

Cultural literacy in an Australian multicultural higher education setting The case of doctoral students

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Background & Aim

Australia is a highly multicultural society, with 51.5% of its population being born overseas or having at least one parent born overseas (Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs, 2024). The cultural and linguistic diversity of the Australian population is an invaluable asset, but it can also pose obstacles to reconciling one's native cultural background with the norms of the Western world. Challenges related to cultural literacy are evident among Australian students, including those pursuing doctoral degrees.

This project aims to investigate the challenges that Western Sydney University (WSU) Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students encounter during their candidature in the domain of cultural adaptation to the educational setting, that is, to a greater or lesser extent, different to their original cultural norms.

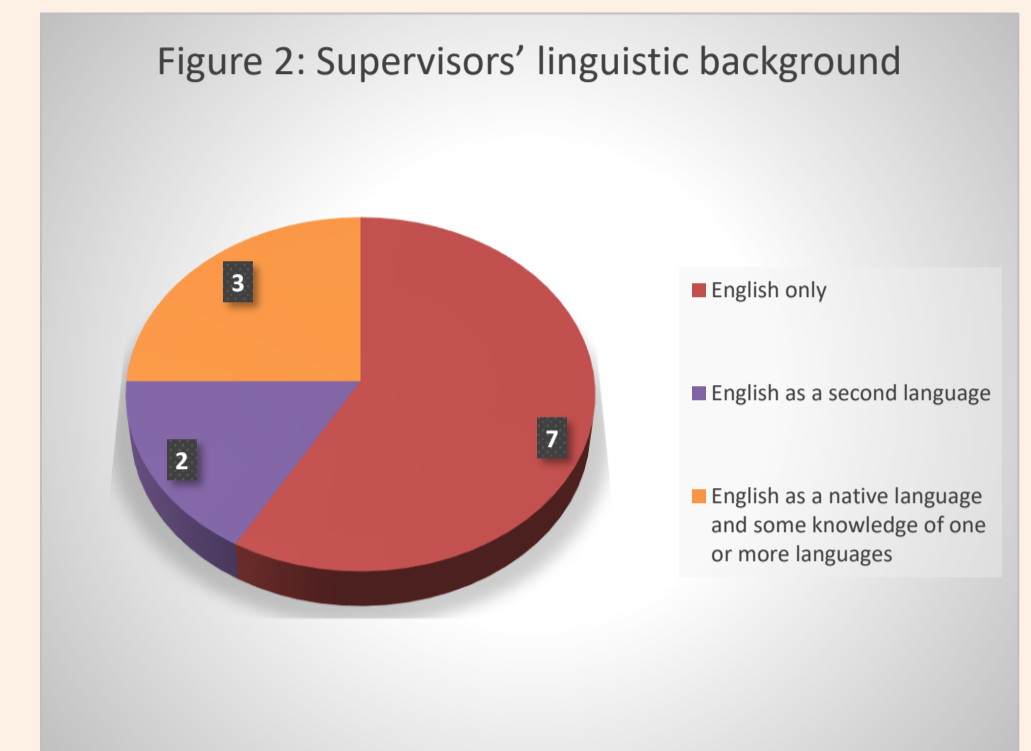
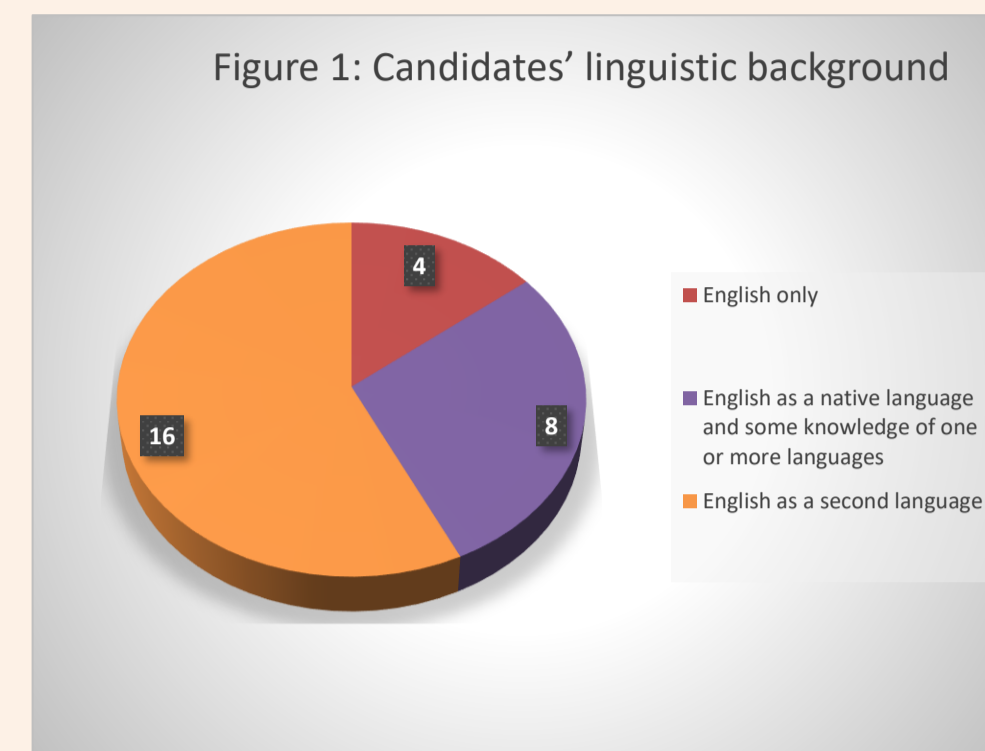
The research questions that the authors are set to answer are:

- How does the cultural and linguistic background of HDR candidates affect their candidature experience?
- What can universities do to support HDR candidates with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds during their candidature?

For the purpose of this project, the concept of cultural literacy is understood as successful communication of academic ideas across a specific culture or cultures (Hirsch et al., 1986) without native culture dominating the process. The project aims to add to the academic discussion about whether Western norms in education should be expected regardless of the students' cultural and linguistic background, or if students' native culture should be acknowledged (Schweizer, 2014) and if so, to what extent.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature, and it is based on semi-structured interviews with 28 higher degree research students, both domestic and international (14, respectively), and 12 supervisors from WSU. Additional demographic data about participants are provided in Figures 1 and 2 below.



The collected data were deidentified, coded and analysed by means of thematic analysis (Xu & Zammit, 2020) in NVivo 15 software. Inductive coding was applied during this thematic analysis.

Results & Discussion

How does the cultural and linguistic background of HDR candidates affect their candidature experience?

Table 1: NVivo thematic analysis results – HDR Candidates

Level no	Themes	No of participants
Level 1	Diverse cultural background as candidates' asset	14
	Having different perspectives & Being more open-minded	5
	Source of learning	4
Level 2	Being multilingual	4
	Using positive cultural norms from non-English culture	2
	Having support from the members of the same culture	1
Level 1	Diverse cultural background as candidates' burden	13
	May cause academic skills challenges	5
	Can cause cultural misunderstanding with supervisors	4
Level 2	Not being able to adjust to Western culture	3
	Can lead to disrespect	3
	Can adversely affect HDR journey	1
Level 1	Examples of cultural and linguistic challenges	20
	Lack of knowledge about Western cultural norms	8
Level 2	Academic skills (language proficiency and critical thinking skills)	16
	Interaction with supervisors	7
	Technical elements (referencing, ethical approval...)	2

Table 2: NVivo thematic analysis results – HDR Supervisors

Level no	Themes	No of participants
Level 1	Diverse cultural background as candidates' asset	4
	Provides different perspectives to candidates	4
Level 2	Provides source of learning for supervisors	1
Level 1	Diverse cultural background as candidates' burden	5
	May negatively affect candidates' academic skills	3
Level 2	May negatively affect interaction with supervisors	2
	May negatively affect candidates' adaptation to Western norms	3
Level 1	Diverse cultural background does not affect candidates' academic skills	1
Level 1	Examples of cultural and linguistic literacy challenges	6
	Cultural adaptation to Western norms	2
Level 2	Cultural influence on academic skills	2
	Cultural influence on interaction with supervisors	2

"I never uh... what is.. call them [my supervisors] by name at that time because it's like a little bit taboo. This is about the relationships, and we respect them, yeah... this is only to respect them. We never argue with them. This is a matter of not to make them offended."
(Participant 23, HDR candidate)



Image created by Microsoft Copilot, 27/05/2026

"They tend to be particularly reverent or respectful towards you... And I think sometimes... that can lead them to be shy, or to be... not ask questions when maybe they should, because they feel that, like they should know something, and... you're the great professor, and even though I'm not, you know, they still think you're a professor."
(Participant 10, HDR Supervisor)

As the results in the tables above suggest, there is a significant overlap in candidates' and supervisors' opinions on the influence of cultural background on HDR candidature. While the main themes overlap entirely, HDR candidates were more detailed in their responses, adding a few additional Level 2 themes.

- Both cohorts recognise that a diverse cultural background can be an asset as it provides different perspectives to the research project and can be a source of learning for both stakeholders.
- Both cohorts agree that a diverse cultural background can be a burden as well, causing various issues with academic skills (mainly in the domain of academic writing and critical thinking) and often leading to misunderstanding in the candidate-supervisor dyad.
- Examples of challenges that both cohorts have noted almost completely overlap.

In general, due to their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, candidates are often unaware of the expectations that the university or their supervisor(s) may have, and there is a lack of preparedness among university stakeholders to address this issue on time (Reid et al., 2009). HDR candidates have a feeling that they are often expected to disregard, or at least not to completely rely on, what they already know (Sheridan, 2011), and furthermore, they are not sufficiently trained and do not feel confident to adopt a new, more Western stance in their academic expression (Cotterall, 2011), which may be misunderstood by supervisors as lack of some academic skills.

Recommendations & Conclusion

What can universities do to support HDR candidates with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds during their candidature?

- Include cultural literacy into the existing academic support programs and other university initiatives where cultural literacy concepts would be explicitly taught and explored so that HDR candidates can actively learn about cultural differences between their native background and Western norms. Some examples can be the exploration and analysis of different academic writing norms (Figure 1) or of different oral presentation styles depending on the context of a culture (Figure 2).
- Provide opportunities for supervisors to more actively explore and engage in discussions on cultural differences of their candidates (with candidates and with other supervisors).

Understanding cultural similarities and even more differences should assist HDR candidates in better adjusting to Western norms expected at Australian universities, but it may also make supervisors more aware of potential obstacles that can arise in the communication with their candidates due to these cultural differences.

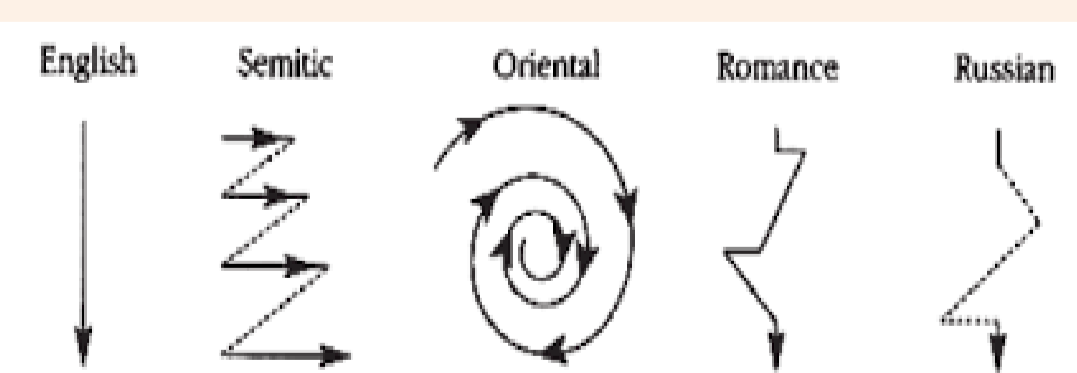


Figure 1: Different paragraph developments (Kaplan, 1966, p. 15)

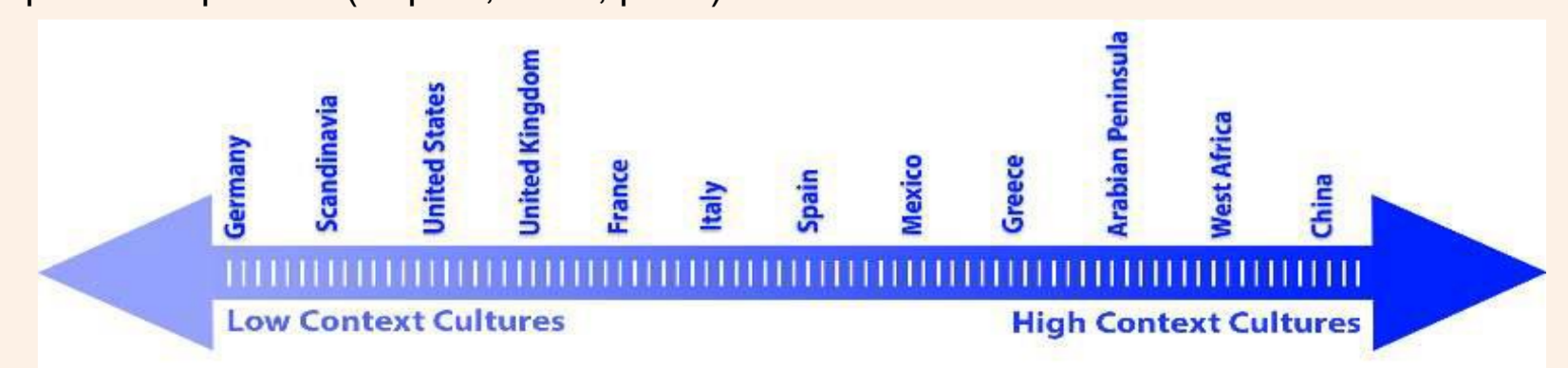


Figure 2: Contexts across cultures (inspired by Hall, 1976, p.)

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