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International Graduate Research Students: Evolving Academic Identities

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ABSTRACT

International students are aspirational and expectant of their learning improving the quality of their life. The stress from academic pressure and acculturative challenges exasperates them from fully experiencing a quality higher educational experience. Despite this, they continuously strive to learn and adjust as they construct their academic identities. While research studies provide several independent perspectives on identity using social, psychological, historical, and political orientations, the current small-scale explorative study focuses on a socio-psychological perspective, discussing the evolution of academic identities of early-career international graduate research (ECIGR) students. This study emerged from the lack of a comprehensive definition of students' academic identity and may contribute to this evolving definition. It adopts a case-study approach with semi-structured interviews and applies the situated learning theory. It finds that adopting a learner-centric pedagogy that considers student's intellectual abilities and academic knowledge, offering opportunities to explore available resources to develop a critical lens, is a sustainable approach towards construction of purposive academic identities. The findings from this explorative small-scale study provides a strong basis for future studies as it identifies an urgent need for more work to be done in this space.

Keywords: academic identity, graduate research studies, international student, student voice, situated learning theory, Australian higher education.

Australia is one of the most favored destinations for higher education (International student data, 2022). Research suggests that every year millions of students choose to study in this culturally diverse country as it provides an extensive range of benefits, including quality education, attractive scholarships, and scope for permanent residency (Marginson et al., 2010; Pekerti et al., 2020; Robertson, 2011). The Australian government data reveals that Australia has 582,636 international students as of January 2024 with a consistent rise due to available benefits (AGDE, 2024), demonstrating a continuous rise. While the education

migration began in the 90's, an identity crisis for international students has grown, as they are often referred to as "resident-aliens" by the academic researchers and government bodies due to their temporary visas (Robertson, 2011, p. 2195). Temporary visas for one to two years for a master's degree or three to four years for a post-graduate research degree intensifies their struggle as time becomes a major constraint to acculturation (Pekerti et al., 2020).

International students find academic acculturation challenging (Szabo et al., 2016) and are often considered problematic by locals (Badenhorst et al., 2015; Wang & Parr, 2021) due to incompetent English, having difficulties in socializing with domestic students and inadequate classroom participation. They are seen as "deficits" (Marginson, 2014, p.8) having low English skills (Katkins, 2021), classified as non-native English speakers. In higher education settings, academic writing skills are critical (Badenhorst et al., 2015; Katkins, 2021). International students often struggle adapting to Western academic writing styles (Wang & Parr, 2021). Confusion, stress, anxiety, and depression (Bui et al., 2021; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016), further affect their academic performance (Pekerti et al., 2020) and as structural barriers disrupt their academic identity formation (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021).

A definition for Early career international graduate research students (ECIGRS) could not be located, so, a definition was curated within this study to locate ECIGRS within literature. Early career researcher (ECR) is an academic researcher having less than 10 years of research experience after Ph.D. (Christian et al., 2021). International doctoral students are those students who have a temporary visa including a temporary protection visa and pursuing a doctoral degree in an Australian university (AGDE, 2021). ECIGRS, for this study are international students studying a doctoral degree with not more than 10 years of research experience (AGDE, 2021; Christian et al., 2021). Studies on international students, center around professional identity (Fox, 2017; Pham et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2012; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021), graduate capital formation or graduate employment outcomes (Pham et al., 2019; Tomlinson, 2012; Tomlinson & Denise, 2021) and wellbeing (Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Marginson, 2014; Szabo et al., 2016). Studies on international doctoral students concentrate on research supervision (Helfer & Drew, 2019; Robertson, 2017) and mental health (Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Sverdlik et al., 2018). While some studies mention 'academic identity', their central argument revolves around the contribution of academic identity to health and wellbeing or student performance or student-supervisor relationships (Marginson, 2014; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Tomlinson, 2012). Research on academic identity construction is limited and, in the case of ECIGRS, invisible. This study investigates how social aspects of mental processing and understanding of knowledge impact the formation of academic identity amongst ECIGRS in Australia, focusing on (i) academic knowledge and (ii) academic social practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Australian research on identity formation of international graduate research students focuses on international student mobility (Marginson, 2014; Tran, 2011), comparative education (Marginson, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2000) and international student wellbeing (Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Szabo et al., 2016). These studies highlight existing debates on the

choice-making of international students in their selection of Australia. The major debates situated in this context are around academic knowledge, academic acculturation and social practices, and psychological wellbeing. Each of these concepts has been discussed below.

Academic Identity

Academic identity is still an evolving concept, capable of exploration from the various perspectives of identity research, such as social, psychological, historical, and political (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). This study adopts a socio-psychological perspective emphasizing the impact of social structures on identity and internal self-verification processes (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

The socio-cultural framework of identity or social identity theory states that "identity is constructed internally and reconstructed externally in various social and cultural settings" (Howard, 2003, p.6). Burke and Tully discuss that "the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, and the incorporation, into the self, of the meanings and expectations associated with that role and its performance" (Burke &Tully 1977 as cited in Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). Howard (2003) infers academic identity as a student's self-conceptualization within an academic domain. Self-identity or self-concept consists of what is already known and valued, shaped mainly by social interactions. Self-conceptualization connects itself to the past, present and future, materializing itself as imagined, projected, or real (Billot, 2010).

An individual constructs an "academic self" according to their notion of being academic (Billot, 2010). This academic self includes their standard of academic excellence, academic goals, academic achievement, and academic motivation to perform well (Ferla et al., 2009). An individual's identity is influenced by their social experiences, including their "personal, ethnic and national" beliefs (Billot, 2010, p.711). Multiple identities exist simultaneously (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021), not being static (Marginson, 2014); these identities may contradict and overlap as well (Cotterall, 2015). Simultaneous narratives or stories coexist, allowing one to choose what to tell oneself and others about who one is (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021).

Identities are contextual and subjective (Howard, 2003), where academic identity becomes part of a more significant social identity (Stets & Burke, 2000) instead of existing independently. Identity reflects one's interpretation of one's experiences – learnt, re-learnt and unlearnt (Billot, 2010). Academic identity is defined as an individual's academic self-concept, determined by academic performance and motivation for academic excellence (Ferla et al., 2009; Howard, 2003), capable of social construction and deconstruction (Billot, 2010; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Academic Knowledge

Academic knowledge comprises a broad range of knowledge, including academic reading, writing, and behavior (Badenhorst et al., 2015; Wang & Parr, 2021). Academic reading and writing are significant components of graduate research courses (Badenhorst et al., 2015; Katkins, 2021). Writing a research paper, the magnitude of a thesis is difficult for those with little to no academic writing experience (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021). Adopting the Western style of writing poses difficulty for non-native English speakers or

L2 (second language) international students, making it challenging to acquire academic knowledge (Wang & Parr, 2021). Poor English skills have often been presented as problematic for international students, obstructing effective communication between students and supervisors, thus negatively impacting learning outcomes (Katkins, 2021). However, Zeivots (2021) indicates this is a myth as not every L2 international student struggles with English. Hence, the problem is more profound than mere English skills.

Acquiring academic knowledge is crucial. A graduate research student must develop an authorial voice and acquire critical discourse analysis competence to succeed academically (Badenhorst et al., 2015). Developing a voice is significant for academic writing as it creates "an impression of the writer" in the readers' minds (Botelho De Magalhães et al., 2019, p. 6). Voice shows the writer's *role* or position at school or university, *subjectivity* or ideological stance and value system, and *awareness* or reflections (Canagarajah, 2015). Botelho De Magalhães et al. (2019) make three critical observations – (i) voice is synonymous with the author's confidence, and early-career researchers often adopt a scholar's voice to mask their lack of authority; (ii) their inexperience creates confusion and incertitude in their mind about the readers' translation of their voice; and (iii) they develop a strong voice through collaboration, publication, and feedback which further shapes their academic identity.

Academic identity is also shaped significantly by students' surroundings. Badenhorst et al. (2015) observe that a student who blindly follows a supervisor like in a traditional student-supervisor model, fails to negotiate a reflexive identity. However, Canagarajah (2015) contends that L2 international students consider supervisor intervention and feedback essential and directly proportional to their academic growth. Pretorius and Macaulay (2021) argue that in such cases, the student's voice does not remain integral to the student alone; it gets influenced by the supervisor's voice, creating a shadow identity or imposter syndrome. Furthermore, as most graduate research degrees focus only on discipline-specific knowledge, and ignore transferable skills, it favors those who already possess a higher identity capital (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). Therefore, courses must be redesigned to nurture the diverse needs of students and make outcomes that are inclusive not just learning spaces (Canagarajah, 2015). Which needs a critical review of "interaction between people, knowledge, value and action" (Leask, 2015, p.18). This must encourage the exploration of academic resources towards inclusive curriculum designs and pedagogical practices (Wingate & Harper, 2021), and invite ideas to develop individual agency through meaningful social interactions (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021).

Academic Acculturation and Social Practices

International students traveling to acquire a higher degree are filled with hope, aspirations, and expectations until they are exposed to reality. The undue pressure to acculturate and quickly adopt the ways of the host country can be stressful (Pekerti et al., 2020). It is a lengthy process and can be stressful for international students due to limited time, academic performance stress, lack of multicultural resources available with the educational institutions, and racial / cultural discrimination (Pekerti et al., 2020). The physical distance from family makes it even more excruciating (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). The interactions between international students and their immediate environment determines the quality of their acculturation experience (Bui et al., 2020). The academic and social

integration along with the cultural difference determines the degree of acculturation (Bui et al., 2021). Moreover, the stressful "publish or perish " academic culture can exhaust ECIGR students quite easily (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021, p. 102). Therefore, intellectual exchanges, networking, and institutional support are essential to construct academic identity (Cotterall, 2015).

Academic social practices can be meant to include activities that aid students to acquire academic knowledge (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). These activities include but are not restricted to observing, interacting, and emulating supervisor, peer, or scholar behavior (Austin, 2002; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Likewise, participation in conferences and performing different roles such as student, staff and voluntary roles simultaneously (Cotteral, 2015) also enhances the academic knowledge of these students. Each of these positively impacts their academic writing (De Magalhães et al., 2019), helping them to negotiate a stronger identity.

Tran (2011) views international graduate research students as "individuals attempting to enter a community of practice" (p. 81) and members of a research community. Studies reveal that interactions in a formal and informal environment help researchers gain validity, acting as a major motivator for early-career researchers (Cotteral, 2015; Zeivots, 2021). Understanding the power relations in society is necessary for researchers to negotiate the power dynamics within the community of practice (Badenhorst et al., 2015). On the contrary, research indicates that while networking with peers and scholars is believed to provide a sense of belonging to the early-career researchers, it tends to create a power hustle amongst them (Bui et al., 2021). To fit-in amongst peers / scholars, early-career researchers often give-up their unique ideas for the fear of being isolated and begin associating with popular notions (Canagarajah, 2015). This is how power relays indirectly as those that are popular have the authority to override individual autonomy (Cotteral, 2015).

Against the general notion that Australian classrooms endorse social learning pedagogy, a study observed that opportunities of socialization in Australian classrooms are rare and challenging (Zeivots, 2021). It also reported that students believe short conversations with academics or engaging in other small talk have a positive impact on them (Zeivots, 2021). Despite this, most students see 'outsider-ness' rooted in the academic culture, making them feel distant and lonely (Cotteral, 2015). Additionally, "assignment delays, competition, workload, and assignment deadlines" hardly allow them to socialize, building further stress and isolation for them (Bui et al., 2020, p. 560). One of the challenges for international students is in-class participation and integration (Bui et al., 2020). University support like social writing sessions, student-run discussion forums on social media platforms, casual catchups, and other support like library, computer laboratory, one-on-one writing clinics, have been useful in mitigating concerns of isolation (Bui et al., 2020). This paper will reveal strategies that international students may adopt to navigate challenges of academic acculturation.

Psychological Wellbeing

International students bring diverse beliefs, ideologies, and values but are expected to forget their old ways and adopt new ways (Marginson, 2014). The adjustment paradigm sees them as deficits against the host country's norms (Marginson, 2014). This often causes

the student to doubt their academic identity. In so doing, the implicit knowledge discourses and academic practices often suppress their voice, indicating that the institutional discourses make students feel marginalized, thereby affecting their wellbeing (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021).

Most international students struggle with both cross-cultural transition and uprooting stress. While cross-cultural transition involves feelings of negative emotions and discomfort due to the unfamiliarity of a new place, uprooting stress is "caused by the pressure and demands placed on individuals by the home country and significant others left behind" (Szabo et al., 2016, p. 191). Few distress symptoms are "loneliness, homesickness, powerlessness, alienation, feelings of isolation, and depression" (Szabo et al., 2016, p.191). Such stress symptoms create a psychological imbalance, building anxiety within many international students.

Isolation and psychological stressors affect first-year students more than others because the intensity of the transformation process is higher when students are new (Zeivots, 2021). The lack of skills and experience adds to their confusion, anxiety, and stress, affecting them more than the advanced students. It is observed that amongst several challenges to identity formation, factors like acculturative stress, language barriers, the anxiety of adjustment into new learning environments are most common (Zeivots, 2021). Therefore, it is suggested that supervisors be considerate of students' cultural diversity when devising pedagogy (Wang & Parr, 2021). Reduced stress and a compassionate supervisor make students feel supported and cultivate a better work-life balance, further aiding in effective academic identity formation (Cotterall, 2015).

A study by Katkins (2021) found that university lecturers believed a lack of academic support resulted in demotivation and had a negative impact on academic performance of international students, whereas face-to-face interactions promoted teacher-student engagement. The degree of engagement determines the relationship between the teacher and student, in turn contributing positively to the student's identity formation (Katkins, 2021). Another study by Cotterall (2015) reported similar findings. It reported that a compassionate supervisor who offers practical solutions to help students fosters confidence in them, whereas blunt or hurtful comments are likely to prove demotivating and shatter students' self-confidence (Cotteral, 2015). Research suggests students feel supervisors appreciate 'self-initiative' and treat them better than others, making them feel seen and accepted (Cotterall, 2015). Therefore, student-supervisor relationship is a significant determinant of students' psychological wellbeing. Towards this, a discussion on aspects of effective supervision is encapsulated in this paper.

International students are prone to depression owing to reduced social scaffolding due to isolation because of cultural differences and person-environment (PE) misfit (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Factors like cultural change and new environment create pressure on them, increasing chances of neuropsychiatric disorders like obesity, malnutrition, and suicide (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). A study by Bui et al. (2020) found that international "student–university goal fit" and student psychological wellbeing is directly proportional (p. 551). It is further mediated by "academic fit, social fit, and facilities fit" (Bui et al., 2020, p.551). Therefore, if students believe that the university goals support their personal goals, they are less stressed, co-operate more, become confident and open-minded (Bui et al., 2020). This conditions a positive psychological

response and minimizes chances of psychological disorders, which further has a positive influence on their academic identity (Bui et al., 2020; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016).

METHOD

This study is based on the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm (Bryman, 2016) and adopts a case study approach using semi-structured interviews to collect data. It aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the feelings, perceptions, and motivations of ECIGR students to capture their academic identity. Interpretivism supports the study as it merits the interaction of the social world, social realities, and social action, recognizing differences, diversity, and dynamism of human behavior (Bryman, 2016). The impact of these subjective interpretations of social experiences on social realities enables a meaningful explanation of the students' academic identity (Chen et al., 2011). It relies on participants' descriptions of their academic experiences, focusing on their usage of words. Thus, as constructivism complements the study, it suggests that knowledge is an outcome of social interactions (Chen et al., 2011), which is construed socially (Bryman, 2016) and ideated through language and dialogue (Suddick et al., 2020).

Data collection strategy

A case study explores the particularities and singularities of cases (Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995), enabling extensive social contextualization to identify the cause and effect of the investigation problem (Pegram, 2000) to develop a theory or hypothesis (Yin, 1994). It will, therefore, complement this study as it advocates learning from lived experiences that are unique to the Australian / local students, presenting opportunities for future investigations exploring the deeper nuances of this uniqueness (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Semi-structured interviews will enrich the cases by allowing the participants to reflect on their experiences as the construction of reality occurs while one reflects on their experiences and not during the actual experience (Suddick et al., 2020). It will further allow active participant engagement and gauge participant feelings that may not be uncovered through mere observation (Simons, 2012).

Participants

The participants are international students who completed their PhD in 2022 and 2023, respectively from a reputable higher education institution in Australia. They were chosen using a purposive sampling method through social media advertisements using the university's verified social media accounts. Purposive sampling ensures greater relevance as it is a non-random sampling method (Robinson, 2014) that disallows generalisation (Bryman, 2016). After working on the literature review, the researchers found that participants needed to have a certain perspective on the research problem that would be significant for the study (Mason, 2002, as cited in Robinson, 2014). An explanatory statement along with a consent form was provided to the participants containing a detailed account of the research project, including aims, data collection, confidentiality / privacy, and complaints / redressal. After receiving the written consent, Zoom meetings were set up and details shared for audio recorded interviews. This study was approved by Monash

University Human Research Ethics Committee. Bright and gentle 'Clarissa'

Clarissa, a 28-year-old woman and an ECIGR from China lived in Australia for 4 years during 2018 to 2022. She completed her PhD from one of Australia's group of eight (Go8) universities (Group of Eight, 2020) in 2022 and moved back to China in November the same year. Her research was about early-career teacher competency. She completed her bachelor's and master's degree in education from China and moved to Australia only for her doctoral degree. She was a recipient of a full scholarship for her doctoral degree. She had limited experience in educational research and became a published author. Clarissa came across as a gentle, quiet, and hardworking person from her responses and demeanor during the interviews conducted with her.

Charlotte, a 29-year-old woman and an ECIGR also from China, moved to Australia in 2021. She was a PhD student at one of Australia's Group of Eight (Go8) universities (Group of Eight, 2020) and is likely to complete her doctorate by the end of 2023. Her research focuses on late career teachers' professional development. She is well-travelled. She has a bachelor's degree from China and a master's degree from the United Kingdom (UK) in language and linguistic studies. After completing her degree in China, she worked for one year there and then worked for three years in the UK. Though she had some research experience during her master's degree, she is quite new to the current field of research. Charlotte came across as a free-spirited and communicative person during her interactions in the interviewing process with her.

RESULTS

Braun & Clark's (2006) six-step thematic analysis guide was implemented. The first step was data familiarization which used Zoom audio transcription technology (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray, 2020) to transcribe data which was then read several times to note initial ideas. Second was generating initial codes where raw data was arranged in a tabular form and preliminary codes were identified to collate relevant data. Third was to search themes where the codes were grouped into similar ideas to generate emerging themes. The fourth stage was reviewing the themes, in which the core concepts of the theoretical framework were used to outline a relation with the emerging themes to create a thematic map. Fifth was defining and naming themes. In the final stage the map was used to summarize synchronous ideas from emergent themes further and locate under major arguments. The seven preliminary themes were – writing groups, academic feedback, psychological wellbeing, power struggle, good supervisor, academic voice, and academic identity. These were housed under three broad themes – *academic knowledge*, *academic social practices,* and *academic identity,* which were further consolidated as - (i) academic resources and changing perspectives, (ii) social practices and psychological needs, and (iii) constructing identity and transforming practice (See figure 1).

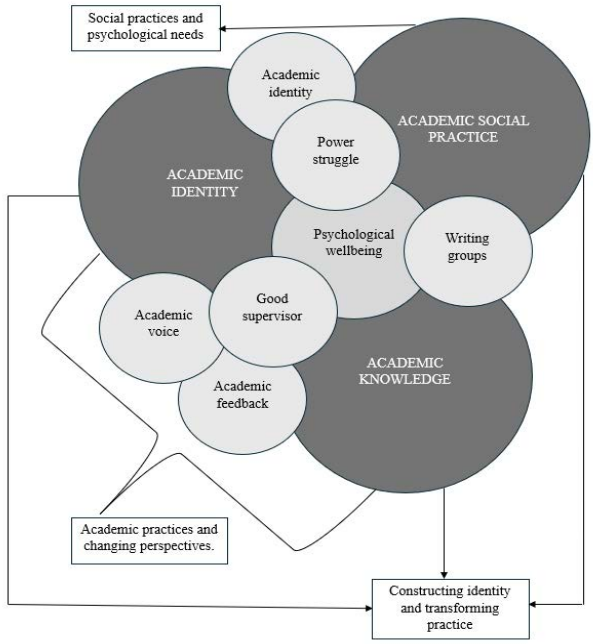

Figure 1: Themes Found in the Qualitative Analysis

Note: Figure 1 is a pictorial demonstration of the thematic analysis of the data collected. It is an adaptation of Braun and Clark's (2006) approach to thematic analysis.

SITUATED LEARNING THEORY

Lave & Wenger's (1991) Situated learning theory (SLT) concerns with learning in a social context through situated interactions and the building of relationships to construct meanings based on prior knowledge and learner's socio-cultural background (Lave, 1993). SLT focuses on creating a "constitutive role in learning for improvisation, actual cases of interaction, and emergent processes which cannot be reduced to generalized structures", thereby rejecting notions of "valid social behavior" and "prefabricated codes and structures" of acceptable social behavior (Hanks, 1991, p.16). SLT indicates that learning is a process of continuous social interaction and meaning construction to negotiate an identity and become a competent member of the community (Lave 1993). SLT argues that – (i) learning is socially contextualized; (ii) collaborative learning spaces contribute to effective learning; and (iii) learning is not just about acquiring skills, it is a journey of acquiring identities (Lave, 1993; Wenger 1998).

There are two foundational concepts of SLT – (i) Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) and (ii) Communities of Practice (CoP). LPP is defined as the process of 'newcomers' becoming a part of an existing community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.29). It

concerns the 'activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice' that are within a particular learning context (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.29). 'Legitimate' implies a sense of belonging for the newcomers; 'peripheral' suggests existence of multiple ways / perspectives / role / lens of interacting with the social world; and 'participant' is ECIGR student (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It also means, more directly, that newcomers are not yet a central 'player' in the CoP because they are not yet expert, hence – peripheral, not central. Furthermore, the concept of 'legitimate peripherality' also implicates power relations in social structures, thus determining the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the newcomer (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.36) with respect to experts of the community. Therefore, they must be acknowledged as a new (and welcomed) member of the CoP.

CoP is defined as the joint enterprise of persons with similar sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, and styles bound together as a community, with a common focus and purpose (Wenger, 1998,2000). Members become part of CoP because of a shared passion and commitment and benefit from the knowledge exchange to further build academic capabilities (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The member chooses to remain a part of the community till they identify with its values and goals (Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) and may leave when their personal values and goals change, and no longer align with the community, resulting in a change of identity and potentially, a loss of identity. Knowing involves two components. First, the competence established over time or what it means to be a competent member of the community, and second, the new experiences in a particular social context or community of practice (Wenger, 2000). Therefore, being a part of a CoP allows an interplay of competence and experience through "mutual engagement", allowing the development or potential loss of identity (Wenger, 2000, p.229)

Lave & Wenger's (1991) SLT provides a critical lens for our research which is focused on investigating the academic identity of ECIGR students. First, influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, SLT takes a constructivist-interpretivist stance to data analysis (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 1993; Wenger 1998) because of the shared core belief of socially situated learning. Second, SLT views learners as active agents of the learning environment which allows them greater autonomy to interact with the social world and construct meanings of their experiences (Bada & Olusegun, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stake, 2010). Third, it distinguishes the learning process of "newcomers" and "old-timers" in a particular learning context (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). Finally, SLT discusses the importance of constructing identity to become a 'legitimate' part of the 'community' (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which in our study will contribute to the discussion of developing competencies and simultaneity of learning and identity construction.

In Figure 2, the green circle represents the community of practice for PhD students. The yellow box marked early-career international graduate research students (ECIGR) represents the "newcomers" and green box marked 'Experts/Scholars/Supervisors/ Seniors/Advanced peers represents experienced researchers and academics in the field. Using the analogy of traffic lights, the yellow box represents the process of adopting values, goals and identity of the PhD community and the yellow box represents the established values, goals and identity of experienced academics (Lave, 1993; Wenger, 2000). However, this difference may in many instances create strong positive or negative power dynamics between them (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, as illustrated in Figure 2, it is upon the ECIGR students to interact with experts to build relationships and for the latter to make them feel welcome by supporting and helping them establish common values

while constructing their academic identity (Wenger, 2000). Through this collaborative space representative of a community of practice established with ECIGR students, helps them establish their competencies by increasing their sense of belongingness leading to a stronger transformative academic identity (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

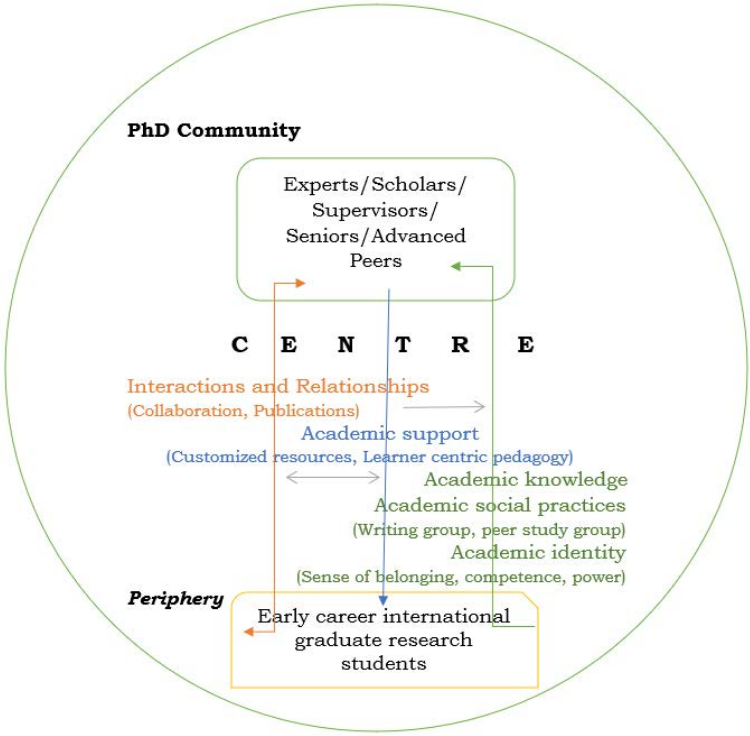

Figure 2: Situated Learning Toward Academic Identity

Note: Figure 2 represents concepts of LPP and CoP from Lave and Wenger's (1991) SLT demonstrating the journey of early-career international graduate research students toward academic identity.

DISCUSSION

Significant research in social psychology indicates that learning is socially constructed (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Individuals learn by making meaning of what is already known (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They use personal experiences, which are validated through social interactions and negotiations (Honebein, 1996) to draw meaningful conclusions (Bada & Olusegun, 2015; Honebein, 1996). New knowledge through interactions with social agents, such as people, nations, organizations, cultures,

and ideologies, all influence the learners' learning outcomes. The quality of the learners' social experience contributes directly to knowledge assimilation and accommodation (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Assimilation allows learners to "incorporate new experiences into old experiences" to develop their thinking, clear misunderstandings, evaluate their knowledge and alter perceptions, whereas accommodation requires learners to alter their expectations and adjust their thinking according to the external world (Bada & Olusegun, 2015, p.67). Hence, learning is more than a mere gathering of information; it is constructing an identity within a dynamic phenomenon (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Academic resources and changing perspectives

Previous knowledge and socio-cultural experiences guide ECIGR students' thoughts, behavior, and feelings when faced with new academic, social structures and practices in Australia (Marginson, 2007,2014; Pekerti et al., 2020). The findings from this small-scale study revealed that the evident linguistic and cultural difference between China and Australia posed several acculturation challenges for Clarissa and Charlotte, as the "status of expert or novice tends to be related to their proficiency level in English" (Wingate & Harper, 2021, p.1).

Charlotte said that incompetent English often gets L2 academics branded as incompetent academics. Charlotte indicated that her challenge with academic writing was not related to developing ideas or forming critical arguments, the challenge was doing so in English. In other words, she was linguistically challenged with the 'English' in English academic writing (Wang & Parr, 2021). Clarissa indicated that as an L2 English speaker and early-career researcher from China, it was difficult to map the gaps between Chinese and English academic literature. However, according to Clarissa, learning to formulate critical arguments in English was "good for her" as it would help her secure an academic job in China. Charlotte indicated that sometimes L2 English-speaking ECIGR students lack confidence due to poor English skills and are unable to negotiate their ideas using academically accepted (English) language, "…they are often graded lower than English-speaking peers". She calls this "discrimination" because "international students are not stupid", they are "multilingual". This is an issue that needs to be further investigated and explored at an institutional level across Australian higher education institutions to be reasonably understood and addressed by supervisors and other academic support staff at the local, individual student level. International students often struggle due to lack of adequate academic support as an outcome of inadequate understanding of multilingual or L2 English students, adding more hurdles to their academic journey, stated Clarissa.

Clarissa found 'Google Scholar' an effective tool for searching relevant literature. She stressed that to write a "compelling argument", reading other literary sources like policy documents or government publications besides academic journals was "…the way to go". She indicates that while use of google scholar or reading literary resources is common amongst academic researchers, it needs some practice and skills to generate relevant publications and construct meaningful arguments. Her struggles are further affirmed as she comments that she "expanded her thesis" after multiple readings of academic topics similar to her thesis. She felt that her academic writing skills developed after she started her PhD in Australia, "letting her share ideas with Western people". She felt confident and optimistic

as honing these skills would improve her employment prospects in China. An Australian PhD is held in high regards in several countries, especially ones that do not speak English as their first language and as indicated by both these students was one of the major reasons for high enrolment of international students into Australian universities every year contributing billion dollars each year to the Australian economy (Pekerti et.al., 2020). This would, therefore, require the Australian higher education sector to take cognizant responsibility towards equipping international students with quality educational experience that grows not just their academic knowledge but also their academic identity while engaging in active collaborative academic social practices. The quality framework to attest the curriculum and pedagogical approaches for these PhD programs that accept international students must be culturally responsive, which is achievable when voices of ECIGR students and their doctoral supervisors along with academic support staff is heard. Students must take responsibility to look for available support – both academic and social support in the universities and the community at large and become active in these groups. Universities have PhD hubs and international student advocacy and support groups that host several academic and social events to help students belong – providing opportunities to meet new people, find others that may be from similar background, make friends, learn and share about culture, and learn about available services. ECIGR students must avail themselves of these opportunities to help themselves.

Mentoring from supervisors and peer feedback are important for ECIGR and PhD students. Therefore, supervisors and academic support staff may work towards considerations made towards the stylistic deviations of academic writing in students' native language and regular English to create a learner-centric pedagogy with customizability (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021). Clarissa suggested courses designed to help ECIGR students must not be limited by language barriers. Supervisors and student support teams must create inclusive curriculums prioritizing ECIGR students' needs (Tran, 2011) to help them develop their *'sense of belonging' in the center - not at the periphery* (See Figure 2). Curriculums that are focused on creating professionally competent individuals, characterized by implications of social and cultural diversity and considers student perspectives / feedback and are needs based curriculums, capable of replication, to suit students with diverse learning styles, additional needs, undergraduate programs, postgraduate programs (Leask, 2015). Available academic support specific for ECIGR students must be evaluated to understand its effectiveness focused on accessibility, current access rate and services accessed.

Clarissa indicated having cultural similarities with supervisors eased her anxiety as they could understand her easily. For instance, when it was difficult for her to narrow the gap between Chinese practices and West(ern) dialogue, her supervisors suggested strategies and exercises to remove those hurdles. Charlotte said, "I love my supervisors…they are good supervisors who are considerate of my needs and always motivate me to do better". She had found that academic positions in a university (like a Professoriate) did not make one a good supervisor; instead, the relational caring and consideration of students did. She mentioned that getting "culture-related critical comments" on her writing was "super helpful". In essence, both participants emphasized socio-cultural understanding as a catalyst to effective resource identification and reduced

academic stress, resulting in higher *academic self-conception* and improved academic performance. As each student has a unique learning style, some students may need more assistance than others (Cotteral, 2015). Supervisor's consideration of students' background and adjustments to the available academic resources paves the way for effective academic acculturation (Tran, 2011). This further enables students' interaction with available academic resources and improves participation in academic social practices like writing groups and peer study groups without hesitation, thus changing perspectives towards a stronger self-concept or academic identity (Refer to the left pointing grey arrow in Figure 2).

Social practices and psychological needs

ECIGR students wish to 'belong' to the community and are often eager to collaborate with the experts. However, publishing with existing scholars of the community (See Figure 2) can be difficult as they lack confidence and fear rejection (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021). This hesitation may be due to a lack of self-belief, a feeling of incompetence (Wingate & Harper, 2021) and a weak sense of belonging (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Charlotte indicated that "the PhD students' community is a platform for PhD students to meet regularly and a source of great social support". She indicated that social writing groups increased productivity and provided opportunities to collaborate with likeminded researchers. She said, "I think, especially, for ECIGR students, we have a strong eager(ness) to collaborate with others, because we know we're not that competent in every aspect of academic things, for example, like publishing or writing". Clarissa also shared similar views and indicated she preferred studying with peers, participating in student writing groups and library support sessions. These social writing / academic sessions acted as psychological benefactors for Clarissa and Charlotte who were struggling with homesickness, loneliness, and depression. Clarissa said that she often felt lonely while writing her thesis in her "small room", suggesting it lacked the warmth of a home because she had no family to support her, which made her want to "finish quickly to go back to China". Charlotte described her doctoral journey to be full of "isolation, depression, homesickness, excitement, and achievement" and said that her confidence would boost from external validations from her supervisors and advanced peers.

Academic pressure and PhD milestones, acculturation stress, homesickness, anxiety, and depression from isolation due to Covid-19 restrictions, and fear of being unsuccessful in academia (Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2021) were emotionally exhausting for Clarissa and Charlotte. They indicated that socializing with other ECIGR students, advanced peers and supervisors was relieving as they could see that although each person had different struggles, there was support and motivation extended towards each other. These sessions served each person well, as it meant different things for different people. For ECIGR students it was about learning from the works of experts to understand the nuances of their work as well as locate common grounds for collaboration (Wenger, 1998). For instance, working as a research assistant with experts is known to legitimize the peripheral vision of students, broadening their perspectives, thus providing opportunities for development of academic competencies (Lave & Wenger, 1991) focusing on developing competences has

been proven to accelerate the learning process in most mentor-apprentice contexts (Wenger, 2000). Such collaborations promote knowledge sharing and mutual learning, fostering relationships between ECIGR students and experts (Please refer to the orange arrow in Figure 2), towards new discourses of language, culture, and identity (Tran & Pham, 2015). Consequently, increasing community participation of ECIGR students develops adequate competences to help them in becoming *'central' to the community* (See green arrow, Figure 2). The desire and intent to *belong* is very high amongst ECIGR students and so is their willingness to collaborate and network with scholars or practitioners in their field to be able to negotiate a stronger identity – one that is not just a shadow or mirror image, but one that is authentic and original to their true self – all this while navigating their social and psychological needs.

Constructing identity and transforming practice

Early-career researchers are often criticized for not having a strong independent voice (Botelho De Magalhães et al., 2019). Their voice is generally influenced by supervisors or scholars in the community (Canagarajah, 2015). It takes time to understand one's agency, so the voice that shapes from one's experiences and self-advocacy, also evolves slowly (Stake, 2010). Clarissa indicated that she draws from her supervisor's academic identity while bringing in her own ideas from her experiences before and during her PhD to make her unique academic identity. Charlotte shared that voice is a way of nurturing, expressing, and reinforcing one's academic identity. Recalling her initial supervisor meetings, Charlotte said she "couldn't say much, only agree on what they said" but now she can negotiate her ideas effectively and disagree with them as she is better read and learning the nuances of developing strong arguments from the CoP. Clarissa and Charlotte were developing their academic voice while constructing academic identities from socio-academic and socio-psychological experiences during their interactions with supervisors, peers and other scholars.

Identity and voice influence each other. As individuals possess multiple overlapping identities (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021), they are likely to have more than one voice. Clarissa and Charlotte indicate that it is difficult for L2 speaking ECIGR students to negotiate their academic voice with persons of dissimilar/unfamiliar cultural background. This sometimes means that ECIGR students may be required to shift/evolve their identities to voice for "academic gains" (Tran, 2011, p. 86) like better grades or community participation (Wenger, 1998). However, one may develop an imposter syndrome which is one's tendency of self-doubt despite their achievements or skills, due to the lack of relevant experience and knowledge (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). So, academic voice must be developed with patience, such that it can withstand unreasonable opinions, judgements, or criticisms, which will then profess an even stronger academic identity.

A significant finding emerging from the insights of both participants is that learning is not merely about acquiring academic skills or collaborating with experts, scholars or peers. It is about acquiring an identity in this space. Identity construction is central to academic careers of newcomers / ECIGR students (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As SLT contends all learning is socially situated and no learning holds meaning if separated from context, it can be argued that identity develops during learning (Smith, 1999; Wenger et al., 2002). Learning and developing a sense of identity essentially is the "same phenomenon" (Lave

& Wenger, 1991, p. 115). Further, as Charlotte said, "we cannot eliminate our own lens", ECIGR students must not disregard their views, thoughts or opinions while entering a CoP. In essence, ECIGR students must build on their existing knowledge and identities as they enter the CoP and then grow themselves further moving away from the periphery to the center over time (See Figure 2). Clarissa indicates that the influence of supervisors and scholars can sometimes force ECIGR students to change their identities significantly due to various reasons like easier entry / acceptance in the community, more relatability with the field of research or availability of academic resources for the ease of completion of the thesis. The findings suggest that ECIGR students often completely adapt to a new identity with only a few who negotiate a new identity (Clarissa; Charlotte). These identities and resulting voices create conflicts amongst the students and experts (Wenger et al., 2002). Therefore, ECIGR students negotiate academic identity through legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) to become part of the CoP (Honebein, 1996) as they constantly undergo assimilation and accommodation (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). This provides them with choices between remaining true to themselves and voice their ideas and opinions or shifting their identity and merge their voices with experts in their CoP. Therefore, learning is valuable and practical if it contributes to more than mere academic skills (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). It must also contribute to transferable skills and stimulate socio-psychological needs of students towards developing their academic identity.

Conclusion and Future Implications

This small-scale study focussed on exploring the impact of academic knowledge and academic social practices on academic identity formation of international graduate research students within the context of Australian higher education. The study involved investigating two cases of Clarissa and Charlotte, who shared their perspectives from their lived experiences as ECIGR students at an Australian higher education institution. Three significant exploratory findings emerging through this study were (i) academic reading and writing is difficult for L2 ECIGR students and therefore they appreciate constructive feedback from supervisors, peers, senior academics and publishers to improve academic skills; (ii) supervisors cognizant of students' diverse backgrounds could positively influence their student's doctoral journey which points at the direct link between academic success and psycho- sociological wellbeing; (iii) ECIGR students find it challenging to construct an identity separate from or independent of their supervisors, scholars or peers due to inadequate academic experience and socio-psychological barriers.

This study presents three arguments. Firstly, in developing ECIGR students' academic identity, having supportive supervisors and PhD academic support staff who use a learner-centric pedagogy who can acknowledge limitations in L2 students' English academic reading and writing abilities making provision of practical strategies for improvement without disregarding their existing intellectual abilities and academic knowledge is central to academic identity formation. Secondly, ECIGR students in Australian higher education institutions require supportive individualised structural enablers that assist them in building their academic knowledge and understanding of their research study throughout their journey. This is due to the absence of formal knowledge-based courses undertaken before or at the start of their doctoral degree which is essential for ECIGR students who in most cases have limited access to relevant academic resources and thinking prior to

enrolling into their doctoral degree. Thirdly, doctoral degrees limited to delivering disconnected academic skill development or presenting few opportunities of academic collaboration besides the student-supervisor interactions on the research study are not sufficiently providing spaces for the construction of purposive academic identities amongst ECIGRs.

A limitation of this study is that it is an explorative small-scale study that has focused on two ECGIR students due to time and financial constraints. Another limitation is that this study does not present a contrast between ECIGR and local student experiences due to its limited scope. Through further large-scale studies it is proposed that an investigation of experiences of ECIGR and local students across Australia be conducted to understand the nuanced distinctions in their journey towards the development of their academic identity. This may further be extended to investigate the power dynamic within the supervisor-student relationship for ECGIR students in particular as they continue to shape and build their academic identity. Future large-scale research studies are also recommended that closely examine the relationship of academic voice and academic identity and their influence that they have on each other.

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