

Award for ACU online course designed for PhD students at Pontifical Institute in Rome

An innovative online writing course initially designed for non-English speaking students studying at a Pontifical Institute in Rome has received a prestigious award by leading global quality assurance organisation NEAS.

The ACU English Language Centre received the 2022 NEAS Online Delivery Award for its two virtual courses on higher education writing in English, developed for PhD students of the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI) in Rome.

The online course is among several initiatives resulting from a formal agreement between ACU and PISAI to share resources that contribute to greater inter-religious dialogue and comparative theology.

The award-winning *ACU Writing for Higher Degree Research Course* and the *ACU Advanced Writing for Higher Degree Research Course* was created in consultation with four doctoral students who were intending to publish their theses in English, the dominant language among published academic research.

The four students, all non-native English speakers living in Europe, had no prior formal training in writing academic research in English and had no ongoing support for higher education writing in English through PISAI.

ACU English Language Centre National Manager, Donna Cook, was approached by ACU's Vice President, Fr Anthony Casamento csma, to create an online course for the PISAI students, following discussion he had in Rome with the Rector and Director of Studies at the Pontifical Institute.

Working with ACU's Digital Learning team, the Centre designed a 20-week course and a subsequent 10-week intensive course that includes interactive forums and activities, optional Zoom workshops, and regular tasks, and published on OpenLearning for virtual access.

The PISAI students commenced the course, and additional weekly discussions led by Mrs Cook, at the height of the global pandemic in September 2020, before completing the program more than a year later in December 2021.

Mrs Cook said the weekly discussions, which for the students meant early morning online classes, had psychological as well as academic value.

"On one level, this was all through COVID so during the lockdown, so it was psychologically really valuable for them because research is a lonely path, but then to be a researcher in lockdown in COVID in Europe was even lonelier," Mrs Cook said.

"The students also had the opportunity to talk, in English, about their research with each other.

"It was something they came back voluntarily for every week, and they got excited about."

One student who completed the course said it was "the most professional online course I have ever had".

Mrs Cook, who received the Online Delivery Award on behalf of the ACU English Language Centre on May 5 in Sydney, said her team were thrilled to accept the award from NEAS.

NEAS is an independent body that has been providing quality assurance to English Language Teaching centres in Australia since 1990.

In awarding the ACU English Language Centre, the NEAS Endorsement Committee said they were "particularly impressed with the attractive and easy-to-navigate presentation of the courses, which support a positive user experience".

"Designed to enhance higher degree research skills, the weekly lessons are well structured, and modelled with clear learning outcomes. Students can readily track the extent of course completion from different aspects," the NEAS said about the virtual courses.

Fr Casamento congratulated the ACU English Language Centre on receiving the award.

"Donna Cook and her team enthusiastically agreed to support the PhD students at PISAI with a high-quality English-writing course, and on top of that, committed to weekly meetings with the students to enhance their learning," Fr Casamento said.

"The result was an engaging, highly collaborative project between ACU and PISAI that embodies the essence of what we stand for as a Catholic university, which is provide an education to all.

“To be recognised with an award by NEAS further demonstrates ACU’s commitment to education for everyone.”

Chris Riley, ACU’s Pro Vice-Chancellor Global and Education Pathways, said: “This is a fantastic example of international institutions collaborating across borders to support students during a time of significant challenge. We are absolutely delighted that NEAS has recognised this innovative program with this award.”

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