

Dotting the i's and crossing the t's: Supervising inexperienced writers of academic English at the postgraduate level in Australia

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Although the profiles of individual students and their reasons for enrolling in postgraduate courses vary, most present their research for examination and public scrutiny in the form of a thesis or dissertation written in English. While a study of examiners and their examination processes undertaken by Mullins and Kiley (2002) has reminded both doctoral candidates and their supervisors that the research thesis is “not a Nobel prize” (p. 369), examiners, supervisors and the wider community expect that each candidate will aspire to undertake ethically sound research using methods that are accepted by scholars in a certain field. There has also been an expectation that the results of the research will be presented in ‘polished’ English, an expectation that now has added weight as the academic community faces increasing pressure to communicate research findings to a wider audience in local and international journals. Within such a context, the supervisors of postgraduate students face a number of challenges when mentoring students whose English departs from the conventions of the formal written English required by examiners, referees, and journal editors. This paper explores various aspects of the complex issues raised above. Attention is also given to the policy developed by the Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies and the Council of Australian Societies of Editors regarding the role of professional editors. On the basis of the discussion, it is argued that supervisors might cooperate more closely with those who offer English language support in Australian universities in order to make suggestions about the types of English language assistance a student may want to access while writing a thesis or dissertation.