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Multiliteracy skills of Australian Higher Degree Research students: Current situation and future prospects

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Abstract

Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidates at Australian universities are expected to demonstrate a complex set of academic skills to produce a high-quality thesis. They are required to be highly successful in academic communication, both written and oral. Furthermore, they are expected to exhibit a notable level of research literacy, which refers to the abilities associated with critical thinking and critical analysis of relevant resources. Finally, it is hoped that HDR candidates will be able to demonstrate awareness of cultural sensitivity to their intercultural communication, which would include both oral and written modes, contact with fellow students, supervisors, and so on. To emphasise this multitude of necessary skills, this paper uses the term 'multiliteracy skills'. The paper presents the results of a recent review of 24 Australian universities which has been conducted to determine the level and the scope of currently available multiliteracy support for Australian HDR students. The results show that the available support is significantly diverse, ranging from quite superficial to more complex and satisfactory, with the former being usual and the latter significantly occasional. Based on this review and the review of the currently available literature on the topic, the paper suggests further steps that would aim to significantly improve the scope and level of multiliteracy support for Australian HDR students.

Introduction

Producing a Higher Degree Research (HDR) thesis is one of the most rewarding, but at the same time, most challenging endeavours in academia. This challenging nature stems from an omnipresent expectation that HDR candidates will successfully demonstrate a wide range of skills and competencies during their candidature which will eventually result in significant scientific contributions presented in their theses. This expectation can be much more than the candidates have anticipated prior to their HDR journey, and it can cause significant stress and anxiety, shifting the positive feelings of the process aside. Furthermore, although HDR research is considered to be a joint venture between candidates and the university, and even though the latter always attempts to provide diverse support to candidates, the former quite often feel lonely and left to cope with sometimes numerous and unexpected burdens almost alone. This entire picture of an HDR journey stresses the importance of research directed toward this cohort of students which would aim to better answer their specific needs and support them during their important academic venture. One of the emphases should be on assisting them in mastering a necessary level of multiliteracy skills which, among others, include those related to academic communication literacy, research literacy, and cultural literacy.

The complexity of the skills required from an HDR candidate has led to complex standards regulating academic literacy skills requirements. Thus, there is a need for a more comprehensive approach to the development and further improvement of these standards throughout institutions (Botha, 2022). One of the first attempts for the field of HDR academic skills to be organised in Australia was the Statement on Skills Development for Research Students issued by the Australian Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies in 1999 (Bastalich et al., 2014). However, additional improvements were still needed. One of the key steps that led towards today's accepted standards is an article by Birrell (2006) which introduced certain practical guidelines that led to institutional changes conducted by Australia's Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) (Botha, 2022). All the changes and improvements have eventually produced the currently applicable Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (2013) which states that aspiring postgraduate students are expected to be able:

... to review critically, analyse, consolidate and synthesise knowledge, to exercise critical thinking and judgement in identifying and solving problems independently, and to present a clear, coherent and independent exposition of knowledge and ideas (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 47).

In addition, AQF defines the expected substantial knowledge, cognitive, technical, and communication skills, as well as the volume of learning required by Doctoral Degree candidates (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 64). However, the question remains as to how universities can check these skills of their potential students if there are no relevant mechanisms for it. For instance, Australian domestic students are not required to undergo any academic skills assessment before starting their HDR degree. This is not surprising as only recently has it been recognised that even within this cohort there are students who have issues with academic skills (Read, 2015). International students, on the other hand, who have been for a long time deemed as the only cohort having issues with academic skills due to not being native English language speakers (Reid & Parker, 2002; Wingate, 2018), are expected to achieve certain success at international language proficiency tests to be enrolled. However, it seems that even students who achieve high marks on these standardised tests often struggle

with academic requirements during their studies (Johnson & Tweedie, 2021; Murray & Nallaya, 2016). Thus, in the case of both domestic and international students, it is crucial to establish reliable mechanisms that would indicate any potential gaps in HDR students' multiliteracy skills, preferably early during their candidature, so that necessary steps towards remedying the gaps can be taken.

Due to the wide variety of skills that an HDR student needs to demonstrate during candidature, there is often inconsistency and lack of clarity in the terminology used to denote and encompass all these skills. This can negatively influence the understanding of the students' exact needs and, thus, the support offered to students. Quite often, authors state that students' 'academic literacy skills' need to be improved (Muresan & Orna-Montesinos, 2021; Wingate, 2018). Similar to this is the term 'academic language ability' (Pot & Weideman, 2015). However, these terms can often be understood as mainly including skills required for proper writing (knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and so on) and can be more applicable to undergraduate students. HDR candidates usually require support with other skills, such as critical thinking, critical analysis, and systematisation of relevant literature (Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, 2017; Gyuris, 2018) which would eventually lead to new advances in the research area.

Another term that some authors use to denote skills that sometimes need improvement is 'language proficiency' (Arkoudis et al., 2012; Botha, 2022; Moore & Harrington, 2016). However, this terminology is mainly applicable to those who speak English as a foreign or additional language or dialect, and it fails to denote the complex set of skills required by HDR students. Thus, there is a need for proper and more unified terminology that would successfully and unambiguously indicate specific skills expected from HDR candidates so that their needs could be addressed more directly.

There are a few suggestions for more appropriate terminology in this sense. One suggestion is a broader term 'communication skills' (Moore & Harrington, 2016; Read, 2015) while some authors opt for 'academic literacies' (Botha, 2022) to denote that, apart from general academic literacy, students also require a proper level of research literacy. Still another option is the term 'professional communication skills' (Botha, 2022) which aims to denote all specific skills that would assist a student to become a full member of a higher-degree research field.

For this paper, the term multiliteracy skills is used. 'Multiliteracy' was first introduced by the New London Group during the 1990s as a new approach to the theory and pedagogy of literacy and it is mainly based on two distinctive aspects – linguistic diversity and multimodal diversity. The former is the consequence of globalization and constant changes in the English language that globalisation has caused, and the latter denotes diverse multimodal forms that the new digital era has initiated and that can be used for various linguistic expressions (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; NLLIA, 1995). In this paper, the emphasis will be on linguistic diversity through which specific multiliteracy skills of HDR students will be explored.

Multiliteracy

The concept of multiliteracy has significantly evolved since the term was coined in the 1990s. Before the concept was introduced, the emphasis for a long time was on students' literacy skills which mainly involved their ability to properly read and write in an academic setting. However, the diversification of the student cohort in recent decades, mainly due to unprecedented migrations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) on one side, and immense technological advances on the other, are continually emphasising the need for many other skills that students, especially those at high levels of education such as HDR candidates, need to acquire and demonstrate throughout their careers.

Today, the concept of multiliteracy can be understood as an umbrella term that includes a whole variety of skills. It includes research literacy (location of necessary resources, effective use of searching tools, referencing, including the knowledge of contemporary referencing tools such as EndNote, and so on); presentation skills literacy (oral presentation techniques, effective use of visual aids, and so on); mathematical literacy (presentation and critical analysis of statistical information); computational literacy (effective use of word processing tools, spreadsheets, data management systems, and so on); social media literacy (effective use of available media and tools that assist in building research networks and interaction with academic community); cultural literacy (understanding and appreciating different cultural perspectives), and many more. The list is far from being exhaustive as the concept of multiliteracy is still evolving. A recent addition to it might be Artificial Intelligence (AI) literacy as this is becoming a new challenge and asset for everyone, including the educational sector (Crompton et al., 2024).

This complexity of multiliteracy skills makes it impossible for one single approach or support program to tackle all of them, regardless of how comprehensive it may be. That is why this paper argues that there needs to be a sort of foundation for multiliteracy skills development. For the cohort of HDR candidates, it should start with academic communication literacy, research literacy, and cultural literacy, which are presented in more detail further in the text. Once this foundation is established, all other skills can be added through timely implemented targeted training. This approach, however, is only possible with the whole institutional approach (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017) as that is the only way to avoid favoring some fields of research, for example, humanities in comparison to sciences.

Academic communication literacy

A PhD thesis needs to satisfy a few criteria to be assessed as successful. Firstly, it is expected to make a distinct contribution to the knowledge in the examined area; secondly, it needs to demonstrate evidence of originality, either in the sense of the discovery of new facts or the exercise of independent critical power; thirdly, it needs to demonstrate satisfactory literary presentation; and lastly, it needs to contain a substantial amount of material suitable for publication (The University of Melbourne, 2023). Scholars mainly agree on the pretty wide and diverse range of skills and competencies that HDR students need to demonstrate, both prior to and during their candidature, to satisfy these criteria. However, one of the most commonly mentioned skills is students' ability to provide critical analysis of relevant findings through clear and succinct writing, based on careful and meaningful planning (Gyuris, 2018; O'Mahony et al., 2013) and demonstration of proficient language knowledge (Biggs et al., 1999). Thus, it is not a surprise that most HDR literacy support programs are based exclusively on students' writing and/or language skills. While this can be helpful to some extent, it is mainly a misconception that only these skills will be sufficient for achieving success in all criteria necessary for a successful HDR thesis.

The fact that some students need additional support in producing a proper academic written text becomes obvious quite early during their candidature. It is not uncommon that students who have been successful during their previous degrees face disappointment after providing their first text for feedback during their HDR program (Ssegawa & Rwelamila, 2009). Furthermore, certain misconceptions and misunderstandings may delay proper support to the students, or even lead to inappropriate support, which only additionally prolongs the process of students' improvement. First of all, students may receive broad feedback that there are issues with their academic writing (Han & Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2017). This may be understood, especially by international students, as a remark against their language proficiency (Bastalich et al., 2014; Han & Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2017). They may be advised to seek some support, but the support that they are offered is often based on general academic literacy only, usually covering grammar and some general writing conventions, using a one-size-fits-all approach, and failing to consider their specific or individual learning needs. This is due to the assumption that the needs of HDR students are similar to those of undergraduate students (Carroll, 2005). However, HDR students' needs are usually more complex and require more than just assistance with grammar or writing conventions (Bastalich et al., 2014) although certain gaps in general language knowledge may be filled in or improved through these general courses. If these types of courses are to be designed for HDR students, they would need to be based on more advanced academic grammar, vocabulary, and writing solutions, and not on general English language instructions.

Apart from the capacity to properly use structures and written expressions, HDR students need to develop a high level of oral presentation skills, including responding to questions, as well. This is essential as one of the expectations during candidature is that students will participate in conferences and other

scientific gatherings and present their work. Neither the literature nor the practice, however, mention this skill as necessary, and it is not always included in relevant training programs for postgraduate students. The lack of proper presentation skills can be even more prominent with students whose previous education is from an overseas educational system that places lesser emphasis on presentation skills or does not promote them (Akindele & Trennepohl, 2008). Thus, it is imperative to include this segment in the proper HDR multiliteracy training so that HDR candidates can be fully trained in the sense of academic communication skills, both written and oral.

Research literacy

Apart from academic communication literacy, HDR students need to develop research skills as they sometimes tend to be inadequate to the level of their research candidature. The issue of research skills has become significantly complicated and still without a definite solution for two reasons. First, it is not often well and clearly defined what research skills actually involve for HDR students. Second, there is an issue of how students should develop these skills and who should assist them in that. Some authors define research literacy as the skill to access, acquire, and retrieve important information from adequate academic resources (Han & Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2017). However, research literacy, especially in the case of HDR students, needs to include students' ability to appropriately interpret, synthesise, and critically analyse the chosen information (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013) and to properly connect it to their own project applying an appropriate critical voice developed through the process of critical thinking (Davies, 2011).

Another point that complicates the understanding of the research literacy concept is that universities in most cases expect that students have already developed these skills during their previous education (Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, 2017). However, this is not always the case. Thus, if students have certain gaps in this set of skills, their HDR journey becomes even more complicated, especially having in mind the usually enormous volume of the materials that they are expected to consult and analyse for their projects (Davies, 2011). Additionally, the concept of research skills is presented differently for native and English as an Additional Language (EAL) students. In the case of EAL students, some authors refer to the issue with students' reading skills. It is often said that EAL students take longer to read and understand the text than their native colleagues (Davies, 2011). While this might be correct to some extent, the issue is not only understanding the text, but also applying critical thinking and coming up with original ideas and interpretations, and this applies not only to EAL students but to native English speakers as well. This has often been unaddressed in the literature (Switzer & Lepkowski, 2007). With EAL students, the greater concern often is how to equip them with an appropriate set of skills that would help them avoid plagiarism issues which tend to be quite challenging, especially for Asian students (Han & Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2017). These issues arise from the fact that in some cultures, the concepts of critical thinking and even more of proper referencing are not nurtured in the same way as in Western cultures.

Finally, most of the definitions of research literacy in the literature are mainly focused on the skills needed during HDR candidature only. Literature does not sufficiently emphasise the development of the skills necessary for scientific publications, for instance. Thus, since research literacy (concepts, skills development, and research outputs) would need to be included as one of the objectives of HDR students' research candidature, a correct and unambiguous understanding of what it includes is crucial for the proper support to be timely provided.

Because of this lack of clarity around what research literacy for HDR students includes, the support provided to students is not always appropriate. Most often, libraries and/or a specialised working group within the university are designated to help students locate and retrieve necessary information, but this assistance is mainly focused on the appropriate and effective use of search engines, and not on any particular use or synthesis of the literature in students' projects (Han & Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2017). Additionally, even if they wanted to, library staff are not equipped with the appropriate knowledge to help HDR students with their critical analysis skills (Webber & Johnston, 2013), so this aspect of research literacy is usually considered to be someone else's job. It is not always clear who that someone else is. Rare are HDR academic skills courses that teach research literacy or critical thinking skills in particular (Gyuris, 2018; Van Gog et al., 2005) although literature recognises that students would extensively benefit from such programs (Han & Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2017). A few research projects that have explored the effects of such courses have concluded that HDR students benefit from such programs, especially if they are offered during the early stages of candidature (Han & Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2017). Thus, it is crucial to, first of all, recognise HDR students' specific needs in terms of research literacy and then to provide specialised training that would rely not only on the technology used for locating the necessary materials but on a hands-on, deliberate approach (Van Gelder, 2005) aimed at the establishment or further development and improvement of existing critical thinking and critical analysis skills.

Cultural literacy

As already stated, for a long time, it was deemed that only international and EAL students had issues with academic communication skills. The reason for these difficulties was assumed to lie in their language proficiency. However, certain issues arise less from a lack of language proficiency than from the effect of the cultural background of this group of HDR students. The aspect of cultural literacy – successful communication of academic ideas across a specific culture or cultures (Hirsch, 1986) without native culture dominating the process – and its influence on the success of the HDR journey is recognised in the literature (Connor, 2002). However, there is no consensus on how these obstacles can be overcome and how students from different cultural backgrounds can be best assisted in this context. The literature confirms that academic writing is the product of not only specific discipline and language knowledge but also of wider cultural, social, and institutional contexts and expectations (Bastalich et al., 2014; Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). Due to this complexity, some students tend to write in a manner that is different, or sometimes even opposite to Western norms (Bastalich et al., 2014; Leki & Carson, 1997). But when expected to follow Western norms, these students often feel that they are forced to acculturate (Sheridan, 2011) – on the one hand, they are asked to disregard what they already know, and on the other, they are often not sufficiently trained to feel confident that they have fully grasped standards and expectations which feel culturally alien to them.

In the Australian highly diverse multicultural setting, where cultural diversity should be valued and nurtured, there is an urgent need for this issue to be addressed. All stakeholders in the education setting need to be highly aware of the cultural sensitivity of our students, and how this can affect their well-being and consequently their academic success. This challenge can be responded to primarily through the willingness of universities to understand and appreciate the different communication styles of their students and to use them as a strong foundation for the development of students' multiliteracy skills based on Western norms. It can be argued that if students have developed academic literacy skills in one language and cultural setting, they can successfully develop academic literacy skills in another (August et al., 2009). For this to be achieved, highly structured training based on explicit teaching and a hands-on approach is needed. Thus, what would be beneficial for the growingly culturally heterogeneous Australian HDR cohort is research training that would be based on these premises and that would encourage students to accept their multiculturalism as an asset, not as an obstacle.

Current HDR support programs

The complexity of the issues of HDR students' multiliteracy skills seems to require assistance and engagement of all stakeholders in the HDR process, particularly institutional support of the universities. However, it seems that until now universities have significantly failed to appropriately support their most qualified and reputable students due to numerous challenges, disagreements, and misconceptions. On one hand, there has been a substantial and repetitive call for a whole-institutional approach to the issue of multiliteracy skills improvement worldwide (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). On the other hand, this has rarely, if ever, been achieved in practice due to various reasons. Firstly, some academics believe that multiliteracy skills improvement is 'someone else's job' and being involved in it would be a waste of time for them (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). Even more, some supervisors believe that any non-supervisory support to students is a waste of time or a threat to a supervisory relationship (Bastalich et al., 2014). Secondly, rare are academics who are educated for and/or experienced in a

proper understanding of students' multiliteracy needs and in providing proper support (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007). This further jeopardises students' progress. Finally, one of the most disappointing misconceptions of some academics that significantly influences both academic success and well-being of the students is the standpoint that students themselves are to be blamed for their multiliteracy skills issues (Hale, 2023; Wingate, 2018) and that it is not the universities' job to assist in fixing these issues. When all these standpoints are considered, it is not difficult to understand why many HDR students often feel unsupported, lonely, and even frustrated during their candidature.

Despite these challenges and misconceptions, most universities do provide certain multiliteracy skills support programs to their HDR students although this type of support is at a much lower level than for undergraduate and coursework postgraduate students (Gale & Parker, 2014). It seems that it is much easier and more convenient for universities to provide academic literacy support (as it is often termed) to coursework students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) as in these cases, they can follow research advice to incorporate this type of support into the existing curriculum, usually through credit-bearing subjects or attached to other course subjects (Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, 2017; Gyuris, 2018; Harper & Vered, 2017; Murray & Nallaya, 2016; Wingate, 2018). Also, the advice regarding the institution-wide approach to the issues of multiliteracy skills (Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, 2017) can be much easier applied through coursework program structure. As a result, most of the programs organised for and delivered to postgraduate students based on these guidelines have provided positive or at least encouraging results (Gyuris, 2018; O'Mahony et al., 2013; Wingate, 2015). Thus, the absence of a coursework segment in PhD programs in Australia obviously causes obstacles for universities as it is difficult for them to decide what the best way is to provide this type of support to HDR students.

Another issue of the existing multiliteracy skills support for HDR students is their content. Generally, these programs often overemphasise general literacy (Wingate, 2018) while research literacy, especially critical thinking skills (Van Gelder, 2005), as well as cultural literacy, are often left out. This influences the overall success of HDR students as without this entire set of multiliteracy skills the quality of their theses might be in question. Thus, the effectiveness of these programs is often questionable.

Finally, one issue that is often disregarded in literature is the lack of an effective method through which specific needs in terms of multiliteracy skills would be determined. Few tests are used for diagnostic testing of HDR students. Currently, most of the diagnostic testing is done based on the subjective opinion of supervisors. Additionally, some institutions administer certain broadly structured questionnaires that are completed by the candidates at the beginning of the candidature (Western Sydney University, 2024b). These questionnaires aim to establish the specific needs of the candidates before the commencement of the research so that, if needed, appropriate support can be provided. However, at this specific point, the candidates might not be aware of potential gaps in their multiliteracy skills, so the information that the supervisors have based on these questionnaires might not be entirely correct. Moreover, HDR students are even directed to attend support programs without any diagnostic testing (Rambiritch, 2015). This is usually the beginning of a vicious circle in which students are aware that they need support but universities fail to determine what specific support is needed. Thus, establishing a simple, but reliable method of determining HDR students' specific needs and then directing them toward the right support program(s) would be an essential step in dealing with multiliteracy skills challenges.

Currently in Australia, apart from general library assistance that all universities offer, most have certain programs aiming to assist students in improving their academic skills. However, few of these programs are created exclusively for HDR students. They rather target students in general but are also available to HDR students. These programs are usually in the form of English language courses, writing groups, seminars, consultations, and workshops offered by language-based units or lecturers in academic writing (O'Mahony et al., 2013). In recent years, many universities also offer web-based programs where students attempt to improve academic skills on their own or with some assistance from remote instructors. This approach seems to have become predominant, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, it seems that most Australian universities offer some sort of assistance to their HDR students, but the level and scope of this support are generally poorly matched to student needs.

A review of current support at Australian universities

For the initial stage of the current PhD research project, the author reviewed 24 Australian universities to determine the level and the scope of currently available multiliteracy support for Australian HDR students. The results show that the available support is significantly diverse, ranging from quite superficial to more complex and satisfactory, with the former being usual and the latter significantly less common.

Most universities offer a combination of online resources for students' self-paced learning and occasional workshops on academic skills. This approach is found in research-intensive Group of Eight universities, such as the University of Sydney (2024), University of New South Wales (2024), the University of Adelaide (2024), and Monash University (2024) among others, but also at the majority of other universities as well, for example at Bond (2024), Charles Sturt (2024), Griffith (2024), La Trobe (2024), RMIT (2024), the University of Newcastle (2024), Western Sydney University (2024a), and many others. However, it is notable that in these cases, little if any of the material provided is designed specifically for HDR candidates. Materials are mostly developed for undergraduate students but are available to postgraduate students as well. Additionally, most of the universities offer short face-to-face consultations (usually between 30 and 45 minutes) where the issues that HDR students encounter can be discussed with academic literacy advisors. This type of support can be found at the University of New South Wales (2024) and the University of Sydney (2024), among others. Another type of support for HDR candidates who would need support with their academic writing is in the form of various university-wide writing groups which are facilitated either by academic literacy staff or by HDR candidates themselves (Macquarie University, 2024; University of Technology Sydney, 2022; University of Wollongong, 2024). However, it seems that these groups mainly serve to provide HDR candidates with a place where they can feel belonging to the community and exchange some ideas, rather than where they can receive structured academic multiliteracy support.

In the past, some universities attempted to create and administer programs for multiliteracy skills improvement exclusively for HDR students. For instance, O'Mahony et al., (2013) present an individual support program organised for HDR students at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. This approach increased students' confidence as it trained them to properly consult relevant resources on the one hand and present their own ideas in writing on the other. In this way, the gap between students' long-term scientific development on one side (ontogenesis) and their current HDR journey (microgenesis) (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) was bridged at least to some extent. However, supervisors believed that literacy advisors engaged in this program tended to cross the line and do the supervisors' job while assisting HDR students. Han and Schuurmans-Stekhoven (2017) suggest research literacy workshops for HDR students, but this approach seems to be effective only for commencing HDR candidates. Furthermore, the University of Wollongong used to implement an eLearning site that led HDR students through various modules aiming to help them develop or improve their academic skills (Purser, 2012). What seems to be most indicative of the success of these programs, or the lack of it, is the fact that they are not administered any more while the reasons for that are currently unclear.

There are, however, a few examples at Australian universities which confirm that the approach to academic multiliteracy skills can be more structured and continuous, which is more beneficial for students than occasional unstructured support. One good example of how multiliteracy support can be implemented in the postgraduate setting can be found at the Graduate School of Engineering at the University of New South Wales (2024). The School delivers a mandatory course (which does not carry any credits) for all HDR candidates before the Confirmation of Candidature (for PhD students) or Presentation of Proposal (for Master of Research students). The program is well structured, including both academic communication and research skills, offering elective streams depending on students' needs and including mandatory assessment tasks. A similar approach is being attempted at the University of Western Australia where HDR candidates can enrol in coursework units bearing up to 24 points concurrently with a higher degree research program if the supervisory board considers that the coursework units are necessary for successful completion of the HDR program (University of Western Australia, 2024). This is an interesting approach that can

provide continuous support to HDR candidates in the form of a coursework segment. Apparently, it is possible to implement a credit-bearing unit within the non-coursework HDR studies. This approach provides continuous and structured support for the students, which is of the utmost importance for the successful development and retention of multiliteracy skills.

Another innovative approach is employed by Monash University which offers longer academic writing courses, specially designed for specific fields (Education, Arts, Law, Science). One of the examples is an intensive writing course which consists of 10 weekly sessions, each session consisting of 1-hour Zoom session and 1-hour self-study for review, preparation, and assessment. While the structure and the delivery mode of the program could be reviewed and improved, what is interesting is that students are encouraged to undertake these programs as they can earn professional development points. These points are awarded for 'participation in a selection of research, professional, and career-related development workshops and seminars designed to establish students as researchers' (Monash University, 2024) and can later be recognised as a reference for employment or further research career. James Cook University also uses this method to attract students' attention (James Cook University, 2024). It appears that this approach can significantly improve attendance and, consequently, students' awareness of all the aspects of multiliteracy skills that they might have not been aware of.

Potentially the two brightest examples of academic literacy support in Australia are those at the University of Queensland and James Cook University. The University of Queensland has specialised academic English courses designed for HDR candidates and delivered on a semester basis, with 1-hour lectures and 2-hour tutorials delivered both online and in face-to-face mode (University of Queensland, 2024). From the course outline, it seems that the content covers academic communication skills, and research skills in both narrow and broader sense (including a session on critical thinking), but there is no cultural literacy segment. The programs are designed for (post)graduate students, both domestic and international, who use English as a second language. These candidates are required to undergo Pre- or Post-Entry Language Assessment (PrELA or PELA) (James Cook University, 2024). In case they do not show satisfactory results on these tests, students may be required to complete a writing support plan as a condition of candidature. The writing support plan is prepared by the coordinator of the HDR Professional Development Program at the Graduate Research School, and it is tailored based on the candidate's specific research field and other commitments during the candidature. Writing plans are nine months long (initially) and are based on various workshops. The most important segment of the plan is peer support workshops that follow candidates' current reading and writing tasks. Other elements of the plan may include compulsory attendance at specified professional development workshops, one-on-one sessions, and a follow-up PELA at the end of the initial nine-month plan (James Cook University, 2024). However, the modules that are not included in this specific program are research literacy skills (especially in the broader sense), and cultural literacy skills. Also, the program targets EAL students while native English speakers again seem to be left without structured support. Nevertheless, the examples of these two universities prove that appropriate academic literacy support, with one or more elements of multiliteracy, is possible, and these examples can be used as templates for further improvement of this type of support.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Based on the conducted review of the available literature and current practice, certain gaps can be noted. They include but are not limited to the following:

- There is rarely research that aims to understand specific reasons behind HDR students' multiliteracy challenges, especially those related to research literacy and cultural literacy.
- There is a limited number of diagnostic tools that aim to determine the specific multiliteracy needs of HDR students.
- There is a limited number of HDR multiliteracy support programs that in a coherent and highly structured manner provide continuous support to HDR students, both native and non-native English speakers, throughout their candidature.

For these gaps to be bridged at least to some extent, this paper outlines the author's PhD research project which aims to design a highly structured multiliteracy support program as a comprehensive support for HDR candidates throughout their candidature. The first stage of the project is to understand the most common issues that HDR candidates are facing in terms of multiliteracy skills and, more importantly, the reasons behind these issues.

Furthermore, two additional contributions of such research can be expected. The first would be the development of a novice diagnostic approach that would be conducted at an early stage of the candidature so that appropriate and timely support could be offered throughout the studies. At present, there is only one official test created for testing HDR students' academic communication skills. That is the Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS) created and administered at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Although proven to be highly valid and reliable (Rambiritch, 2015), and although it attempts to test different academic skills, this test seems to be quite complicated and likely to be overwhelming for the students taking it (it consists of 100 questions), but also it seems to be quite technical, resembling standardised language tests. This raises the question of whether such a diagnostic test can identify the specific needs of HDR students, especially those related to research and cultural literature. To establish whether students need support with these notions, a more direct and individualized diagnostic approach would be needed.

A second proposed contribution is a new multiliteracy support program. This is expected to be significant, especially because there are not many multiliteracy skills support programs designed exclusively for HDR students. This newly suggested program would start from a few premises. Firstly, it would attempt to debunk the myths that anything can be done fast (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017), and it will argue for systematic and flexible academic support for HDR students offered across the entire candidature, as needed, covering various needs that arise during the studies. Furthermore, the program would promote and enhance students' self-directed learning (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017) as well as a hands-on approach (Ssegawa & Rwelamila, 2009) as it is believed that these two approaches are crucial for students' long-lasting success. Secondly, the program will provide proper multiliteracy skills support for HDR students at a relatively low cost for universities while being beneficial for the students. Thirdly, the core of the program would be HDR students' research skills (Van Gelder, 2005), but a proper emphasis will be on the cultural aspect of the research experience as well (Bastalich et al., 2014; Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). Finally, the program will aim to improve students' academic motivational literacy (Hale, 2023) and avoid blaming students for the problems, but provide proper and timely support for the benefit of all stakeholders in the HDR candidature process.

In terms of structure and delivery, this research recommends the support program be delivered continuously, preferably on a semester basis, with students' intensive hands-on participation accompanied by explicit teaching of certain concepts where necessary. A combination of the approaches delivered at the University of New South Wales, the University of Queensland, and James Cook University, with a meaningful diagnostic tool, elective streams depending on students' needs, and potentially the structure of credit-bearing mandatory units, seems an appropriate starting point (James Cook University, 2024; The University of New South Wales, 2024; The University of Queensland, 2024). Additional resources and activities, specially designed for the cohort and targeting their weaker points, may be made available to students for self-improvement on a digital platform that the university regularly uses. This is expected to increase students' independence in the further development of multiliteracy skills. The key characteristic of the program should be the availability of different streams targeting students' identified needs and sparing them from attending classes for the skills that they do not have issues with. It seems that this structure, if applied throughout the candidature, would allow for gradual implementation of all other training sets targeting other multiliteracy skills, thus equipping candidates with the entire diapason of abilities prior to graduation.

The current situation in the field, with a significant lack of understanding of and comprehensive support for HDR candidates in the sense of the development of their multiliteracy skills opens space for the entire research area. Thus, researchers are strongly encouraged to look closer at the specific needs of this invaluable cohort of their colleagues as improvements in this domain would lead to a stronger and more competitive HDR system in Australia. Such a system

would be essential for the strategic development of Australian academic skills and research base in general, but it would also ensure that Australia remains a competitive, effective, and attractive destination for overseas students who are invaluable for the financial support they bring to Australian Universities.

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