



# The academic discourse socialisation challenges and coping strategies of international graduate students entering English-medium universities



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## ABSTRACT

The internationalisation of higher education and current dominance of academic English has led to a significant growth in the number of international students studying in English medium universities. The University of Reading in the United Kingdom and the University of Auckland in New Zealand are two such universities, and they provide the settings for this study. While research to date has given us insights into the psychological and socio-cultural challenges faced by these students, their academic discourse socialisation difficulties have attracted less research attention. Drawing on data from narrative frames and interviews, this study explored aspects of the academic discourse socialisation of 31 incoming international graduate students from 20 countries. We found many commonalities in students' reports of their previous experience and the difficulties they were facing, including their unfamiliarity with aspects of source-based, critical, and writer-responsible writing, and self-perceived inadequacies regarding their knowledge of discipline-specific academic vocabulary, metadiscourse strategies, and the ability to compose concise, coherent texts. However, students also reported developing independent learning strategies and identifying useful sources of advice and support. Participants' reflections revealed a self-critical appreciation of and sense of responsibility for overcoming their difficulties, and a determination to achieve success in their studies.

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## 1. Introduction

One consequence of the internationalisation of higher education and dominance of English as an academic lingua franca has been the significant growth in the number of international<sup>1</sup> students who travel to English medium universities for graduate study (Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, 2017). Two universities that host such students and provide the settings for the study are the University of Reading (UoR), where 37% of all graduate students are international students, and the University of Auckland (UoA), where 26% are international students<sup>2</sup>. Institutions with significant numbers of international students need to have a good understanding of the challenges they are likely to face and the coping strategies they prefer so that they can best provide academic literacy and social support services to attract and support this important sector of the student

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population. International graduate students not only contribute revenue and develop understanding of intercultural communication and diversity in the host community, but may also have specialised skill sets of benefit the host country if they decide to seek employment there after graduation (Andrade, 2006). Previous research into the difficulties of international graduate students has provided insights into the psychological and socio-cultural challenges they face; however, their linguistic and academic discourse socialisation difficulties with regard to written academic literacies, and the coping strategies they develop, have attracted less attention. This is therefore the focus of our study.

## 2. Review of the literature

Scholarly literature has contributed many insights about challenges facing international graduate students that are psychological and sociocultural in origin, and has also explored some of the academic literacy difficulties they face.

### 2.1. Psychological, socio-cultural and academic discourse socialisation challenges

Although all students face challenges in mental, emotional and social aspects of the transition to graduate study, when this shift involves a new language and culture the likelihood of difficulties increases. A common finding from research on this topic (e.g. Guilfoyle, 2006; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001; Zhou & Todman, 2009) is that acculturative stress is greatest immediately after arrival, and is influenced by personal factors such as proficiency in English, preparedness, coping resources, and contextual factors including the cultural distance between home and host countries, amount of contact with the host community, and availability of social and academic support. With regard to the adjustments that international graduate students need to make, researchers in the social sciences have long been convinced of the influence of prior knowledge on future learning (Ausubel, 1968), particularly with regard to adult learners (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Two studies (Holmes, 2004; Wu & Hammond, 2011) that investigated the experiences of East Asian students entering English-medium universities reported that they attributed their difficulties in no small part to the fact that instruction in their home countries had focused on sentence-level grammar, vocabulary and translation. Other studies (e.g. Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Ward et al., 2001; Yeh & Inose, 2003; Zhou & Todman, 2009) have confirmed that a good knowledge of academic English on entry is a reliable predictor of academic success, a connection that has been endorsed by both scholars (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997; Hyland, 2013), lecturers (Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, 2017; Huang, 2010), and graduate students (e.g. Huang, 2010; Nam & Beckett, 2011).

Academic discourse has been defined as “a complex representation of knowledge and language and identity” (Duff, 2010, p.175), and *academic discourse socialisation* as the processes by which novices gain full membership of their disciplinary communities (Duff, 2010). The most influential view of the socialisation process is an apprenticeship or “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) model in which novices learn primarily through explicit teaching, guidance, and feedback from experts to familiarise them with accepted linguistic and genre conventions and metadiscourse strategies, and by participating in a community of practice (Belcher, 1994). More recently, an alternative view has been proposed that defines academic socialisation as a complex, interactive process involving potentially problematic negotiations between novices, full community members, and peers from the home and host communities (Duff, 2010; Morita, 2004) and the networks of practice (Kobayashi, Zappa-Hollman, & Duff, 2017) or social relationships that students are able to develop. Competence in academic discourse is both essential and challenging for all graduate students (e.g. Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Huang, 2010; Morita, 2004; Nam & Beckett, 2011; Yeh & Inose, 2003), who need to become familiar with disciplinary norms for variety of academic genres ranging from summaries and syntheses through essays to theses, grant applications and journal articles. The occluded practices and power dynamics often associated with disciplinary text production add to their difficulties (Curry, 2016).

Studies of academic discourse socialisation processes have found that, with regard to written literacies, international students can experience difficulties in planning, organising, revising and editing texts (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997; Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, 2017; Huang, 2010); in the use of discipline-appropriate metadiscourse strategies to convey stance (Hyland, 2004); and in developing authoritative authorial identities in English (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Morita, 2004). With the “rehabilitation” of contrastive rhetoric (Connor, Nagelhout, & Rozycki, 2008), the contributing role of prior knowledge as negative transfer from the discourse norms of the L1 is now also acknowledged; for example, the shift from reader-responsible to writer-responsible writing (Hinds, 1987; Leki, 1991).

### 2.2. Coping strategies and sources of support

Studies that include descriptions of successful graduate students' strategies for managing the challenges of adjusting to the new academic discourse and disciplinary culture (e.g. Furneaux, 2018; Belcher, 1994; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Guilfoyle, 2006; Kuwhara, 2008; Nam & Beckett, 2011; Okuda & Anderson, 2018; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Seloni, 2012; Wu & Hammond, 2011) have revealed that students are aware of and actively engage with the challenges they face, and that they report using self-directed learning strategies such as seeking out useful practice opportunities, attending writing centre consultations, study groups and workshops, and establishing helpful, open relationships with supervisors, tutors and peers. In a study of the use of support resources by five Korean graduate students (Nam & Beckett, 2011), they described using

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