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## Academics' Understandings of the Literacy Needs of International Graduate Students

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### Abstract

This article critically explores the understandings about the English academic literacy needs of international graduate students from the perspective of academic teaching staff in a Faculty of Education at a large Australian university. Research suggests that international graduate students for whom English is another language, on coming to English speaking countries, acquire English academic literacies as part of a complex set of academic competencies needed for successful graduate study. In this study, 16 academic teaching staff participated in focus groups and revealed their understandings and practices about academic literacies in the context of their experiences of working with international graduate students as teachers and supervisors. Emergent thematic analysis and Bourdieu's ideas of *doxa*, *field*, and *habitus* were used to examine the data. Findings revealed a range of beliefs about what international graduate students need regarding academic literacies and language support, and some contestation about the role of the academic in providing literacy support. This suggests challenges of consistency in graduate teaching and learning, and the need for greater clarity concerning what equitable support international students are given.

### Keywords

academic literacies, graduate education, teacher beliefs, academic teaching practices, Bourdieu, habitus, doxa

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## Academics' Understandings of the Literacy Needs of International Graduate Students

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This article critically explores the understandings about the English academic literacy needs of international graduate students from the perspective of academic teaching staff in a Faculty of Education at a large Australian university. Research suggests that international graduate students for whom English is another language, on coming to English speaking countries, acquire English academic literacies as part of a complex set of academic competencies needed for successful graduate study. In this study, 16 academic teaching staff participated in focus groups and revealed their understandings and practices about academic literacies in the context of their experiences of working with international graduate students as teachers and supervisors. Emergent thematic analysis and Bourdieu's ideas of *doxa*, *field*, and *habitus* were used to examine the data. Findings revealed a range of beliefs about what international graduate students need regarding academic literacies and language support, and some contestation about the role of the academic in providing literacy support. This suggests challenges of consistency in graduate teaching and learning, and the need for greater clarity concerning what equitable support international students are given.

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### Introduction

In this article, we examine the understandings and practices of academics from different disciplinary areas about the academic literacy needs of their international graduate students. The context for the research is in a Faculty of Education in a major Australian university. We were motivated to do this research by our concern, as fellow education academics, about how colleagues understand the academic literacy needs of their graduate and research students and apply such understandings in their teaching and supervision practices. Within this faculty, a significant proportion of students doing graduate level study, including pre-service teaching degrees and research students, are international, making issues about academic literacies potentially significant for this cohort of students. We position our study within the understanding that the notion of the university *per se* is a Western construct, but one that is adopted by many non-Western countries and sought after as an imprimatur of expertise by students who function in a globalised world.

The concerns of this article sit within two narratives in contemporary graduate education for international students for whom English is an additional language (EAL in the Australian context) or who learn English for academic purposes (EAP). One is about the espoused imperative of equitable provision of academic literacies to support international graduate and research students (IGRS) and the assessment expectations that are the basis of that support (Benzie, 2010; Dunworth, 2010; Harmon, 2003; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). This

sits alongside the notion that international students for whom English is not the first language are (in many cases) paying to acquire the insider knowledge of the academic skills and traditions central to universities in Western countries. This suggests hegemony in terms of the positionality of Western universities and their knowledge paradigms, built on neo-colonialist values and the imperative of university rankings (Lo, 2011). The second is about the beliefs of academics about the work they do with IGRS and their experiences of the complexities of this work (Åkerlind & McAlpine, 2017; Elliot et al., 2016; Lee & Murray, 2015). The literature suggests that there is tension between these two narratives—in how academics understand what is expected of them in terms of the literacy needs of their students in the Western university.

University education has tended to be content-based, rather than language-based, which can engender problems for IGRS for whom English is an additional language (Trigwell & Shale, 2004). Due to the perceived bifurcation between content and language, academic and teaching staff at universities often tend to think that addressing the language needs of international students from non-English speaking backgrounds is not their responsibility, especially as these students would have already met the university's entry English language requirements. Such a view can situate these students at a significant disadvantage (Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2014). It also places academics and teaching staff in the contested space of how best to meet the language needs of their students (Pyvis & Chapman, 2005) and provide appropriate support for writing and other assessment requirements to assist their graduate students to enter the academy.

The importance of addressing the EAL needs of international students and supporting the development of their academic literacies is particularly significant for Australia because it is a preferred destination for such students, especially those from the Asian region. In June 2019, there were 630,247 international students enrolled in Australian higher education institutes – a 12 per cent increase from the previous year. Just over half the international students are enrolled in higher education (Department of Education, 2019). The steady increase in this number over the past two decades, both in Australia and in other Anglophone countries, is the result of the ongoing globalisation of higher education institutions (Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2014; Tran & Soejatminah, 2016).

This has led to a critical consideration of the linguistic, social, and cultural diversity that international students bring to higher education institutions, and the English literacy needs of these students (Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2008; Handa & Falioin, 2006). The diversity of international students is also increasing (Fatemi & Saito, 2019; Merriam & Kim, 2008), often promoted, and celebrated at the rhetorical level, such as in institutional mission statements and policy documents. However, within the culture and practices of tertiary institutions, such diversity can be framed as a “problem” to be solved rather than a resource to be utilized (Street, 2004). This may be due to Western practices around learning and academic literacies in higher education that retain an implicit colonialist set of values about teaching and learning and assume a homogeneity between students from locations (Le Ha, 2014; Pyvis & Chapman, 2005).

In the last decade, there has also been a significant shift in the number of IGRS coming to Australian universities (Ferguson & Sherrell, 2019; Norton et al., 2018; University Rankings Australia, 2020) with clear growth in the field of education. At the time of writing, the impacts of the global pandemic are still occurring with potential changes to future numbers, making it even more important for academics to consider the literacy and learning needs of a diverse range of international students. Given the impetus for equitable learning and inclusion across all sectors of education and in all modes of delivery (face-to-face, flexible, and online), providing graduate and research education that meets the multidimensional academic literacy needs of IGRS thus continues to remain a high priority (Harris & Ashton, 2011; Wingate, 2015).

## Literature Review

Our study centres on academics' understandings of the notion of "academic literacies" and the complex and evolving set of practices about the literacy needs of graduate EAL students in a university context. In this section we explore a range of research and conceptual thinking in the field, with the purpose of positioning our research in this emerging field.

What is meant by academic literacies is both disputed and potentially problematic. Conventionally, academic literacies are a set of discrete skills associated with the reading and writing of texts in academic contexts (Spack, 1988). Recently, this definition has come under dispute and academic literacies are being understood as part of a "critical field of inquiry with specific theoretical and ideological historical roots and interests" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 7). From the basic mechanics of writing, such as grammar and how to organise paragraphs, through constructing scholarly articles for submission to journals, and all the way to the composition of a thesis, academic literacies can encompass a wide range of written, spoken and performative discourses, genres or text types, and an array of rhetorical practices that need to be grounded in critical practices (Patterson & Weideman, 2013; Richards & Pilcher, 2018; Street, 2004).

Lillis and Scott (2007) identify the deficit discourses surrounding the use of the term "academic literacies" in the context of higher education systems, also noting levels of confusion and ambiguity and arguing for the need for broader multidisciplinary understandings. They suggest that there are recognised learning and economic benefits of targeted academic literacy education, but that these benefits are often seen through a deficit lens in which students need to comply with and are measured against a narrow set of competencies designed to complete prescribed tasks (Lea & Street, 2006). Thus, academic literacies can become overly prescriptive and reflect the increasing focus on measurable outcomes within many Western universities. Rather than such a narrow perspective, some researchers conceive academic literacies in terms of the needs of graduate students in educational contexts and the personal assets that they bring to their learning (Badenhorst et al., 2015).

Enacting the required rhetorical and communicative practices as part of academic literacies involves the development of an academic identity (Canton et al., 2018; McKenna, 2004). This sense of a student's identity and voice that emerges in a discourse community broadens the notion of academic literacies beyond competency with academic genres, which is based in systemic functional linguistics (Campbell & Li, 2008; Skillen, 2006), and suggests that research into academic literacies needs to shift the emphasis away from the production of texts towards situated practices in which academics work in context with their students (Wingate, 2015). As socially situated practices, academic literacies are constructed within the power relations inherent within academic institutions. As such, accepted institutional writing and communication conventions and practices can, to a greater or lesser extent, enable or constrain how learners are allowed to make meaning in a university setting (Rose, 1985). This is especially significant in terms of the experiences of IGRS.

The extent to which students with an EAL background are allowed to draw on their existing linguistic knowledge and repertoire, cultural understandings and writing skills to make meaning can be limited in university settings and in the offered feedback (Reinties et al., 2012). Academics can shift away from undue focus on students' writing and skills development towards critically examining the underlying processes that legitimise Western academic discourses and accepted forms of disciplinary and institutional practices (Lillis & Scott, 2007), including the conventions of academic writing (Kaufhold, 2015; Trice, 2003). Academics often traverse a fine line between empathetic cultural practices and teaching the academic literacies

that are privileged in university contexts. We were interested in where that line exists for academics and how they understood their role in teaching academic literacies.

Lillis and Scott (2007) identify two approaches to understanding academic literacies. First, a “normative” approach, which presupposes the homogeneity of the student population and clearly understood academic conventions at the grammatical, rhetorical, and discursive levels. In this approach, academics’ role is to draw students’ attention to explicit academic conventions and for students to comply with these conventions. Second, a “transformative” approach in which conventions are situated in relation to contested traditions of knowledge making; and eliciting the writers’ views on the ways in which “such conventions impinge on their meaning making” (p. 12). This approach also embodies alternative ways of meaning making in academic writing and communication, by considering the resources students themselves bring as “legitimate tools for meaning making” (p. 13).

In graduate and research education, learning involves “adjusting and assimilating [to] new ways of understanding, interpreting and articulating knowledge” in which “students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158). Academic literacies are not always specifically delineated; rather they “circulate unobtrusively in academic culture but maintain a readily available judgemental climate” (Turner, 2012, p. 18). This is especially evident in terms of writing practices. Some research suggests that there may be gaps between academics’ expectations and student interpretations concerning the practices of student writing (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Lillis & Turner, 2001), and it is the role of academics to help students recognise, understand, and acquire the skills of academic writing and communication “by making the tacit explicit” (Richards & Pilcher, 2018, p. 163). We bring attention to the disparities between what students need and what academics think they need.

Over the past two decades there has been growing research attention about writing support for graduate students (Canton et al., 2018; Pearson, 2017). Focus on this aspect of academic literacies is in part driven by the rhetoric in universities about equitable institutional support for student literacy development that links to an employability agenda (Fallows & Stevens, 2013; Kneale, 2008). Writing is seen within universities as pivotal to being successful in research work, such as thesis preparation, but also for employment within professional areas that require sophisticated writing skills. Although there may be overlaps, academic literacies are not the same as employability skills, but form “a complex, situated social practice through which students learn to make and contest meaning within a scholarly community” (Benzie & Harper, 2019, p. 1), and include various literacy practices valued by academics that can vary across disciplines and domains (Hyland & Bondi, 2006). Indeed, we observe that there are a range of academic literacy approaches currently employed in university education. In this regard, Ivanič (2004) points to a multilayered understanding of literacy skills that goes beyond the privileging of genre-based writing in the work of graduate and research students, including diverse forms of communicative practices (McGowan, 2018; Maher et al., 2008; Tracy & Muller, 1994). At the same time, “disciplinary norms and values often remain tacit, latent in a discipline’s texts and practices, but difficult for academics to articulate explicitly to their students” (Benzie & Harper, 2019, p. 1).

We consider academic literacies to be complex, multimodal, and culturally situated, and their navigation can be a challenge both for international students and the academics who work with them. Graduate students have the expectations of producing both prescribed academic texts and participating effectively in research and practice communities. There are further constraints of local institutional rules and guidelines (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006). We propose that it is often the case that academics become both holders and defenders of knowledge and practices to be acquired and the tour guides who lead the student through what

can feel like foreign territory that the student hopes to traverse and conquer. However, there appears to be little empirical research to support this proposition.

We also note that academics navigate the tensions generated by different drivers for supporting the development of academic literacies that are “deeply rooted in two of the most important elements of any teaching intervention: the nature of the matter to be taught and the desired learning outcomes” (Canton et al., 2018, p. 674). Desirable learning outcomes may include the perception by both students and institutions that writing is an employability skill, whereas academics may hold as core the notion that academic writing skills are part of a practice community, of which students are peripheral members (Lee & Boud, 2003). There has been a long-held belief by academics that “standards of student ‘literacy’ are falling [and] that students can no longer write” (Itua et al., 2014; Lea & Street, 1998, p. 157). Holding a deficit view of student ability can also have “deleterious effects also on the role of EAP practitioners, who are seen as sorting out the problems” (Turner, 2012, p. 17). We are interested in these tensions as they are shown in the understandings and practices of academics.

There is a lack of agreement in this emerging field of academic literacies about what should be included in the term and what this means for practice, especially regarding the needs of graduate students from EAL backgrounds. There also appears to be a lack of research about how academics specifically understand academic literacies in their contexts and how these literacy practices are instantiated in their work with graduate students, including expectations of themselves and their students.

It is into these apparent gaps in research knowledge that we come as researchers. As three academics who have worked extensively with EAL graduate students and experienced the complexity of navigating their academic literacy needs, we were interested in the understandings and practices of our colleagues. Our interest is more than a mere curiosity; it is substantially about improving the practices of ourselves and our academic colleagues in a university that has a significant intake of graduate students with an EAL background.

We thus conceived of two research questions:

1. How do academics understand the notion of academic literacies and what is expected of them?
2. What are their experiences and practices in working with graduate students from an EAL background?

## **Methodology**

In this article, we report on a small qualitative case study of a select group of 16 academics working within a faculty of Education at a large Australian university. We also describe this research as an exploratory case study (Yin, 2003) because it is part of a wider examination of the current academic literacy needs of IGRS, and it is to be used to identify key issues and themes related to academic literacies in the context of international graduate and research students. Case study research is an investigation of a phenomenon as experienced by a circumscribed group within a naturalistic setting (Hamel et al., 1993; Stake, 2005). In this instance, it is the phenomenon of academics working with IGRS, and we explore their understandings and practices in terms of academic literacies and the perceived needs of their graduate students.

We employed a set of three focus groups. This strategy has a significant but contested history in qualitative research (Bloor et al., 2001; Greenbaun, 1998; Parker & Tritter, 2006). Using focus groups enabled the creation of generative feedback about a phenomenon from multiple points of view, allowing for a range of opinions and experiences to be shared interactively. Selection of focus group participants was through heterogenous purposive

sample (Palys, 2008) of academics ranged across discipline or cognate areas and included academics from literacy and English education, technology, primary education, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), arts education, LOTE (Languages other than English), TESOL, Humanities and Physical Education. Given the range of disciplinary backgrounds, this represented a valid sample of the over 160 academics within the faculty. All participants teach in Masters' level units within graduate degree programs and supervise the thesis research of master's and doctoral students. With ethical approval, each academic participated in one of three 60-minute focus groups held over a period of two weeks. Focus group 1 had seven participants, focus group 2 had five and focus group 3 had four. The focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed.

Participants were initially recruited through a group email out to academic staff in the faculty, and by snowballing. Each focus group was then constituted randomly, without regard to any specific differentiating criteria such as gender or discipline area. The interactions and discussions of each group were guided by an equivalent set of topic areas about academic literacies, teaching practices, personal reflections about academic literacies, understandings and experiences of supervision and teaching, and views about the perceived literacy needs of IGRS in education. The guiding questions operated as starting points in the focus groups, but in practice the discussions of each focus group were emergent, and the members of each focus group were given considerable agency in presenting their experiences, understandings, and descriptions of practice to the rest of the group.

Finally, in this qualitative case study of education academics we employed thematic analysis as an initial grounded approach to understanding the data, which involves identifying and understanding emergent themes that came from the focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This inductive approach is useful in this research for allowing the voices, opinions, and beliefs of the participants to emerge without imposing an initial theoretical perspective. The construction of the thematic categories described below was also influenced by the set of questions that we used in the focus group, which amounts to a deductive 'bracketing' of possibilities for emergent themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

## Theoretical Lens

Whilst we began in an inductive way in considering themes that emerged out of the focus group data, we later turned to a selection of Bourdieu's ideas to assist our analysis of the data, in particular his ideas of *habitus* and *doxa*. *Habitus* is understood as social norms and practices that are interpersonally acquired over time and are part of the formation of a person's subjectivities (Bourdieu, 1980; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). These social norms and practices are made visible in individual actions, embodiments, choices, and representations of self in the world, and they also drive behavior, meaning making and thought (Hunter, 2004). *Habitus* is embodied both as the site of social existence and as an actor in the social world (the *field*), thus it "structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81). Enacting *habitus* allows cultural embodiment and reproduction that can mediate the field. Practice is the product of a *habitus* that is generated by "the embodiment of the immanent regularities and tendencies of the world" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 138). The reproduction of accepted practices can be unconscious, driven by "normalizing practices of the society into which [the individual] was born and learned to re-enact" (Hunter, 2004, p. 177).

*Doxa* is co-existent with *habitus* and is the "taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs" (Hunter, 2004, p. 175) held by any particular social group. Bourdieu asserts that by "using *doxa* we accept many things without knowing them, and that is what is called ideology" (Eagleton & Bourdieu, 1992, p. 113). The unquestioning acceptance of *doxa* diminishes the ability to

challenge established practice. It is important to challenge the naturalization of ideas which are the accepted *doxa* based on practical knowledge (Eagleton & Bourdieu, 1992).

The ideas of Bourdieu are important in this study as a way of critically understanding the situated understandings and practices of academics in the context of their work with international graduate students. In particular, the concept of *habitus* is useful for shedding light on the norms and practices of academics as embodied in their interactions with IGRS. Also, the notion of *doxa* enables us to identify and analyse the core beliefs of academics about their students' academic competency and needs, which are of central concern to this study.

## Findings

In this section we present our findings based on the data collected from the three focus groups. We begin with an explanation of our data coding and analysis processes. Our findings are then reported under numbered and discrete categorical headings.

Once the data for this project was recorded and transcriptions completed, we followed a process of coding, identification of themes and then analysis.

1. *Coding*. We read the transcripts separately and began initial coding work. We then met as a team and consolidated our codes.
2. *Emergent themes*. Once the codes were agreed upon, we worked as a team and coded all the transcripts. We then met and considered the emergent themes. Our collaborative work led to the identification of important themes.
3. *Analysis*. Once the themes were established, we began with selective description of what the participants said in the focus groups, using a range of short and longer quotes to give a sense of the understandings and the practices articulated and drawing out the meanings as we understood them. This analysis also included use of the notions of *doxa* and *habitus* from Bourdieu that were interwoven as conceptual tools for further interpreting the ideas of participants.

From the first two parts of this process, we identified four emergent themes (Figure 1), and these were employed as a set of numbered categories for reporting the data, as shown in the findings sections that follow. Within analysis sections no attempt is made to compare responses across discipline areas within education. Indeed, in most instances, the academics spoke in quite cross-disciplinary terms about academic literacies and their students' needs, which may be a result of the cross-disciplinary, heterogenous composition of the focus groups.

### Figure 1

#### Reporting Categories

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Expectations</i> about language proficiency (academic or everyday) of IGRS</li> <li>2. <i>Assumptions</i> and understandings about the learning, literacies and intellectual resources that IGRS bring to study in Australia</li> <li>3. The <i>reality</i> and grounded experiences of teaching/supervising IGRS</li> </ol> |
|---|

For this article only a small selection of participant responses is used, and these are curated to give a sense of the understandings and practice experiences of academics within four overlapping categories of meaning. Within the constraints of this article, responses and quotes were selected as they best reflected the range of views in each of the focus groups. The four categories were conceived of also in terms of where we would apply Bourdieu's ideas. The first two categories, *Expectations* and *Assumptions*, capture the *doxa* of our participants; the latter two, *Reality* and *Limitations*, address mostly the *habitus* within the field. As part of reporting category 4 there are sub-headings that focus on different types of limitations that were perceived by academics.

### ***Expectations about Language Proficiency***

Throughout the three focus groups, many of the 16 academics appeared to have had explicit expectations about the level of language proficiency of their international graduate students and how this directly connects to English academic literacy as understood in a Western context. Discussion points included the ability to write accurately, participate orally in class and other settings, and understand academic requirements to complete set tasks. Whilst there was discussion about the differences between “everyday” and “academic” English, for many of the academics, “everyday” uses of English by international students were positioned as an important linguistic support for the overall development of academic literacies.

One academic explained: “[The] first principle is the ability to be able to connect in a broad range of contexts.” Another articulated the need for interaction and engagement in the context of academic class work, saying that “those students who are willing to put themselves out there, and to engage through discussion each week [oral and written], are also the ones who will do much better in the summative assignments.” This suggests an especially performative notion of ‘student’ that reflects Western ideas about student subjectivities.

An academic in the educational technology field extended expectations about the general competencies in language to what he called “generic sorts of skills,” which include “different modes to communicate” with a range of technologies—alluding to the multimodal nature of academic literacies for the so-called digital age. Finally, there was a lot of attention on international graduate students taking responsibility for their language learning and compliance in terms of academic literacies, and that notions of equity must be balanced by individual responsibility. One academic in the second focus group quite emphatically stated: “I sometimes wonder: have you really understood what the expectations are from this degree? I can help you and assist you and talk with you and talk with you again and again if you haven't understood the assignment, but you're going to have to do the work.” This comment points to *doxa* about the expected high levels of agency for graduate students and perhaps reflects a Western notion of academic autonomy, that is founded on the idea of independence, rather than *interdependence*.

In sum, it was clear across all three focus groups that language proficiency was positioned as pivotal to the success of IGRS and that there was thus a strong expectation that students would prioritise this proficiency through ongoing opportunities to use English in social and community, as well as academic settings. The integrated nature of EAL language practices was thus emphasised by participants across the entire disciplinary spectrum.

### ***Assumptions and Beliefs about the Learning, Literacies, and Resources***

Throughout the focus groups the academics articulated a range of assumptions and beliefs about IGRS, with focus especially on teaching and learning practices, English competencies, and the core work of academics with their students. These assumptions and

beliefs included that oral English skills should be central to academic literacies in the Australian context; those international students have limited opportunities to employ their linguistic and cultural resources in their study programs; and that current assistance programs within the faculty are not preparing students well for work and interactions in real-world contexts, such as schools. One academic stated:

Personally, I feel that by the time they reach here, and they're here, it's already too late if they don't have the skills. So, the Learning Hub [a support service], while it's a great idea, we can't say that that is the substitute to help them to enculturate themselves. Because I think it's too late.

This academic appears to be expressing a deficit view of the linguistic and cultural resources that (at least some) IGRS bring to their study in Australia, even a pessimism about the possibility of effective development of English academic literacies for international EAL students upon their commencement of studies at this Australian university. Nor does this academic seem to be aware of the University's rigorous screening practices for international students. There is also the sense that the responsibility for competence in using academic English language lies outside the scope of the academic's work.

Across the three focus groups beliefs about an academic's perceived level of responsibility for writing and other core academic literacies, varied greatly. Some academics had the view that helping IGRS with their academic literacies is fundamental and equitable, while others believed that it is a peripheral and thus should be tasked to student support services. Such mixed views also suggest that students would likely be confused with regards to where to seek academic literacy support at the university.

### ***The Reality and Grounded Experiences***

In terms of the on-the-ground reality of the lecturers' lived experiences of working with IGRS, what was reported varied greatly from success narratives and affirmations about the commitment of this student cohort, to demonstrative statements about the perceived difficulties in working with international graduate students, which includes, but is not limited to, participating in group-based tasks and risk-taking in teaching and learning situations. One academic disclosed the following:

I think a number of them [IGRS] that come out are very capable students, and they come with this expectation that they're going to get an international degree that is going to be of merit for them when they go back. I also think that some of them come just so that they can get a visa to stay here. So, they get one degree, then they get another degree, then they get another degree, and they keep on trying to look for work. I think some of them come with entitlement. They feel they don't need to do anything, and I sometimes wonder if, in some ways, we encourage that. Not deliberately. But just with the way we have things set up. For example, our attendance. I really sometimes wonder that when we have the tutorials, and stuff for them, especially in units ... they refuse to do all those little pieces of work that we have in each of those tutorials. Or they do it very half-heartedly. I just get surprised, because I think, gosh, you're here, in a different environment, I'd like to see you engaging with this. You're all sitting down bunched together talking a different language that I can't help you [with].

In this emotionally textured statement, with clear oscillation between formal and informal language registers, the participant has focused on experiences of lacking connectedness with students with an EAL background. The emphasis is also on what the person claims is a significant level of disengagement of these students with not only the content of the course but with the assumed values of Western education, such as displaying levels of independent learning and initiative within group settings. Implied here are not only the academic's beliefs about levels of proficiency with and willingness to use English, but also an expected level of commitment to and engagement with academic work, which the participant suggests is lacking in some instances with IGRS. The academic is thus pointing to a set of subjectivities grounded in Western notions of how to "perform" the role of student. The participant is highlighting the complexity of what is meant by academic literacies and is perhaps conceiving them as inclusive of a range of performativities and multimodal forms. Clearly, there is also a problematising of the notion of EAP (with its focus on textual production and academic compliance) that are familiar to many students in the Asian region in the context of the multidimensional and embodied ways that academic literacies might be understood by some Australian academics.

### ***Perceived Limitations of IGRS and Their Engagement with and Use of Academic Language***

Within the three focus groups, the educational and social challenges of the cohort of IGRS in the Education faculty was a central theme. Three areas were identified by participants as pivotal to this perception of limitation, even deficit.

**Social Isolation.** A significant area of perceived limitation, according to several participants, is the isolation of IGRS from engagement in socialising and participating culturally in Australian life, especially through using English, a situation which at the time of the writing of this paper, has intensified due to social restrictions in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One academic stated:

I had two Chinese international students who were just at a complete loss. I chatted to them after class, and they said they didn't know what to do, and I said, "look, could you go out and have a meal, some dumplings, something cheap and cheerful." and they said [that] they didn't think that they could, and I said, "but, do you ever go out with your friends?" Yes, they do. They had. But that was last year. I said, "last year?" [and] they said, "we are busy studying". So, all those layers socialising [were absent] and I thought, these are two very well-meaning, very isolated young women who just don't even begin to engage with the task that we've set.

In this statement, the engagement of the academic with the experiences of isolation of her students is causally linked to the academic tasks that they must complete. In effect, social and cultural engagement is seen by the academic as a prerequisite for success with academic literacies, again reinforcing this idea of a broader notion of academic literacies beyond reading and writing. The assumption behind the construction of "the task that we've set" is that because it is culturally framed within an Australian English context and a Western academic construct, international students "should" move their cultural frame to accommodate its completion, a construction that does not appear to account for or include the cultural resources the students bring in – in other words their *habitus* is not acknowledged, but the *habitus* of the academic is overt in highlight "socialising" as part of a set of pedagogical practices.

**Enculturation.** The connection between academic language competencies and social engagement was understood by some participants as amounting to a need for a thoroughgoing enculturation into mainstream community and university life to overcome the perceived barriers to communication and thus academic proficiency. One academic stated:

So that [helps to] prepare international students, to enculturate them into our academy, community, and learning ... I remember the very first session, [in which] we were supposed to be talking about the differences in culture and expectations. So, what are we expecting our students to be able to do in Australian universities compared to their own country's expectation? Trying to get them to understand and be aware of that. But in terms of the number of students who attended this, although there is always a crowd, I'm sure that's not everybody. There will still be a large [group not attending].

This academic is echoing ideas shared by others in two of the three focus groups: those academic literacies are situated within a broader cultural setting and that there are local cultural and contextual understandings that are part of an academic discourse community that international students need to embrace. By contrast, this view of enculturation was not especially shared by participants in the first focus group, who were composed mainly of TESOL, technology and literacy educators, and perhaps reflects a stronger multilingual and pluricultural view of the ways that students can participate. The prevailing view in the first focus group was also that there needs to be an equitable provision of resources to meet the needs of international EAL students and that English academic language learning should emphatically be part of an academic's work with IGRS.

This apparent discordance of perspective about the place of English learning and explicit academic language support might be attributed to differences of pedagogical outlook and practice across cognate or discipline areas, or perhaps it is due to long-held beliefs and expectations, the *doxa*, about the role of academics in working with international graduate students. The focus group data suggests that at the time there was no apparent consensus about the level of support that should be offered in terms of academic literacies among the academics who participated in this research.

**Independent Thinking Skills.** One of the core academic skill sets identified by most academics across the three focus groups was the ability to think independently, engage critically in discussion and problem-solve. One academic in the second focus group stated the following:

So, as graduate research students, we expect them to be thinking independently... and we provide the directions and so on. I find that ... I have students, currently [at the] beginning stage, and they are still thinking about, "okay, tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

There is a perception here that graduate students, especially from the Asian region, have a more-or-less passive view of learning and do not recognise their potential agency, and thus the motivation to engage actively in learning contexts tends to be latent. This passivity ("we provide the directions") appears to be built on the idea that for students from the Asian region there is a hierarchical conceptualisation of the relationship between academics and students ("tell me what to do") that apparently undermines the potential for independent thinking. In this case the participant is clearly speculating about the reasons for the observation that students are reluctant to engage critically, have a voice and be interactive in their learning; and the

cultural and language factors that might mitigate against such overt involvement are not identified.

## Discussion

We preface our discussion with acknowledgement of our positionality in the field. We are academic supervisors and teachers who grapple with the complexities and situatedness of academic literacies; we recognise that this term is not static but reflects the complexities and shifting boundaries of international graduate education. In supervisory teaching, we acknowledge the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of our students (Merriam & Kim, 2008). This inevitably creates tensions because, as academics in a contemporary Western university, we exist in a potentially exclusionary “political-semantic web that restricts the way we think about the place of writing in the academy” (Rose, 1985, p. 342). We note that our research contributes to the already disputed and problematic understandings of academic literacies discussed earlier. Our findings revealed held normative perspectives that grouped IGRS into homogeneous lumps of assumption but also showed individual questioning and reflection that might lead to a more transformative practice (Lillis & Scott, 2007). We underscore this possibility of change by seeing it as positioned in *habitus* and influenced by *doxa*.

By researching this issue and by seeking data from our colleagues, we are effectively researching our own practices. As academics, we exist under the imperative that we link our teaching and our research. Thus, in this study, we explore issues embedded in our one-to-one or small group instruction of our graduate and research students. We hold an insider status and thus bridle our explorations from the outset. Just like our participants, we are formed by our own field and *habitus*, while we struggle with the *doxa* we inherit and often unquestioningly acquire (Eagleton & Bourdieu, 1992; Hunter, 2004). Our assumed *doxa*, forged through a Western frame of reference, is one of academic rigour and often hard, individual struggle to acquire our own academic literacy, which is also accompanied by the expectation that we scaffold and manage the development of the academic literacies of our students. Some academics push this matter aside as it is not within their purview, but others admit to functioning as editors, proof-readers, and teachers of English academic writing. In an ever-shifting field, our *habitus* must change to accommodate new demands and expectations reflecting the global graduate education environment in which we work, often incongruent with our inherited *doxa*.

Further, the university *per se* is a Western construct that has evolved over centuries since its foundation in Europe in the eleventh century but does not reflect the traditional Eastern/Oriental conceptualisation of higher education (Yang, 2013), although we note this difference is changing. Over time, universities in the Western tradition have been established and a university qualification is understood as a prestigious credential to be gained. Our participants are aware of this and caught in the tension of being the gate keepers and tour guides for international students who come wanting to acquire the academy. Both we and our participants recognise that there is a tightrope between being supportive, understanding and accommodating for students for whom English is an additional language, and at the same time responding to student desires to learn the Western model.

From our experience and that of our participants, international graduate students are keen to learn how to write “academically” and become part of an academic community. This tension between accommodation and the standard of the academy is reflected in our participants who waver between editing, modelling, and scaffolding, and expecting students to seek help from others to address inadequacies in academic language and literacies. Despite the extensive rhetoric about accommodating student difference expounded by institutions with extensive programs to help EAL students, it must be recognised that these students have come

to our institution to acquire the skills and credentials we offer. We are offering a desired commodity (the outcome of substantive pieces of writing) but also expected to teach the “nuts and bolts” of how to achieve it. Such ambivalence between expectations and realities underpinned our data, reflected in the many qualifying statements that participants made to manage their expectations.

We have identified the tensions and complexities encountered by academic and teaching staff who work with IGRS. Even the most entrenched positions held by academics were becoming ragged about the edges, with individual participants qualifying their own assertions, sometimes contradicting themselves. They seem aware that the field is shifting, and that their *doxa* must be unpacked and interrogated. By asking them in small groups about their fields of practice, we offered a space for the questioning of the unquestioned and taken for granted *doxa* and *habitus*. The conversations revealed expectations of language proficiency and responses to perceived deficits. Some felt that students should be responsible for their own perceived “shortcomings” while others believed it was their role to scaffold and model English academic literacies. The differences of perspectives were palpable. We hope that participation in the focus groups has allowed conversations to begin about practices and assumptions, which should be captured in future research.

In addition, a continuum of understandings of cultural engagement existed, as did the aspirational goal of independent thinking skills for IGRS. Again, these were framed in the Western paradigm of graduate teaching and learning, offering limited recognition of cultural differences, especially regarding expected levels of interaction by students. Essentially, it was implicit that, having chosen to study in a Western university, such as in the Australian context, students would buy the whole assimilationist package and learn to think and perform in a particular way. However, we have seen that IGRS are not a homogeneous, compliant clump, and it behoves academics to move from a normative to a transformative understanding that contests conventions and recognises that students bring alternate and legitimate tools for meaning making (Lillis & Scott, 2007).

## Conclusion

Our study was limited by participant numbers. As outlined, we included those who responded to our invitation whilst being careful to capture a range of levels of experience and disciplinary backgrounds. We acknowledge that undertaking three focus groups was only a beginning, as understandings were shared that suggest directions for future research. As stated, our case study captured the perspectives of a circumscribed group. Although not generalizable to a broad international population, from our experience, the findings are apposite for similar Australian institutions. We found little research addressing academic literacies from this perspective and suggest that future research might address this gap.

The implications of this study are that we need to reflect on established practices concerning the academic literacy needs of their IGRS. Before we can offer new ways of engaging with this cohort, it is essential that we interrogate the old assumptions and beliefs we carry about learning, literacies, and personal resources. We must recognise that these are constructed within the hegemonic relations that permeate Western academic institutions (Lo, 2011). To achieve an equitable provision of education, particularly the acquisition of academic literacies, it is necessary to unpack the social norms and practices we have acquired over time (our *habitus*) and that challenges prevailing assumptions. We suggest that the conversation we engendered in the focus groups is the beginning of a larger dialogue about EAL graduate and research students in Western contexts. This dialogue is about moving beyond the deficit cipher to a position where each student is seen to carry cultural and linguistic resources that can, with equitable language and literacy support, enable full participation in Western university life.

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