involved over 500 university students and revealed strong statistical

evidence for the development of self-efficacy for students who attended at least three sessions in the writing centre. The results of both Schmidt and Alexander, and Carino and Enders (2001) suggest that students who attend sessions more regularly are more satisfied with the development of their writing skills and perceive themselves to be more confident writers.

Within the Sultanate of Oman, the current research site was also the subject of an investigation by Alrajhi and Aldhafri (2015) into tutees' English self-concept. One hundred and twenty-five FP students completed an English Self-Concept Scale and a Tutorial Program Factors Scale to indicate their perceptions of the effects on self-concept of Tutorial Centre sessions. Results indicated the positive influence of peer tutoring on participants' English self-concept. More recently, Finlay (2017) conducted research on three struggling FP students who were regular users of SQU's Tutorial Centre and who attended 19, 9 and 16 sessions respectively during one semester. The researchers used interviews to examine respondents' perceptions of how their sessions helped develop their English language skills. All three reported an increase in confidence, to varying degrees, which allowed them to participate more in class and to talk to their teachers outside of class. An increase in understanding the teacher was also mentioned as a perceived benefit.

3. Methodology.

3.1 Support Centre Context.

The Tutorial Centre at SQU, one aspect of Student Support (with the others including the Writing Centre (WrC), an extensive reading library, an extra-curricular activities office, as well as an independent learning hub, known as Self Access), has been in existence since 2011. It has grown from 12 peer tutors and approximately 450 appointments in the first semester of operation, to over 50 peer tutors per semester and more than 4,000 appointments per year (roughly 2,500 in the Fall and 1,800 in the Spring semesters) from 2014. In addition, since Fall 2016, tutoring services have also been offered to FP Maths and IT students. While the content is different for these students, the core methods and training are similar.

Senior students are recruited each semester, and are mainly Education (English), English Language and Literature, and Translation majors, although a growing number are from the College of Economics and Political Science, the College of Law, and the College of Engineering. Successful applicants whose writing has been assessed and who have passed an oral interview attend 10 hours of training prior to tutoring. They are allowed to work for up to 5 hours per week and they are paid an hourly rate: the equivalent of \$US10.50 per hour. During the first semester of

work, new peer tutors are paired with a mentor who is an experienced peer tutor. The mentor is both observed by and observes their mentee. The coordinator also listens and provides feedback on an audio-recording of one Tutorial Centre session by each new tutor, which provides another strand of quality assurance. The training process is extensive and ongoing. As student satisfaction is a key component to repeat visits, there are several training points that are focused on more than others, including empathy, engagement, scaffolding, and agency.

Perhaps one of the most important skills a tutor can have is the ability to empathise with their students (Kaiden, 1994). Learning a language can be difficult and stressful, but going to a support centre to ask for help can be doubly so. For this reason, tutors are trained on soft skills like building rapport and acknowledging the difficulty of any particular task. Additionally, all of our tutors have learned English as a second or additional language, and some have completed the FP at SQU. This shared experience enables tutors to understand and empathise with the students, thereby improving the emotional experience for tutees. Once the groundwork has been laid, the tutor and tutees can then move on towards engaging in the task.

There are various strategies that are well established in tutoring, but to keep training more efficient, we focus on engaging in two general approaches – directive and non-directive – which have been discussed at length in the literature (see Clark, 2001; Eleftheriou, 2011; Harris & Silva, 1993; Nordlof, 2014). There are a number of basic approaches within these methods, although the tutors are trained specifically on elicitation methods, working within a tutee's linguistic framework, rather than the tutor's, and using appropriate times of silence and thought. It is also worth noting that tutors are given latitude during a session to determine what is best for the student, the task, and the moment. The decision on whether to use a direct or non-direct approach is largely left to the discretion of tutors, who are trained to consider task, purpose, outcomes, and the tutee's needs when choosing the most appropriate way to conduct a session.

One measure of success in tutoring (or teaching, for that matter) is that the students are able to grasp the concepts being discussed and apply them in a way that is meaningful, memorable, and achievable. Tutors are trained to break down tasks and present them in a manner that is engaging for the tutee, but also within the students' capabilities. As an example, if a student were to attend a session with a particular task of writing an email to a friend about their weekend, and wanted to work on such an assignment with the tutor, the tutor is trained to break down the task and work with the student one step at a time. This task would require brainstorming of common

actions performed over the weekend, places one might go, listing subjects who perform those actions, changing the verbs into the past tense, and determining which verbs are regular and which are irregular. Each task may only take a few minutes, but each is an important step. Learning is, therefore, more achievable for the tutee, and they leave the session with practical knowledge that can be applied to other tasks.

The final core component to the training revolves around the concept of agency. Essentially, ownership must stay with the tutees – a tutor writing on student work or completing tasks for them is not allowed. Tutees should maintain ownership of their ideas. This seems straightforward; however, there are a few challenges. First, we are using a sociological concept that is culturally bound to apply a rule to groups of people who may have alternative understandings of agency. In other words, the same understandings of ownership do not apply to all cultures. Moreover, Geisler (2004) argues that the idea of rhetorical agency is changing with the ubiquitous nature of online writing and the multitude of developing genres. This, in turn, raises the question of whether or not the entire concept of rhetorical agency needs to be scrutinised further and perhaps re-defined. As defining and understanding the concept can be elusive, for practical purposes, tutor training at SQU focuses on the traditional western understandings of agency.

3.2 Promotion and General Procedures.

The centre is promoted to the lower levels of the FP, but all students at any stage of their studies, up to PhD students, are welcome to attend sessions. This makes the type of tutoring carried out in the centre mainly “dyadic cross-year fixed-role” (Topping, 1996, p. 335), meaning that most sessions are one-to-one, between students at different stages of their university career, and non-reciprocal. Students make their appointments via an online booking system (WCONLINE), where, as well as giving information about their level and subject area, they select their intended focus of each session: reading, writing, speaking, presentation skills, vocabulary or grammar. The most popular focus is speaking, followed by writing, and then grammar.

After each session, the peer tutor completes a client report form stating what was covered in the session. This is automatically emailed to the tutee who can then add it to their assessed portfolio of work as evidence of self-study. The report form is written in the style of a “thank you” letter, addressing the tutee by name, and encouraging the tutee to return for additional sessions. This is a small but important way to build further rapport once the student has left the centre. The Tutorial Centre space is shared with peer tutors who tutor FP Maths and IT, and WrC consultants,

who are graduates or postgraduates and generally non-Arabic speakers. The WrC is promoted to students in the higher levels of the FP and only focuses on writing but, as with the Tutorial Centre, all university students are welcome to make appointments.

Participants in this study were FP English Language (FPEL) 0340 students during Spring 2017. These students are pre-intermediate to intermediate level, or the equivalent of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) A2/B1. Most of these students progressed from the previous level in Fall 2016, although some may have failed FPEL 0340 and were repeating the course, or they achieved a 'D' in the previous level and so were repeating the second half of the FPEL 0340 course. The students following this course were selected as they formed the largest course grouping of students who attended the Tutorial Centre in the semester of the study.

3.3 Survey Methods.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How satisfied are students with their experiences at the Tutorial Centre?
 - a. Does this level of satisfaction change based on number of visits?
2. How do students perceive their visits to the Tutorial Centre?
 - a. Does this change based on number of visits?

The first question addresses a critical issue in tutorial centres. As former directors, we have countless anecdotes concluding that students participating in the centre are satisfied. In fact, many of the tutors first discovered the centre when they came to seek assistance, and enjoyed the experience enough to apply for a position as a tutor later in their degree programme. While anecdotes such as this help to paint the picture, they do not provide quantifiable data that is actionable for a director.

To refer back to an earlier point, many administrators would like to see tangible, quantifiable evidence that the centre is doing well, which enables greater advocacy for increased funding, promotion, staffing and expansion. It is also possible to gauge the success of a centre simply by numbers alone. In the case of the SQU Tutorial Centre, the numbers speak for themselves. It has grown nearly threefold in a short period of time. However, just because more students are attending sessions does not necessarily mean that they are actually satisfied with those sessions. Perhaps we have increasing numbers of students who come only once; alternatively, we

could have the same number of students attending an increasing number of times. The first research question is an attempt to clarify if the students are actually enjoying the sessions, and whether satisfaction is related to number of visits.

The second research question explores the connections between emotion and learning – Are there positive connections between the perceived impact sessions had on language learning and overall satisfaction? In other words, do students enjoy sessions more if they feel they are improving their language, or do they simply enjoy the interaction of the space? Directors can use this knowledge to modify training and practice, and improve the overall experience of a tutorial centre session. As the concept of tutorial centres is relatively new to the MENA region, and completely new to SQU Omani students (the authors are not aware of the existence of any support centres in Omani government schools), it is unclear as to how students perceive the space and the experience they have here.

Towards the end of the semester, all tutees were encouraged to complete a survey to gather information about their level, how many times they had attended sessions at the Tutorial Centre, their experiences at the centre, and their perceptions about how they felt their sessions at the Tutorial Centre had impacted on their English language abilities (see Appendix). Fifty-one FPEL 0340 students completed the survey, which was available in both English and Arabic. Participants were asked to complete the survey after being reminded of its voluntary and anonymous nature. The centre's desk staff handed out surveys at the end of a session to those students who indicated a willingness to participate. The survey was not completed in front of the tutor or under the supervision of the desk staff. Throughout the research process, the students were identified by ID numbers rather than names, and their anonymity was protected in the presentation of the data, as no further identifying information was included.

Survey questions were developed on a 4-point scale with response options of Poor to Excellent for the survey category concerned with experiences of the Tutorial Centre, and of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree for the survey category about perceptions of the centre. Using a 4-point scale was a deliberate choice for both survey categories as students were required to respond positively or negatively to survey items. All items were positively worded, and distributed between the two main survey categories of student experiences (8 items) and perceptions of the Tutorial Centre (5 items). After the surveys were completed, the data was entered into GNU PSPP for analysis.

To investigate the research questions, several analyses were carried out. First, descriptive analysis was conducted to determine means and standard deviations for all items on the experiences and perceptions survey categories. To aid in the interpretation of means, all scores above 2.50 on the 4-point scale was interpreted as indicating higher levels of satisfaction/agreement with the positively worded items, and scores under this point were deemed to indicate lower levels of satisfaction/agreement. Overall means for each survey category were also calculated and interpreted in the same manner.

To address the research sub-questions regarding the impact of number of visits on participants' experiences and perceptions, inferential analysis was used. One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to explore the impact of number of visits (based on the categories of 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, and 10 or more) with each item from the experience and perception survey categories. Given the possibility of inflated type I error due to multiple testing in this approach, a Bonferroni correction was made with resultant acceptable levels of statistical significance being set at $p \leq 0.01$. Finally, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for both survey categories as a measure of internal consistency, with a level of 0.70 deemed by the researchers as acceptable given the exploratory nature of the research.

4. Results.

The Cronbach alpha coefficient for both survey categories was 0.80, thereby indicating a good level of internal consistency. Table 1 features means and standard deviations for the 8 items associated with the survey category of students' experiences of the Tutorial Centre ($M = 3.13$). The table indicates that participants displayed highest levels of satisfaction with the assistance of office staff ($M = 3.47$). This was followed by session length options ($M = 3.37$), overall satisfaction ($M = 3.33$), and the helpfulness of peer tutors ($M = 3.18$). Items recording the lowest means on this category were Tutorial Centre atmosphere ($M = 3.10$), suitability of task(s) ($M = 3.08$), convenience of online booking system ($M = 3.02$), and amount of speaking practice ($M = 2.90$). However, in each of these cases, item means remained above the cut-off point of 2.50, thereby indicating relatively high levels of satisfaction.

Table 1: Experiences of the Tutorial Centre

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Convenience of online booking system	3.02	1.07
Assistance of office staff	3.47	0.81

Session length options	3.37	0.72
Tutorial Centre atmosphere	3.10	0.83
Suitability of task(s)	3.08	0.80
Helpfulness of peer tutors	3.18	0.82
Amount of speaking practice	2.90	0.83
Overall satisfaction	3.33	0.65
Category Total	3.13	0.52

Item mean scores in Table 2 indicate that students responded positively to all five questions about their perceptions of the Tutorial Centre ($M = 3.16$). Students responded most strongly to questions about overall satisfaction, confidence, and enjoyment. That is, items that recorded the highest means were, “My Tutorial Centre sessions improved my overall English” ($M = 3.24$), “My Tutorial Centre sessions were enjoyable” ($M = 3.22$), and, “My Tutorial Centre sessions made me feel more confident about my English” ($M = 3.22$). The two items with the lowest means from this category were, “My Tutorial Centre sessions improved my exam scores” ($M = 3.06$), and, “My Tutorial Centre sessions made me become a more independent learner” ($M = 2.94$). However, similar to the results to the first survey category, these were again above the 2.50 cut-off point, thereby indicating relatively high levels of participant satisfaction.

Table 2: Perceptions of the Tutorial Centre

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
My Tutorial Centre sessions were enjoyable	3.22	0.50
My Tutorial Centre sessions made me feel more confident about my English	3.22	0.73
My Tutorial Centre sessions improved my overall English	3.24	0.76
My Tutorial Centre sessions improved my exam scores	3.06	0.73
My Tutorial Centre sessions made me become a more independent learner	2.94	0.73
Category Total	3.16	0.52

Table 3 features the breakdown of overall means and standard deviations for the two survey categories based on number of visits made to the centre. An examination of the means indicates that an increase in number of visits is associated with increasing levels of satisfaction. This general trend suggests that students increasingly felt more positive about their experiences in and perceptions of the Tutorial Centre as they attended more sessions. However, despite this apparent pattern, ANOVAs exploring the potential impact of number of visits on overall scores for the categories of experiences and perceptions did not reveal statistically significant differences.

Table 3: Relationship between number of visits and student satisfaction

Item	Number of Visits	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum
Experiences	1-3	21	3.03	0.64	1.43
	4-6	12	3.05	0.29	2.71
	7-9	8	3.30	0.46	2.43
	10+	10	3.38	0.41	2.86
Perceptions	1-3	21	2.94	0.48	1.80
	4-6	12	3.12	0.40	2.20
	7-9	8	3.20	0.64	2.00
	10+	10	3.40	0.51	2.60

Table 4 details the results of the ANOVA that investigated the impact of number of visits on item means from the survey category about student satisfaction with the Tutorial Centre. The only item where statistically significant differences were reported at the $p \leq 0.01$ level was for Tutorial Centre atmosphere. In response to this item, participants with 10 or more visits ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.47$) and 4-6 visits ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.65$) recorded the highest means, while those who had visited the centre 1-3 times ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.87$) and 7-9 times ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 0.74$) recorded the lowest.

Table 4: Number of Visits and Satisfaction of Experiences ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Convenience of online booking sytem	Between groups	10.20	3	3.40	3.42	0.025
	Within Groups	46.78	47	1		
	Total	56.98	50			
Assistance of office staff	Between groups	6.09	3	2.03	3.58	0.021
	Within Groups	26.62	47	0.57		
	Total	32.71	50			
Session length options	Between groups	2.38	3	0.79	1.59	0.205
	Within Groups	23.54	47	0.50		
	Total	25.92	50			
Tutorial Centre atmosphere	Between groups	8.67	3	2.89	5.26	0.003*
	Within Groups	25.84	47	0.55		
	Total	34.51	50			
Suitability of tasks	Between groups	0.69	3	0.23	0.35	0.791
	Within Groups	31.00	47	0.66		
	Total	31.69	50			
Helpfulness of peer tutors	Between groups	4.82	3	1.61	2.64	0.060
	Within Groups	28.59	47	0.61		
	Total	33.41	50			
Amount of	Between groups	0.15	3	0.05	0.07	0.975

speaking practice	Within Groups	34.35	47	0.73		
	Total	34.51	50			
Overall	Between groups	1.91	3	0.64	1.54	0.216
satisfaction	Within Groups	19.42	47	0.41		
	Total	21.33	50			

*significant at the $p \leq 0.01$ level

The impact of number of visits on items from the survey category of perceptions of the Tutorial Centre are featured in Table 5. Again, statistically significant differences were only reported for one item from this category – “My Tutorial Centre sessions were enjoyable”. Means increase for this item along with number of visits as follows: 1-3 visits ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.38$); 4-6 visits ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.45$); 7-9 visits ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.52$); and 10 or more visits ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.52$).

Table 5: Number of Visits and Perceptions ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
My Tutorial Centre sessions were enjoyable	Between groups	4.63	4	1.16	4.93	0.001*
	Within Groups	21.12	90	0.23		
	Total	25.75	94			
My Tutorial Centre sessions made me feel more confident about my English	Between groups	5.37	4	1.34	2.79	0.031
	Within Groups	43.22		0.48		
	Total	48.59				
My Tutorial Centre sessions improved my overall English	Between groups	4.88	90	1.22	2.40	0.055
	Within Groups	45.71		0.51		
	Total	50.59				
My Tutorial Centre sessions improved my exam scores	Between groups	0.80	94	0.20	0.39	0.817
	Within Groups	46.19		0.51		
	Total	46.99				
My Tutorial Centre sessions made me become a more independent learner	Between groups	1.42	4	0.35	0.61	0.659
	Within Groups	25.58		0.58		
	Total	54.00				

*significant at the $p \leq 0.01$ level

5. Discussion.

The study sought to gain a clearer understanding of student participants’ levels of satisfaction with their experience of SQU’s Tutorial Centre and their perceptions of the centre, including whether number of visits impacted these levels. It is clear from the data that students are satisfied with both the Tutorial Centre’s impact on their language acquisition and their overall experience in the space. Out of a maximum score of 4.00, students recorded survey category means of 3.16 and 3.14 for

experiences and perceptions respectively. As 2.50 was deemed the cut-off point between lower and higher levels of satisfaction/more positive perceptions, means over 3.00 can be interpreted as quite positive. Moreover, these results appear to support anecdotal reports from regional affiliates as well as student testimonials that students, in general, enjoy their tutorial sessions.

In relation to the second research question, results of ANOVA analysis indicate that there was no statistically significant impact on number of sessions participants attended and overall satisfaction. While intuition would suggest that students who attend more sessions are more likely to be satisfied, it is interesting to discover that in the current research it was not an indicator or predictor of student satisfaction. While this result is surprising, it is not an altogether negative one. In fact, there is some reassurance that students who attend one session are just as likely to enjoy the experience as those attending more than ten times.

One plausible explanation for this finding is that the first time students come to the Tutorial Centre, tutees are provided with an overview of what the space is, how it functions, and how they are expected to interact with the tutors. Thonus (2003) refers to this as “sociopragmatic discourses”. Because a support centre is an unknown entity to schools in Oman, it stands to reason that the first few sessions would be improved by the tutors helping students to relax and familiarising tutees with the procedures and protocols of the space. The CPS Tutorial Centre focuses heavily on this, not only in the initial, but also in subsequent sessions. It is likely that the emphasis on teaching students how to engage in the space effectively contributes to a feeling of ease and satisfaction, regardless of number of visits.

The results also speak to the nature and value of rapport. Much training is spent on relationship building, helping tutors establish rapport from the first session, and making students feel as comfortable as possible. This is particularly important when students are attending from the FP with a low level of English – risk taking can only be encouraged in a supportive environment. Rapport building does not end with the first session, either. Many of the tutees make regular appointments with specific tutors and, over the course of a semester, a tutor can develop a relationship with the tutee and provide a more specialised service. This could manifest as an understanding of particular learning styles (some students prefer visual whiteboard explanations; others prefer more kinaesthetic activities), or preference for experiential or rote learning. Moreover, it is also likely that the tutees themselves are developing their overall tutoring skills as the semester progresses. Because tutors can have as many as ten sessions a week, it is not

unreasonable to assume that a tutor has had over 100 sessions over the course of a semester. Along with the regular discussions and problem-solving that happen among the Tutorial Centre staff, there is a progression and development of shared expertise that likely contribute to positive sessions.

The results regarding students' experiences are also informative. Our desk staff are clearly successful in their mission of making students feel welcome and comfortable. This may in part be because they are former peer tutors themselves and have a strong sense of empathy and a shared commitment to a quality experience for the tutees. The Tutorial Centre has generally low turnover as many of the tutors have been with the programme for multiple years, furthering their experience and quality of service. The other noteworthy finding from this category sheds some light on an ongoing challenge in MENA tutorial centres – tutor versus student talking time. It was rated as the lowest satisfaction in the category, and has been noted as a feedback point for future training. This result seems to confirm the findings of Eleftheriou (2011) that tutees in the Middle East context prefer egalitarian sessions where both sides are contributing. While there is training at SQU in which methods and techniques for reducing tutor talking time are discussed, it is clear that further training is advisable.

Regarding students' perceptions, participants' responses to the items, "My Tutorial Centre sessions made me feel more confident about my English", and, "My Tutorial Centre sessions improved my English exam scores", are particularly important as they demonstrate that students perceive their Tutorial Centre sessions as positively impacting both their overall English and their confidence as an English user. If no other questions were asked, this would demonstrate a strong rationale for continuing to expand the Tutorial Centre space and services. Students find inherent value in their time spent there, which in itself is a justification for additional resources to be allocated to the centre. This finding mirrors those of Carino and Enders (2001) and Schmidt and Alexander (2012): support centres provide important opportunities for students to develop and strengthen positive relationships with language.

The item, "My Tutorial Centre sessions made me become a more independent learner", had the lowest overall response rate. This finding is possibly related to a number of issues. First, the question may have been misplaced. Because the Tutorial Centre is a collaborative space, the notion of independent learning may seem contradictory to participants, even though students are aware that evidence of attending a session counts towards the 'self-study' component of their

portfolio. Second, while tutors are trained in developing autonomous skill sets with students, many of the sessions are centred around speaking practice, where independent learning may be less relevant, or merely less explicit.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations.

The first research question concerned how satisfied students are with their experiences at the Tutorial Centre. Overall, results indicate that students view their experiences positively. Whether considering interpersonal skills such as effectiveness of the peer tutor and helpfulness of the desk staff, or impacts on student learning, exam marks, and confidence, students, it can be argued, based on these results, enjoy their time there. The mean score for all categories was above the cut-off point of 2.50 separating more positive from more negative responses, and almost all were 3.00 or higher. However, the answer to whether this changes based on number of visits is no. Students attending 1-3 sessions were just as satisfied with their visits as those attending ten or more.

Regarding the second research question, “How do students perceive their visits to the Tutorial Centre?”, participants again had overwhelmingly positive perceptions. As this category was also concerned with whether participants believed their Tutorial Centre sessions had a positive impact on their academic and language skills in general, it is affirming to note that students responded positively to all items, with the only item receiving a mean score below 3.00 being, “My Tutorial Centre sessions made me an independent learner”. Students clearly see a link between their sessions and academic achievement in general. However, number of visits again did not have a statistically significant impact on these results.

When interpreting the results of this exploratory study, however, it is important to take into account several important limitations. The research focused on a narrow band of students in a large programme. The CPS Tutorial Centre English team services around 2,500 students per semester across primarily nine FP English courses. Over 150 students completed surveys, but only 51, who were from the FPEL 0340 cohort, were investigated as they were the largest group of same-level responders. While the surveys were offered in English and Arabic, it is possible some of the terms such as “independent learning” were not fully understood as concepts. Finally, because the research is exploratory and limited in scale, it was difficult to benchmark results against similar institutions in the region. Another limitation is that, by using a 4-point response scale, students were forced to respond positively or negatively, and it is possible that Omani students, being eager to please and generally positive as a student profile, were reluctant to give negative feedback about

a free service on campus. It could therefore be interesting to re-run the study using a 5-point scale that includes a neutral response option to compare results.

Additional exploratory research, both in the institution and the region, would provide a framework to build upon more robust research. The idea of student support as a necessary entity is gaining traction in Oman, and more institutions contributing to a body of research would enable institutional support allowing centres to emerge, evolve, and maintain a quality of service.

As students are generally satisfied with the services provided by the SQU Tutorial Centre, resources should continue to be allocated and developed to expand the services provided. The lowest “experiences” category (tutor-student talking time) should be addressed in two ways: (1) ongoing training and practice to help reduce the amount of talking by the tutor and increase productive language use by the tutees; and (2) increased observations and more focused feedback sessions by the Student Support Coordinator and the experienced peer tutors. SQU would benefit from mirroring the work of Eleftheriou (2011) by incorporating audio and/or video recordings of all tutors as currently only new tutors are recorded, assessed, and mentored. Such a system would provide more assurance of quality and opportunities for developing tutorial skills.

A study that investigated the satisfaction of tutees with particular tutors would be informative to help determine which tutors are providing the highest perceived service. While the researchers have several tools to gauge the effectiveness of a tutor, including audio recording new peer tutors, providing feedback and gaining a sense of strengths and weaknesses, documenting peer observations, and informally listening in to sessions while they happen, more could be done. Two additional questions on the survey, “How would you rate your tutor?”, and, “What could your tutor have done to make your session better?”, would also provide further clarity on what methods students prefer and find valuable. The above questions were omitted from the current exploratory research as it was felt they could impact the positive environment of the Tutorial Centre. That is, the questions have the potential to be perceived as punitive or an attempt to rank the tutors, rather than a genuine inquiry into best practice.

In an attempt to address the item, “My sessions made me become a more independent learner”, tutors should be more explicitly trained in ways to develop autonomous learning and transfer. At the end of each session, it would be beneficial to focus on what skills were learned, and, importantly, how those skills could be applied to other tasks and language activities the tutee can be expected to do, particularly if this can be elicited from the tutee through guiding questions

by the tutor. Some support centres keep a paper-based or e-portfolio on each student, focusing on the progression of student skills. Such a tracking and filing system may have benefits at SQU when attempting to develop independent learning skills.

Finally, future research could be conducted to determine the value-added component of student support. A structured longitudinal study following students over the course of several years could inform administration regarding the tangible impact that the Tutorial Centre may have on student marks and overall achievement, and would also have consequences regionally as new and existing centres benefit from examples of measurable impacts of tutorial centres.

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Appendix: Data Collection Instrument

The CPS Tutorial Centre (TC) is very interested in your opinions about its services. Please take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire about your experience of the TC this semester (FL 17). Please write a number or tick, as appropriate.

يسعى المركز التعليمي بجامعة السلطان قابوس للحصول على آرائكم حول الخدمات التي يقدمها. أكمل الاستبيان التالي معتمدا على خبرتك الحالية في المركز التعليمي خريف (2017) ضع إشارة صح أمام خيارك.

General information

معلومات عامة

1. What is your ID number?

الرقم الجامعي

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2. Gender (الجنس): ☐ Male (ذكر) ☐ Female (انثى)

3. What is your current FPEL course?

البرنامج الدراسي الحالي؟

120 ☐ 230 ☐ 340 ☐ 450 ☐ 560 ☐ 604 ☐

4. Approximately how many times did you visit the TC this semester?

كم عدد المواعيد التي حجزتها في المركز التعليمي لهذا الفصل؟

1-3 times ☐ 4-6 times ☐ 7-9 times ☐ 10+ times ☐

5. Did you mainly work with the same tutor?

هل تحجز مواعيدك غالبا مع نفس المعلم الطالب؟

Yes ☐ No ☐

6. Did you mainly come for 30 minute or 1 hour sessions?

طول الجلسة التي تحجزها غالبا في المركز التعليمي؟

30 minute sessions ☐ 1 hour sessions ☐

Please turn over. اقلب الصفحة.

Your experiences

خبرتك:

7. Please rate the Tutorial Centre on the following:

قيم المركز التعليمي من النواحي التالية:

(from 1-4: 1 = poor and 4 = excellent)

حيث يمثل 1 أقل درجة في التقييم و 4 أعلى درجة

	1	2	3	4	
a. Convenience of online booking and walk-in procedure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	• نظام الحجز الإلكتروني والدخول دون ترتيب موعد مسبق
b. Assistance of front office staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	• المساعدة المقدمة من الموظفين في مكتب الاستقبال
c. Session length options	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	• خيارات طول الجلسة
d. Tutorial Centre atmosphere	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	• طبيعة المكان
e. Suitability of task(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	• مدى ملائمة الأنشطة المستخدمة
f. Helpfulness of peer tutors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	• المساعدة المقدمة من الطالب المعلم
g. The amount of talking you did compared to your peer tutor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	• مقدار تحدثك مقارنة بتحدث الطالب المعلم
h. Overall satisfaction with the sessions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	• المستوى العام للرضا عن الجلسات

Your perceptions

8. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Please tick **one** box for each statement ما مدى موافقتك على العبارات التالية؟ (ضع علامة صح في مربع واحد لكل عبارة)

	Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree لا أوافق	Agree أوافق	Strongly agree أوافق بشدة
A. My Tutorial Centre sessions were enjoyable. جلساتي في المركز كانت ممتعة.				
B. My Tutorial Centre sessions made me feel more confident about my English. زادت جلساتي بالمركز من ثقتي بنفسي				
C. My Tutorial Centre sessions improved my overall English. طورت جلساتي بالمركز لغتي الإنجليزية بشكل عام.				
D. My Tutorial Centre sessions improved my English exam scores. حسنت جلساتي بالمركز درجاتي في English exam scores.				

امتحان اللغة الإنجليزية				
E. My Tutorial Centre sessions made me become a more independent learner. جلساتي بالمركز جعلت مني متعلما مستقلا				