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## The “Bermuda triangle” of academic writing

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how non-Anglo-Saxon doctoral students transform and develop their academic writing skills during PhD studies in an Anglo-Saxon context. Applying institutional work theory and memory work methodology, we study the experiences of doctoral students with an Eastern European background completing their degrees in Norway. The findings reveal the struggles of these doctoral students, expressed through the metaphor of the “Bermuda Triangle” of academic writing. This metaphor originally refers to the navigationally challenging area, where ships and planes used to inexplicably crash and disappear. In this paper, the Bermuda Triangle illustrates the riskiness, mystery and drama of an academic ‘shipwreck’ during a PhD journey. In particular, we claim that it is important to recognize the non-Anglo-Saxon institutional baggage of these doctoral students and how they interact with the Anglo-Saxon academic traditions and transform their academic writing skills. To address the struggles and increase the chances of transformation, we suggest the importance of ‘transitional institution’ formation, to be driven by both formal transition procedures and the institutional work of academic altruists, who help students escape from the Bermuda Triangle of academic writing.

## 1. Introduction

In all academic activity, academic writing is critical for success (Katila et al., 2020; Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018; Lonka et al., 2014). Particularly for PhD students, acquiring academic writing skills and the ability to contribute to discussions in reputable academic journals within their field are at the core of doctoral training (Huang, 2010). However, mastering the practice of academic writing is not easy for many novice researchers. High levels of self-doubt are reported among PhD students regarding raising their own voices and ideas through their academic texts (Kirk & Lipscombe, 2019). Yet the problem might be even more significant for international (in this paper, non-Anglo-Saxon) PhD candidates<sup>1</sup> taking their doctoral studies in Western higher education institutions.

Research indicates that international PhD students often struggle to make sense of Anglo-Saxon doctoral education, due to significant differences between academic traditions in their countries of origin and their host countries (Acker & Haque, 2015). In addition, international students customarily experience challenges such as isolation, strangeness, loneliness, ‘foreignness’ and

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge different categorizations, which might be potentially applicable in our case, e.g. Western vs non Western, English-speaking vs Non-English-speaking (Gendron, 2019). Yet, through our terminology, we want to stress the basic idea of Anglo-Saxon dominance of academic norms that are not limited to East–West or English-speaking–Non-English-speaking categorization. In this paper, we refer to Eastern Europe as a case of a Non-Anglo-Saxon tradition, while Scandinavia (specifically, Norway where we obtained our PhDs) is included in the circle of the Anglo-Saxon academic writing tradition.

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alienation – to name just a few (Lonka et al., 2014; Janta et al., 2014; Elliot et al., 2016). For some international PhD students, this becomes an important reason for dropping their studies and never defending their theses (Castelló et al., 2017; Acker & Haque, 2015).

Non-Anglo-Saxon PhD candidates' periods of transition and adaptation to a new academic environment are arguably captured in the existing literature, which has mainly focused on comparing Saxon/non-Anglo-Saxon academic traditions, the difficulties of publishing in international journals, issues arising in supervision, along with contingency and personal psychological factors (Abdullah et al., 2014; Corner & Pio, 2017; Lonka et al., 2014). Therefore, much of the research has focused on the formal elements of a doctoral training system considered important for international PhD students' transition, while students' deeper reflections on the transition process remain overlooked (Corner & Pio, 2017). It is therefore important to study how international students discern Anglo-Saxon academic writing norms and 'become' part of them.

The purpose of this article is to explore international PhD students' transition to new academic writing norms in practice: from the initial transition point (starting their PhD journey) to the successful completion of PhD training (reaching the new land). By 'successful completion', we mean formal completion of a PhD programme and defence of a PhD thesis, written within the contract period. The research question posed in this study is *How do non-Anglo-Saxon doctoral students transform and develop their academic writing skills during their PhD studies in Anglo-Saxon contexts?*

To answer this question, we employ ideas from institutional work theory (Lawrence et al., 2009, 2011) to study human interactions within academic norms' formation and their influence on international PhD students' transition in action. In other words, we address the transition to new academic writing norms, not with regard to separate contingent factors (e.g., psychology, student-supervisor relationships, etc.) (Corner & Pio, 2017; Lee, 2008; Lonka et al., 2014) but in terms of the accumulated individual experience/interactions and work of the academic community in sustaining Anglo-Saxon academic writing norms as an institution.

By default, it is implied that all those whom a PhD candidate meets along the way do their best to help him/her towards becoming an international researcher in the so-called institute of world science (e.g. Gendron, 2019). However, this might not necessarily always be the case in practice. While there can be many individuals and institutional actors that serve as lighthouses in a stormy PhD journey, some, instead of showing the way out of the *Bermuda Triangle*,<sup>2</sup> may facilitate a shipwreck, intentionally or not. For many non-Anglo-Saxon students who cannot yet navigate the rules of the new Western academic sea, this can become the point of no return.

Empirically, we bring to readers our own experience as international researchers with Eastern European backgrounds, who were enrolled and successfully completed their doctoral degrees in Scandinavia from 2009 to 2018. The context of our study is Nord University Business School (NUBS). Engaging in memory work (Johnson et al., 2018; Katila et al., 2020) and focusing on retrieving and analysing subjective events and important aspects that contributed to personal transformation, we highlight the differing experiences in becoming academics in the Anglo-Saxon academic writing tradition, despite similar struggles related to a common context of origin.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss implications of the differences in academic writing traditions between Anglo-Saxon and non-Anglo-Saxon countries and present our theory. In the third section, we provide details on research method, data collection and analysis. This is followed by the findings, discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Research background and theory

### 2.1. Preferential treatment of the Anglo-Saxon academic tradition and consequences for non-Anglo-Saxon scholars

In recent decades, we have witnessed an ongoing assimilation of 'Western' educational practices, driven by the Bologna Declaration and Lisbon Convention, and attempts to create the 'institute of world science' (Abdullah et al., 2014; Bosch, 2010; Gendron, 2019; Tröhler, 2010). In principle, academics, especially young academics with decent English, who are trained in line with the above-mentioned practices that aim to stimulate critical thinking, capacity for self-study, cross-cultural collaboration, lifelong learning, etc., can move freely between different contexts and actively contribute to ongoing discussions in international journals. Despite the *de jure* harmonization, there remain many linguistic, cultural, and epistemological barriers in academic writing traditions that *de facto* hinder non-Western researchers in making valuable contributions to their field of research (Gendron, 2019).

Non-Anglo-Saxon countries' PhD candidates usually do not stand out in the international research arena, due to their difficulties in getting published in high-quality international research journals, even after completing doctoral training (Huang, 2010). This makes the international research output of these scholars less significant than it could be. Many non-Anglo-Saxon scholars, thus, fall into the trap of submitting research papers to predatory open-access journals, such as those listed in Beall's List (Al-Khatib, 2016). There are several potential reasons for this: lack of focus on developing appropriate academic writing skills; difference in research traditions (normative research rather than identification of knowledge gap/theoretical contribution); faulty recruitment processes and PhD thesis composition – the choice between writing a monograph or a collection of articles (Bourmistrov & Mellemvik, 2007, pp. 31–56; Bourmistrov et al., 2011; Corner & Pio, 2017).

The cost of disregarding or excluding non-Anglo-Saxon scholarly contributions (at least from mainstream tier-one journals) is a reduction in both the intellectual potential of non-Anglo-Saxon countries and international society's awareness of problems faced by those non-Anglo-Saxon contexts. It is therefore important to properly address gaps in non-Anglo-Saxon PhD candidates' required knowledge, skills and competence to perform high-quality research and publish in recognized international peer-reviewed journals.

<sup>2</sup> The Bermuda Triangle is the area in the Atlantic Ocean that has long had a mysterious reputation as one that is extremely challenging for navigation (e.g., New York Times). In this paper, the Bermuda Triangle is used metaphorically to describe dramatic and often mystical disruptions of a PhD journey.

2.2. Academic writing as the core of doctoral training and growth

Starting a PhD at a ‘Western’ higher education institution, non-Anglo-Saxon PhD candidates often do not understand the difficulties of the transformations they will undergo as academic writers. Formally, PhD students are given instructions on how to perform research and hone their academic writing skills, during relevant courses. In practice, learning academic writing is not easy because of the challenges related to how to transform knowledge into a comprehensive and acceptable entity for a specific audience (Lonka et al., 2014). For PhD candidates from non-Anglo-Saxon countries, this is an additional challenge (Bourmistrov et al., 2011; Bourmistrov & Mellemvik, 2007, pp. 31–56; Corner & Pio, 2017; Gendron, 2019).

For example, in Norway, two elements of education are often emphasized: ‘education’ and ‘personal growth’. The former deals with formal aspects of PhD training, such as completion of courses, institutional support, participation in workshops and conferences, and supervision: the elements that PhD candidates can read about in manuals and their PhD contract. The latter concerns more informal, often invisible, elements of PhD training that form academic writing practices. Among important elements are relations with supervisors (Corner & Pio, 2017), interaction with peers (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017) and writing a good research proposal (Denscombe, 2013). In principle, institutions can ‘protect’ themselves from recruiting PhD students without the necessary academic writing skills, by making recruitment procedures to PhD programmes tougher (more interviews, tests, etc.), but this is not necessarily a panacea, considering the resources spent on recruitment. Further, due to the Bologna process – a shift from six to five years’ education – pre-research training is reduced in many countries, creating an additional issue for academic writing skills’ development for all PhD students, regardless of ethnicity (Olson & Grønhaug, 2019).

Besides the traditional discussion on the crucial role of the supervisor in the PhD student’s life and the formation of their reflective practices (Vos & Armstrong, 2019; Corner & Pio, 2017; Shen & Chen, 2017), recent studies pinpoint the great benefits of participating in doctoral writing groups (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2019), as peers’ learning communities foster reflective practice skills’ development. Continuous peer feedback and discussion particularly benefits PhD students, by helping them verbalize their internal reflective thinking, fostering reflective practice skills through various learning experiences (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Farrell et al., 2018). Consequently, these studies highlight the importance of establishing and supporting doctoral writing groups, to further develop students’ personal epistemology, growth and professional practice.

Generally, the transition to researcher is an ongoing and interactionally influenced process (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015). However, PhD students often expect more from their formal training than personal transformation. A lack of support in academic writing and the struggle to make sense of doctoral education are often reasons for dropping out of doctoral degrees (Castelló et al., 2017). Lonka et al. (2014) suggest that the following personal aspects form PhD students’ perceptions about academic writing practices: adaptive ideas about writing (knowledge telling vs knowledge transforming), productivity and self-efficacy, beliefs in innate ability, problems in writing (writer’s block, procrastination, self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism) and general dysfunctional emotions related to writing (lack of interest, stress, frustration, exhaustion, mental distress, etc.).

Therefore, much research focuses on the formal elements of doctoral training, alongside contingent elements to be fulfilled for international PhD students to succeed. At the same time, while there is growing discussion regarding social and psychological aspects, students’ deeper reflections on becoming part of new PhD environment and academic writing tradition remain overlooked (Corner & Pio, 2017). In this regard, following Corner and Pio’s (2017) call, we study how international students become aware of Anglo-Saxon academic writing norms and ‘becoming’ a part of them. Below, we present institutional work theory ideas which help to fulfil this call.

2.3. Institutional work bonded in the process of becoming part of new academic writing norms

Covering social aspects of organizations and society in general, institutional work theory has become one of the dominant streams of institutional theory, explaining the role of collective actors in creating, sustaining, disrupting and changing institutions (Lawrence et al., 2009, 2011). Particular attention is devoted to the question of how it is possible for individuals to emancipate themselves from existing institutional arrangements (Lawrence et al, 2009, 2011; Lenglet & Rozin, 2019). To address this, institutional work proposes

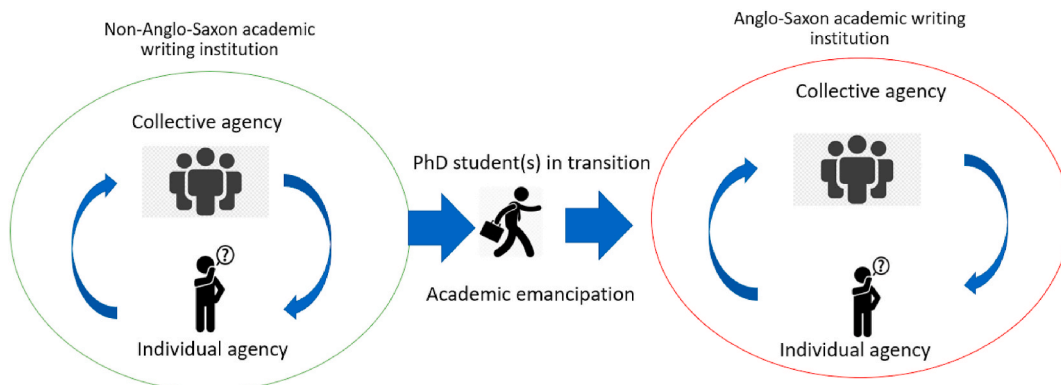


Fig. 1. International student(s) ‘becoming’ part of new academic writing norms, from an institutional work perspective.

to study the formation of collective and individual forms of agency.

Collective agency applies to understanding the efforts of collective actors in (re-)producing and potentially changing existing taken-for-granted ways of doing things and related norms, i.e. being embedded in particular institutional arrangements but also potentially changing them. Individual agency, in turn, suggests that individuals have the ability to be reflexive towards existing institutional arrangements, i.e. question taken-for-granted routines and re-consider collective efforts. That said, institutional work suggests looking at emancipation, i.e. freeing oneself from existing institutional arrangements, as dynamic and interdependent interaction between collective and individual agencies (Lenglet & Rozin, 2019). In other words, individuals' ability to question existing taken-for-granted ways of doing things and related norms, i.e. institution, will depend on their capacity to be reflexive towards the institution they are embedded in and the mobilization of collective efforts to change it.

Such theorization of emancipation and understanding institutional (re-)production and change are particularly valuable in studying the process of international PhD students becoming part of new academic writing norms, i.e. tracing the transition in practice (see Fig. 1). The starting point is viewing the transition process as a move from one academic writing institution to another (see green and red circles in Fig. 1).

Each institution reflects taken-for-granted ways of collective actions in relation to academic writing, justified by the corresponding norm (Czarniawska, 2009). Meanwhile, both institutions are formed based on collective and individual forms of agency. The transition from one institution to another suggests an academic emancipation process, in which PhD students could be reflexive towards the Non-Anglo-Saxon writing institution and move to transition. Yet, it could also be the case that, when moving, PhD students remain embedded in the institution they are leaving (institutional baggage in Fig. 1), influencing their efforts to be part of a new institution. The Anglo-Saxon writing institution, in turn, also has its own interaction between collective agency and individual agency.

This framework opens up possibilities to investigate the influence of and relations between collective agency and individual agency and, as a result, possibilities for emancipation: one of the central necessities for a successful academic career in the Anglo-Saxon context. To emancipate themselves, PhD students must first engage in an element of reflexive individual agency, challenging habituated ways of conducting research (Modell, 2020, pp. 1–26).

Motivated by such theorizing, we construct our empirical findings, based on the following theory-driven questions:

- What are the distinctive core characteristics of both academic writing institutions, from the perspective of those PhD students embedded in these institutions (i.e. us, as former PhD students in transition)? In other words, we describe and analyse the collective agency in forming the understanding of what counts as good academic writing in these two institutional cases.
- Do PhD students emancipate themselves from the Non-Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution and move towards Anglo-Saxon academic institutions and, if so, how? In other words, we reveal the individual agency aspect and whether and how PhD students become reflexive towards what counts as good academic writing, when in transition.
- What happens with relations between collective agency and individual agency, when PhD students move to Anglo-Saxon academic institutions? In other words, we reveal whether actors in Anglo-Saxon academic institutions welcome newcomers and are ready to take into account their institutional baggage, and, vice versa, whether PhD students in transition can move further and exercise individual agency in their new institution.

### 3. Method

The study is built on the so-called memory work approach, which focuses on written individual memories and their collective analysis and theorizing. Memory work is a social constructionist method that focuses on subjectively important events in the construction of self into social relations (Johnson et al., 2018). As a group method, it pays attention to written individual memories and their collective analysis. It entails us acknowledging our own participation in the formation of our past experiences and, in our case, of

**Table 1**  
Memory work in practice.

Stage	Description
Stage 1: Writing stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Each researcher wrote a few pages. We agreed that the writing must be as detailed as possible.</li> <li>- The memory work texts were factual, without interpretations and analysis.</li> </ul>
Stage 2: Sharing and analysing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Each memory-work group member expressed opinions and ideas about each written memory in turn. We paid attention to similarities and differences between the memories.</li> <li>- Among the memories, group members looked for continuous elements whose relation to each other is not immediately apparent.</li> <li>- Each member questioned particularly those aspects of the events that do not appear amenable to comparison, without resorting to biography.</li> </ul>
Stage 3: Collective rewriting and theorizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The group discussed theories and conceptions as a way of identifying the common social explication of meaning around the topic.</li> <li>- The group also examined what is not written in the memories (but that might be expected to be).</li> <li>- The researcher who was the supervisor was eventually excluded from the narrative, as his story resonated with the other three stories.</li> <li>- The memories were rewritten and developed in one collective narrative.</li> </ul>

our academic selves (Bansel et al., 2008). The method breaks down barriers between the subject and the object of research and the “knower” and the “known” (Katila et al., 2020).

In memory work, the academic researchers’ role is to position themselves as members of the researched group, where all participants become co-researchers. The memory work method consists of three phases: individual reflection, collective reflection and further theorization of the materials (Johnson et al., 2018; Katila et al., 2020). The memory work was performed by four researchers (two males and two females) of Eastern European origin (Russian and Ukrainian), who obtained their PhDs in Business Administration at NUBS in the period from 2001 to 2018, where they continue their academic careers today. One researcher was the main supervisor to the other three researchers involved in this study.

The four researchers cooperated to construct an intersubjective understanding of academic writing practice development and transformation during their doctoral studies. In the narrative that follows in the next section, using the theoretical lens of institutional work theory, we elaborate on how we, as PhD students from Eastern Europe in Norway, have formed our understanding of ‘good’ Western academic writing practice. We describe our actions and feelings about the transformation that, over time, became part of our PhD student experience and developed our academic writing skills.

During three collective writing seminars in August–October 2020, and based on Johnson et al. (2018), we employed the following procedures for memory work (see Table 1). Before writing our memories, we defined some topics that we considered important elements of our PhD education: for example, proposal, PhD courses, our participation in conferences and workshops, supervision and thesis writing itself. We wrote personal reflections on each element. After that, we presented our narratives and discussed them with the group. Surprisingly, the struggles were very similar, and many were related to our context of origin.

We agreed that the supervisor would participate as referee and provide reflections on the memory works. This was also because the other researchers are a more homogenous cohort, having defended their theses quite recently, and it appeared to be easy to produce one generative narrative that is relevant for all. Our memory work concerned our own PhD journeys on the NUBS doctoral programme, where the number of international PhD students has doubled over the past decade. NUBS is an example of an Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution, and its doctoral programme is designed in accordance with Bologna standards. In 2020, the number of international students taking their doctoral degree at the business school almost equalled that of local PhD candidates, replicating the overall trend in other Scandinavian countries and elsewhere (Kyvik & Olsen, 2014). According to internal reports, more than 90% of admitted PhD students complete their training and defend their theses successfully.

Following Johnson et al.’s (2018) suggestions on aggregating individual memories to common synthesized themes, we organized a final-round memory work presentation by each researcher and discussed commonalities and differences in our interpretations, based on theory-driven aspects, i.e. institutional work. The process was not straightforward but, rather, creative, moving between memory work narratives and theory-driven themes (collective agency, individual agency and reflexivity concepts). This resulted in the formation of aggregated themes around our narratives, such as institutional baggage, reflexivity shock, reflexivity trap, moments of emancipation and related triggers. In that sense, when presenting findings, our memories were rewritten and developed in one collective narrative, giving the most illustrative examples of those themes. Moreover, in order to facilitate more exciting and easily readable findings, we frame our findings via the “Bermuda-Triangle” metaphor (explained earlier, in the introduction), which was expressed by one of the authors when presenting her memories. This metaphor fitted very well for illustrating our common struggles during our PhDs, as well as general theoretical points.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. *Setting out on a journey from east to west: same waters – different maps*

Previous research has demonstrated some sound differences in research traditions between East and West (Gendron, 2019; Corner & Pio, 2017; Huang, 2010). Bourmistrov and Mellemvik (2007, pp. 31–56) and Bourmistrov et al. (2011) show the formal differences between PhD education in former Soviet Union countries and Scandinavia. Despite some ongoing radical changes, doctoral education in post-Soviet countries, such as Russia and Ukraine, continues to be characterized by a strong hierarchical structure compared to the more horizontal/flat Scandinavian model. Formal elements of PhD education and research traditions shape PhD candidates’ Eastern-European academic *embeddedness* – baggage that a PhD candidate takes with him/her when going to study in a different [Western] context.

The hierarchical structure of higher education in East-European countries supports a high degree of power distance (Hofstede et al., 2005), which characterizes many post-Soviet countries/the countries of the researchers’ origin. While Scandinavians prefer equality and informality, Ukrainians and Russians may favour hierarchies where, as a rule, both leaders and workers do what they are told – and academia is no exception. In line with this, academics in Ukraine and Russia often prefer to demonstrate status and dominance, facilitating a ‘*compliance culture*’ among young scholars. In practice, this means that supervisors and peers are always right, and the way to success (approved defence and degree) implies following supervisors/peers’ advice without question. So, if your supervisor thinks that *management of oil-and-gas projects in the Russian High North* is the right topic for your PhD project, so should you. You believe you should *think big, or you may get in trouble*. The significance of research is associated with the significance or scale of the topic.

This culture makes a substantial imprint on the behaviour of young researchers, who are taught to show respect and maintain social distance when interacting with supervisors and other senior researchers. Keeping your distance and obedience become integral parts of PhD candidates’ behaviour, even when they find themselves in another context. Unlike Ukrainians and Russians, Scandinavians prefer a more informal style of communication (e.g. using only first names when addressing everyone at work), while academic initiative is appreciated. This has often been a source of frustration among PhD candidates, including ourselves at the beginning of our journey in



the new context, when, instead of receiving clear instructions, even on PhD courses, we were constantly provoked to express our own opinions. The training programme, with its multiple obligatory courses, such as Philosophy of Science, Qualitative Camp and Academic Writing, force you to do so in a written form, since *how can you know what you think until you see what you write* (Weick, 1995). Along with the necessity to express one's own opinions came an understanding that Western research does not welcome the 'black and white' view of the world appreciated by East-European countries, partially due to the same sound differences in power distance.

More academic interaction and participation in different academic events was necessary, to learn that we would not be 'punished' for raising our voices. In line with that, the goal of any academic discussion (verbal or written) was not to please a more senior researcher (whether your supervisor or another professor) but to be able to contribute to a scientific discussion. It took us time to gain the courage to disagree with our peers and raise our own academic voice in our '*academic cocktail party*' – a particular stream of research in an academic field.

#### 4.2. Facing new collective agency: navigating western waters

On entering the doctoral programme, our knowledge on the meaning and essence of academic work in the West was limited. To make research a priority, teaching and administrative work (if any) in principle should not have taken more than 25% of our time. In this respect, a standard four-year contract implied three years of pure academic writing work and a maximum one year of other duties. However, due to the East-European mentality, we all ended up saying "yes" to all the tasks related to administrative and project work and teaching, due mainly to compliance culture but also to those tasks being more understandable to us, at that time, than research. Not fully realizing what academic writing actually implies (stages, rounds, rewriting, etc.), we easily switched to those clearer tasks, without even trying to make academic writing a habit during the first year. That work even gave a sense of progress, while, in practice, we were rather diverging from the core. We deprived ourselves of the time to reflect on an everyday basis and postponed self-learning through critical thinking, in favour of listening and writing down suggestions at supervisory meetings. Understanding the possibility to say "no" to this other work, and prioritizing academic work instead, came later, when interacting with other, senior PhD students.

Before 2015, international PhD students had their offices outside the Business School building, where all the teaching faculty, administration and local doctoral candidates had their offices. Thus, physical distance from the faculty did not allow regular informal communication with other colleagues/peers and, in this respect, did not facilitate a shortening of the existing mental distance. Uncertainty about one's own work (what is expected from me) and lack of control led to frustration about one's own progress – *am I doing well/everything (everything that is expected)? Or am I doing nothing?* The rarity of interactions enforced the significance of what was said/discussed during them. However, in 2015, all doctoral candidates were moved from a separate building to the Business School building. Two of us, who started and later defended our theses, found it very helpful to sit in close proximity to the faculty, have opportunities for informal interactions and feel ourselves part of the Business School/research community. Short conversations with colleagues at the coffee machine when you were suddenly asked, "*What are you working on now?*", followed by "*That is interesting!*", facilitated reflection on our own research and encouraged us to continue working.

It was unusual that so many people, not only our supervisors, actually read and commented on our drafts. These multiple actors were supervisors, classmates, other faculty members, invited researchers, etc. In the East-European tradition, this circle is much smaller – most often supervisors are the only advisors. When we faced criticism and plurality of opinions, it was confusing and often taken personally, especially when it was supported with a personal message. Excited to continue being the best students from our home-country institution, at this stage, we started having a feeling of not fitting the collective agency that, in our case, was the so-called Bodø School of Accounting (BSA) – one of the most influential accounting schools in the Nordic countries (Näsi & Rohde, 2006).

"*Why are you being so normative/descriptive?*" was the question we used to hear but, at the start, could not even understand its meaning. Suddenly, there was no right or wrong answer to a question at stake but, instead, different answers or even question(s) to the same question. There are alternatives (theoretical, methodological, philosophical), and the role of a supervisor and peers is precisely to make you aware of them. You can get advice from people whom you interact with throughout your PhD training, but you must choose a path and defend yourself later to the interested audience (e.g. the defence committee). In line with this, a defence should not necessarily be perceived as a *court* (Bourmistrov & Mellemvik, 2007, pp. 31–56), with regard to your potential individual failure, but rather a performance of your shared success.

In BSA, 'community' support and horizontal relations are common. Its research tradition is qualitative, which resonates with our context of origin. Thanks to interactions with the supervisors (also part of BSA) and other researchers, we could learn what reflexive and interpretative research is, but not at once. In this respect, three months given for developing a research proposal was never enough, since it continued to *lack problematization*. We used to think the more the better and, through habit, intended to simply *fill in space* with some ambitious and *big* ideas. As a result, when we presented the literature/theoretical gap, we faced common discussions:

- *Why is the idea you describe here interesting [theoretically]? (Supervisor/other colleague)*
- *Because nothing has been written about it! And our context (East Europe) is quite unique and not well-described in the literature. (Us)*
- *How do you know? Or, if nothing has been written about it, why is so it interesting? (Supervisor/other colleague)*
- ... (Us)

Such or similar questions and no answers to them at that time did not inspire confidence and motivation. We experienced many disappointments during conferences, workshops and supervisory meetings, when we heard that the context itself is not interesting, regardless of how big the country of origin is, no matter what we think about our big, innovative and breakthrough idea, which, by the way, had already been extensively covered by other – Western – researchers. Importantly, this happened not because we had an

inadequate overview of the literature and seminal works in the field. On the contrary, we were reading widely, but, without clear understanding of the variety of theories, approaches and research methods, we ended up with merely a summary. In other words, we were trying to read the Western navigation map with an Eastern legend and no wind correction. The general feeling was that we were *permanently* (authors' emphasis) doing badly or even wrong, compared with other students (from Anglo-Saxon countries). Thus, at a certain point, we all started feeling unwell and even stressed, regarding our scientific research abilities.

Often, hearing some new ideas that we thought brilliant, we tried to reflect those in our theses. These ideas often came from supervisors and other colleagues, whom we perceived to have good experience in publishing and a broad overview of theories. Naturally, many ideas, offered by so-called 'opinion leaders', seemed to be very good and suddenly started appearing in our writings. Along with the 'opinion leaders', who gladly shared their ideas and thoughts as regards how to develop our theses further, we met many sceptics, who did not believe in our ideas and expressed their opinions that we would not survive in Anglo-Saxon academia. During our memory work, we all agreed that, in the middle of the PhD storm, it is crucial for the light from the lighthouses to be timely and strong enough to allow an escape from the Bermuda Triangle and a continuation of the journey.

#### 4.3. Bermuda triangle demystified: from shock to reflexive agency

Not entirely understanding the meaning of theoretical frames and methods, we consequently continued struggling to define potential contributions and our researcher identity. Discouraging situations and comments could be met at different positions on the PhD journey. A PhD course, which is meant to help you learn how to write academically, can, on the contrary, sow a grain of doubt regarding your capabilities, when the faculty does not see the relevance in your research on management control of six-figure projects in, for example, the Russian Arctic or Ukraine's largest energy company, but easily does so for the study on, for example, the challenges of a US prisoner, presented by an American student.

A catastrophe could occur at an open research seminar (arranged by another research team), at which, despite a warning from the supervisor, one of us decided to present a paper and was literally paralyzed by *kind advice* from a respected professor to "cast away what you have and start all over again" – just several months before the planned defence. It is good if you are ultimately strong enough to reflect that these opinion leaders, however experienced, may be looking at your qualitative research through the prism of their more quantitative standards: something foreseen by your supervisor, who was unable to stop you from using your academic freedom. In line with this, the first tough rejection from a journal was perceived very personally by a *clearly non-English speaking writer* (reviewer's comment), stopping the researcher from submitting a new paper in years to come. Although the first submitted paper was proofread by a language specialist before submission, in the reviewers' letter, academic inabilities were put down in black and white – e.g. poor language, strange wording and use of jargon – and lack of argumentation, on top of it.

In the Bermuda Triangle, you never know when the storm will begin. The ninth wave can reach you, even during a friendly conversation at the conference dinner table, when, with regard to one of your first presentations, a highly respected professor can simply shoot: "*Maybe you are not meant to become a researcher?*" This might be the moment when your navigation and positioning system stops functioning. After such a question of (academic) life and death, one researcher seriously considered quitting, while another was inspired to do everything to prove that he/she actually *is* meant to be a researcher, no matter what.

Situations like these led to serious personal struggles, insecurity and doubts that took considerable energy and time. However, the same sharp damning question can be asked and tackled very differently: either sinking the ship or filling the sails with wind, stimulating reflection. When one researcher struggled with writing the method chapter in their PhD research proposal, considering it boring to write, compared to other, more vivid chapters, another PhD student with a different background raised the same "to be or not to be" question but added the following: "*The method section is not for you, it is for your reader! The reader must believe in what you are doing! So, help your reader!*" Just a few years later, both *non-researchers* published their papers in good journals, even one of the top journals in the field.

It was important to have it explained that our *damage* was not permanent and could be *fixed*, that you cannot reach land yet – not because you are a bad sailor but because your map is a bit different. In this respect, the supervisors' role becomes even more crucial. Luckily, our main supervisor had been in our shoes several years before, while second supervisors had experience of supervising international students and perceived our differences (*weak sides* from a Western viewpoint) as the potential for seeing taken-for-granted Western concepts in a new light.

During the memory work sessions, and remembering all these episodes, we understood that there was a complex mix of aspects, such that a particular interaction was perceived as working *for* us and not *against* us. We started reflecting upon when the moment of transformation and emancipation from a non-Anglo-Saxon academic writing tradition had arrived. After painful downfalls during the first years of the doctoral programme and understanding what we lacked, each of us reflected on how to transform the accumulated knowledge into academic writing skills. The sharing of ideas about academic writing and best practices, use of theories, and exchanges on other important aspects of academic work – amongst us (doctoral candidates) and those who had already defended their theses – became important, shaping our reflections and leading to transformation. In our understanding, the transformation happened when we felt able to explain to other (younger) doctoral students with similar backgrounds 'what to do', 'why' and 'how'. We started reading each other's papers and giving constructive feedback. Having realized the power of reflexivity in academia, we began to suggest readings that could be especially helpful for East-European scholars, including ourselves, to understand, for example, how to use and criticize theory, at the same time.

Thus, we were becoming 'opinion leaders' ourselves, i.e. when we started to understand what others did not understand, whether other East-European PhD students or the faculty. We started producing more academic texts, in terms not only of length but also of content. Eventually, we gained academic courage and started expressing our own voices in academic texts, emphasizing the quality of

arguments. It was important at this stage to receive support from supervisors, who finally said: “This is good enough! You’ve got it!”

One example of such a “you’ve got it” moment is our own experience and reflection on philosophy of science and the meaning of contributing to theory during the PhD journey:

As a young scholar, it is very easy to get lost in the vast world of accounting and ways of understanding it. In such conditions, one inevitably becomes shaped by others’ understanding of the world, making the question of paradigm choice rhetorical and rather pre-given. Here, such a philosophical position justification as pre-given by literature you read (which is usually the tip of the iceberg), the research community you inhabit is especially relevant when you are an emerging young scholar who arguably can challenge the contemporary understanding of accounting with the small baggage of knowledge. Rather, you try to extend the literature and, with your dissertation, “make one contribution or even less”<sup>3</sup> and this is totally normal! (Aleksandrov, 2017, p. 21).

Therefore, while having different timescales in our “you’ve got it” moments, we all agreed that we became a part of the new academic writing norms and started to contribute to their formation, no longer afraid of expressing ourselves. Below, we reflect on general points learned from our journeys and implications for understanding the ongoing discussion on doctoral students’ struggles in taking their PhD degrees in new contexts.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper reports a qualitative study of challenges faced by Eastern-European PhD students during the transition to Anglo-Saxon academic writing norms. Through the so-called memory work method, we provide an empirical narrative of our own experience of the doctoral education journey, as international students with an Eastern European background, who completed their doctoral degrees in Norway. Specifically, we have explored how we, as non-Anglo-Saxon doctoral students, transformed and developed our academic writing skills during our PhD studies in an Anglo-Saxon context. Drawing broadly on institutional work theory (Lawrence et al., 2009, 2011), we discuss how we, as non-Anglo-Saxon doctoral students, moved to and became part of the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution, considering the aspect of collective and individual agencies on the way to emancipation (see Fig. 2).

### 5.1. Individual agency faces ‘navigation’ problems: institutional baggage, reflexivity trap and reflexivity shock

In line with previous studies on international PhD students’ challenges in academic writing (Acker & Haque, 2015), we see the strong role of academic traditions in the countries of our origin and in the host countries. Yet, our story gives a more nuanced picture, reflecting on the emancipation of international PhD students from the academic traditions of their countries of origin. As suggested by institutional work, we claim that PhD students’ transition to a new academic writing institution is a non-straightforward and difficult process.

Our memory work illustrated that the exercise of individual agency was limited in ‘navigating’ a new (to us) Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution. In other words, there were struggles to make sense of the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution, even though we, as students, were performing many daily actions (e.g. writing, re-writing and other duties). In this regard, we claim that institutional baggage from a non-Anglo-Saxon academic tradition was still a crucial constraint on emancipation, as it influenced our daily actions and attempts to be reflexive towards existing institutional arrangements. In that way, a sort of illusion of reflexivity is created when we form the specific reflexive choices regarding which action to take in a new academic environment, but those choices are limited by experience. Such observations only recently appeared in the literature as part of the so-called “reflexivity trap” in institutional work (Aleksandrov et al., 2018).

“Reflexivity trap” suggests a situation in which individuals are unaware of their reflexivity limitations, which makes escape from the trap, to define better alternative actions, impossible (Aleksandrov et al., 2018). In other words, individuals form a ‘vicious circle’, in which their possible future institutional embeddedness, current exercise of individual agency and choice of particular actions are trapped by their past embeddedness, individual agency and related actions. In our particular case of being PhD students in transition, we were trapped by the possible choices of the institutional work to be performed in the new (to us) Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution. Not surprisingly, in that sense, the critical edge of the reflexivity trap was what we call “reflexivity shock”. This relates to those memory snapshots of where we felt depressed, frustrated, lacking confidence, as much of the literature captures (e.g. Elliot et al., 2016; Janta et al., 2014; Lonka et al., 2014), but without a deeper explanation of the underlying reasons.

Nevertheless, we can still observe that, despite institutional baggage and the related reflexivity trap and reflexivity shock, we managed to begin to exercise individual agency and become part of the new academic writing norms. We can call this period a saturation point and even a period of academic courage, when we were no longer afraid to express ourselves and made a ‘break-through’ to finish the doctoral programme and defend our PhD theses. That said, despite the challenges of ‘navigation’, emancipation and finding the way from *the Bermuda Triangle* was evident. Below, we present how collective agency aspects explain such dynamic observations.

### 5.2. Collective agency as both constraint and trigger for emancipation: role of formal triggers and mediators

Previous studies suggest that, during their doctoral training, international PhD students need support from supervisors (Vos &

<sup>3</sup> Comments of one of the top scholars in the accounting field during a PhD seminar, 2016.



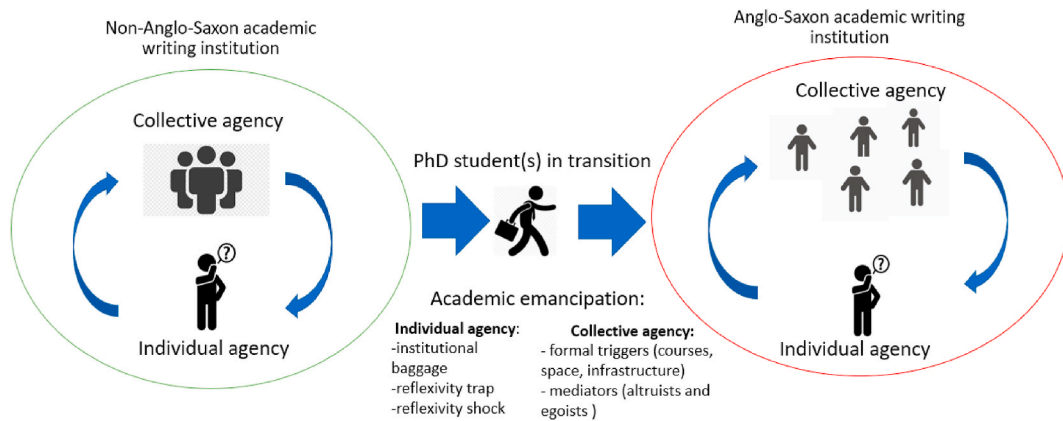


Fig. 2. International students becoming part of new academic writing norms at the business school.

Armstrong, 2019; Corner & Pio, 2017; Shen & Chen, 2017), peers (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017) and the overall academic environment, in the form of seminars, doctoral writing groups (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2019) and learning space/-infrastructure (Cahusac de Caux et al., 2017; Farrell et al., 2018). While our memory work has shown that these elements constitute what institutional work would call the collective agency of the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution, we claim that it does not always lead to emancipation. Instead, our narratives illustrate that there could be both constraining and triggering effects of collective agency that respectively prevent or allow emancipation.

It was not surprising that formal parts of collective agency, such as seminars, courses and supervision, were helpful in triggering our personal transition towards the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution, as the literature suggests (Lonka et al., 2014). What is really surprising is what institutional actors do and how reflexive they are towards understanding individual newcomers. As our memory work showed, those actors (opinion leaders) whom we met during our PhD journeys probably did their best to help us towards becoming part of the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution. Yet, many of those institutional actors served, intentionally or not, as both *lighthouses* in our navigation and factors to disorient us in the *Bermuda Triangle*; i.e., actors within collective agency differ, with plenty of opinions about and attitudes to newcomers (see separate human entities within collective agency on the right side of Fig. 2). Based on our memory work, we identified two different groups of institutional actors, or mediators, depending on their welcoming of newcomers and ability to take into account newcomers' institutional baggage.

As we illustrate, the first group relates to those actors who are ready to be open to newcomers and reflexive towards their institutional baggage and struggles (including reflexivity trap and reflexivity shock). Metaphorically speaking, we call those actors 'academic altruists',<sup>4</sup> as they invest extra and freely given effort, as part of their institutional work, in sustaining the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution and making it more transparent for outsiders. As revealed, you never know who the altruists will be and whether they are so intentionally (e.g. supervisors, peers, colleagues). However, what is crucial is that those 'academic altruists' were more open to challenging the idea that transition to the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution was an easy one for us, international PhD students, i.e. exercising individual reflexive agency towards our struggles.

The second group identified during our memory work comprised those actors who, intentionally or not, were hesitant to welcome us as newcomers with our institutional baggage and struggles. Metaphorically speaking, we call those actors 'academic egoists': those who were unable to make an extra effort to guide us in the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution, except for the 'usual' -for-this-institution comments. Again, you never know who the egoists will be (e.g. supervisors, peers, colleagues), but their institutional work could lead to international PhD students becoming even more lost in the *Bermuda Triangle*, even though they thought they were helping them as usual inhabitants of an Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution.

By these means, we claim that the reflexivity trap can be applied, not only to our journey of academic emancipation but also to institutional actors of the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution itself. As illustrated, the welcoming efforts and help of egoists were evident but were given without them realizing the consequences for the PhD students' journey. In other words, their choice of particular actions was influenced by their past embeddedness, individual agency and related actions of the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution, which directed a 'vicious circle' of academic egoism towards newcomers' struggles for emancipation.

Finally, we found that local infrastructure (physical proximity and daily interactions) facilitated our emancipation and the way one becomes part of the Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution. Here, our observation relates to the general claim regarding collective and individual agency formation by PhD students in transition, namely, the closer international PhD students are to institutional actors (both altruists and egoists), the faster they become reflexive and exercise individual agency in the Anglo-Saxon academic writing

<sup>4</sup> We acknowledge that the introduced 'academic altruism and egoism' metaphor has its limitations, as any other metaphor. We do not claim that it is always either 'altruism' or 'egoism', as a form of conduct, and that there is nothing in between. However, we uncover these two categories of people in our research (i.e. those able or unable, for different reasons, to make efforts to help the PhD candidates) and therefore describe them through the two extremes of human behavior – altruism and egoism.

institution.

### 5.3. Implications and further research

Theoretically, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion on international (in our case, Eastern-European) doctoral students' struggles in taking their PhD degrees in new contexts (Abdullah et al., 2014; Acker & Haque, 2015; Corner & Pio, 2017; Janta et al., 2014), by highlighting issues of academic writing transformations and analysing the keys to these transformations from an institutional work perspective. Our central claim in this regard is that acknowledging the formal procedures of international PhD students' transition to new academic writing norms (Lonka et al., 2014; Janta et al., 2014; Elliot et al., 2016) is not a panacea for the problem of students abandoning their studies and never defending their thesis (Castelló et al., 2017; Acker & Haque, 2015). Hence, while the Bermuda Triangle of a PhD journey will always have many unknowns/be buried in mystery, some parts of the enigma can certainly be demystified. As the current paper reveals, several social obstacles are evident, when looking at transition as a social and interactive process.

There are implications for educators, in terms of how educational practices in doctoral education for students coming from Eastern Europe might be developed and improved. As this study revealed, one obstacle to completing their PhD studies for international PhD students is their limited capacity for emancipation from the non-Anglo-Saxon academic writing institution, due to the institutional baggage they carry and related reflexivity trap formation. Thus, we call for a careful look at how students' former experience can have consequences for their reflexive capacities. In order to increase the chances/speed up the process of emancipation, we call for the creation of a 'transitional institution'. This should be of great concern, since the number of PhD students from non-Anglo-Saxon contexts is increasing (Corner & Pio, 2017). One part of forming this transitional institution involves developing and running – for Eastern European students who start their PhD in Western intuitions – formal introductory courses that problematize the differences in academic writing traditions and the impact of those difference on research activities. Our team has developed and successfully run since 2016 an online PhD course, "Introductory Academic Writing" (2.5 ECTS), which does exactly that. The course addresses the role of the researcher in Western society, the importance and building blocks of theories and theoretical contributions, principles and practices of working with scientific literature, etc. Our impression is that students who excelled at this course were actually better equipped to take on the challenge of studying for a Western PhD.

However, introductory courses are not enough. Another crucial part of this transitional institution would be the formation of a collective agency, driven by academic altruists who would be open to mentoring, co-authorship and follow-up in the revision process, i.e. would dedicate extra time to help students escape from the PhD Bermuda Triangle. This is simply about recognizing the 'special needs' of people from different backgrounds and not leaving individuals to survive by chance, offering them only formal transition procedures. Therefore, it is important not only to train students themselves but also to make faculty and administration aware regarding the need for transitional institution formation. Further, universities should encourage, support and reward altruistic researchers who are willing to share their experiences and views, emanate positivity and motivate doctoral candidates.

In a broader sense, such conceptualization of PhD students in transition may also give other important scientific benefits because it fosters better understanding of how international PhD students can make valuable contributions to their research field, while "staying true to the context" of their origin, being able to talk *to the institute of the world science* (Gendron, 2019) in a written form.

The paper has several limitations, opening avenues for further research. We share the experiences of a few international PhD students, with an Eastern-European background, in transition. In doing so, the paper is essentially offering particularization (e.g. Birkinshaw, 1996). It is important that the findings of this study are carefully applied to other contexts, to develop a better understanding regarding the extent to which they might be generalizable and form theoretical implications (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2011). Therefore, more comparative research on the experiences of international PhD students with different backgrounds, as well as the struggles of 'natives', offers potential areas for further research. Secondly, while our story is derived from 'successful PhD completion', we encourage future research to facilitate more learning from failures. Particularly, it could be intriguing to see how institutional work can explain the journeys of PhD students with Eastern-European backgrounds who have not defended their theses. Further, as we advance an idea about the role of academic altruists in personal transformations, it is reasonable to investigate how to train academic altruists and how to foster double embeddedness, i.e. taking the best from both non-Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Saxon traditions for novel research contributions (Gendron, 2019).

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