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Reflections on a bilingual Peer Assisted Learning program

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to identify and evaluate faculty and academic staff perceptions, experiences and expectations with respect to a voluntary, bilingual peer assisted learning (PAL) program, which operates for the benefit of students studying in the Faculty of Business at a regional Australian University.

Design/methodology/approach - A survey instrument and semi-structured interviews were used to faculty executive and academic staff in order to collect information about the perceived benefits of the program and identify opportunities for improvement.

Findings - Based on an analysis of student results, the bilingual PAL program is shown to have a positive effect on performance of students participating in the program. Results from interviews with executive and academic staff indicate a high level of support for this type of student learning program.

Originality/value - Although the value of both bilingual teaching and PAL has been explored in the teaching and learning literature, few studies have examined the integration of these two approaches. This research contributes to the literature by exploring the practical contribution of integrating these approaches. This research also provides valuable information regarding executive and academic perceptions of PAL programs, which is infrequently addressed in the literature. Findings may be used to inform institutions of the value of bilingual PAL programs in relation to international student retention and learning support and provide a starting point for discussions around the practical implications of such programs.

Keywords

learning, reflections, program, peer, assisted, bilingual

Disciplines

Business

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1. Introduction

International student recruitment and retention is vital to Australian higher education institutions (Sakurai *et al.*, 2010; Hellsten, 2002; Robertson *et al.*, 2000). Many barriers to international students' successful transition into Australian universities have been identified and discussed in the literature, including the challenges of enculturation, socio adaptation, language, communication and academic skills (Deumert *et al.*, 2005; Sawir, 2005; Hellsten, 2002; Robertson *et al.*, 2000). Various programs have been implemented by institutions to provide learning support to international students to help overcome these barriers. Among them, the benefit of the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) program is praised for its effectiveness in motivating and rewarding interactions between domestic and international students as well as improving students' academic performance (Leask, 2009). However, the fundamental philosophy of PAL (or its origin, Supplemental Instruction) is focussed on targeting challenging disciplines rather than struggling students (Arendale, 1994). Thus, PAL programs commonly implemented in Australian universities are open-access study support rather than focussed support for specific cohorts such as international students.

PAL programs in Australian higher education institutions are conducted in English, as these programs aim to improve participations' communication skills and facilitate interactions as well as enhancing their academic capacity. Hence, to date there has been little discussion on whether these programs could (or should) be conducted in a language other than English.

This study endeavours to provide some reflection on the potential value of bilingual PAL programs by reporting on the efficacy of one such program, the Chinese Commerce Academic Development group (hereafter CCAD), that operates through the Faculty of Business at the University of Wollongong. This group offers learning support to Chinese international students using bilingual workshops. The academic performance of participants is presented, followed by the results of interviews and surveys that sought information about the perceptions, expectations and experiences of academic and executive staff with

respect to CCAD. Based on these exploratory results, the bilingual PAL program is considered a valuable means of international student learning support.

2. Literature Review

Although research has been broadly undertaken on PAL programs (Parkinson, 2009; Malm *et al.*, 2011; Yaoyuneyong and Thornton, 2011; van der Meer and Scott, 2009; Hammond *et al.*, 2010; Sole *et al.*, 2012) and bilingual education (Johnson, 2010; Baker, 2011; Garcia, 2011; Valdes, 2011) to address the contribution of each approach towards learning and teaching, little has been written on the integration of the two approaches. This gap in the literature is primarily the result of the different foci of each stream of study. First, the common form of bilingual education generally takes place in early childhood education programs. In Australia, the most common bilingual programs are designed to cater to indigenous children (Harris and Devlin, 1997). In contrast, bilingual programs are almost non-existent in Australian higher education. Secondly, PAL programs are open access learning support programs that targeting subjects with a high failure rate and perceived difficulty. Fundamentally, PAL is not a program designed for the specific needs of international students, and thus it is imperative that the PAL programs offered in Australian universities are delivered in English.

This paper attempts to outline some of the potential benefits of a bilingual PAL program by considering the program as an overlapping area between PAL, bilingual education programs, and international students' learning support programs. In the following sections, the benefits of each of these programs are reviewed separately and then together to consider the benefits of voluntary bilingual PAL program.

2.1 *Peer Assisted Learning (PAL)*

PAL programs often utilize a peer-led group to provide academic assistance for students in addition to face-to-face teaching hours (lectures, tutorials, workshops or seminars) and aim to assist students achieve better results. Facilitated by senior students (commonly referred to as 'Leaders') who have excelled in the subject during previous semesters, PAL provides opportunities for participating students to strengthen their knowledge by actively being involved in group learning focused on material reviewing and practical problem solving (Sole *et al.*, 2012). Recognized benefits of participating in PAL programs for students include

better engagement with the university (van der Meer and Scott, 2009), better connections with other students (van der Meer and Scott, 2009; Longfellow *et al.*, 2008), improved self-confidence and learning behaviour (Ginsburg-Block *et al.*, 2006) and notably observed improvement in academic performance (McCarthy *et al.*, 1997; Parkinson, 2009; Malm *et al.*, 2011; Devine and Jolly, 2011). PAL programs thereby benefit the institution facilitating the PAL program via positive impacts on student well-being, performance, and retention (Etter *et al.*, 2001; Hensen and Shelly, 2003).

For international students specifically, the major benefits of participation in a PAL program include more opportunities for engaging and interacting with domestic student peers and consequently become more accustomed to the host country culture and learning environment (Leask, 2009). Along with formal teaching hours, PAL programs are deemed to provide complementary benefits for international student learning as they are responsive to diversity and cultural pluralism (Fuchs *et al.*, 1997). Although PAL programs are not specifically oriented towards international students, PAL is an effective approach that targets many of the difficulties faced by international student transition, particularly with respect to cultural learning and immersion.

2.2 Bilingual Education

Bilingual education involves teaching delivery in two languages, a native and a second language with varying amounts of each language used in accordance with academic content (Baker, 2011; Garcia, 2011). There are several different types of bilingual education programs and each has its unique strengths and contributions towards learning.

Cook (2001) considers that a first language can be used as an effective element in enhancing students' learning of the secondary language in a way which helps convey meaning. Similarly, Turnbull and Arnett (2002) suggest that appropriate levels of first language usage motivate students and scaffold learning. Current debates exist over the priority of second language acquisition and whether the use of a first language enhances the learning process of the second language. In particular, Ghorbani (2011) finds that the use of a first language facilitates communicative features in group learning and enhances student/teacher interactions. Moreover, Littlewood and Yu (2011) suggest that with proper strategies, teachers can make extensive use of first language for the benefit of establishing constructive social relationships and communicating complex meanings (and hence to

ensure understanding). However, Crawford (2004) states that the success of first language usage in teaching largely depends on the teachers' own proficiency in both languages and experiences in both cultures.

2.3 Support for International Students

Australia's education sector relies heavily on international students, as they account for more than a quarter of the entire student population and therefore contribute significantly to higher education institutions' financial and academic performance (Sawir, 2005; Arkoudis and Tran, 2010). Australian universities generally perform well in accommodating international students' learning needs and developing an internationalised curriculum (Dawson and Conti-Bekkers, 2002). However, there are still quite a number of concerns that have been identified in previous research. For example, Kawajar and Dempsey (2008) compared the experiences of domestic and international students in an Australian university. Their results suggest that international students receive less social support, and rely on dysfunctional coping strategies more often than domestic students. In addition, they found that international students find greater incongruence between their expectations and experiences of university life (Kawajar and Dempsey, 2008). As a result, providing high quality supportive programs to international students is an important step towards enhancing their learning experiences and address pastoral issues that international students experience in higher education institutions.

As well as social support, the need for comprehensive international academic support is also apparent. Commonly identified academic issues that international students (and in particular Chinese students) encounter include becoming accustomed to western notions of student-teacher relationships, implementing self-learning strategies, engaging in team work and group assessments, dealing with language issues, academic writing and plagiarism (Edwards and Ran, 2006; Akoudis and Tran, 2010). Language and learning support programs are largely available in Australian universities (Robertson *et al.*, 2000; Ramburuth and McCormick, 2001; Andrade, 2006). However, there are debates on whether these English skill-focused programs effectively enhance students' academic performance as these programs are often detached from discipline content (Wingate, 2006). In addition, research has shown that international students have lower participation rates (than expected) in these programs (O'Loughlin and Arkoudis, 2009). Among suggestions to deal with these issues, the use of student role models is perceived as an important teaching strategy for

helping international students make a successful transit into western learning and social life (Edwards and Ran, 2006; Arambewela and Hall, 2012). Social learning theory promulgates the effect of role models, explaining that when people observe positive, desired outcomes from modelled behaviour, they are more likely to model, imitate, and adopt the behaviour themselves (Bandura, 1977; Wenger, 2010). Therefore, the emphasis of student role-modelling in the perspective of international student support is consistent with the PAL aspects.

As noted, this paper reports on a voluntary academic development group, CCAD, which is associated with the Faculty of Business at the University of Wollongong. This group is led by a group of academic high-achievers studying in the Faculty, including Higher Degree Research (HDR) students, coursework students (Dean's Scholars) and casual academic tutors. It is dedicated to help Chinese student peers academically in accounting, finance, management and other relevant majors, with an aim of providing and sharing experiences of studying and living overseas

3. The Chinese Commerce Academic Development Program

3.1 Defining CCAD

Based on the review of literature in PAL, bilingual education and international student support, this paper defines CCAD as a bilingual PAL program specifically designed for Chinese international students. As Figure 1 illustrates, CCAD is at the intersection of these three types of student support.

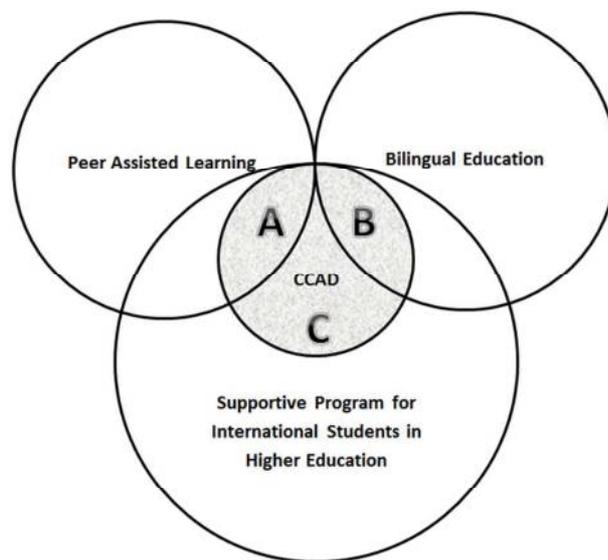


FIGURE 1: DEFINING CCAD

Bilingual education programs and PAL programs help students to understand academic content better, and hence improve students' academic performance. The PAL philosophy embraced by CCAD involves peer teaching. In contrast to typical PASS programs, where peer mentoring is adopted and re-teaching is strictly avoided, CCAD workshops involve deliberate re-teaching of academic content covered in lectures and tutorials. There are also cases of peer-teaching focused PAL sessions, they are often conducted in disciplines with strong emphasises on memorising and understanding academic contents, such as medicine. Ma *et al.* (2010) and Bulte *et al.* (2007) both comment that, in a peer-teaching relationship, the peer teachers fulfil roles such as information giver and facilitator as well as providing a role model for their peer learners. Consequently their contributions enhance student learning and help students master the curriculum. These roles are consistent with CCAD's aim, which is to provide student role models for the Chinese student cohort while facilitating PAL workshops. The leaders in CCAD group function well as role models for Chinese international students, and their engagement with Chinese international students provides both academic and social support that many Chinese students need in order to perform well in higher education institutions. Thus, CCAD acts social support platform in addition to its academic contribution.

The peer leaders who work within the CCAD group are experienced students who have spent a number of years in Australia, and who have rich experience in both Australian and Chinese cultures. All leaders speak fluent English and Mandarin. In CCAD workshops, the form of bilingual teaching can be defined as using students' first language in a foreign language classroom environment (Turnbull and Arnett, 2002).

While CCAD adopts many of the PAL characteristics in its programs, there are also important differences between the two approaches. Table 1 provides a comparison between these two approaches:

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF PASS AND CCAD

	PAL	CCAD
Supplemental Instruction Philosophy	Peer mentoring	Peer teaching
Language Used	English	English and Mandarin
Coordination/Administration	At the institution-level	Voluntary, student- led group
Frequency	Weekly	Twice per session
Length of the Workshop	Normally one hour	Two to three hours
Main Focus	Enhance learning ability	Exam preparation
Accessibility	All students in a subject	Chinese students
Re-teaching of Academic Content	Normally avoided	Deliberate
Targeted Subjects	Transitional subjects	By student request
Student Leaders	Current students who excelled in the subject previously	Chinese HDR students, tutors, dean's scholars
Remuneration	Paid as casual employees	None

Following its initial formation in 2010, CCAD grew rapidly. At present CCAD provides academic support to as many as twenty subjects per semester, across all disciplines with the Faculty of Business, and at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Both the number of subjects supported and total attendance grew significantly from 2010 to 2013, as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3 below:

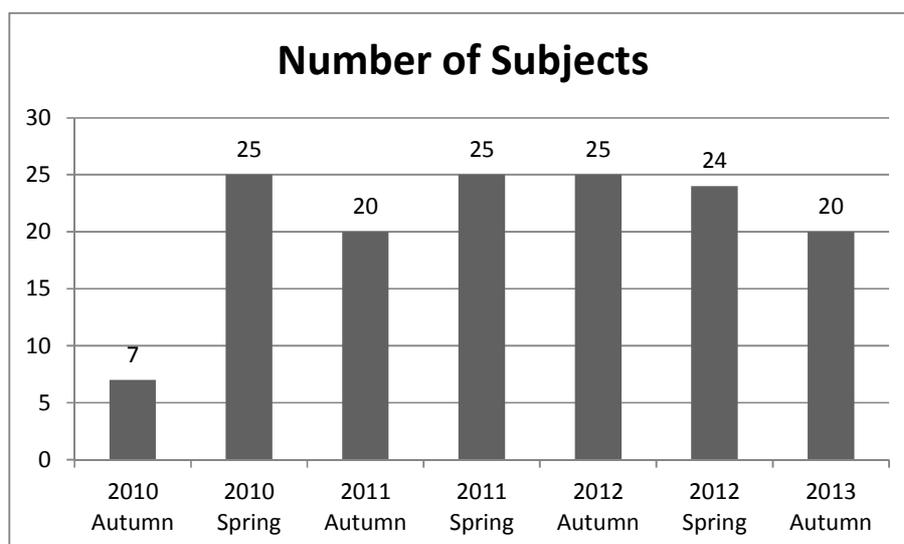


FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF SUBJECTS SUPPORTED BY CCAD PER SEMESTER

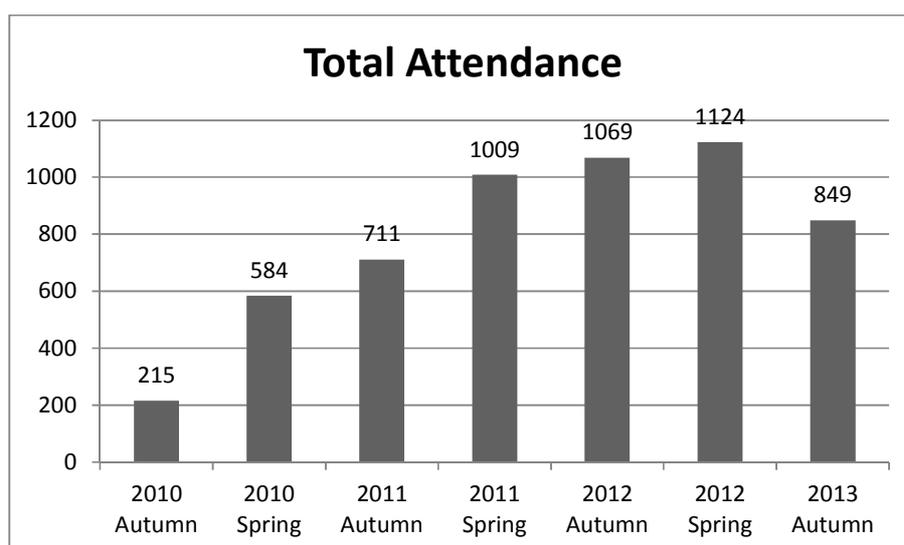


FIGURE 3: TOTAL ATTENDANCE AT CCAD WORKSHOPS PER SEMESTER

The CCAD group implemented a number of mechanisms to minimise the potential conflict of interest concerns caused by offering Mandarin-only workshops to Chinese international students studying in the faculty. Firstly the group established clear policies and procedures, mandating that the leaders of CCAD do not provide additional private tutoring to participating students and that every participating student can have equal accessibility to content through CCAD's own web portals. In addition, whenever is possible, the leaders conducting workshops for a certain subject will not be involved in exam marking. If the leader is a tutor for a particular subject, it is unlikely that the leader will conduct the bilingual workshop for the same subject. Instead, other leaders who are not part of the

subject's teaching team will be responsible for the material preparation and workshop delivery, hence ensuring that CCAD workshops remain a peer led supplemental instruction program focus on academic content, rather than an 'exam tips' information sharing session.

The existence of CCAD provides a valuable opportunity to evaluate a distinct PAL program from a unique perspective. Based on our research, no similar, voluntary bilingual PAL program exists at other Australian higher education institutions.

3.2 Enhancing Student Performance

Based on the claims made by PAL program coordinators across Australian institutions, observable benefits of students attending PAL programs include the increased likelihood to obtain a higher grade and reduced failure rate. Moreover, regular participants obtain significantly higher marks compared to students who have low attendance (Monash University, 2013; University of Wollongong, 2013; University of Sydney, 2013).

CCAD's bilingual PAL approach achieved the same outcomes in terms of enhancing Chinese international student performance in business disciplines. Figure 4, which contains the aggregated students' results from 20 subjects that CCAD supported in autumn session 2013, provides support for the effectiveness of this bilingual PAL program.

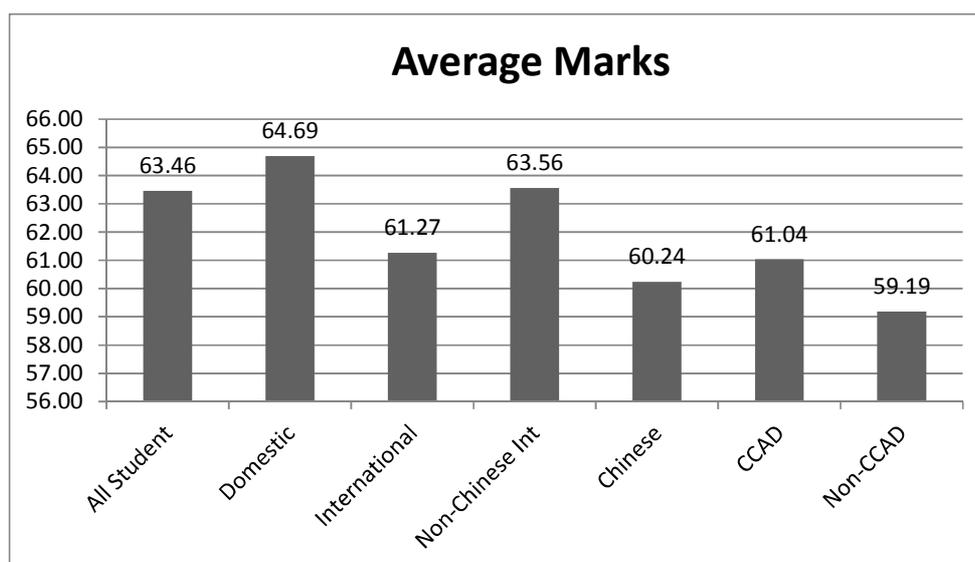


FIGURE 4: AGGREGATED AVERAGE MARKS

From the above figure, it can be seen that, overall, domestic students performed better than international students in these 20 subjects. In the international student cohort, the performance of Chinese international students is weaker than that of international students from other countries. Encouragingly, CCAD participants obtained higher average marks than those that did not attend (+1.85). In addition, and consistent with the findings of English PAL program studies, on average, students who attended CCAD had lower failure rates (-5.95%) compared to students not receiving the bilingual support.

3.3 Examining academic perceptions

Given the success of the CCAD program from a student performance perspective, it is important to explore academic perceptions of the program. Faculty executive and academic opinions were canvassed to consider whether bilingual PAL programs such as CCAD are recognised as valuable by staff. To that end, a questionnaire was administered across the Faculty, directed at both the Faculty executive and academic staff whose subjects are supported by CCAD. A five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was used to identify respondents' attitudes towards CCAD in relation to satisfaction levels and perceived effectiveness of the program. This questionnaire was administered in the context of a semi-structured interview so that other expectations, concerns, and recommendations could be elicited from respondents.

Participants were interviewed via face-to-face and electronic mediums. In total, eighteen interviews were sought and responses were obtained from all executive and academic staff approached. Responses were analysed in order to identify the perceptions of staff regarding CCAD's effectiveness in assisting student transition, student learning outcomes, and international student engagement and the provision of social support.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Faculty awareness and perception

Based on the responses obtained from the Faculty executive (comprised of Deans of the Faculty of Business, Heads of School, and Senior Teaching and Learning Managers), the CCAD program is considered a valuable addition to other types of learning support provided to students. Several strengths and benefits unique to CCAD were also identified. One respondent noted that the philosophical orientation of CCAD "is designed to assist students

of all academic abilities to have a better understanding of subjects and offers the opportunity for students to build relationships with other participating students". Another respondent observed that the peer-assisted pedagogical approach of the CCAD program uniquely enhances students' learning experiences, and is capable of providing educational benefits that otherwise cannot be accessed by students in formal teaching hours. Another commented that, like other PAL programs, CCAD is sometimes used as an intervention strategy that is recommended to struggling students, particularly when students are perceived as lacking both English proficiency and academic skills.

On the other hand, feedback from teaching academics showed that the majority of subject coordinators considered that the foremost value of CCAD program is assisting students to gain a better understanding of the academic content (especially when the subject is highly theoretical) through the bilingual interpretation and re-teaching of the subject content, regardless of whether they had much awareness and engagement with CCAD. Specifically, there was a common perception that the program encouraged students to understand concepts and ideas, rather than falling into the trap of relying on memory and information dumping in the exam. One academic stated that "many Chinese students are more receptive toward a structured learning environment. They often feel there is a lot of uncertainty in terms of learning outcomes and assessment tasks in this subject". Thus, a bilingual peer teaching program like CCAD provides value by contributing to resolution of these types of concerns by providing "an avenue for clarification of information". The bilingual approach better utilises the CCAD leaders' Chinese language skill, which in turn help interpret subject materials for Chinese students in their first-language. According to all academic respondents who participated in the survey, this was perceived to offer great comfort to students that feel unsure and/or anxious about subject materials, assessment tasks and exams.

In sum, both the Faculty executive and teaching academics consider that the acknowledged benefits of PAL, bilingual teaching and international student social support have overlapped successfully via the CCAD program. The Faculty executive emphasise the importance of social interactions which take place in CCAD workshops, and acknowledge that CCAD not only adds value to teaching and learning, but also functions as an international student social support platform. One member of the executive remarked that "international students know there are senior students they can seek help from when facing difficulties in both studying and living and that these people can fully understand them as there is no

communication barrier". From an academic perspective, teaching staff focussed more on the academic contribution of the program, as they consider that with CCAD's help Chinese students can better deal with learning difficulties and accomplish learning objectives associated with the subject. Thus, a bilingual PAL platform such as CCAD can address some of the issues raised in literature concerning international students studying in higher education institutions. As noted by Wingate (2006), these types of programs are particularly important because they focus on academic content rather than English language skills alone, thereby filling a void in learning support programs. Further, a bilingual environment enables international students to communicate without fear of embarrassment, which provides a safe learning environment which can enhance student engagement and address low participation rates (O'Loughlin and Arkoudis, 2009).

4.2 Faculty concerns and expectations

Although both the Faculty executive and teaching academics acknowledged CCAD's contribution to learning and teaching, they also expressed potential concerns and identified opportunities for improvement. Issues identified in the literature that have caused academics to express negative attitudes towards PAL programs (see, for example, Capstick, 2004; Longfellow *et al.*, 2008) were used as the basis for interview questions regarding concerns, expectations, and recommendations, which were categorised as "serious", "modest", or "never". Table 2 below summarises the responses from the 11 subject coordinators interviewed:

Concerns with the CCAD program	Serious	Modest	Never
Demotivates attendance at formal teaching hours	3	3	5
Unhelpful instruction given to students		2	9
Out-dated or irrelevant materials given	1	2	8
Re-teaching of academic content			9
Answers are provided directly (instead of via teaching staff)		3	8
Guidance given for assignments		2	9
Learning outcomes are not aligned			11
Subject content is too complicated for CCAD workshop			11
Potential inequality (especially for other international students)		1	10
Conflict of interests arising among leaders and staff		1	10

TABLE 2: CONCERNS WITH CCAD

Based on the results in Table 2, the primary concern is that Chinese students are using CCAD as an alternative to formal teaching hours (lecture and tutorial) is most serious. Respondents expressed concerns about the low attendance and student engagement rates in formal teaching hours, however this concern was not exclusively one related to Chinese students. All respondents interviewed were surprised to learn of the high rates of attendance at CCAD workshops, with most conceding that Chinese students would likely feel more comfortable raising learning difficulties in a bilingual environment such as CCAD compared to formal lectures and tutorials. A concern, however, was the perception that CCAD may be seen as a 'quick fix' at exam time that could replace deep learning of subject materials. As a solution, some teaching academics, particularly those who have been involved with CCAD for some time, confirmed that they implemented certain strategies to emphasise the importance of formal teaching hours, suggesting students need to obtain essential information in formal lectures.

Problems related to declining student attendance have been discussed in the literature for several decades and is an issue for both domestic and international students (Romer, 1993; Massingham and Herrington, 2006; Walbeek, 2004; Billings-Gagliardi and Mazor, 2007). Some of the factors contributing to low attendance rates identified in the literature include access to electronic resources, work/lifestyle demands, as well as teaching styles of lecturers and tutors (Massingham and Herrington, 2006; Walbeek, 2004; Billings-Gagliardi and Mazor, 2007). More importantly, as indicated in a number of previous studies (see, for example Conxon *et al.*, 1994; Dolnicar, 2004), students often perceive education as a mere means to a career, rather than an enjoyable journey of intellectual discovery and skill stimulation. Thus, they have relatively little motivation to attend formal teaching hours. For international students, visa conditions require satisfactory attendance (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2013). However, academics have found that international student attendance in lectures can also be low, often because in most cases attendance at lectures is not recorded. While programs such as CCAD may indeed contribute to low attendance in formal lectures, they may also be used as a strategy to improve attendance and engagement. CCAD leaders are trained to emphasise the importance of formal teaching hours and ensure that students see CCAD as a supplemental instruction program rather than an adequate substitution for formal teaching hours. Moreover, from the perspective of social engagement and student role modelling, through

the communication of their own 'success stories' CCAD leaders can potentially motivate students to attend and engage in classes and thereby have a better learning experience.

Results also suggest that the deliberate re-teaching of academic content in CCAD workshops was not a serious concern for the majority of respondents. This was contrary to expectations given that the avoidance of re-teaching is heavily emphasised in the PAL philosophy (Arendale, 1994). Respondents remarked that "re-teaching is inevitable as students need to be told what to do to study my subject" or "as long as the program can help students do better, re-teaching is not an issue". A contributing factor for lecturers' acceptance of re-teaching may be the more serious concern that students perceive CCAD as an adequate alternative for formal teaching hours such as lectures and tutorials. In this case, the irreplaceability of lectures and tutorials is a consistent message that is communicated to students in both the formal teaching and CCAD forums.

Respondents expressed a much lower degree of concern in relation to students' equity than expected. The majority of academics interviewed were aware that CCAD is a voluntary group formed by Chinese students to assist Chinese students. A common argument was that, in contrast to institutionally implemented learning support programs which are open to all students, the altruistic nature of the CCAD group is such that University resources are not being used to serve a limited sub-set of the student cohort. Further, because the program sprung from the initiative of a handful of students who identified a need for support among their peers, there is a perception among academic staff that other students are equally capable of development a similar group if desired.

All subject coordinators interviewed noted that a key reason for their support of the CCAD program stems from the inherent trust that has been established between academic staff and program coordinators and leaders. This highlights the important role for CCAD leaders in maintaining active collaboration with academics as well as an emphasis on continuous feedback and improvement. Thus far, the CCAD program has avoided the concerns that typical surround PAL programs. The CCAD model, therefore, strengthens Skalicky's (2008) claim that the outcomes associated with PAL programs are largely dependent on program leaders.

5. Conclusions and implications

This study reports the results of the use of a bilingual PAL approach as a means of improving international student performance. It has been demonstrated that student-led bilingual group contributes positively to international student learning by combining the benefits of PAL, bilingual teaching and student support in one academic program. On average, Chinese students that participated in the CCAD program achieved higher marks compared to those that did not take part in CCAD-led initiatives. The dramatic growth of the CCAD program since its inception in 2010 indicates the perceived value of the program by students, with attendance increasing from 215 students in 2010 to over 1,000 students by 2012.

An important contribution of this study is the exploration of perceptions from the point of view of Faculty executive and academic staff. Based on the results of semi-structured interviews, support for the CCAD program is strong across all levels of Faculty with perceived benefits including establishing student role models, assistance with conveying meaning and complicated concepts and the provision of cultural and social support to international students as they transition to the Australian education system and way of life. These benefits are in addition to the enhanced academic performance that staff perceive as a result of student involvement with CCAD.

The expectations and concerns raised by Faculty executives and academics have practical implications regarding establishing and maintaining the bilingual PAL group as well as identifying areas of improvement. The existence of a voluntary, student-led group as facilitator of bilingual PAL workshops is shown to be a cost effective approach that produces considerable synergies across the teaching and learning with the Faculty of Business. However, considering the scale of the program already and its potential for growth, improvements to the structure in terms of management and succession planning should be considered. This study provides an opportunity for institutions to consider the value of bilingual PAL approach when evaluating the learning support programs for international student.

This study has only briefly considered the benefits of the bilingual PAL approach in terms of enhancing student performance and reducing failure rates. In future studies, statistical analyses will be used to further evaluate the effectiveness of the program in terms of a longitudinal observation of student performance across disciplines. Results from future

research could potentially build an even stronger case for the development of bilingual PAL programs in higher education institutions.

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