Academic Writing Workshops and Research Mentorship in Iraq: Impact and Evaluation Report

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Aims and Objectives

The Nahrein Network's AcademIQ programme consisted of three elements: (a) an online research course; (b) academic writing workshops; and (c) research and academic mentorship. I was enrolled as the co-ordinator and the instructor in the last two elements of this project.

Academic Writing Workshops and Research Mentorship (AWW-RM) was composed of a workshop series specifically tailored to the needs of Iraqi academics in the areas of research, academic writing and methodologies.

The main aim was to provide training for ten Iraqi academics in each cohort by leading them through the research process: starting with formulation of a research question (or a research paradox or hypothesis), surveying the available literature in relation to the research topic, choosing a suitable research design, choosing appropriate data collection techniques dictated by the research design and collecting the necessary data, and finally, reporting the research results in the form of a publishable, good quality research article.

A secondary aim, encapsulated in Research and Academic Mentorship, was to contribute to the teaching of methodologies, both at undergraduate and post-graduate level, in the respective universities of the participants. In other words, the participants were expected to disseminate good practice acquired during the workshop sessions to their methods classes.

The workshops' first objective, therefore, was to create an intellectually stimulating environment that would guide, encourage and support participants through constructive criticism and feedback from fellow participants and the course instructor, who was expected to act as *primus inter pares* throughout the workshop series. The second objective was to discuss problems related to writing an academic article in the English language in the context of publication in respected academic journals, and to convey to the participants the quality expectations normally prevalent among academic journal editors. For this purpose, specific attention was paid to the writing conventions that generally inform publications in the fields of social sciences and humanities in the English-speaking world.

Background of the Programme and Problem Formulation

This programme built on three British Academy-funded workshops on academic writing which the Nahrein Network held in different parts of Iraq in 2019, led by Dr Mehiyar Kathem. I was enrolled in this project due to my publication experience, both as an active academic and researcher in the discipline of Politics and International Relations and as one of the associate editors of *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (BJEMS) since 2008. I also brought extensive experience in teaching methodologies and research design, having taught courses on these subjects, both at graduate and post-graduate levels, in three different countries since 1996.

Based on this experience, we initially identified the aim of the new research development programme as supporting Iraqi academics in arts, humanities and social sciences against the decades-long background of sanctions, conflicts, neglect and brain-drain that had undermined Iraqi academia. Our point of departure was the observation that the overwhelming majority of academic articles on Iraq or subjects related to Iraq were authored by Western academics or Iraqi academics employed in Western universities. Tentatively, we traced the sources of the problem to cultural factors (the question of adjusting to writing styles prevalent in the English-speaking world) and quality factors (the problem of insufficient methodological and disciplinary training in Iraq, as well as access to basic research resources).

In order to incorporate stakeholders into programme planning, in early 2022 we formed two focus groups consisting of Iraqi academics. During the discussions, our Iraqi colleagues not only listed the problems that they encountered in the Iraqi academic scene, but also expressed their expectations of the Nahrein Network. Analysing the output of the discussions at the focus groups, we first differentiated the problems unique to Iraqi university environment from those that are universal in academia. Concentrating on the former, we distinguished those problems that require institutional solutions (such as changes in the criteria for promotions, funding, research libraries) from those that can be resolved through individual or collective (such as the Nahrein Network) initiative. Confining our focus of attention on the latter, we had a fruitful point of departure to formulate the parameters of the project, which we named AcademIQ.

Structure of the AWW-RM Workshops

The workshop series consisted of a total of seven sessions, two of which were in-person and the remaining sessions online. In order to complete the discussions of final draft articles an extra session was added on several occasions. In-person sessions were all two days long (six to seven hours each day) and they took place in various cities in Iraq (Baghdad, Erbil, Duhok and Basra). From the very start we aimed to organise in-person workshops so that they would not be concentrated within a certain region or large cities. This setting also facilitated networking possibilities: both the participants and I visited the local universities in the cities where the workshops were held. Online sessions, on the other hand, were normally three hours long and took place in the evenings. The hybrid format of the workshops turned out to be effective. A purely in-place workshop series

would be excruciatingly expensive and logistically challenging, while solely online sessions would probably be detrimental to group dynamics and less likely to generate an intellectually stimulating environment. After an in-person session, colleagues and I were looking forward to and happy to meet again at an online session.

The workshop sessions were complemented with opportunities for individual supervision, through one-to-one Zoom sessions as well as WhatsApp and email exchanges, attempting to address in real time the methodological problems that participants were encountering in their projects. Several participants made frequent use of this opportunity.

Attendance, Retention and Successful Completion

Once the workshops got started, the attendance and retention levels were generally good. However, several participants never showed up and a couple of participants dropped out after the first session. While instructing the first cohort (September 2022 – November 2023), I adopted an "Open University style" pro-active, individual engagement with the participants starting from the fourth session. This approach turned out to be effective. Consequently, this approach was adopted from the very beginning with the second and the third cohorts. I believe this has been effective both in keeping retention levels, and more importantly, in ensuring successful completion of the workshops by a significant number of participants. A total of 23 participants completed the workshop series successfully (Cohort One: 7, Cohort Two: 10 and Cohort Three: 6). Of those who regularly attended the workshops, excluding the initial dropouts, only three participants in total failed to submit a final draft article for discussions.

Publication, Submission and Conference Output

While it is too early to conduct an evaluation of the publication output of the Second and the Third Cohorts, such an assessment can be done for the First Cohort, as it has been almost one and a half years since this workshop series have been completed. As mentioned above, 7 participants composed a final draft article and hence successfully completed the programme. On the basis of the questionnaires and email exchanges, I can confirm that two participants have published their articles, one has submitted a draft article which is currently under review and one has made a conference submission. Only one participant has neither published nor submitted his draft article, and two did not respond to my emails or questionnaires.

General Impact on Career Development

For the purposes of impact evaluation, we conducted a general survey, to which 14 participants responded. As noted above, I also had email contact with three additional participants from the first cohort about their publication output.

A recurrent theme in the evaluations is enhanced critical thinking and professional confidence in networking and academic writing. Almost all participants mentioned how the workshops improved their methodological and academic writing skills.

There is also some evidence of dissemination of good practice. One of the participants has held two post-graduate seminars in his university utilizing what he has gained from the AcademIQ workshop series. At the same time, several participants mentioned how, thanks to what they acquired during the workshops, they were able to provide guidance both to undergraduate and postgraduate students and colleagues at their respective universities. One participant wrote that:

> "[The] programme has significantly enhanced both my confidence and capacity as a university instructor and researcher. I now feel much more equipped to supervise final research projects, and this has been recognized by my peers, who frequently consult with me when facing challenges in supervising their own students."

One difficulty that several participants referred to was the challenge of acquiring leave of absence from university administrators to participate in in-person sessions. One participant even suggested holding the in-person sessions during summer months (July and August) when universities are closed. We tried to solve this problem by scheduling the in-person sessions at weekends as much as it was possible. However, this issue should be brought to the attention of the Ministry of Higher Education, in the hope they may issue a general recommendation to universities in this respect.

Quotes from Participants

In general, the experience of participants was overwhelmingly positive. What follows is a sample of quotes (from different participants):

> "Collaborative and respectful atmosphere among mentor and participants."

> "Amazing experience."

> "I ... appreciated the inclusive and respectful atmosphere created by the mentor, which encouraged open dialogue and confidence-building. ... The overall impression I have is deeply positive. The program was well-structured, empowering, and intellectually stimulating. It filled a gap that many early-career academics in the region experience, lack of access to quality mentorship in writing and publishing. The workshops not only enhanced our writing skills but also fostered a sense of academic identity, critical awareness, and long-term vision. I left the program feeling more equipped and more connected to a broader academic network."

> "Well-structured, impactful, and motivating for early-career researchers."

> "Very useful and successful programme."

"A valuable, well-organized experience that provided both academic growth and networking opportunities. I left the programme with new skills and a clearer vision for my academic path."

"The programme is very good. The combination of online sessions and in-person meetings helped me learn a lot and work well with others."

"This program has been one of the most important academic experiences of my career. It was highly intensive, informative, and academically rigorous. The program focused on every stage of scientific writing and publishing from the initial idea to the final publication. ... Overall, the program was very successful, and we gained a great deal of knowledge and valuable insights. I hope it will continue in the future so that others can also benefit from it."

"A very beneficial programme. The lesson I have learnt is that group discussions is a very effective technique in sharing and enhancing knowledge."

"It was a wonderful experience both scientifically and culturally."

"It was an amazing programme."

"This programme didn't just teach us how to write, it taught us how to think like researchers. ... I left the programme feeling inspired, better prepared, and more connected to a larger academic community."

"The program was a great opportunity of learning, sharing and socialization. I learned a lot from different colleagues in the program and I got great knowledge and expertise from Dr. Ersun through the program. He was helpful and supportive all through."

My Own Personal Development

For me personally and professionally, AWW-RM has been a fantastic experience.

Firstly, I met and collaborated with amazing colleagues from Iraqi universities, who against all odds, tragic events and decades-long deprivations were doing their best to perform their profession. Through my interactions with them, I learned a lot about resilience. This experience has also given me a degree of humility and appreciation of the conditions that I live in.

Secondly, working with colleagues with different disciplinary backgrounds was a challenge which not only taught me a lot about other disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities, but also enhanced my skills of mentoring methodologies in different – and sometimes unfamiliar – settings. This was a huge input into my own professional development.

Thirdly, after four visits to Iraq, I gained a degree of proficiency in my Arabic, which was dormant and rusty for decades. Towards the end of my visits to Iraq, I was able to socialize with people in Arabic. And finally, I developed a kind of attachment to a beautiful country and its people. I took an intellectual interest in the history (both modern and antiquity) of Iraq and became a keen reader about these subjects.

Recommendations

In order to improve the quality of the contents and delivery of future research development workshops for Iraqi academics, I recommend the following:

1. Given the fact that dropouts tend to occur in the very early stages of the workshops, consider admitting a larger number of participants at the beginning. This may safeguard the workshops against the possible emergence of a "lack of critical mass problem" — which didn't occur in AWW-RM, but which always loomed as a possibility.

2. Given the comparative importance for Iraq for the disciplines of Archaeology, Conservation and Early Civilizations, consider providing tailored workshops specifically designed for academics from these disciplines.

3. Encourage participants to co-author articles with non-Iraqi academics. Such an approach would not only mitigate the sense of isolation which, according to my observations, is prevalent among Iraqi academics, but also tap into the comparative advantages that Iraqi academics have. In my opinion, Iraq constitutes an excellent venue to study subjects such as post-conflict rebuilding, intercommunal conflicts, ancient civilizations and archaeology, conservation and heritage issues – just to name a few areas.

4. There is scope to do more after the initial drafting of articles, to increase their chances of publication. One participant, for instance, suggested "creating a follow-up component or alumni network." The overwhelming majority of the articles were in disciplines which I, as the co-ordinator, was only moderately familiar with. This has been an obstacle in developing strategies for post-programme support.

5. According to evaluations, participants would like to have more in-person sessions. Naturally, the main obstacle here is the cost. My general impression is that the hybrid system did function well. In my opinion, more in-person sessions will be prohibitively expensive while purely online sessions will not generate the necessary group dynamics.

6. One participant suggested that "incorporating more practical exercises on structuring arguments, referencing, and responding to reviewers' comments could enhance the applied aspect of academic writing." This point has been taken on board.

7. There was mixed reaction to the disciplinary composition of the cohorts. Several participants expressed a preference for specialized cohorts while others appreciated the interdisciplinary setup of the groups. I believe both approaches have their positive and negative sides and both can be beneficial, in different ways. While the former may create a specialized conference-like environment, where the participants can focus on the subject matter, the latter shifts the emphasis to methodologies and research designs (and stresses the methodological unity of both natural and social sciences and humanities) which, seen from my point of view, was the main purpose of the workshop series. As one participant expressed it in the evaluations "I had the opportunity to learn about other areas of social sciences, as each participant had a different specialization."

8. A session on Research and Publication Ethics should be included in future workshops programmes.