

# THE EXTENDED ESSAY AS A RESEARCH-BASED LEARNING TOOL IN THE INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE PROGRAM (AN ANALYSIS OF THE UWC DILIJAN EXPERIENCE)

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## Abstract

A growing number of international educational institutions have adopted the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme, within which the Extended Essay serves as a pivotal component for cultivating students' research competencies, critical thinking, and independent learning skills. The present study examines the structure and implementation of the EE, with particular attention to its application at UWC Dilijan International School, illustrating its contribution to students' academic development and preparedness for higher education.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the structural and procedural dimensions of the Extended Essay, highlighting its principal characteristics, educational functions, and pedagogical value. Furthermore, the article investigates the practical implementation of the EE within the UWC Dilijan context, demonstrating how the Programme facilitates the development of students' research skills, critical thinking, and autonomy in learning. This analysis also considers the role of the EE in preparing students to meet the academic demands of higher education institutions.

The study substantiates that the EE plays a significant role in fostering advanced research skills among students. Effective implementation, exemplified by the UWC Dilijan International School, enhances students' capacity for critical analysis, structured inquiry, and methodological rigour. Graduates of this Programme exhibit heightened academic competence, enabling them to pursue studies at leading universities globally, thereby increasing their competitiveness and opportunities for admission to prestigious institutions.

Empirical observations and pedagogical outcomes indicate that the EE implementation process strengthens students' ability to apply disciplinary knowledge in practical research contexts. In addition, it promotes the development of research-oriented thinking, project management skills, and independent study habits. Beyond individual skill acquisition, the EE contributes to the enhancement of the overall educational environment by fostering students' scientific curiosity, initiative, and creative approaches to problem-solving.

In conclusion, the Extended Essay constitutes a critical pedagogical tool within the IB Diploma Programme. Its structured research framework, combined with guided supervision and autonomous inquiry, ensures that students develop essential academic skills and competencies. The UWC Dilijan model exemplifies best practices in EE implementation, demonstrating how the program can effectively prepare students for higher education and cultivate the intellectual and creative capacities necessary for

lifelong learning and scholarly achievement.

Research methods: analysis of scientific literature, study of best practices in educational activities of educational institutions, and interviews.

Methodological foundations of the research: systemic and information-cognitive approaches.

**Keywords and phrases:** International Baccalaureate, Extended Essay, research skills, critical thinking, UWC Dilijan.

## **ԸՆԴԼԱՅՆՎԱԾ ԷՍՍԵՆ ՈՐՊԵՍ ՀԵՏԱԶՈՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՎՐԱ ՀԻՄՆՎԱԾ ՈՒՍՈՒՑՄԱՆ ԳՈՐԾԻՔ ՄԻՋԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ ԲԱԿԱԼԱՎՐԻԱՏԻ ԾՐԱԳՐՈՒՄ (ԴԻԼԻՋԱՆԻ «ՅՈՒ-ԴԱՐԵՅՈՒ-ՄԻ» ԴՊՐՈՑԻ ՓՈՐՁԻ ՎԵՐԼՈՒԾՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ)**

### **ԱՐՓԻՆԵ ՀԱԿՈՒՅԱՆ**

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ գիտակրթական միջազգային կենտրոն,  
մանկավարժության ամբիոն, կրթության կառավարում, մագիստրանտ  
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### **Համառոտագիր**

Մեծ թվով միջազգային ուսումնական հաստատություններ կիրառում են Միջազգային բակալավրիատի (IB) ծրագիրը, որում ընդլայնված էսսեն (Extended Essay) ծառայում է որպես ուսանողների հետազոտական կարողությունների, քննադատական մտածողության և ինքնուրույն ուսուցման հմտությունների զարգացման հիմնական բաղադրիչ: Սույն հետազոտությունն ուսումնասիրում է ընդլայնված էսսեի կառուցվածքն ու այն գրելու գործընթացը՝ հատուկ ուշադրություն դարձնելով Դիլիջանի «Յու-Դարբյու-Մի» միջազգային դպրոցում դրա կիրառմանը՝ ցույց տալով ողջ ներդրումը ուսանողների ակադեմիական զարգացման և բարձրագույն կրթություն ստանալու պատրաստականության գործում:

Հետազոտության նպատակն է վերլուծել ընդլայնված էսսեի կառուցվածքային առանձնահատկությունները՝ ընդգծելով դրա հիմնական բնութագրերը, կրթական գործառնությունները և մանկավարժական արժեքը: Բացի այդ՝ հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում է ընդլայնված էսսեի և Միջազգային բակալավրիատի ծրագրի գործնական իրականացումը Դիլիջանի «Յու-Դարբյու-Մի» դպրոցի համատեքստում՝ ցույց տալով, թե ինչպես է ծրագիրը նպաստում ուսանողների հետազոտական հմտությունների, քննադատական մտածողության և ինքնուրույն ուսուցման զարգացմանը: Այս վերլուծությունը նաև ուսումնասիրում է ընդլայնված էսսեի դերը բարձրագույն ուսումնական հաստատությունների ակադեմիական պահանջներին ուսանողներին նախապատրաստելում:

Ուսումնասիրությունը հաստատում է, որ ընդլայնված էսսեն կարևոր

դեր է խաղում ուսանողների առաջադեմ հետազոտական հմտությունների զարգացման գործում: Արդյունավետ իրականացումը, որի օրինակն է Դիլիջանի «Յու-Դաբլյու-Սի» միջազգային դպրոցը, բարձրացում է ուսանողների քննադատական և ստեղծագործմտածողության ու կառուցվածքային հետազոտությունների կարողությունները: Այս ծրագրի շրջանավարտները բարելավում են իրենց ակադեմիական կարողությունները, ինչը թույլ է տալիս նրանց շարունակել ուսումը աշխարհի առաջատար համալսարաններում՝ դրանով իսկ բարձրացնելով իրենց մրցունակությունը:

Էմպիրիկ դիտարկումները ցույց են տալիս, որ ընդլայնված էսսեի իրականացման գործընթացը ամրապնդում է ուսանողների ունակությունը՝ գիտելիքները կիրառելու գործնական հետազոտությունների համատեքստում: Բացի այդ՝ այն նպաստում է հետազոտական մտածողության, նախագծերի կառավարման և ինքնուրույն ուսումնասիրություն կատարելու հմտությունների զարգացմանը: Հմտություններ ձեռք բերելուց բացի՝ ընդլայնված էսսեն նպաստում է ընդհանուր առմամբ կրթական միջավայրի բարելավմանը՝ ուսանողների մեջ զարգացնելով գիտական հետաքրքրասիրություն, նախաձեռնողականություն և խնդիրների լուծման ստեղծագործական մոտեցումներ: Ամփոփելով կարելի է նշել, որ ընդլայնված էսսեն Միջազգային բակալավրիատի դիպլոմային ծրագրի շրջանակներում ամենակարևոր մանկավարժական գործիքն է: Դրա կառուցվածքային հետազոտական շրջանակը, որը զուգորդվում է դիտարկման և ինքնուրույն հետազոտության հետ, ապահովում է, որ ուսանողները ձեռք բերեն անհրաժեշտ ակադեմիական հմտություններ և գիտելիքներ: Դիլիջանի «Յու-Դաբլյու-Սի» միջազգային դպրոցի մոդելը նմանօրինակ ուսուցման ներդրման լավագույն փորձի օրինակ է, որը ցույց է տալիս, թե ինչպես ծրագիրը կարող է արդյունավետորեն պատրաստել ուսանողներին բարձրագույն կրթություն ստանալու պահանջներին և զարգացնել ինտելեկտուալ և ստեղծագործական ունակություններ, որոնք անհրաժեշտ են՝ ողջ կյանքի ընթացքում սովորելու և գիտական նվաճումների հասնելու համար:

Հետազոտության մեթոդներ՝ գիտական գրականության վերլուծություն, ուսումնական հաստատությունների կրթական գործունեության լավագույն փորձի ուսումնասիրություն, հարցազրույց:

Հետազոտության մեթոդական հիմքեր՝ համակարգային, վիճակագրական, տեղեկատվական ճանաչողական մոտեցումներ:

**Բանալի բառեր և բառակապակցություններ՝** Միջազգային բակալավրիատ, ընդլայնված էսսե, հետազոտական հմտություններ, քննադատական մտածողություն, «Յու-Դաբլյու-Սի» Դիլիջան:

# РАСШИРЕННОЕ ЭССЕ КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ ОБУЧЕНИЯ, ОСНОВАННЫЙ НА ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯХ В ПРОГРАММЕ МЕЖДУНАРОДНОГО БАКАЛАВРИАТА (АНАЛИЗ ОПЫТА ШКОЛЫ “Ю ДАБЛЮ СИ” В ДИЛИДЖАНЕ)

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## Аннотация

Все большее число международных учебных заведений принимают программу Международного бакалавриата (IB), в рамках которой расширенное эссе служит ключевым компонентом для развития исследовательских компетенций, критического мышления и навыков самостоятельного обучения у студентов. В настоящем исследовании рассматривается структура и реализация расширенного эссе, с акцентированием внимания к ее применению в Международной школе “Ю Даблю Си” в Дилиджане, демонстрируя ее вклад в академическое развитие учащихся и их готовность к получению высшего образования.

Целью данной статьи является анализ структурных и процессуальных аспектов расширенного эссе, выделение его основных характеристик, образовательных функций и педагогической ценности. Кроме того, в статье исследуется практическая реализация расширенного эссе в контексте “Ю Даблю Си” Дилиджана, демонстрируя, как программа способствует развитию у студентов исследовательских навыков, критического мышления и самостоятельности в обучении. В данном анализе также рассматривается роль расширенного эссе в подготовке студентов к выполнению академических требований высших учебных заведений.

Исследование подтверждает, что расширенное эссе играет важную роль в развитии у студентов передовых исследовательских навыков. Эффективное внедрение, примером которого является Международная школа “Ю Даблю Си” в Дилиджане, повышает способность учащихся к критическому анализу, структурированному исследованию и методологической строгости. Выпускники программы демонстрируют повышенную академическую компетентность, что позволяет им продолжать обучение в ведущих университетах мира, тем самым повышая свою конкурентоспособность.

Эмпирические наблюдения показывают, что процесс внедрения расширенного эссе развивает способность студентов применять дисциплинарные знания в контексте практических исследований, а также способствует развитию исследовательского мышления, навыков управления проектами и самостоятельного проведения исследований. Помимо приобретения индивидуальных навыков, расширенное эссе способствует улучшению образовательной среды в целом, развивая у студентов научную любознательность, инициативу и творческие подходы к решению проблем.

В заключение отметим, что, расширенное эссе представляет собой

важнейший педагогический инструмент в рамках дипломной программы международного бакалавриата. Его структурированная исследовательская основа в сочетании с управляемым наблюдением и самостоятельным исследованием гарантирует, что студенты приобретут необходимые академические навыки и компетентность. Модель школы “Ю Даблю Си” в Дилиджане является примером одной из лучших практик внедрения электронного обучения, демонстрируя, как программа может эффективно подготовить студентов к получению высшего образования и развить интеллектуальные и творческие способности, необходимые для обучения на протяжении всей жизни и получения научных достижений.

Методы исследования: анализ научной литературы, изучение передового опыта образовательной деятельности образовательных учреждений, интервью.

Методологические основы исследования: системные и информационно-когнитивные подходы.

**Ключевые слова и фразы:** международный бакалавриат, расширенное эссе, исследовательские навыки, критическое мышление, “Ю Даблю Си” Дилиджан.

## **Introduction**

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme is globally recognised as a leading model in international education, fostering inquiring, knowledgeable, and socially responsible learners. It enables students to take ownership of their learning process while developing competencies essential for future success, preparing them to adapt and thrive in a rapidly evolving world [1]. This approach shifts the educational focus from the mere transmission of knowledge toward skill development, values formation, and active student engagement. Particular emphasis is placed on critical thinking, independent learning, and research-oriented methodologies, encouraging deliberate and reflective participation in the learning process.

Consisting of three compulsory components, the program aims to broaden students' educational experience and challenge them to apply their knowledge and skills.

## **Theory of Knowledge**

Theory of Knowledge is a unique course and is taught only within the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. The course is discussion-based, and students receive their final grades based on these discussions. Students explore areas of knowledge such as natural sciences and the arts, as well as ways of knowing — that is, how we accumulate knowledge, what sources we use, and how we process the information we receive.

## **Creativity, Activity, Service (hereinafter CAS)**

CAS is one of the most engaging parts of the IB Diploma Programme. It encourages students to try new activities, learn new skills, and engage with the community. All students must participate in various CAS activities over two years.

## **Extended Essay**

All students must write a 3600–4000-word essay on a topic of their choice

related to a Diploma Programme subject. Through writing the Extended Essay, students develop independent research skills and written communication skills necessary for university studies [2].

It can be assumed that the combination of these three components contributes to the formation of a learner who not only possesses knowledge but also critically evaluates and applies it in practice. As a result, an individual is formed who is ready to continue education in a university environment, adapt to a rapidly changing professional world, communicate effectively in diverse cultural and social environments, continuously develop personal skills, and responsibly participate in social processes.

Special attention should be paid to the third component of the IB Diploma Programme — the Extended Essay — which is designed to develop students' independent research and scientific thinking skills. It allows students to deeply explore a topic of their choice related to a Diploma Programme subject, formulate research questions, work with various sources, and present structured academic work that meets academic requirements [3]. At the initial stage, the student selects a topic related to one of the program subjects based on personal interest. This approach enables them to focus on their preferred field, develop creative thinking, and demonstrate an individual research approach. Creative and critical thinking can be regarded as fundamental competencies that underpin effective learning, independent research, and problem-solving in contemporary education systems. Critical thinking is a person's ability to evaluate their own and others' thoughts objectively, and to carefully and comprehensively check all proposed positions and conclusions [4]. In my opinion, this skill is especially important in the modern educational environment, as it enables learners not only to analyse information but also to make reasoned decisions, avoid superficial conclusions, and develop well-structured and evidence-based arguments.

Next, the student selects the research question or questions that must be included in the Extended Essay [5]. A comparative analysis can be conducted between scientific articles written by university students and the Extended Essay, which is part of the IB Programme. In the case of a scientific article, the function of the research question is often performed by the article title, which clearly reflects the research topic. In contrast, within the Extended Essay framework, it is advisable to clearly formulate the research question and include it in the introduction. A properly formulated research question contributes to purposeful, structured research implementation, whereas an unclear or poorly formulated question complicates the research process and often leads students to deviate from the main problem, limiting them to general discussions of the topic.

After selecting and formulating the research question, relevant data and scientific literature are collected, and the research is conducted. It is noteworthy that within the IB Programme, the defence stage of the Extended Essay is called the "viva voce" interview, which is Latin for "living voice." At this stage, the student presents and justifies the research conducted, detailing the research process, results, and conclusions [6].

In addition to the intrinsic intellectual rewards, engagement in the Extended Essay provides students with numerous developmental benefits. Participation in this substantial research project enables learners to gain practical experience

in conducting independent, rigorous investigations while contributing to the construction of knowledge within their chosen discipline. The process fosters collaboration with supervisors and academic staff, promoting professional guidance and deeper integration into the research culture emphasised within the International Baccalaureate framework. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that students are familiar with the requirements of the extended essay. Supervisors and students must discuss:

- The nature of the extended essay
- Their chosen subject, topic and research question
- The most appropriate research methods to be used, given the subject for which the student is submitting their essay
- The formal requirements for the completion of the task [7].

Moreover, students develop a clearer understanding of the expectations of higher education, including both undergraduate and postgraduate study, while simultaneously enhancing key competencies such as research methodology, organisational skills, critical analysis, and interpersonal communication. Collectively, these outcomes underscore the Extended Essay's role not merely as an academic requirement but as a formative experience that cultivates the skills and dispositions essential for success in university-level research and beyond [8]. It is also important to note that the extended essay contributes to the overall diploma score of awarding points, in conjunction with theory of knowledge. A maximum of three points is awarded according to a student's combined performance in both the extended essay and theory of knowledge [9].

Thus, the Extended Essay in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme is not limited to serving of a learning assignment but also serves as an effective tool of structured, purposeful, research-based learning, contributing to the development of students' independent thinking, research abilities, and academic literacy. The clear structure of the Extended Essay, the requirement for precise formulation of the research question, and the viva voce interview stage together ensure active and conscious student involvement in the learning process, forming fundamental scientific research skills. To present more fully and comprehensively the effectiveness of the practical application of the above-mentioned theoretical provisions and methodological requirements, it is appropriate to refer to a specific example of the Extended Essay implementation. In this context, the experience of the UWC Dilijan International School, founded by Ruben Vardanyan and Veronika Zonabend, is of particular interest, where the International Baccalaureate program, particularly the Extended Essay component, is implemented through a systematic, continuous, and goal-oriented approach.

The scientific novelty of this research lies in the comprehensive analysis of the pedagogical and organisational features of the Extended Essay as a research-based learning tool within the framework of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. The study is based on the experience of the Dilijan International School "UWC Dilijan". The findings of the research reveal the structural characteristics of the Extended Essay and demonstrate its role in fostering students' research competencies, critical thinking abilities, and independent learning skills.

The research is based on the hypothesis that the Extended Essay, as a systematically and purposefully implemented component of research-based learning

within the International Baccalaureate program, significantly contributes to the development of students' research skills, critical thinking, and their ability to formulate well-grounded academic arguments.

This study employs a systemic and information-cognitive approach to examine the Extended Essay (EE) as a research-based learning tool. The systemic approach enables analysis of the EE as an interconnected component of the IB Diploma Programme, considering its interactions with other program elements, such as Theory of Knowledge and CAS. The information-cognitive approach emphasises how students acquire, process, and apply knowledge during the EE writing process, highlighting the development of critical thinking, research skills, and autonomous learning. Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive framework for understanding both structural and cognitive dimensions of EE implementation.

Empirical data were collected through a structured interview with the Assistant Head of the IB Programme at UWC Dilijan International School. The interview followed a structured format, allowing flexibility to explore the participant's perspectives while maintaining focus on key areas: organisational structure of the EE, supervisory practices, student support mechanisms, and observed outcomes. The interview was audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, whereby recurring patterns, concepts, and categories were identified and coded systematically. This approach enabled the extraction of coherent themes that highlighted both opportunities and challenges in EE implementation. The combination of systemic, information-cognitive, and thematic analysis methods ensures a rigorous and nuanced understanding of the EE as a research-based learning tool within the UWC Dilijan context.

### **Case Study: UWC Dilijan International School**

The empirical component of this study is based on qualitative data obtained through a structured interview with Dinithi Bandaranayake, the Assistant Head of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme at UWC Dilijan International School. The interview focused on the organisational structure of the Extended Essay (EE) process, supervisory practices, academic support mechanisms, and skill development outcomes associated with EE implementation.

Interview findings indicate that UWC Dilijan International School offers the IB Diploma Programme with a broad and balanced subject selection across all six IB subject groups, including Visual Arts and Theatre within Group 6. The school also provides an expanded subject offering within Group 4 (Sciences) and Group 3 (Individuals and Societies). According to the interview data, a considerable number of students select self-taught subjects. Institutional support mechanisms, including the provision of tutors and coordinators, are implemented to ensure students' academic success in these cases, particularly in the development of literature analysis skills and independent learning competencies.

Qualitative data further reveal that the Extended Essay is not introduced as an isolated academic requirement but is integrated into the broader subject learning process. Interview evidence suggests that students first develop subject-specific knowledge and research-related competencies before formally initiating the Extended Essay. For example, students intending to complete an Extended Essay in Biology are encouraged to first establish strong theoretical and methodological foundations within the subject.

According to interview findings, the academic year at UWC Dilijan is divided into four semesters, and the formal Extended Essay process begins in the second semester of the program. This delayed initiation is intended to allow first-year students sufficient time to adapt to the academic environment and develop subject-specific competencies. Assistant Head emphasised that during this period, the school organises regular information sessions to familiarise students with the Extended Essay requirements and to support research topic development.

Interview data indicate that teachers actively discuss the advantages and challenges of writing Extended Essays across different disciplines. For instance, students completing Extended Essays in Biology are required to dedicate substantial time to laboratory-based research, whereas humanities students often face challenges related to maintaining research focus and staying within the defined scope of their research questions. The interview participant noted that students are encouraged to begin the Extended Essay only after gaining confidence in their topic selection, as early uncertainty may negatively affect the quality of their research.

The interview also revealed that students are initially encouraged to explore research topics across multiple subjects and submit research proposals. Following approval of the proposal, supervisors are assigned. Supervisory workload is limited to a maximum of five Extended Essay students per supervisor, which, according to interview data, allows for more individualised academic support and monitoring.

Furthermore, qualitative findings suggest that students are strongly advised to select Extended Essay topics within their current subjects. The Assistant Head indicated that insufficient subject background knowledge may limit students' ability to understand theoretical concepts and research methodologies, potentially reducing research quality.

The interview findings also highlight the interdisciplinary nature of the Extended Essay process. Students are encouraged to apply knowledge acquired across disciplines. For example, Biology students frequently utilise statistical methods learned in Mathematics, while analytical reasoning skills developed in Philosophy contribute to the quality of scientific research projects. Additionally, collaboration with English-language teachers is encouraged to enhance academic writing proficiency. According to the interview data, participation in the Extended Essay process contributes to the development of both academic and transferable competencies, including critical thinking, conceptual understanding, research skills, academic writing, and communication abilities. The interview participant noted that students who complete the Extended Essay often demonstrate greater confidence and preparedness when engaging in academic writing during higher education studies.

Collected findings also indicate that UWC Dilijan graduates frequently apply to universities in the United States, supported by scholarship opportunities. The interview participant reported that alumni have been admitted to highly selective institutions, including Harvard University, Princeton University, and Yale University. Additionally, increasing numbers of students apply to universities in European countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, as well as to universities in Hong Kong, where scholarship opportunities are available.

Qualitative data further reveal that students with limited academic preparation receive scaffolded support during the Extended Essay process. Instead of requiring immediate completion of a full written research paper, teachers guide students

through incremental stages, including oral presentations and structured research reporting. According to interview evidence, this step-by-step approach supports confidence development and improves academic clarity. The interview participant emphasised that students are consistently encouraged to justify their arguments with evidence-based reasoning, particularly through reflective questioning that focuses on explaining “why” research conclusions are valid.

Overall, interview findings suggest that UWC Dilijan International School implements a structured and scaffolded model of Extended Essay supervision that prioritises subject competence, student autonomy, and individualised academic support. The delayed initiation of the Extended Essay, combined with supervisory limits and interdisciplinary integration, appears to contribute to improved research preparedness and higher-quality academic outcomes.

### **Summary and conclusions**

The present study examined the Extended Essay as a research-based learning tool within the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, with particular focus on its implementation at UWC Dilijan International School. The analysis of scientific literature and qualitative interview data enabled evaluation of both the theoretical and practical aspects of the Extended Essay as a mechanism for developing research competencies.

The findings demonstrate that the Extended Essay contributes significantly to students’ development of research skills, critical thinking, academic writing, and independent learning. The structured stages of the Extended Essay process — including research question formulation, literature review, data collection, and the viva voce reflection — support the formation of scientific thinking and academic literacy, while also preparing students for university-level research.

The case study of UWC Dilijan International School illustrates an effective model of Extended Essay implementation based on gradual skill development, subject-based preparation, and individualised supervision. The delayed start of the Extended Essay process allows students to first develop sufficient subject knowledge and methodological understanding, positively influencing research quality. In addition, scaffolded instructional approaches and interdisciplinary integration help students with different academic backgrounds develop research competence and confidence.

The study also indicates that participation in the Extended Essay process supports students’ transition to higher education by strengthening transferable skills such as analytical thinking, research methodology, and communication. IB graduates demonstrate strong academic preparedness and competitiveness in international university admissions.

In conclusion, the Extended Essay serves as an effective tool for implementing research-based learning within the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. The UWC Dilijan model demonstrates that structured supervision, scaffolded academic support, and interdisciplinary learning can significantly enhance the effectiveness of Extended Essay implementation and contribute to students’ readiness for university study and lifelong learning.

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