

From Offshore ELB at home to tertiary mainstream study overseas: An academic journey

Michele Doray and Peyman G. P. Sabet

Global Curtin, Curtin University

Email: Michele.Doray@curtin.edu.au and P.Ghassemipoursabet@curtin.edu.au

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International students significantly contribute to the economies of some countries, particularly those that are English-speaking. For this reason, initiatives to enhance the academic performance of international students in several host countries have been focused on. Their enhanced performance can contribute to the university's global ranking and overall reputation, revenue generation, and student enrolment growth. The present study examines the efficacy of an offshore academic enabling program, Offshore English Language Bridging (ELB), in preparing students for mainstream studies at Curtin University in Australia, focusing on two key areas: student exam performance and student perception of the program's effectiveness. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the performance of 684 Chinese students across four sets of grades: ELB results (in the home institution), Semester 1 results, Semester 2 results and Course Weighed Averages (CWAs) at Curtin University. The program's efficacy was investigated through focus group interviews. The results indicated that the ELB students performed extremely well as a cohort in both their onshore semesters of study after completing the ELB course. Three types of perceived efficacies – academic, affective and socio-cultural – were identified in the interview transcripts. The study reveals that offshore ELB programs can help international students to perform strongly in host university courses.

Key Words: Enabling Programs, English Language Bridging, Offshore Programs, Pathway Courses, Preparation Courses.

1. Introduction

International students significantly contribute to the economies of some countries, particularly those that are English-speaking. Australia is no exception, with these contributions funding both the wider economy and universities (Floyd, 2015). According to the 2021 report by the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment, international student enrolments increased consecutively from 230,343 in 2012 to 442,219 in 2019, prior to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic witnessed a significant decline in enrolments due to border closures and the cessation of international travels, dropping to 365,714 in 2021; however, following the reopening of borders in Australia, the sector recovered quickly, and the numbers surpassed the pre-pandemic peak, reaching a record high of 499,371 in 2024.

International students can underperform in their studies in Australia due to several reasons, including differences in academic and educational systems (Halimah et al., 2024), language barriers (Sawir, 2005), psychological and sociocultural challenges (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017;

Sabet & Chapman, 2023) and personal problems (Calder et al., 2016). Economic drivers in the recruitment of international students have motivated institutions to attempt to address these issues by adopting a range of initiatives to support students in achieving their best academic performance. One such initiative, ‘university preparation courses’ (DETYA, 2000), has been addressed by different terms in the literature: ‘bridging courses’ (Barrett & Malcolm, 2006), ‘enabling programs’ (Clarke et al., 2000; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016), ‘pathway courses’ (Hodges et al., 2013) and ‘EAP pathways’ (Floyd, 2015). A modified version of the first term, English Language Bridging (ELB), will be adopted in the present paper.

The academic performance of students following completion of ELB courses in tertiary education is of key significance to both program providers and the industry. As Crawford (2014) suggests, such programs offer profound and multilayered benefits, such as developing academic skills, enhancing affective performance (Floyd, 2015) like confidence building, and promoting socio-cultural understanding (Crawford, et al., 2016) like acculturation (Floyed 2015).

In light of such benefits, research in this area has attracted substantial scholarly attention from a range of perspectives. Findings indicate benefits include, but are not limited to, increased retention rates (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016), greater student engagement (Hellmundt & Baker, 2017), and reduced barriers and challenges to program completion (Whannell & Whannell, 2014). With such a diverse range of benefits from these programs, it is not surprising that host universities are willing to explore these areas more innovatively, seeking to maximise academic and financial outcomes. This motive has contributed to an extensive body of literature on enabling programs.

What almost all existing studies on ELB programs have in common is their focus on onshore offerings, where students take courses in the host institutions prior to commencing their mainstream studies. To the best of the researchers’ knowledge, studies examining the efficacy of offshore ELB courses, delivered in the students’ home institutions, are limited in the relevant literature. The term ‘offshore’ in this study refers to programs offered by the provider institution in the students’ home institution prior to their arrival in the host country for mainstream studies. To fill this identified gap, the present study aims to answer the following two research questions:

RQ 1: To what extent does the Offshore ELB program prepare students for their academic performance in mainstream university studies?

RQ 2: What are the students’ perceptions regarding the academic, affective and socio-cultural efficacies of the ELB program in their mainstream university courses?

To answer research question 1, we tracked the academic performance of students who had completing an Offshore ELB course offered to six Chinese partner institutions in China, as part of an Australian university’s offshore articulation program, through to their final year of university study in Australia. Five of the institutions offered the program to undergraduate students, while one institution offered it to undergraduate and postgraduate students. The program required students to meet the English language prerequisites in their home country for direct entry to a degree program, allowing them to complete the final year of their mainstream studies at the host institution. Therefore, the students’ academic performance throughout their academic journey, from the commencement of the ELB course in China to the completion of their mainstream courses in Australia, were analysed to answer research question 1. Research question 2 was answered through a thematic analysis of data derived from focus group interviews on the efficacies of the program.

The paper is structured as follows: a brief overview of background studies will be presented in the subsequent section, followed by a description of the context of this study. Next, the methodology will be detailed, followed by the presentation of the findings. The discussion will then be presented in the penultimate section, after which the conclusions will be summarised.

2. Background studies on the benefits of enabling programs

University enabling programs are vital for ensuring that students from equity groups, such as those from regional or remote areas, refugee communities and with a low socio-economic status and diverse educational, linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Crawford, 2014; Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016), have sufficient opportunities to participate successfully in an Australian higher education context. Not only do enabling programs widen participation, but, more importantly, they are able to support underprivileged/disadvantaged students who often face multiple barriers to their education, such as needing to transition from distinctly different educational systems, mental health challenges, interrupted schooling and financial instability (Crawford et al., 2016). The student cohorts involved in this study are from both culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, necessitating academic preparatory programs to enhance students' learning outcomes. Success indicators for these students are significantly enhanced through the establishment of student-centred, course-embedded models of support, particularly those that integrate academic and emotional care, reflecting a broad ethic of care among educators (Crawford & Johns, 2015).

While the transformative learning environments provided by enabling programs are instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging, agency and purpose (White et al., 2024; Osborn et al., 2024), inarguably there are inherent limitations. Such barriers include the resource intensive nature of support programs that not only place huge emotional demands on educators but are further compounded by the inadequacy of some institutional infrastructures which educators need to manage (Crawford et al., 2018). Yet another complication is the complex issue of retention. Arguably, retention is shaped less by demographic factors and is instead influenced more by individual circumstances which can include health and family obligations (Lisciandro & Gibbs, 2016). Mitigating strategies that can promote resilience include early intervention and engagement which build both peer connections and community within the support programs (Kift et al., 2010; Whannel et al., 2013).

2.1. Academic benefits

In the international higher education context, academic and cultural transitions are closely linked. Students entering mainstream university courses through pathway programs, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs, often begin with lower levels of academic performance but typically narrow the gap within a semester as a result of previous training in academic literacy and referencing conventions (Floyd, 2015). We adopt Wingate's (2018) definition of academic literacy as "the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community" (p. 350). Students demonstrate the transfer of academic skills they develop in the pathway programs (Dyson, 2014). For example, Keefe (2016) reported that learners found presentation skills development and collaborative learning helpful in improving their speaking ability. They also reported pathway programs helped students improve their academic management skills, which they could apply in their disciplinary courses. Enabling programs have also been found helpful in preparing students to adjust to a new educational system (Dooley, 2010).

Recent studies (Brunsting et al., 2023; Swarts et al., 2021) further reinforce the importance of academic acculturation and cultural intelligence, noting that they are imperative in the adjustment period for international students; they facilitate "adjustment to various demands in an educational setting, including different educational systems, teaching and learning styles" (Brunsting et al., 2023, p. 745). The evolution of related literature is evident as recent studies (Wu, 2015) reject essentialist preconceptions and stereotypes such as the "Chinese learner" but instead acknowledge enabling program students' ability to adapt and acclimatise their learning behaviours to different and unfamiliar pedagogical contexts.

2.2. Affective gains

A dominant affective gain reported in the related literature is psychological adjustment, which is defined as positive "affective responses to the new environment, including psychological

wellbeing and satisfaction with life” (Schartner & Young, 2016, p. 374). Enabling programs have the ability to embed and achieve multicomponent positive psychological interventions that have the added bonus of bolstering student confidence, motivation and emotional resilience (Llistosella et al., 2023). Furthermore, the embedding of curriculum-level interventions across disciplines is pivotal in strengthening student engagement and self-regulation (Osborn et al., 2024). As a result of making new friends owing to their improved speaking skills in a preparatory EAP program, learners feel more relaxed in new learning environments (Keefe, 2016). Such programs also enhance learners’ coping strategies, which are instrumental in addressing potential psychological issues in the host country (Dooley, 2010).

2.3. Socio-cultural influences

The first socio-cultural influence of enabling programs is socio-cultural adjustment. Socio-cultural adjustment is defined as “the ability to fit in and negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture” (Searle & Ward, 1990, p. 450). Brunsting et al. (2023) divide socio-cultural factors into factors associated with social integration, educational environment, language, engaging in activities, drinks and food, transport and bureaucracy. An approach to addressing the socio-cultural discomfort experienced by international students is to foster intercultural dialogue and cooperation among learners from diverse cultures, including domestic students (Zhao & Wildemeersch, 2008). Organising such activities can provide international students with in-depth intercultural understandings and promote their multicultural competence.

2.4. On the need for further research

Despite encouraging studies that recognise the instrumental role of enabling programs in helping international students overcome their overall academic, cultural and psychological adjustment challenges, further longitudinal research is necessary to evaluate the sustainability, continuity and transference of the skills attained by students from enabling programs to their mainstream study programs. By adopting such an approach, the present study will investigate the performance of 684 Chinese students in an intervention, the Offshore ELB program, completed in their home country, and the effects it had on their academic performance, as well as on their levels of affective wellbeing and socio-cultural adaptation during two semesters of mainstream study in Australia, as well as the perceived efficacy of the program.

3. The program and study set up

3.1. The program

The ELB program, in operation since 1989, is an academic literacy course which prepares students for mainstream studies at an Australian tertiary institution by providing the necessary introduction and induction into Australian tertiary academic culture. The partner institutions are Chinese institutions with established partnerships with the host institution, and they are located in four provinces: Liaoning Province, Hebei Province, Hubei Province and Jiangsu Province. The course is holistic in nature and enables students to improve their English language proficiency skills, study skills and academic literacy. While the primary aim is to enable improvements in English language proficiency, this is contextual to their discipline studies. The course is developmental with appropriate scaffolding, progressing from the foundations of academic literacy to more advanced skills such as critical thinking and basic research skills.

The duration of the course can be adapted to the needs and academic calendar of the partner institutions. Overall, the course is taught over 380 contact hours on campus, delivered over 2–5 semesters, depending on the number of hours allocated weekly by each partner institution. Most institutions have replaced their ‘College English’ course with the ELB program, contributing significantly to its overall success. All assessments and exams (See Table 1) are provided by the host institution and undergo strict moderation to ensure consistency and the maintenance of quality standards. Students achieving the requisite scores gain direct entry to the host institution upon

completion of the program at their home institutions. They are then able to complete their degrees at the host institution over the course of two semesters.

3.2. The students

The 684 students involved in the study were tertiary-level Chinese students, aged between 19 and 20, from similar cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds. They had previously passed the university entrance examinations to qualify for entry into their home institutions. The students on the ELB program completed the course prior to enrolling at the host institution, a 2+1+1 structure: two years of study in China, one year in Australia and then a final year in China. Before being accepted by the host institution, students must meet the requisite English Language entry requirement, which is achieved by attaining an overall score of 60% or higher on the ELB (Offshore) program, ensuring they are prepared for the rigours of studying at an Australian institution.

3.3. The lecturers

The lecturers who taught on the ELB program in this study were selected by the home institution, with the final approval to teach the program given by the host institution. Upon confirmation, the selected candidates underwent an intensive 12-week teacher training program conducted by the authors at the home institution. Sixty-two lecturers were trained over a period of five years and were added to the pool of qualified teachers. The objectives of the teacher training program were to:

1. promote teacher education and knowledge in English Language teaching;
2. provide opportunities for the practical application of ELT methodologies, such as Communicative Language Teaching;
3. enhance pedagogical skills in the delivery of academic preparatory English Language classes.

The training program, delivered over 80 hours, comprised eight modules:

1. Module 1 – Theoretical Background (Historical Perspectives, SLA Theories)
2. Module 2 – Learners (Focus on the Learner)
3. Module 3 – Teaching Methods and Approaches
4. Module 4 – Microteaching Theory and Application
5. Module 5 – Teaching Language and Sub-skills (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, Reading, Vocabulary, Grammar)
6. Module 6 – ELB Syllabus
7. Module 7 – Teaching Critical Thinking Skills
8. Module 8 – Teaching Research Projects

The teachers were all from China and had similar educational backgrounds and qualifications but varied in age from 26 to 48. The minimum qualification required for training and teaching in this program was a master's degree in English language teaching.

3.4. Ethical approval

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical regulations stipulated in Curtin University Ethics Approval forms. The focus group participants were given written consent forms, informing them of the purpose of the study and their contribution. They were also made aware of their right to withdraw from the study through the use of an information sheet. They were given the hard copy of the consent form at the beginning of the interview when the purpose of the interview was being explained orally. They were then given five minutes to review the details, sign the form, and return it to the interviewer. To ensure participant anonymity, the researchers used pseudonyms in reporting the findings associated with their responses. For security purposes,

the data are stored on Curtin OneDrive and are shared only between the two authors. They will be discarded seven years after the paper is published.

3.5. Monitoring of the program

The offshore ELB program was delivered at the students' home institutions by teachers trained by the host institution. Coordinators at the host institution regularly monitored delivery and progress through fortnightly meetings with teachers at the home institutions. Furthermore, visits were also conducted each semester at the home institutions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, coordinators conducted regular online meetings with both students and teachers to ensure that standards were maintained.

3.6. Assessments

The offshore ELB course was designed to progressively develop students' competencies, developing from language-based to academic-based skills across the semesters. As illustrated in Table 1, the skills listed in the first column correspond to the assessments in the second column; each skill was assessed through multiple assessments. Because the number of semesters over which the ELB course was administered varied across partner institutions, the assessments are not listed in a semester-based sequence but by skill progressions. For instance, the listening assessment typically progressed from listening comprehension to more complex tasks such as listening, note-taking, and summary writing, regardless of whether this development occurred over two or three semesters at the home institution.

Table 1. List of skills and assessments in the ELB program.

Skills	Assessments
Listening	Listening comprehension
	Listening, note-taking and summary
Speaking	Individual speeches
	Academic presentations
	Group presentations
Reading	Reading comprehension
	Reading and summary writing
Writing	Paragraph writing
	Writing opinion essays
	Writing argumentative essays
Critical Thinking	Logical fallacies
	Writing critical reviews of newspaper articles
	Writing critical reviews of journal articles
Research Skills	Writing proposals
	Writing literature reviews
	Writing research reports

4. Methodology

This section provides a description of the datasets collected and the analytical procedures adopted in this study.

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The descriptive data include four sets of marks, collected across three teaching blocks: final ELB course results from the home institutions, Semester 1 (S1) results, Semester 2 (S2) results and course weighted averages (CWAs) from the host institution. The final ELB results were finalised and recorded by the two authors of this study, who were directly involved in the design and delivery of the ELB curriculum. S1 and S2 results were obtained via Student 1, the host institution's platform used to store the academic records of students. The researchers received assistance from administration staff at the host institution to access the students' results and were granted ethical approval by the host institution to access these results.

Name lists were classified according to their respective home institutions and course commencement years. However, 'years' in this study refers specifically to the year the first semester at the host university was commenced subsequent to completing the ELB course. While the overall contact hours of the ELB course are consistent across institutions, the number of weeks allocated to the program by each home institution varies according to the relevant partnership agreements. Therefore, ELB syllabi are tailored to the needs and academic programs of the home institutions, and not all students begin their first semester at the host institution immediately upon completion of the ELB program. Students from some institutions commence their mainstream studies one semester after ELB completion, while others commence after two semesters. For this reason, mainstream commencement years at the host institutions have been adopted as the reference point in this study.

4.2. Data coding

Upon obtaining the results from 684 students, all name lists, classified by institutions and entry year into the host institution program, were transferred to an Excel spreadsheet comprising five columns. Column 1 contained the students' full names, Column 2 displayed the ELB results and Columns 3, 4 and 5 presented S1 results, S2 results and CWAs, respectively.

The next phase of data preparation involved entering marks into the appropriate cells on the spreadsheet, followed by colour coding the marks based on the academic grading system outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Academic grading system.

Code	Grade	%
HD	High Distinction	80-100
D	Distinction	70-79
C	Credit	60-69
P	Pass	50-59
F	Fail	0-49

Colour coding was applied by highlighting the marks as follows: High Distinction (HD) marks in dark green, Distinction (D) marks in light green, Credit (C) marks in yellow, Pass (P) marks in orange and Fail (F) marks in red. Following the colour coding stage, descriptive statistics were applied to analyse assessment-based performance across ELB, S1, S2 and CWAs.

4.3. Focus groups

The second stage of the research involved semi-structured interviews conducted with a total of 38 students across 11 focus groups on completion of their mainstream programs at the host institution. Each year, a cohort of three students from each home institution was invited to participate in interviews post-graduation at the host institution, prior to their return to China. Some students

were unable to attend the interview sessions for various reasons. Due to the short notice given of their absence, rescheduling face-to-face meetings for all participants was not feasible, and therefore their interviews were conducted online.

Three of the interviews were conducted online, and eight were conducted in person. Both online and face-to-face interviews, each lasting between 30–45 minutes, were recorded and transcribed by one of the authors to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of the program's efficacy. The interviews comprised questions that focused on the students' experiences with the ELB course and their subsequent mainstream studies. The split did not affect the results as the interviews were conducted shortly after their return to China, and the participants could still recall the details of their experiences at the host institution.

4.4. Focus group data analysis

Data analysis was conducted manually by one of the authors. The transcripts underwent thematic analysis to generate themes arising from the interview responses following the procedures described in Savin-Baden and Major (2013). The initial stage involved a close examination of the transcripts, which were read multiple times to gain insights into the data. The next stage involved generating initial codes, a process whereby each paragraph underwent open coding and was assigned an initial code in preparation for creating broader categories and identifying themes that led to answering the research questions.

Following initial coding, the search for themes began with axial coding. This involved classifying codes with similar meanings under broader categories identified throughout the transcripts. The authors adopted inductive coding (Berg & Lune, 2017), a reiterative process of refining and re-categorising codes driven by the emerging content. The retrieved codes were then used to develop the underlying themes. The initial themes underwent several rounds of review and reinterpretation before the themes and subthemes were finalised.

5. Findings

This section will present the analysis of assessment-based performance using descriptive statistics, followed by an examination of perceived efficacies.

5.1. Assessment-based performance

A total of 684 students who completed the seventeen-week ELB course in their home institutions enrolled at Curtin University for their mainstream studies between 2016 and 2020. As can be seen in Figure 1, the largest mark category of the ELB program over the five years is C marks [62% (424)], followed by D marks [24% (165)] and P marks [12% (81)], with only a very small proportion receiving HD marks [2% (14)].

The academic performance of the students improved over the two fourteen-week semesters at the host institution. The most frequent mark category of the ELB program (C) shifted upwards by one level by the end of S2 (D), accompanied by a significant increase from D marks to HD marks, contributing to an increase in CWAs at the end of S2. This increase led to a corresponding decrease in the proportion of C and P marks compared to the ELB program.

HD and D marks account for 26% (179) of the overall ELB results with a significant increase in the two mainstream semesters, with 63% (395) in S1 and 62% (425) in S2. Specifically, the proportion of HD marks in the ELB results [2% (14)] increased significantly to 23% (155) in S1 and 18% (126) in S2. In the same way, D marks in the ELB results [24% (165)] increased to 40% (270) in S1 and 44% (299) in S2. These increases resulted in the students graduating with 21% (141) of the CWAs being HD marks and 47% (323) being D marks.

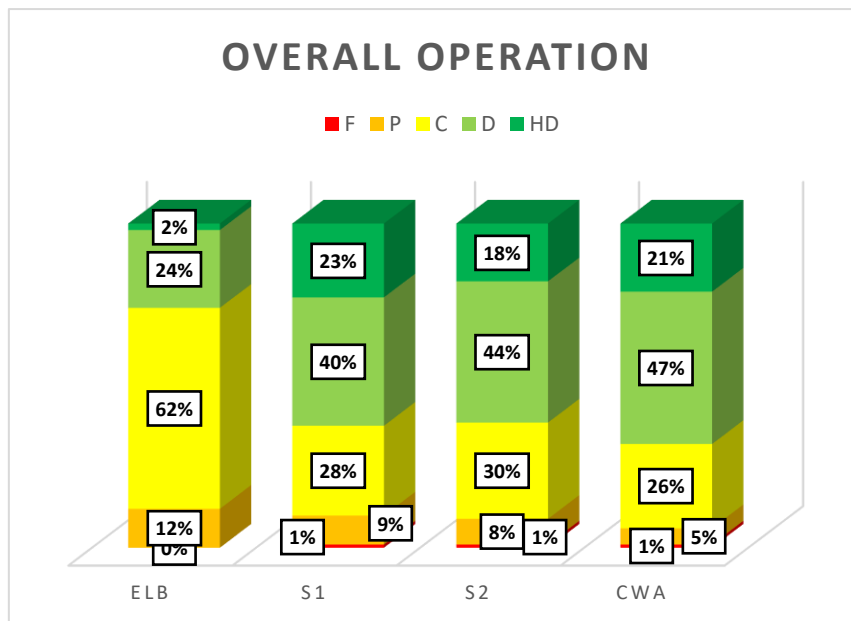


Figure 1. The overall increases and decreases in grades within the study period.

Such increases in the two highest mark categories of Curtin University results, HD and D, led to corresponding decreases in two lower categories, C and P. C marks [62% (424)] in the ELB course results decreased to 28% (190) in S1, 30% (200) in S2 and 26% (178) in CWAs. P marks decreased, albeit slightly, over time, from 12% (81) in the ELB results to 9% (59) in S1 results, 8% (52) in S2 results, reaching 5% (37) in CWAs. F marks consistently remained at the lowest possible level of 1% (5) after completion of the ELB course.

Overall, C marks in the ELB course results [62% (424)] decreased significantly across the subsequent stages: 28% (190) in S1, 30% (200) in S2 and 26% (178) in CWAs. This decrease corresponded to a substantial increase in HD marks, rising from 2% (14) in the ELB course to 23% (155) in S1, 18% (126) in S2 and 21% (141) in CWAs. Likewise, D marks showed a notable increase from the ELB course [24% (165)] to 40% (270) in S1, 44% (299) in S2 and 23% (155) in CWAs.

It must be acknowledged, however, that many factors other than the effects of the ELB could potentially have contributed to the higher grades received by the students while studying at the host institution. Such factors include things such as differences in teaching methods and the level of student support provided (e.g. the amount of scaffolding given for assessment tasks), and differences in assessment tasks' levels of difficulty and marking standards. Nevertheless, that the students objectively scored very well right from their very first semester at the host institution, when many international students initially struggle (e.g. Floyd, 2015), suggests that the ELB was successful in helping the students as a whole to make a swift and successful transition to their studies in Australia. In addition, as will be shown next, this conclusion is supported by the students' perceptions of the efficacy of the ELB program.

5.2. Perceived efficacy

To develop a deeper understanding of the program efficacy, 11 focus group interviews were conducted, three of which, comprising 14 students, were online. Three broad categories comprising academic, affective and socio-cultural efficacies emerged, as referred to earlier in this paper. Each category, along with its subcategories, are described individually below, with any overlaps between the categories highlighted.

5.2.1. Academic efficacy

The primary theme identified in the interview transcripts was the academic efficacy of the ELB program. Participants acknowledged receiving extensive academic preparation for their time spent at Curtin University. The wide-ranging academic benefits of completing the program from the participants' perspective were categorised as follows.

English for Academic Purposes: The eight face-to-face and the three online focus groups unanimously reported a significant improvement in their English as a result of the ELB program.

Extract 1:

Bridging course gave us... the English vocabulary and grammar we needed in our course at Curtin. They were difference, different from what I learnt in school. We learnt a lot of words and ... expressions that we used every day at Curtin. We could understand our teachers and classmates. We could use them in doing our home, homework. (G2 – Jack)

In addition to the development of academic language, the participants identified other essential academic skills, including critical thinking, research skills, study skills, note-taking, collaborative learning, and engagement with feedback, as being of paramount importance for their mainstream programs. These skills, which had not been adequately emphasised in their previous education system, were all new to the participants. While some initially questioned the significant emphasis placed on these skills in the ELB program, the rationale for doing so became evident upon commencement of their mainstream studies at Curtin University.

Extract 2:

Critical think was a very hard, difficult lesson. I and my friends had to think a lot, most of time, we spent on this skill. I was asking why we use this lesson, skill. My mark was not very high in this lesson, but the teacher said it is very important. At Curtin, the lecturers emphasised critical thinking, and it was difficult, but I knew what was it because my teacher has taught me. (G7 – Margaret)

As is evident in Extract 2, the initial question regarding the emphasis on critical thinking was answered once the students began their studies at Curtin University, where they recognised its value and were able to apply it. Nevertheless, some participants suggested writing fewer critical reviews and allocating more time instead to teacher and peer feedback on student critical reviews in each ELB study period.

Moreover, the research project unit facilitated their research project subskills, such as identifying research questions, writing different sections of a research report and referencing skills, thereby providing them with advantages that many of their classmates in the mainstream program lacked.

Extract 3:

... and I could teach my classmate who didn't know what literature review is and how she could write a literature review. (G1 – Frankie)

Students also experienced a distinctive form of learning, which indicated to them that not all learning necessitates intensive reading and rigorous analysis. The learning-by-doing model, known as 'the experiential learning approach', employed in the ELB research project unit was frequently applied in mainstream studies at Curtin University. Participants recognised the value of this new learning experience developed within the ELB program, noting that learning and demonstrating the material being imparted did not rely solely on the verbatim reproduction of lecture content. They discovered that memorisation and repetition were not the exclusive pathways to academic success. Instead, this approach suggested that academic achievement is facilitated and evaluated through practical engagement and experience, rather than through an exam-centric approach.

The ELB program also fostered other academic skills, including study skills such as time management and notetaking. While initially challenging, students successfully developed effective note-taking techniques for long lectures through the consistent practice of essential micro-skills. Despite occasional student feedback regarding the length of lectures during the ELB program, participants found the duration of these lectures reasonable when they commenced their mainstream studies at Curtin University, as these lectures involved extended periods of listening to live lectures. This prior training enabled them to adapt more easily and quickly than other international students.

Furthermore, collaborative learning, fostered by the particular emphasis placed on collaborative activities and assessments by the ELB program, proved to be another crucial academic skill for the students' mainstream studies.

Extract 4:

We had to, to, change the, s,s, structure of our sitting at the beginning of each class, huh because we had to sit around, around and work with our group members. (G2 - Mark)

Extract 4 illustrates the initiation of collaborative learning within the ELB program through activities such as group essay writing, group critical response and the fully collaborative research project. This process involved developing familiarity with the language and functions essential for collaboration, including asking for clarification, expressing agreement and practising discourse management skills like turn-taking, turn-holding and turn-giving.

Moreover, the ELB program enabled students to maximise their learning using a diverse range of collaborative assessment formats, mirroring those used in their mainstream courses. The ELB program introduced and adopted a diverse range of assessments in the same formats as used in the mainstream programs, including group projects, group presentations, seminar discussions and take-home exams. Consequently, as can be seen in Extract 5, participants were more at ease during their mainstream courses due to the groupwork experiences they had developed during the ELB program under the same assessment conditions and requirements as the host university.

Extract 5:

... this, these exams were, err, very difficult because, huh, we weren't familiar with them a lot, but we, we practiced a lot in China with our teachers in our exams. When we came to Australia, Curtin, they weren't difficult because we know how to do it. (G2 - Andy)

Furthermore, participants identified rubrics and feedback as two assessment-related concepts that had made a significant contribution to improvements in their academic performance. These crucial elements, largely absent or entirely overlooked in their previous education, were emphasised in the ELB program. For each productive assessment, the instructors provided and explained rubrics when the assessment was being introduced.

Extract 6:

I, I, see, looked at the rubrics on Blackboard first, huh, because I knew the teacher will mark my paper according to these goals. (G9 - Johanna)

As is evident in Extract 6, teachers tended to adhere to rubrics when marking ELB assessments. Consequently, the students became more familiar with the assessment criteria and were able to use them when completing their assessments. In turn, the use of rubrics became a common academic practice when students commenced their mainstream studies.

Students also found feedback to be an invaluable resource for improving their academic performance. They received instruction on how to effectively engage with feedback provided by their teachers, as indicated in Extract 7.

Extract 7:

My Chinese, Chinese teacher said I should, underline, I should underline the key words in comment and tell her what should I, what I should do. (G5 - Brian)

Students expressed satisfaction that they had been given the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses in their performance as it helped them to understand how to progress and to identify those areas requiring further practice. They also appreciated their teachers providing supplementary resources that were aligned with the feedback provided. Students were somewhat surprised to discover that the same approach was adopted at Curtin University, where they received detailed feedback on each individual assignment. Some students had noticed inconsistencies between the ELB teachers regarding the amount of feedback provided, but the quality of feedback was positively highlighted, regardless of the quantity.

5.2.2. Affective efficacy

The second category identified in the focus group interviews related to affective aspects of their studies. Students reported that completing the ELB program increased their self-confidence, as it provided them with the necessary background knowledge about academic life at Curtin University. They felt they possessed the same knowledge and skills as other students with prior study experience at the university.

Extract 8:

It was less scary, for example, because we were familiar with the huhhh work we had to do at Curtin. We had studied in the Curtin way before we, we came to Australia. (G4 - Mary)

Maximum exposure to English and the diverse accents used in the teaching materials and listening assessments contributed to a smoother adjustment for the students when in the host country. As indicated in Excerpt 8, students possessed the basic requirements for their courses and the use of academic English resources helped to ease them into their studies at Curtin University.

Another theme emerging under the affective category was the sense of belonging. Students completed the ELB program because they had decided to study at Curtin University, and they were aware that this program was provided by the university. Teaching materials and assessments featured the Curtin University logo, with 'Curtin University' printed at the top of each page. Furthermore, academic staff from the university visited students in China each semester, undertaking some teaching and engaging in informal chats about Curtin University and Australia.

Extract 9:

... and ... came to ... (Institution name). They taught us every semester and answered our questions. They were very kind and supportive. (G11 - Cindy)

Overall, the participants felt that completing the ELB course provided them with the mental readiness for starting their mainstream studies at Curtin University.

5.2.3. Socio-cultural efficacy

The socio-cultural category emerged as the third theme from the interview transcripts. As a result of receiving essential linguistic resources and consistent engagement in English communication throughout the ELB program, learners were able to communicate relatively effectively in the host country. In addition to academic English competence, improved general English facilitated interaction outside of educational contexts and thus increased their enjoyment of their social lives. Students experienced fewer problems understanding people with different accents, contributing to improved socialisation and reducing misunderstandings.

Extract 10:

Curtin teachers were the only foreigners I had talked with, but here I could make new friends and talked with my neighbours about China. (G7 - Tim)

However, some suggestions were made regarding the integration of more general English into the ELB program.

Participants also highlighted the advantages of familiarity with Australian cultures as incorporated into the ELB program. The ELB curriculum program included themes such as Australian Aboriginal culture, Australian Multiculturalism, and Migrants and Refugees, topics with which most students were unfamiliar.

Extract 11:

... my friend, Nancy, and I saw, saw a Aboriginal man in the bus next day. It was the first time, but I had looked, I had seen photos and videos of the Aboriginal in the ELB, but, but, but I hadn't seen any, any Aboriginal people before. They were the first people ... (G6 - Diana)

The data revealed that students were able to engage early on with the manifestation of these concepts in their daily lives in Australia because they understood what they meant. For example, they expected to encounter people in Australia from diverse, racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds with various accents and appearances. The cultural competencies developed from undertaking the ELB course contributed to a more pleasant experience adjusting to life in Australia and facilitated integration into the host country. Despite its later significant impact, the theme of 'refugees and migrants' was initially perceived as challenging in the ELB program, which could only be assimilated with increased interaction. Many participants reported that upon arrival in Australia, they were able to follow the daily news about refugees and migrants as they were familiar with this theme.

6. Discussion

The aim of this study has been to examine the academic assessment-based performance and perceived affective and socio-cultural efficacies of an offshore ELB program in preparing 684 Chinese students for their mainstream studies at an Australian tertiary institution between 2016 and 2020. The ELB course, delivered within partner institutions in China as part of an articulation program, provides students with direct entry upon successful completion. The findings will be discussed in two sections: assessment-based performance derived from ELB results (home institutions), Semester 1 results, Semester 2 results and CWAs (host institution), and perceived efficacies explored through focus group interviews following graduation from the host institution.

This study was conducted to answer two main questions associated with an Offshore ELB program that prepares students for mainstream Australian university programs. However, as it was conducted as a quasi-experiment with no control group, we cannot be sure how big the impact the ELB preparation had on the students' results in Australia. Nevertheless, the qualitative findings support our conclusions that the ELB did make substantial, worthwhile contributions to the students' success in Australia.

To provide deeper insight into these findings, the research questions will be discussed in reverse order, using the qualitative data to support the interpretation of the quantitative results.

6.1. RQ 2: What are the students' perceptions regarding the academic, affective and socio-cultural efficacies of the ELB program in their mainstream courses?

To address this question, focus group interviews were conducted, with the analysis focusing on dominant themes emerging from the transcripts. The results are discussed below.

Three main themes pertaining to the efficacy of the ELB program emerged from the interview data. Participants reported academic, affective and socio-cultural efficacies as the result of completing the ELB course in China. This supports Johns et al.'s (2016) research, highlighting the instrumental role of enabling programs in preparing international students for their mainstream studies.

From the participants' perspective, the ELB program yielded academic benefits throughout their mainstream studies. Aligning with prior research findings that enabling programs promote the self-efficacy of students (Atherton, 2015; Crawford et al., 2015), the data indicate that participants reported developed academic skills, also referred to as academic literacies (Baker & Irwin, 2016), following completion of the ELB program. This finding directly addresses Baker and Irwin's (2016) call for greater focus on academic literacies in enabling programs. The academic efficacy reported by the participants fell into three main categories: academic skills (study practices such as critical thinking, collaborative learning and note-taking), academic language (including genre and vocabulary) and assessment (entailing feedback and rubrics).

Participants highlighted their acquisition of critical thinking skills, an academic skill that was initially challenging for many due to its novelty. This essential skill is a prerequisite for tertiary competency (Edwards & Ritchie, 2022), and its mastery demands consistent hard work over time. Critical thinking involves acquiring skills in different areas such as the possession of effective heuristics and operational knowledge of appropriate standards (Bailin et al., 1999). While Atkinson (1997) treats critical thinking as a product unique to Western culture, with which Asian collectivist culture finds itself incompatible, the current study revealed the opposite.

Despite initial challenges, students successfully developed critical thinking skills and improved their academic performance. They even acknowledged the significance of these skills in their interviews. Rebutting Atkinson's (1997) stance, this study corroborates Patson's (2005) view that it is insufficient knowledge and practice with critical thinking, rather than cultures, that hinders critical thinking. This conclusion is further supported by Wu (2015), who highlights the role of practice and reports that practice and active participation in appropriate learning environments enhance learning beliefs and behaviours. This finding might be the rationale behind Tian and Low's (2011) recommendation for pre-course training, an approach adopted in the present study.

Participants also reported improvements in their collaborative learning and note-taking skills. Wu (2015) states that group learning is a traditional pedagogical approach in the Chinese educational system but contrasts the nature of this approach adopted in Chinese and Western educational systems. In the former, the academically strongest team members often complete the majority of the work because team members primarily focus on the marks awarded to the submitted group work. To mitigate such an issue in preparatory courses for Chinese students, Wu (2015) suggests addressing these dynamics 'as part of guidance' (p. 760) at the outset of the program, an approach which was adopted and strictly monitored by teachers within the ELB program. Teachers had been trained to actively engage students in collaborative learning activities and rigorously monitor group dynamics. The perceived novelty in the collaborative learning experience by the students might have arisen from the distinctive differences between group dynamics in the two educational systems.

In contrast to the customary way of assessing academic success in China, which tends to rely on final examination papers (Wu, 2015), the collaborative experiential learning (Marpaung & Hambandian, 2018) frequently applied in the new learning environment, emerged as a novel experience for the participants. This approach, which focuses on process-oriented active and engaging thinking (Dooley, 2008), underlies the rationale for some learning outcomes and assessments. For example, participants acknowledged the significant role of rubrics in enhancing their learning and improving their assessment performance. They stated that rubrics facilitated the monitoring and assessment of their own learning, functioned as an instructional tool (Andrade, 2000) and prepared them for assessments. They also used rubrics as evaluative tools (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007)

to understand the rationale behind the assigned score given in feedback. Teachers with responsibility for delivering the ELB program provided students with instructions on rubrics in advance; however, Sundeep's (2014) findings did not suggest any significant differences between explicit instructions on the rubrics and simply providing learners with rubrics. Students experienced the latter during their mainstream studies. However, as some of the focus group participants acknowledged, the explicit instructions on using rubrics that were provided within the ELB program prepared them to effectively use any rubrics provided during their mainstream university studies.

The data also revealed a critical role attributed to feedback by the interviewees, a concept often studied under the term 'student feedback' (Carless & Boud, 2018). The learners' responses indicated that the ELB course helped them acquire feedback literacy, which they could then transfer to their mainstream studies. Understanding feedback initially involves cognitive, psychological and emotional challenges (Tian & Lowe, 2013), as experienced by students during the first two blocks of the ELB program. Students learned how to use feedback to avoid errors, enhance learning and improve their academic performance. This process promoted motivation, an affective outcome that will be discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

This finding around the value of students developing feedback literacy aligns with Heng's (2014) report that identifies a positive relationship between these skills and the academic achievements of students. As stated by Kift (2009), enhanced academic performance can increase student motivation, leading to positive affective outcomes. It can also improve socio-cultural efficacy (Hernández López, 2020).

The second dominant theme arising from the data analysis pertains to the ELB program's affective efficacy. An example of an affective outcome could be mental health issues arising from a student's lack of prior educational experiences in enabling programs (Crawford et al., 2016; Lisciandro et al., 2016) and adapting to mainstream studies in new teaching environments can also involve serious challenges (Hernández López, 2020). Thus, as a result, international students often enter such programs with low levels of self-confidence (Atherton, 2015; Crawford et al., 2015). However, having undertaken the ELB course in their home country, participants did not report any mental health issues.

Mental health issues were not observed in mainstream programs either. The following two factors associated with the ELB program, as noted above, might explain this absence. Firstly, exposure to a new teaching/learning environment in the home country, which is similar to that of their upcoming mainstream studies, prior to their arrival in the host country, probably enhanced their self-confidence, thereby contributing to a smoother and more pleasant transition period. This observation supports the view that prior educational experience, especially when similar to the new environment, helps students affectively adapt to their new surroundings, subsequently enhancing academic performance. This finding supports the existence of a positive correlation between the affective and academic performance of international students (Dymock, 2007; Floyd, 2015; Zepke, 2013).

As revealed during the interviews, upon entering mainstream studies, students found themselves at an advantage as they had already acquired various academic skills, such as research report writing, referencing and the preparation of literature reviews, skills which some of their local and international peers lacked. Therefore, they were able to provide assistance to these students or lead groupwork activities due to their enhanced academic skills. This increased their self-confidence and promoted motivation for further learning, aligning with the finding that enhanced motivation can improve learning and academic performance (Goodman et al., 2011), and improved academic performance can enhance affective outcomes such as motivation (Wang et al., 2012), a bidirectional relationship.

The second significant factor identified under the affective category was a 'sense of belonging'. A sense of belonging can contribute to good mental health (Atri et al., 2007) and academic persistence (Mamiseishvili, 2012), impacting course completion and dropout rates (Lisciandro &

Gibbs, 2016). As discussed in the interviews, a sense of belonging started with the feeling of belonging to the university, which was inspired during completion of the ELB program through interaction with the host institution's teaching staff during visits to China and the use of teaching materials and exams with the host institution's name and logo. The sense of belonging continued with feelings generated upon arrival at the campus, a transition facilitated by factors associated with socio-cultural efficacy (Bai, 2016).

This study lends support to Brunsting et al.'s (2018) finding that increased social interaction correlates positively with affective impacts and helps to ensure that students experience fewer challenges while adjusting to studies in a new educational environment. In other words, affective efficacy and socio-cultural efficacy have a reciprocal relationship. Affective efficacy can lead to positive academic and socio-cultural outcomes, and can enhance peace of mind, provide more mental space for learning, increase self-confidence and promote learning motivation. In turn, socio-cultural efficacy can promote the students' affective preparedness for life in the host country.

The responses given by the participants also highlighted various helpful socio-cultural outcomes arising from the ELB program. This result lends support to Crawford et al.'s (2018) finding that enabling programs contribute to the success in tertiary education of a diverse student population. The students that undertook our program acknowledged the facilitative role of familiarity with cultural concepts such as Australian Aboriginal life and multiculturalism being developed throughout the ELB program. This familiarity contributed to greater interaction with the main cultural values of the host country, a factor which, according to Ward and Kennedy (1994), facilitates socio-cultural adjustment. Participants also underscored the importance of the rich general English linguistic resources that were developed in the ELB program which facilitated communication in the new environment. Edwards and Ritchie (2022) emphasise that such skills are "crucial for students in twenty-first century Australia, who live in vibrant, multicultural society, surrounded by peers of many cultures and faiths" (p. 16).

The data revealed that the students' improved English language proficiency enabled them to communicate effectively and make friends with others from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As stated by Tinto (2003), fostering relationships can lead to more supportive learning environments. Such environments can enhance both affective and academic efficacies. A supportive environment can enhance the affective performance of students by boosting their mental well-being and promoting adaptation. It can improve their academic performance by meeting learning needs. These findings support the view that the ELB program supported students beyond academic skills, addressing Crawford and Johns' (2016) call for the extension of support beyond academic skills.

Overall, the findings indicate that the ELB program contributed to three efficacies: academic, affective and socio-cultural, as illustrated by the three vertices of the triangle in Figure 2. The relationships between the ELB program and the three efficacies are unidirectional, with small one-headed arrows indicating the causal pathways. However, relationships among the efficacies are bidirectional, corroborating numerous studies in the relevant literature (e.g., Hernández López, 2020; Zepke, 2013). Relationships between the three efficacies cannot be depicted as linear causal relationships, but as interactive correlations. In other words, improvements in one efficacy can contribute to the enhancement of the other two efficacies, as depicted by the bidirectional arrows surrounding the triangle. For example, improved academic performance can enhance affective performance and vice versa, and better socio-cultural performance can yield more positive academic outcomes, with the reverse also being true. Therefore, it can be inferred that the three interconnected efficacies support the students' improved assessment-based performance in mainstream studies.

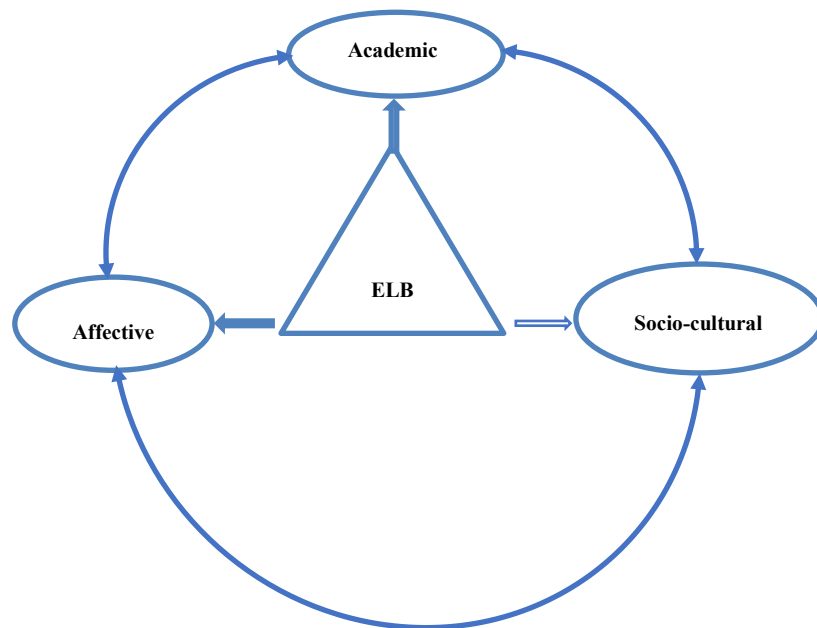


Figure 2. Relationships relating to the efficacies of the ELB program.

6.2. RQ 1: To what extent does the Offshore ELB program prepare students for their academic performance in mainstream university studies?

Although our findings cannot directly and precisely answer this research question as we did not have an equivalent control group for comparison, the assessment-based performance of the students on the ELB program in China, and their subsequent S1 results, S2 results and CWAs in Australia, together with the qualitative findings, are strongly suggestive that the ELB had a substantial, positive impact on these students' onshore assessment performance.

Specifically, while the most common grade on the ELB was a credit (62% of students), the most common grade in the onshore program for these students was a distinction (47% of students when averaged over the two semesters). In addition, while only 26% of the students scored a distinction or high distinction in the ELB assessments, 68% did so in the onshore assessments when averaged over the two semesters. Thus, the ELB grade distribution suggests that the ELB students were a good, but not an out of the ordinary group of students, but the onshore results indicate exceptional performance for the cohort as a whole. In particular, the initial struggle to adapt one typically sees in international student cohorts (e.g. Floyd, 2015), was not apparent for the ELB group as a whole. These observations, together with the qualitative findings, therefore strongly suggest that the ELB had a substantial, positive impact on these students' onshore assessment performances, and hence support Crawford's (2014) finding that highlights academic benefits as one of the multilayer advantages of enabling programs.

Further support for our conclusion comes from the fact that consistent results across the two semesters indicate a low possibility of chance or accidental outperformance in the mainstream results, indicating there is a significant level of preparatory value inherent in the ELB program. While it is not possible to determine which elements of the ELB contributed the most to the students' onshore assessment performances, the qualitative findings suggest all elements were important to some extent. This observation provides support for our belief that the academic preparatory efficacy of ELB programs depends on the inclusion of different forms of support; academic (e.g., critical thinking) and non-academic (e.g., supportive environment) (Crawford & Johns, 2016), which the present ELB program appears to have successfully provided, evidenced by the very high performance of the ELB students in mainstream studies. This finding aligns with Heng's (2014) report which shows a strong relationship between preparatory programs and the academic achievement of tertiary-level students.

Looking more closely at the key requirements of effective preparatory programs, Rastall (2006) found that a lack of clarity regarding expectations from the commencement of the course exacerbated the affective and cognitive difficulties faced by international students. This issue is in line with our findings which suggest that the ELB course successfully mitigates such difficulties, reducing Chinese students' struggles to normal levels. In addition, Patson (2005) reported that deficiencies in the target language and subject area knowledge of Chinese students can lead to difficulties with critical thinking. This finding underscores the necessity for sufficient attention to be paid to various micro-academic skills to ensure comprehensive training is included within enabling programs. The incorporation of such micro-skills into the ELB syllabus and the very high performance of students in the present study indicate that these skills were sufficiently attended to.

7. Conclusion

Studies on the efficacy of offshore ELB courses prior to the commencement of mainstream university studies are somewhat scarce within the literature on enabling programs. The aim of this study has consequently been to address this gap. The findings have revealed that students gaining direct entry into their mainstream university courses upon completion of the offshore ELB program detailed in this paper at their home institutions demonstrated very high academic achievements in their mainstream studies, right from their very first semester. Regarding the perceived efficacy of the ELB program, the findings indicated that students found the ELB program to be supportive across three key areas, academic, affective and socio-cultural, which supports the literature that enabling programs have multilayered benefits. Furthermore, the findings showed that the relationships among the efficacies are interactive and mutually reinforcing, rather than unidirectional. This study responds to the call for increased institutional support to improve the academic, cultural and affective transitions of international students.

A limitation of the present study is that, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, students experienced changes to their academic environments and modes of study, which may have negatively affected their academic performance in mainstream studies. These changes could not be accounted for in this paper, and all performance data were treated homogeneously, regardless of the above-mentioned impact. In addition, the number of participating institutions varied throughout the five-year study period. Hebei Institution undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts commenced their studies at the host institution in 2018, leading to variations in the number of institutions and cohorts across the study period. The duration of ELB courses also varied between 2 and 5 semesters across the home institutions, depending on the structure of programs agreed in their contracts.

The implication of this study is that offshore ELB programs represent effective models that should be adopted within articulation agreements with overseas tertiary institutions, provided that the necessary academic and non-academic logistics are adequately provided by both home and host institutions. Future research is recommended to focus on a comparative analysis of the mainstream results of students who gain direct entry through the offshore ELB program versus those who obtain direct entry through English language entry exams such as IELTS and PTE.

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