Article

# Graduate Transitions: Canadian Master's and PhD Writing Experiences

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## Abstract

This exploratory study researches the experiences of Canadian graduate students as they pursue writing tasks for their degree. A better understanding of the difficulties Canadian graduate students experience in completing key components of their programs, as well as of the supports both existing and needed, could enable supervisors, administrators, and graduate students themselves to more expediently overcome barriers to timely degree completion. The research uses a case study design based on qualitative focus group interviews to provide detailed information regarding both interdisciplinary and single discipline Master's and PhD students' perceived experiences with their academic writing tasks and available supports. The approach is informed by academic literacy theory. Graduate students who participated in this study identified transitions related to the pressure to publish and professionalize, and to the misalignments  between their own and supervisory and institutional expectations, which resulted in some interrogation of institutional norms. They utilized Writing Centre, online and supervisory supports, but called for additional ongoing and peer support. The study has implications for the development of new, collaborative, and peer-based writing supports, as well as identifying future research areas related to interdisciplinary degrees and continuing stages of transition.

## Introduction

Graduate students' timely completion and retention rates are a documented concern across academia (DiPierro, 2012; Tamburri, 2013). In Canadian universities, doctoral completion rates

hover around 70% across all disciplines (Tamburri, 2013), while in the U.S. completion rates remain steady at approximately 50% (Crede & Borrego, 2014). Previous research has identified academic writing tasks as common barriers or stumbling points (Meloy, 2002). Badenhorst (2018b) explains that this is likely because thesis and dissertation writing is a form of currency enabling entrance into the academic research community; graduate students succeed (or fail) to become members of that community based on their ability to master the often obscure customs of academic discourse. A better understanding of the difficulties Canadian graduate students experience in completing key components of their graduate programs, as well as of the supports both existing and needed, could enable supervisors, administrators, and graduate students themselves to more expediently overcome these barriers.

   As a whole, the transition from undergraduate to graduate-level writing has not been as widely researched as the transition from secondary school to undergraduate university communication. While a number of supports for graduate writers have been proposed and piloted (e.g. writing groups, communications training, communities of practice), existing research shows that these supports are impacted by institutional and national contexts and expectations. Indeed, research on the difficulties Canadian students experience in preparing and writing their seminal documents has only recently commenced (see, for instance, Badenhorst, 2018b; Starke-Meyerring, 2011). Academic literacy approaches have further revealed that graduate students must navigate the development of professional research identities through their writing, managing the transition from novice to expert researchers as they pursue their graduate studies (Castello et al., 2013; Ivanič, 1998). Thus, the preliminary pilot study reported here seeks to further nascent research into the Canadian graduate writing context using semi-structured focus group interview data. It presents a multi-year study of Master's and PhD students' experiences at a secondary campus of a major Canadian research university, based on the logic that all graduate students would be encountering new writing tasks and/or new expectations of proficiency during their degrees. The respondents include both mono- and multilingual graduate students, as well as students writing within one discipline and those registered in interdisciplinary graduate programs. The study focuses on the student perspective as less defined than that of supervisors or institutions, seeking to better understand the difficulties students experience with key graduate writing tasks, as well as to identify directions for pedagogical and support practices.

## Literature Review

The impact of graduate writing tasks on retention and completion has been clearly established. The U.S.-based *PhD Completion Project* (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010) identified writing assistance, writing support initiatives, and ongoing professional and research development programs as key elements for increased student success and improved completion rates. Moreover, the *PhD Completion Project* (2010) identified the two most common attrition periods as occurring during first year, as potential candidates discover whether or not they are suited to doctoral research, and during the thesis or dissertation writing process. Lindsay DeClou's (2016) research on Canadian graduate school attrition found similar patterns. The second spike in attrition during the thesis or dissertation writing process suggests that graduate writing tasks present a prohibitive undertaking. Indeed, academic literacy perspectives (Casanave & Li, 2008; Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 2006) propose that graduate writers are not only contending with new genres and research contexts, but are also expected to demonstrate an expert and professional identity through their research writing, effectively undergoing a double socialization or enculturation into both graduate school and the profession. For international students, a third level of enculturation often occurs as they may be entering a new language and cultural context (Casanave & Li, 2008). It is no wonder that, as Bell and Hewerdine (2016) note, "Graduate students transitioning to becoming scholars may lack a strong sense of self or their identities as scholars, creating challenges to writing impacted by shifting agency in a liminal place in academia" (p. 51). Any resulting failure to complete a graduate degree negatively impacts not only the students themselves, but also supervisors, institutions, and the larger community (Bell & Hewerdine, 2016).

Research on the specifics of graduate writing experiences has revealed that challenges arise during several stages of the academic enculturation process. Reading and identifying the significance of previous research (Kwan, 2009); navigating the publishing process (Badenhorst & Xu, 2016; Casanave & Li, 2015); writing and researching in unfamiliar genres such as theses, proposals, and peer-reviewed articles (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Feak & Swales, 2009; Hyland, 2015; Negretti, 2017); and addressing work life balance and writing anxiety (Huerta et al., 2017) have all been identified as distinct hurdles. For multilingual graduate writers, it is well established that these processes are even more fraught (Cheng et al., 2004; Hyland, 2016; Kim, 2015; Maringe & Jenkins, 2015; Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008; Okuda & Anderson, 2018; Singh, 2017). Multilingual writers must adjust to new socio-linguistic, as well as academic norms, experiencing, as Kim notes, acculturative stress on

several levels. Given the shift in expectations from undergraduate to graduate academic writing tasks, Casanave (2019) suggests that demonstrating expertise in research methods and genres is an ongoing performance, both for students and supervisors, long before it becomes a reality. Indeed, if we accept that writing is a social practice, not a set of skills or a deficit in need of fixing, as Badenhorst et al., (2015) stipulate, then it follows that some of the hardest tasks for graduate writers are those that mark belonging within knowledge-making communities. The use of graduate genres, development of a professional voice, and, perhaps the ultimate mark of acceptance, peer-reviewed publication, all fall within this territory and, not coincidentally, are key obstacles identified in the research on graduate writing. Several studies note that these professional markers are also intersected by personal capabilities such as the ability to handle stress and resilience in the face of uncertainty (Badenhorst & Xu, 2016; Holmes et al., 2018; Huerta et al., 2017). Lindsay (2015) posits that situational, writing, and emotional factors all play a role in promoting or hindering thesis completion, and Odena and Burgess (2017) identify personal organization and the need for "individually tailored supportive feedback" as key components in their qualitative research on facilitating strategies for thesis writing (p. 572). As Badenhorst and Xu (2016) conclude, academic writers need both critical competence and emotional intelligence to succeed as published researchers.

Interdisciplinary graduate writing, as the majority of our participants were doing, adds a further set of challenges for students negotiating the acquisition of a professional academic identity. While European and North American universities are increasingly championing interdisciplinarity (Hibbert et al., 2014; Kaufhold, 2017), novice writers in interdisciplinary studies may be expected to master multiple voices and disciplinary positions. As defined by Julie Thompson Klein, "Interdisciplinarity is a means of solving problems and answering questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed using single methods or approaches" (as cited in Borrego & Newswander, 2010, p. 63). It is integrative, bringing together knowledge and methods from two or more disciplines in combination and synthesis (Bishop-Williams et al., 2017; Hibbert et al., 2014). In doing so, interdisciplinary work challenges traditional university and professional organizational structures, which are based on disciplinary distinctions, and much of the literature focuses on such challenges related to interdisciplinary funding, administration, publishing, and hiring (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2009; Boden & Borrego, 2011; Borrego & DePauw, 2012; Clark et al., 2011; Hall, 2014). Research that looks specifically at the supervisory relationship and writing tasks in interdisciplinary studies identifies the lack of a community, common terminology, audience, or methods as creating added

complexity (Borrego & Newswander, 2010; Hibbert et al., 2014; Holley, 2015). Kathrin Kaufhold (2017) notes that the acquisition of a professional voice is a particularly complicated and dynamic positioning process for interdisciplinary graduate writers. Furthermore, Kaufhold explains, "Academic Literacies research has emphasized the heterogeneous nature of disciplines and demonstrated the limits of disciplines as frames for student enculturation into academia," with students in her interdisciplinary study "question[ing] the relevance of a disciplinary community" (p. 254). Indeed, Kam and Meinema's (2005) earlier research identified the mismatch between disciplinary and interdisciplinary expectations as a factor in supervisor and international graduate student tensions. Given these complexities, Vanstone et al.'s (2013) call for "more empirical and theoretical exploration of barriers to and facilitators of [interdisciplinary] research" seems warranted (p. 60).

Alongside interdisciplinary concerns in graduate writing, education scholars have come to recognize that learning contexts vary and this can significantly impact the effectiveness of pedagogical interventions (Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2006). Specifically, graduate programs can vary internationally in important respects such as admissions requirements, amount of coursework, criteria for completion, and length of funding. For this reason, it is important to consider the Canadian graduate writing context as distinct. Indeed, in a general sense, Canadian writing instruction varies significantly from U.S. models due, as Kevin Brooks (2002), Nan Johnson (2006), Judith Kearns and Brian Turner (2008) explain, to national and institutional histories which tended to favour literary approaches and often did not make discursive expectations explicit. Existing Canadian-based research on graduate writing has not directly addressed this history; however, Canadian studies such as those by Starke-Meyerring (2011), Badenhorst and Xu (2016), Stooke and Hibbert (2017), and Badenhorst (2018a) emphasize the need for greater transparency regarding graduate writing expectations, suggesting the impacts of this pedagogical legacy. Doreen Starke-Meyerring (2011) specifically points to the tacit assumptions behind Canadian graduate writing, noting how these impact doctoral writers' progress and suggesting the need for a graduate curriculum that examines "the roles of writing and discourse in the production of knowledge, researcher identity, disciplinarity" (p. 93). Moreover, there have been recent calls for change to graduate degrees in Canada which would place greater emphasis on interdisciplinarity, alternate forms of dissemination, and non-traditional career paths (Amell & Badenhorst, 2018; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; White Paper, 2013). The following case study builds on Starke-Meyerring and Badenhorst and Xu's explorations of student experiences focused through academic literacy theory's attention to

assuming a research identity. Student experiences play a central role in understanding the difficulties of enculturation and the ways that these issues manifest in graduate writing. This research likewise focuses on Canadian experiences as distinct from U.S. and European practices given the history of writing instruction and the structure of graduate degrees in Canada.

## Methods

This study was conducted to further research on the writing experiences of graduate students and to inform current and future graduate writing support services and programming. The research questions were:

RQ1: What are graduate students' past and present perceived experiences of graduate-level communication, particularly the literature review?

RQ2: What supports or pedagogical approaches currently prepare students for graduate writing tasks? How can that support system be improved?

To achieve this dual purpose, the researchers conducted qualitative focus group interviews to obtain a rich description of graduate students' perceived experiences with their academic writing tasks and of the supports available to them. A case study design was chosen to investigate and describe how our institution's graduate students perceived the transition to graduate-level communication, and to determine how graduate student writing may be better supported through campus programs and services. While the results may not necessarily be generalizable to other institutions, the study contributes to the growing research into graduate writing experiences in Canadian postsecondary institutions and seeks to further recommendations for institutional support for the transition to graduate-level writing.

This study was conducted through the university's graduate writing centre and received approval from the University's Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The centre, established in 2011, provides consultations (~700/year) and workshops (~40/year) to support graduate student writing. Graduate students were recruited during January and February 2014 for an initial online FluidSurvey through campus email, posters, and social media. The intent of the survey was to gather initial data about the graduate students at our institution, the areas they identified for improvement with their writing tasks, and the supports they accessed, and follow up focus groups would gather more information-rich data about their experiences with transitioning to graduate-level writing. Limited survey results that identified writing the literature review as a problem area have been reported elsewhere (Walter & Stouck, 2020). The researchers invited all survey respondents in the first year

of a Master's or Doctoral degree to participate in a series of focus groups that would gather data throughout the duration of the students' graduate programs. Six in-person focus groups were completed between April 2014 and November 2015. Two initial focus groups (April 16 and 28, 2014) were asked questions about writing tasks and accessing supports (see Appendix A), and the subsequent focus groups in November 2014, December 2014, April 2015, and November 2015 were asked versions of the same questions that recognized they were further along in their degrees (see Appendix B). Seven graduate students participated in the initial two focus groups. Six of these students participated in the subsequent focus groups (Table 1). There were no participants in the final focus group scheduled for August 2016 because most participants had either completed their degree or their PhD residency requirement and had moved from the region. However, after examining the data gathered from the previous focus groups, the researchers felt that data saturation had been reached because similar question responses were appearing across the focus groups.

Table 1. Focus Group Participants' Degree Program, Knowledge Area, English as Additional Language (EAL), and Focus Group Participation

| Participant | Degree program | Knowledge area | EAL | Focus groups |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | PhD | Applied Science | Yes | 1 |
| B | PhD | Social Science | Yes | 1, 3, 5 |
| C | Masters/PhD | Social Science | No | 1, 3, 6 |
| D | PhD | Social Science | No | 2, 3 |
| E | Masters | Humanities, Social Science | No | 2, 6 |
| F | Masters | Social Science | No | 2, 4, 5 |
| G | PhD | Social Science | Yes | 2, 4 |

The focus groups were digitally recorded and then transcribed by a graduate student using InqScribe. The transcripts were analyzed by two research team members using an inductive analysis approach and constant comparative method. NVivo software was used to assist with the data analysis. The data analysis began with the two principal researchers creating potential coding nodes based on the research questions, interview guides, initial survey data, and reading of the literature. For example, initial nodes included transition to graduate-level communication, past writing and research experiences, present writing and research experiences, writing anxiety, writing the literature review, pressure to publish, helpful existing writing supports, student requested writing supports, supervisor support, peer support, timely graduate degree completion, among others. These

nodes created in advance were intended to allow for analysis related to the research questions. New nodes were also created during the first round of coding to identify emerging relevant text related to both the researchers' concerns and the participants' subjective experiences. For example, emerging nodes included confusion over genre or terminology, variations in expectations, difficulties managing large amounts of information, among others. After the first round of coding, the researchers refined the nodes list for the second round of thematic coding. Some nodes were split into multiple nodes to capture several themes emerging in a particular node; for example, writing the literature review became three separate nodes and the peer support node was split into existing peer supports and requested peer supports to match the distinctions participants were highlighting in their discussions. Other nodes were broadened to better capture several associated repeating ideas; for example, Committee Support was changed to Faculty Support to capture that participants were receiving similar help from both committee and non-committee member faculty mentors and the two nodes capturing past and present writing and research experiences became one node called past and present writing and research experiences facilitating the transition to graduate-level communication because participants were not talking about these experiences as distinct. The second round of coding was completed by the two initial coders and an additional graduate research assistant coder. This third coder was introduced to strengthen the reliability and credibility of the data analysis, and this particular graduate student was selected because she had completed the initial transcription of the audio and thus was familiar with the research data. After the second round of coding, the three coders met to discuss the coding. Themes were then finalized by the two principal investigators, which are discussed below.

To increase the trustworthiness of the results, the participants in the focus groups were chosen from various degree programs within Applied Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities and language backgrounds, and they were studied over the course of their programs and until data saturation was achieved. In addition, member checking with two participants was completed, and two external peers reviewed and provided feedback on the final research report. Because the data collection and analysis was completed by two researchers who also work or had worked in the graduate student writing centre, they discussed and reflected on their potential biases and assumptions, as well as the possible insights to be gained from their positionality. Using NVivo allowed for immersion in the data but also a distance that aided in this reflection process. As mentioned, the study results may not be generalizable to other contexts, but this exploratory study hopes to indicate areas for further research and add to the literature on Canadian graduate student

writing experiences. A further limitation is some lack of specificity in the focus group questions, which resulted from wanting to be open to student perceptions of their writing tasks and experiences.

## Findings and Discussion

Consistent with previous research (e.g. Bell & Hewerdine, 2016; Paré, Starke-Meyerring & McAlpine, 2011), our data indicates that there are transitions in voice, in genres, and in expectations, which impact students as they pursue graduate research and writing tasks. These transitions, as reported by our participants, occur in multiple stages, with particular focus on the pressure to publish and professionalize, and misalignments between their own and supervisory and institutional expectations. Our research further reveals that, for mature and international students, this shift can be compounded by their lack of familiarity with current Canadian practices. While ethics considerations prevent us from identifying disciplines beyond the large areas of Applied Science, Social Science and Humanities, four of our seven participants noted that they were working in interdisciplinary contexts. One such participant explains, "I'm kind of gonna be bridging both [Discipline 1] research and [Discipline 2]" while another participant states, "So I'm working in [Discipline 1]… and I'm working in [Discipline 2]… and those two fields are really coming together." For these students, the process of transition becomes even more complicated, as they are negotiating multiple sets of expectations in which the norms of one discipline may not align with those of another discipline. Throughout our focus groups, comments related to graduate transitions were often implicit rather than explicit, due in part to the phrasing of the focus group questions. However, the shift from undergraduate or professional to graduate expectations underlies most of the experiences the participants described. For instance, concerns were coded around the fundamental and ongoing transition to an academic voice in participants' writing. Participant C explained that graduate work requires a different kind of engagement with the research: "the way I wrote in my bachelor's [was] very much you know get all the facts together, organize all the facts and write it, whereas graduate school is very much about integrating your own thoughts." Similarly, the participant noted that this was a shift from professional, workplace communication where, "we write very quick and short hand, direct and to the point, so sometimes it can be a challenge to be writing at an academic level" where a writer is expected to provide more detail and support. As is well established by previous researchers such as Roz Ivanič (1998), "writing academic assignments causes people to 'change their speech,' to take on particular identities" (p. 7) so that graduate students may well find themselves

performing in a voice very new to them. Making this transition from previous discursive modes is a foundational and particularly challenging part of graduate writers' development.

## Pressure to Publish and Professionalize

An unsurprising marker of the transition into graduate work elucidated by our study was the pressure all participants felt to publish, which was linked to the development of a professional research identity. It was noteworthy that all participants mentioned this theme and it was addressed across all the focus groups. As Participant C explained, "I've been told pretty much the goal all the way through my PhD is to publish everything I write." Several participants described faculty and supervisor support for publication, with one participant actually publishing in collaboration with a faculty member. Participant B noted the value of a more experienced faculty member providing guidance through the steps of picking a journal, then drafting and formatting with that journal's subject focus in mind. Most participants described being encouraged to view their coursework, thesis, and even comprehensive exam papers as revisable for publication. As Participant C explained, "typically they really encourage their graduate students not to write assignments, but to write manuscripts, so everything is targeted towards a journal." Book reviews and conference paper proceedings were also identified as initial opportunities for publication that could help these new researchers establish themselves within their respective knowledge-making communities. As Participant F explained about a recently completed book review,

> It's going in a journal […] like a special issue that was a bunch of people in the same field who were all on a panel together and then they – each of them were professors – invited a few of their students to do book reviews so it will be really handy to have my name in an issue with a bunch of other people in my field.

Despite these recognitions of the need to publish and faculty support for publication, participants expressed difficulty or frustration over achieving that first publication. Respondents described the "struggle" of revising, and Participant G commented particularly on the difficulty of converting material from a Master's project or course work into a publishable journal article. Clearly it was a new expectation that participants were grappling with, since most programs do not expect undergraduate students to publish in peer-reviewed forums.

Pressure to publish was frequently linked to the need to professionalize. As Participant C noted, publication not only creates recognition within one's field, but is often tied to further opportunities:

> The role of the tasks […] is very much to publish and [the] reason for that is so that you have
> something to put on your resume for when you apply for […] funding, they want to know that you
> have presented and that you've got publications behind you. So I think that's a big part of why I've
> been invited to participate in these tasks and why the push has been to publish manuscripts.

Participant G similarly identified publication as a "performance indicator" demonstrating one's professional qualifications and, in turn, preparation for the academic job market. This emphasis on publication is perhaps unsurprising, since Canadian graduate programs are scrutinized for their ability to produce successful researchers, the key marker of which is peer-reviewed publication (Badenhorst & Xu, 2016; Pickering et al., 2015). Moreover, future professional rewards in the forms of funding, jobs, and research opportunities are linked to publication, so that graduate students such as the focus group participants have received the message to publish loud and clear.

## Expectations and Misalignments

Another, less widely-documented theme explicated by our focus group participants concerned the expectations held by graduate students, as well as the misalignments that could occur between faculty, institutional, and graduate student understandings. The focus group participants noted that their own initial expectations about the graduate research and writing process were not always accurate or realistic. Participant C, in our final interview, explained that,

> It's just, honestly it's been this last paper, which is the last paper of my coursework for my PhD,
> where all of a sudden a light has gone off and I've gone 'Oh I've been writing all wrong throughout
> this whole program.'

Participant C noted that research methods had changed significantly since their undergraduate degree, which had been completed several years previously. Participant D, also a returning student, similarly found their research process had to shift,

> I think something that I would add because I've been out of the research realm for about ten
> years…. I look at the seminal writers and then I look at the most recent articles in that area and I
> kind of work toward the middle because I need to track the topic… through some time that I wasn't
> really participating.

In addition to expectations for their own learning, the participants entered their programs with clear expectations about supervision, including that they would receive guidance (without "spoonfeeding"), that they would be contacted and given feedback in a timely fashion, and that they

would experience some degree of mentoring. In several cases these expectations were exceeded, with Participant F explaining,

> My supervisor has been really good about sending relevant literature and also reviewing... she's really fantastic at that and very good at timelines and I think at this stage of writing, I mean, this is my first, you know my first graduate degree and my first time writing something so massive, but I think the really detailed comments are helpful.

In other cases, student expectations were not fully met, with one participant noting, "professor feedback would be wonderful in some areas but it's not always available." Such variations in supervisory support have been noted in previous literature (Carter & Kumar, 2017; Paré, 2011).

Following from the initial expectations students held as they began their graduate degrees, a dominant source of anxiety in the focus group discussions concerned the misalignments that could occur between student and faculty expectations. These misalignments covered both broader issues, such as academic roles (noted above), genre expectations, and institutional requirements, as well as narrower concerns around grammar and style conventions. Even narrower concerns, however, could be understood as related to academic enculturation.  Participants reported confusion, for instance, over grammar and style conventions, which impacted their thesis and dissertation writing. Participant E recalled,

> I had a professor that hated 'however' with the semicolon, comma, so every one of them was marked wrong. It was marked, period, capital H. Okay. But they're both correct, it's just how they want it. So sometimes... maybe not necessarily grammar errors, but grammar preferences.

The same participant astutely noted that some of this misalignment was  likely due to the interdisciplinary aspect of their degree, since differences in terminology and style occurred across courses in several social science areas:

> I took a [Discipline 1], I took a [Discipline 2], I took a [Discipline 3], so everybody had a different set of terminology and this one wanted you know, quotes around certain words, that one hated quotes around certain words, and it affects your mark.

Other participants surmised that confusion over writing and style conventions could be due to national preferences. Participant B explained the misalignments with faculty expectations experienced on arrival in Canada:

> I found that the most challenging thing for me when I came from [South Asia] to do my Master's was that I was expected to start writing this American English, which because [South Asian

country] obviously follows the British English, so that was... a tough transition…. I just have this emotional connection to what you've grown up with.

Participant C then queried, "is that faculty dependent, because [in Canada] we spell the British unless you're publishing in an American journal" and the discussion ended with a participant saying, "Okay, so fight back." Indeed, the group proposed that the international as well as disciplinary backgrounds of faculty members can impact their expectations in regards to style and grammar. Often, it seemed, those expectations were communicated as absolutes rather than what they were – matters of preference or convention – and this led participants to question the validity of these instructions. Without a single style guide used consistently throughout their programs, graduate students often find themselves unclear on which national or disciplinary norms to follow. Given that style guides communicate the values and standards of their professional organizations—the MLA Handbook (2016, p. vii) describes itself as embodying "the values that define the association"—these seemingly minor spelling and grammar issues can take on weight as markers of belonging or unbelonging.

Different understandings of genre similarly caused miscommunications between graduate students and faculty. One discussion centred around misunderstandings regarding the literature review and the amount of personal opinion that should be included in the discussion of existing research. Another discussion concerned how to manage the literature review in an interdisciplinary context, where students were expected to demonstrate knowledge and insider understandings of significance in two or more disciplines, rather than one. As a participant explains,

Kind of the words of wisdom from my supervisor was as you do each of your next three courses, which are content courses, focus on … your literature searches at that time. So I'm doing [Discipline 1] is my next course, so I'm just going to read all the [Discipline 1] literature research while I'm doing that course and try to build everything around it and then I'm doing [Discipline 2] … and my last course can be a directed studies in [Discipline 3] and so that I know I'll be getting into [Discipline 3].

In a similar sense, another focus group participant observed that the terminology used to assign work could carry varying expectations. The respondent recounted how, after completing several précis and an annotated bibliography, the professor's expectations for those genres turned out to be very different from conventional understandings. Suggesting, as above, a degree of frustration, the participant concluded, "some profs get it and they're really good at clarifying with their graduate students and some are not so succinct about what it is they're looking for." As with misalignments in grammar and style, confusion over genres often occurs due to disciplinary differences. For students

working in multiple disciplines, what identity to use where, what literature to reference how, or what genre definition to apply when, becomes highly complex, particularly since they are still learning the norms of each discipline (Vanstone et al., 2013). Although the challenges of writing interdisciplinary theses and dissertations are only beginning to be investigated in the scholarship (e.g. Kaufhold, 2017), they were a recurring topic for our participants who particularly emphasized the ways in which interdisciplinarity challenged the received conventions of graduate education. Indeed, Anthony Paré (2011) explains that supervisors frequently struggle to articulate what to them are norms of professional communication, making the transmission of expectations complicated even within a single discipline. This lack of transparency in communicating style and genre conventions appears to have lead our participants to question certain kinds of received information, exposing the tension authors such as Lea and Street (1998; 2006) have revealed between graduate students' need to adapt to academic discourse and expose its biases and exclusions.

Expectations could also misalign in relation to institutional requirements. During the focus group discussions, participants discovered variations between programs for comprehensive exams and other formal requirements. During one session, Participants B and D found that their candidacy exams were taking quite different formats, with Participant B unable to contact committee members during the writing process and Participant D describing a more "collaborative" and consultative process. As they neared completion of their degrees, Participants C and E found that defense and final thesis formatting expectations could vary. Both expressed anxiety about this, with Participant C explaining, "there's no point in writing a huge long dissertation if they're going to turn around and say, well that actually doesn't conform to [University] expectations. And therefore you need to go back and rewrite huge portions of it." Such anxieties may be exacerbated by shifts occurring in graduate education in Canada. In the face of increasingly precarious academic employment, there have been several calls to "leverage" the skills acquired through graduate research into non-traditional, non-academic careers (see Graff, 2006; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; White Paper, 2013). This has been particularly pronounced in some institutional contexts (see Hibbert et al., 2014; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011) and has resulted in calls for more interdisciplinary research as well as greater focus on alternate kinds of research dissemination (e.g. the thesis as a series of publications or presentation in digital forums) (White Paper, 2013). While noting that "disciplines are not stable entities" (p. 11), McAlpine and Amundsen (2011) call for the "rethinking of certain doctoral policies and practices" which may challenge "taken-for-granted assumptions underlying institutional

policies" (p. 170). As Canadian graduate education itself thus undergoes transition, it seems likely that students such as our participants will continue to experience multiple, ongoing levels of change.

## Supporting the Transition

In addition to questions related to the transition to graduate-level communication, the focus group participants were explicitly asked to talk about the types of support they had been accessing throughout their degree programs. All of the focus group participants accessed writing support at the graduate writing centre throughout their degree, which included one-on-one writing support as well as a range of workshops. Several participants sought independent self-support, such as online blogs/guides and print/ebooks. Most participants were seeking multiple supports to further their transition to graduate-level writing and genres. Not at all surprising, the most talked about support was from direct supervisors. The most helpful supervisor supports mentioned across focus groups were guidance for finding key research and detailed feedback on writing. Although their experiences were mostly positive, some participants perceived areas where supervision could be improved. Specifically, they wanted more direct support in the initial stages of the graduate program and relevant examples of writing to align supervisor and student expectations for particular genres throughout their degrees. Several participants across focus groups requested institution-specific examples of writing genres, which Participant E stated could be housed in a shared institutional repository.

   While focus group participants were clearly finding existing supports helpful, a major concern for this research was to identify additional support needs. A recurring theme mentioned by all participants was more support from their peers, particularly writing support. Participant A reported that having a cohort of other students was helpful in ensuring writing expectations were met. Participant C explained:

   When you start grad school having some ideas about how other people approach the shift, like what that looks like for some people, so you know tools and techniques that other people have used and how they have used them would have been, for me would have been really helpful.

Participants also seemed to desire further peer support beyond strictly feedback on writing to support their transition. Participant B wanted greater peer interaction because "writing [is] a very isolating process," while Participants B, D, and F explicitly discussed the lack of a "cohort" as a drawback of their program. These three participants also expressed a desire for the formation of peer writing groups.

Though independently-accessed one-on-one consultations, workshops, and published writing resources were applauded, participants perceived ongoing peer support as important for successful completion of their degrees. These insights into the participants' perceptions of both helpful and needed supports for transitioning to graduate-level communication along with the other themes discussed above, suggest new directions for providing graduate writing support.

## Conclusions, Implications, and Further Research

Institutional collaboration is key for developing and providing the ongoing, collaborative, and peer-based initiatives needed to support graduate students and ensure their retention during their first year and later dissertation writing stages, which have been identified as common attrition periods (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010; DeClou, 2016). The graduate writing centre responded to the themes that emerged from this study and the findings reviewed in the literature by introducing new services and pursuing greater institutional collaboration to support graduate students throughout their degree programs. In partnership with Graduate Studies, a peer writing group program was co-created to provide greater peer support, which was the most requested support at the time of the focus groups. This was intended to offer the ongoing discursive community identified in the literature and by the participants as necessary for supporting their various transitions. Peer groups enable graduate students to discuss and participate in the social practices that facilitate their enculturation into graduate school, knowledge-making communities, and the profession. Specifically, such groups provide a place to discuss the strategies involved when writing in multiple disciplines or for new genres; handling supervisor-student misalignments; and pursuing publication. The pressure to publish is an overwhelming expectation of the profession, the institution, supervisors, and the students themselves and must be addressed through multiple avenues in any graduate support program. To complement how the peer writing group program was addressing the pressure to publish, the scholarly communication librarian created a new series of workshops aimed at demystifying the publishing process and providing concrete support for writing for publication. The graduate writing centre began collaborating with a campus undergraduate research award program to support advanced undergraduate research and writing as these students often transition into graduate programs at the institution or elsewhere. Support at this stage also helps with managing student expectations and potential misalignments that can occur during their transition to graduate-level communication, such as the ones identified by our participants. To aid students in their ongoing acquisition of new academic literacies for graduate school, dissertation writing, publication, and

professionalization; to remedy some of the misalignments currently occurring for genre expectations; and to address the participants' desire for a local shared repository of materials, the graduate writing centre has begun collecting, seeking copyright permission for, and distributing authentic examples of successful Tri-Agency Scholarship research proposals, dissertation research proposals, lay summaries, and other genre documents, as well as directing students to discipline-specific or interdisciplinary theses in the institution repository. These examples are also distributed during instruction at pro-seminar courses, workshops, writing events, and peer writing group sessions. This new approach of ongoing, collaborative, and peer-based graduate student support arose from both our findings and from the call to move beyond a "dominant skills-based discourse" (Badenhorst et al., 2015) and deficit approach toward understanding writing as a social and discursive practice within knowledge-making communities (Badenhorst et al., 2015; Casanave & Li, 2008; Haggis, 2006). This academic literacy approach compels us to work together at local and institutional levels to examine and revolutionize our current supports to ensure they facilitate "sustained, disciplinary embedded writing pedagogies that allow graduate students to negotiate academic literacies over time" (Badenhorst et al., 2015).

In addition to these new directions for graduate writing support undertaken in response to the results, the research revealed avenues for continuing study. Specifically, the participants' experiences suggest a need to more fully identify and review Canadian interdisciplinary degree expectations. As noted above, interdisciplinary writers are often expected to navigate multiple genre and style expectations within their graduate projects. Such competing expectations significantly complicate the process of establishing a professional research identity (which identity, which discipline, which expectations should be met). Two of the focus group participants located their projects as interdisciplinary and specifically suggested that this led to the misalignments between their understandings and those of faculty members and supervisors. At the same time, interdisciplinary degrees are becoming more common and Canadian institutions in particular have embraced this trend (Hibbert et al., 2014; Vanstone et al., 2013). As Vanstone et al. (2013) note,

> In response to encouragement from funding agencies, enthusiasm from faculty and students, and an acknowledgement that the search for creative and innovative solutions to complex problems is best addressed through interdisciplinary collaborations, research-intensive universities are increasingly encouraging interdisciplinary projects and programs. (p. 43)

Identifying appropriate responses to the challenges of interdisciplinary graduate work is thus a pressing concern, both in terms of facilitating graduate writing that crosses disciplinary boundaries

and in building what Hibbert et al. (2014) describe as a more collaborative interdisciplinary culture. In doing so, as the participants in this study initiate, the norms and expectations of academic discourses can be productively questioned and transformed.

Similarly, the study participants revealed that transitions are ongoing within graduate research writing. Not only did they engage with "early stage" transitions in voice and academic roles, but participants revealed ongoing experiences of transition as they grappled with genre and style conventions, and, later in their degrees, negotiated institutional norms and prepared for professional publication. While graduate writing instruction directed at initial tasks of conceptualizing a research audience and developing a professional identity is undoubtedly valuable, our participants were clear about the need for ongoing peer and institutional supports as they grappled with "later stage" writing tasks and challenges. As one participant noted regarding a professional grant application during the final focus group,

> This year, writing [funding agency] grants I noticed there's a big gap on this campus… nobody knew what was supposed to go in that document, nobody could help me, really, they could read it and edited it for language, but there was no one that said well this is what they're really looking for in this particular area.

Similarly, professional publication typically requires profiling a new audience and revising to address reviewers' feedback, later stage degree tasks that graduate writers can find daunting. Understanding graduate writing as ongoing transition and finding ways to support it in that context is thus a valuable insight from our participants' commentary. Moreover, as Canadian graduate education itself shifts to new modes and norms, as well as interdisciplinary options, writing needs seem bound to continue changing in ways that warrant ongoing investigation.

This study has sought to contribute to the emerging research into Canadian graduate writing by describing the perceptions of Master's and PhD students as they progressed through their graduate writing tasks. In addition to proposing strategies for graduate writing support, this research points to continuing areas for study as novice scholars, and indeed graduate programs themselves, transition into more complex futures.

## Appendix A: Initial Focus Group Questions

**Focus Group Questions**

Questions for focus groups of **first-year Graduate Students**, Masters and PhD

*The following questions will be asked on a short form that will state not to reveal any definitively identifying information:*

1.  Please indicate your first language: _____

2.  Are you a Master's or PhD student?_____

3.  Which of the following areas best describes your scholarly research and writing area?
    - ☐ Humanities (e.g. fine arts, English, languages, philosophy)
    - ☐ Social Science (e.g. management, psychology, social work, nursing)
    - ☐ Applied Science/Science (e.g. engineering, biology, chemistry)
    - ☐ Other: _____

*The following questions will be asked verbally during initial focus group sessions, with follow-up discussion among participants:*

1.  What kinds of writing and scholarly research have you done in the past?

2.  What was your past experience of that writing and research process or in previous writing tasks?

3.  What scholarly writing and research tasks do you expect to encounter in your degree program?

4.  As part of your program, you will probably be asked to write a literature review defined as a survey of published research on a specific topic. How might a person go about doing this?

5.  What scholarly writing and research support have you found helpful in the past?

6.  What support do you believe will be helpful as you work on your graduate papers and/ or thesis?

## Appendix B: Later Focus Group Questions

*The following questions will be asked on a short form that will state not to reveal any definitively identifying information:*

1. Please indicate your first language: _____

2. Are you a Master's or PhD student?_____

3. Which of the following areas best describes your scholarly research and writing area?
   ☐ Humanities (e.g. fine arts, English, languages, philosophy)
   ☐ Social Science (e.g. management, psychology, social work, nursing)
   ☐ Applied Science/Science (e.g. engineering, biology, chemistry)
   ☐ Other: _____

*In later focus groups, the following questions will be asked verbally, with follow-up discussion among participants:*

1. What scholarly writing and research tasks are you currently engaged in?

2. What do you see as the role of that task or tasks? How do you think these tasks will contribute to your professionalization or ability to complete your degree program?

3. How is the literature review progressing? What have you done in your survey of published research on your topic and what remains to be done?

4. What is and has been helpful as you write your graduate papers and thesis/ dissertation while here at UBC?

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