

Understanding the Situation of Learner Autonomy within the Context of Higher Education in Kurdistan-Iraq

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has been recognised as a desirable educational goal, especially within the domains of adult and higher education. Whereas this has led to a growing body of research addressing learner autonomy across different educational and cultural contexts, there are still contexts, including Kurdistan-Iraq (i.e. the context of this research), which have remained under-researched. On that account, researchers (e.g. Dickinson, 1996; Little, 1999; Palfreyman, 2003; Usuki, 2007) encourage examining learner autonomy within such settings. This research, therefore, was an attempt to understand the realities and complexities of the situation of learner autonomy within a public institution of higher education in Kurdistan-Iraq. To achieve that, this research included students, teachers and senior administrators as participants assuming that these are the major interacting parties that could influence and determine the overall situation of learner autonomy.

This study adopted a qualitative case study design within which multiple methods of data collection were used. The data was obtained through classroom observations, focus groups with thirty-four students divided among six groups and interviews with six teachers and five senior administrators. The sample of students, teachers and senior administrators was drawn from five different academic disciplines, namely English, Kurdish, Law, Psychology and Biology across the four distinct existing faculties.

The findings generally showed an unsatisfactory situation of learner autonomy within this specific context and there emerged multiple personal, pedagogical, institutional and socio-cultural constraints which altogether seemed to pose serious challenges to the exercise and development of learner autonomy. Apart from that, students turned out to be relatively more autonomous compared to their previous educational experiences and there appeared to be certain behaviours and practices not just among students as a manifestation of their autonomy but also on the part of teachers towards encouraging the sense of autonomy and responsibility among students. However, these autonomous and autonomy-supportive practices and behaviours seemed to be confined to 'isolated individual efforts' of some students and teachers which implies that no systematic institutional attempts were present to promote autonomy or at

least to create a conducive environment within which autonomy could flourish or be exercised.

The findings also indicated that the autonomous behaviours and autonomy-supportive practices appeared to mainly circulate within the non-political form of autonomy which tends to focus on personal learning gains and lack a political dimension which concerns with the need for autonomous capacities to resurge within the social and political life to serve the public good. This seemed to reflect the interpretations and values the participants associated with learner autonomy which were significantly oriented towards the non-political variant of autonomy. This study, therefore, points to the need of further research, particularly action research, aiming at promoting the political understanding of autonomy.

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1. Chapter One: Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of the way learner autonomy has emerged and become a widespread concept within the field of education. Following this, the discussions will focus on the problem that this research tries to address and the theoretical framework under which the issue of learner autonomy will be explained. Afterwards, the chapter introduces purpose that this study intends to achieve, the reasons behind conducting this investigation and the significant contributions the study can make. The chapter concludes with presenting the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Background

A glance at the literature shows a growing trend towards learner autonomy over the past four decades, especially within the context of language education, adult education and higher education (e.g. Holec, 1981, Chene, 1983; Dickinson, 1987; Higgs, 1988; Boud, 1988; Candy, 1991; Little, 1991; Wilcox, 1996; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Benson, 2001; Palfreyman, 2003). There appears to be a consensus among researchers and educators over the educational and social values of learner autonomy. Benson (2001) finds autonomy as “a precondition for an effective learning.”(p. 24). While autonomous learners are portrayed as educationally effective and successful, they are also identified as citizens who are likely more capable to contribute positively to their surroundings as well as to become socially responsible members of their societies (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1995; ; Benson, 2001; Reinders, 2010; Murphy, 2011). This has led some researchers (e.g. Little, 2004; Smith, 2008) to see autonomy as a ‘universally’ valuable feature imperative to active and dynamic learning. Even critics like Pennycook (1997) and Schmenk (2005) who have strongly contested the claim which regards learner autonomy as a “universally good thing . . . irrespective of the social and cultural context” (Pennycook, 1997: p. 40); they do not entirely reject the idea of autonomy. These researchers do recognise the importance of learner

autonomy but also emphasise that careful consideration should be given to educational and contextual factors and conditions.

Assuming that autonomy can serve both the individual learner and the society at large, educational institutions, particularly universities, have come under pressure to set the development of learner autonomy at the forefront of their educational goals (Garrigan, 1997; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Perumal, 2010). Higher education institutions have been expected to provide not only the “specific demands of course provision and qualifications, but also to develop autonomous, well-motivated and committed learners” (Marsh, Richards & Smith, 2001, p. 383). Notably, the unprecedented social, political, economic and technological changes facing the world have accelerated the demand for autonomous and lifelong learning citizens (Candy, 1991; Knapper & Cropley, 1991; Carter, 2005). Boud (1988) stresses that independent learning has become a vital prerequisite for someone to function and survive effectively within the modern world. Accordingly, Combs (1966) claims that the goals of modern education are less likely to be accomplished without individuals who are equipped and capable of autonomous learning and thinking.

A close look at educational and institutional policies and statements explicitly reveals the high emphasis placed on developing the sense of responsibility and autonomy among students (Candy, 1991; Ramsden, 2002). However, Derrida (cited in Marsh et al., 2001) alerts us that such policies and statements about the promotion of learner autonomy could sometimes remain as rhetoric since they cannot be easily implemented. According to Auerbach (2007), moving towards learner autonomy is “a bumpy ride where contradictions, uncertainty, and conflicts are obstacles to be expected and overcome” (p. 87). This sounds particularly true when dealing with learner autonomy within institutionalised settings where inevitable constraints may arise (Boud, 1988; Higgs, 1988; Little, 1990; Benson, 2008). This, however, does not make the enhancement and exercise of autonomy impossible within such contexts. As Trebbi (2008: p. 34) highlights, “there is evidence from many countries that learner autonomy appears functional” despite the existing cultural and institutional restraints. However, this does not mean that learner autonomy, within formal educational

settings, could be left to chance or to certain discursive policies and constructs. While there needs to be conscious practical steps taken to ensure the provision of a productive and autonomy-supportive environment (Little, 2001; Wingate, 2007), different parties from within these institutions are also required to play their roles to create such a climate and to make the development and exercise of autonomy possible.

Without doubt, the situation of learner autonomy within a particular context cannot be divorced from the broader circumstances within the domain of education which tends to largely reflect the wider social, political and economic conditions. At this point, it is important to present a brief account outlining the educational developments in Kurdistan Region and the way these developments are shaped by socio-political forces within the Region. There is consensus that the current educational system of Kurdistan Region has been largely inherited from the Iraqi formal education system which has been identified as traditional, centralised and authoritarian (Saeed, 2008; Ala'Aldeen, 2012; Wahab, 2014). According to Wahab (2017), "similar to the unchanged social and political structures, radical changes did not take place with respect to the foundations on which education and schooling are based" (p. 30). What has made the situation even worse seems to be related to the systematic attempts by the political authorities to maintain or even reinforce the existing educational system (Wahab, 2017).

The dominant political forces have manipulated education as a strong apparatus to impose and achieve their ideological policies and gains. Saeed (as cited in Wahab, 2017) argues that the education system "has been a powerful utility for social engineering based on the design and agenda of those in power" (p. 33). One can clearly see this through the growing and detrimental political interference in the education sector. The interference seems to be to the extent that all the major issues and decisions pertinent to the educational life are controlled by the ruling political parties. The relationship between politics and education should be constructive leading to the development of both the political and educational institutions. However, the overwhelming negative impact of the political establishment has diminished and

paralysed the role that education can play in Kurdistan. As a result, educational institutions remain as places to mainly serve party-political interests, rather than operating as spheres to benefit the public good and interests.

Under the current circumstances and the ongoing political incursion into the system and process of education, the provision of quality education seems to be a far-fetched goal. Indeed, the quality of education, especially within public schools, continues to decline. The politicians seem to be least concerned about the situation for a number of reasons. First, a living and dynamic education system capable of influencing and bringing change to the social and political status quo may not serve the interests and ambitions of the political class. Second, the poor quality of public education has given the political elite a strong justification to promote private education which, according to Wahab and Mhamad (2017), has allowed political forces to intrude more directly into the institutional and educational affairs. Through the privatisation of education, these forces have been able to provide an easier access to their members to gain a university degree without which their affiliates were less likely to take high-ranking positions, within the educational and political systems. These positions are often given to them based on nepotism, favouritism and party loyalty rather than merit. This has led to having people who are not well-qualified to take charge of our educational issues and who are primarily appointed to serve their party interests. All this comes at the expense of the quality of education. Chapter two provides further account about the systems of education within schools and universities in Kurdistan.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

On one level, the theoretical framework within this study has made use of the three-dimensional conceptualisation (i.e. the technical, psychological and political versions) introduced by Benson (1996; 1997). Chapter three broadly elaborates on these three versions and makes explicit that each of these variants has certain philosophical underpinnings of positivism, constructivism and critical theory. Therefore, on a deeper level, the theoretical framework draws on these philosophical foundations, particularly critical theory which, according to Benson (1997), has informed the political-critical

form of learner autonomy. Critical theory has been informed by diverse theoretical traditions, especially the philosophy of Frankfurt School. According to Giroux (2001), critical theory represents both a “school of thought and a process of critique” which entails “a commitment to penetrate the world of objective appearances to expose the underlying social relationships they often conceal” (p. 8). Giroux (2001) also writes that “critical theory refers to the nature of self-conscious critique and to the need to develop a discourse of social transformation and emancipation” (p. 8) which all together invaluablely benefit the different fields of life including education.

Critical theory has taken the form of critical pedagogy within the domain of education. Kincheloe (1999) highlights that “critical pedagogy is the term used to describe what emerges when critical theory encounters education” (p. 72). Critical pedagogy, according to White, Cooper and Mackey (2014), “represents both a philosophy of education and a social movement combining education with critical theory” (p. 126). McLaren (1997) defines critical pedagogy as “a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship between classroom teaching, the institutional structure of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation-state” (p. 1). Paulo Freire has been considered as one the influential and founding figures of critical pedagogy. Freire viewed education as an inherently political project which he believed should offer “students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life and critical agency” (Giroux, 2010: p. 336). Following Freire, advocates of critical pedagogy also emphasise the political nature of education that intends to “understand, reveal, and disrupt the mechanisms of oppression imposed by the established order, suturing the processes and aims of education to emancipatory goals” (Grande, 2007: p. 317).

At the heart of Freire’s work lies ‘critical consciousness’ that Freire (2005) views as a ‘motor’ of liberation and emancipation. Critical consciousness enables learners to “become aware of the forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness” (Aronowitz as cited in Giroux, 2010: p. 336). Critical consciousness or critical pedagogy more broadly as an educational movement allows students to “recognise authoritarian tendencies, connect knowledge to power and

agency, and learn to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for justice and democracy” (Giroux, 2010: p. 336). While critique constitutes a major part of critical pedagogy, this critical educational framework also offers ‘hope’ or ‘pedagogy of hope’ (the title of another book by Freire) which helps students and teachers to accept the belief that alternative ways of creating educational and social experiences are possible (Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005). On that basis, critical educators argue that educational institutions, including schools and universities “as venues of hope, could become sites of resistance and democratic possibility through concerted efforts among teachers and students to work within a liberatory pedagogical framework” (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 71).

To achieve that goal, critical pedagogy tries to link “the practice of schooling to democratic principles of society and to transformative social action” (Darder, 2005: p. 90). Likewise, McLaren (2007) writes that critical pedagogy connects “students’ everyday experiences to the larger struggle for autonomy and social justice” (p. 307). Critical pedagogy, at the same time, creates an environment where students should be able to recapture their own power and sense of autonomy as critical agents (Giroux, 2007) with an ultimate aim to use their power, autonomy and agency to change and transform human condition. This makes clear that the struggle for autonomy within critical theory and critical pedagogy cannot be isolated from the struggle for social justice and constructing a more equal and democratic society. For this reason, political autonomy stands out from the technical and psychological types (often referred to as ‘non-political’ within this study) as they are mainly concerned with personal learning gains of students. It is worth noting, though, that even to say that these two versions of autonomy are categorised as ‘non-political’ or as Benson (1997) and Pennycook (1997) call them the ‘depoliticised’ versions of autonomy, there are possibly political agendas behind the ‘depoliticisation’ of the notion of autonomy.

That is where the principles of critical theory and critical pedagogy prove to be really useful to make sense of not just the political-critical variant of autonomy but also of the depoliticised form of autonomy and the underlying factors and reasons behind the

presence of a certain type of autonomy and the absence of another within a specific institutional and socio-political context.

1.4 Problem Statement

Whereas many researchers (e.g. Knowles, 1988; Gow & Kember, 1990; Boud & Higgs, 1993; Wilcox, 1996; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Hughes, 2003) consider higher education as a place where students are expectedly guided and attracted to actively engage with autonomous modes of learning and thinking, there are indeed concerns and dilemmas about higher education being part of perpetuating the 'culture of dependency' and passivity among students across different socio-cultural and educational contexts (Clifford, 1999; Breeze, 2002; Railton & Watson, 2005; Wingate, 2007; Brockbank & McGail, 2007). This seems apparently applicable to the condition of higher education of Kurdistan Region-Iraq. Despite the continued efforts during the past decade to transform the system and structure of the higher education institutions, there are still widespread discontent and frustration over the quality and situation of learning and education within our universities. A recent report prepared as a 'roadmap to quality' and reformation of the system of higher education acknowledges that there are serious crises existing within various domains of higher education. To overcome these problems and to raise the higher education standards to a satisfying level, the report suggests that some 'radical changes' need to take place (MHE, 2011).

The challenges facing Kurdistan higher education are multiple and diverse ranging from the issues of teaching quality and educational standards to institutional capacity, facility and infrastructure (Garner, 2013). To begin with, teaching practices still seem to circulate around the traditionally dominant forms of lecturing and teacher-centredness. This has pushed students to the margins of the education process (Ahmad, 2015; Garner, 2013). Meanwhile, students are still dealt with as passive receivers of knowledge and not as individuals who are capable of gaining and constructing knowledge on their own. This could be partly related to the fact that learning, both within school and university systems, has been largely equated to memorisation and regurgitation for years (MHE, 2011). According to Ahmad (2015),

the reform plan intends to “reduce the traditional emphasis on memorisation, teacher-centred classrooms, and traditional forms of assessment” (p. 26) provided that the current situation “neither helps students to develop their skills, nor does it assist them in thinking creatively or independently” (MHE, 2011: p. 28). On that account, helping students to “learn how to search for information, self-educate and become increasingly independent” (MHE, 2011: p. 33) has been set out as a major goal of this reform process within higher education.

While the above discussion shows that there are good intentions and policies to change the existing state of higher education, one cannot deny that there are still several issues that Kurdistan higher education suffers from. The discussion also indicates that learning and thinking autonomously are given least importance within our higher education institutions and exercising autonomy seems to encounter serious challenges which tends to place negative implications on learning and educational outcomes. Despite that, one cannot simply pinpoint where the problem(s) really lie without bringing to light the underlying factors and actors involved. This indicates the pressing need for research to expose the reality of the situation of learner autonomy.. To date, there has been no research to examine the condition of learner autonomy and the roles different parties play with regard to learner autonomy within Kurdistan universities . As a result, many issues related to the situation of learner autonomy have remained unknown.

1.5 Purpose Statement

This thesis has a twofold purpose. Firstly, this study attempts to explore how different parties understand learner autonomy (i.e. their perceptions of learner autonomy) within the context of higher education. Secondly and more importantly, this research intends to understand the realities and complexities of the situation of learner autonomy (i.e. contextual factors) within one of the institutions of higher education of Kurdistan. As learner autonomy has often been conceived as a complex and multidimensional construct (Little, 1991; Nunan, 1997; Benson, 2001); this research has tried to draw on the roles and perspectives students, teachers and senior

administrators (decision makers) have with regard to learner autonomy and the way their roles and understandings influence the current situation of learner autonomy within their specific context. More specifically, this research aims to address the following questions:

1. What meanings and values do different parties attribute to learner autonomy?
2. What roles do different parties play or are expected to play with regard to learner autonomy?
3. What autonomous experiences/behaviours and autonomy-supportive practices are displayed by different parties?
4. What challenges are there that constrain the exercise and development of learner autonomy within higher education?

1.6 Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this study is based on a number of practical, academic and personal grounds. First, there has been an overwhelming dissatisfaction with the practical situation of learner autonomy within the higher education context of Kurdistan. The lack of attention given to autonomous learning and thinking within Kurdistan universities have undeniably had severe consequences for both students and the society as a whole. This partly necessitates the conduct of this research through which sources and aspects of the problem of learner autonomy could be exposed and more informed decisions and actions could be taken with the intention to create a better climate for students to exercise and experience their autonomy.

Second, despite a great deal of research addressing learner autonomy across certain educational and cultural settings, there are many contexts including Kurdistan of which we know little. Based on that, researchers (e.g. Dickinson, 1996; Little, 1999; Palfreyman, 2003; Usuki, 2007) strongly encourage examining learner autonomy within such societies and contexts. As mentioned earlier, learner autonomy has not been subject to any empirical investigation within the context of Kurdistan and there

seems to be no research evidence to elucidate the nature and situation of learner autonomy within this particular context. This is another clear justification that propelled the need for this study.

Lastly, the rationale for this study cannot be detached from my personal interest for the subject of learner autonomy and the concerns I have grown about the ongoing situation of learner autonomy throughout several years of experience within higher education both as undergraduate, postgraduate student and also as a faculty member at different institutions. I have always believed that education generally and university education more specifically should allow autonomous capacities to unfold and also encourage students to be both academically and socio-politically more responsible; mainly because, students, at this stage, become more mature and reach a state where they are expected to take responsibility not only for their learning but also for other aspects of their lives (Knowles, 1975; Merriam, 2001). However, I also believe that adult learners entering university do not spontaneously become autonomous without the availability of an autonomy-friendly environment to grant students the opportunity to operate as autonomous learners and thinkers.

1.7 Significance of the Study

Given the fact that no studies have attempted to investigate the subject of learner autonomy within the school and university contexts of Kurdistan, the present research is an effort, for the first time, to contextualise the study of learner autonomy within the higher education setting of Kurdistan. While the findings of this research could make an important contribution to the field of learner autonomy and the ongoing debates around this topic, they can also provide an empirical basis upon which future research either within the context of Kurdistan or beyond can be compared. More specifically, this study can also serve to guide and pave the way for other researchers throughout the educational institutions of Kurdistan to bring relevant issues and aspects of learner autonomy under close scrutiny.

The significance of this research can be equally associated with the contributions this study could make to the practical situation of learner autonomy within this particular context. Since the situation of learner autonomy has been approached from multiple angles, the study may provide a broad and multidimensional view of the critical conditions and areas related to learner autonomy. Besides, the study may also offer some important insights about the way personal, pedagogical and institutional factors and dimensions influence the current situation and the entire process of learner autonomy. Uncovering the roles and positions of the major parties involved across the different levels of higher education may significantly shape the way meaningful decisions and actions can be taken towards the betterment of the situation of learner autonomy.

Finally, this research also hopes to form a basis upon which meaningful negotiations will take place among students, teachers and senior administrators which hopefully lead to more informed learning, pedagogical and institutional practices and policies that could help the development of learner autonomy and bring about a more sympathetic climate for learner autonomy.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured around seven intersecting chapters as follows:

The present chapter begins with a brief background to the topic of learner autonomy, presents the problem and purpose of the study and explains the rationale and significance of the study.

Chapter two describes the context where this research was conducted with the focus not only on the educational and institutional background of Kurdistan, but also on the socio-cultural background which may shed more light on the situation of learner autonomy.

Chapter three reviews the literature relevant to learner autonomy particularly within the higher education context. The chapter consists of two major parts. The first part

provides conceptual and theoretical explanations pertinent to the study. The second part establishes an empirical framework within which this study can be positioned. Here, several studies which are related to my research and which have been carried out across different cultural and educational contexts are presented.

Chapter four introduces the paradigmatic assumptions which guide the formulation of the research questions and underpin the selection of the research methodology and methods. Following this, a detailed account of the research design and methods of data collection is presented. This chapter also describes the research participants and the process and stages of data analysis. The chapter concludes with discussing the quality criteria and ethical considerations.

Chapter five analyses and reports the research findings which are supported with the data collected through observations, focus groups and interviews.

Chapter six presents a detailed discussion of the key findings of the study with reference to the existing literature.

Chapter seven concludes the thesis with outlining the major conclusions, implications and contributions of the study to the research and to the current practical situation of learner autonomy within the context of Kurdistan. The chapter also highlights some limitations of the study as well as some recommendations for future research.

2. Chapter Two: Research Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and discusses the contextual background of the thesis with the main focus on the cultural, educational and institutional contexts. Understanding the situation of learner autonomy, within the context of Kurdistan higher education, necessitates, at least, an overall account of educational, institutional and cultural dimensions. At first, the chapter addresses aspects of 'Kurdish culture' which may have a direct or indirect influence over personal autonomy generally and learner autonomy more specifically. Following this, the chapter presents an overview of both the education and higher education systems of Kurdistan with an emphasis on the ongoing efforts to bring change and reform to these systems. Within these two sections, the issue of learner autonomy will be briefly highlighted. Finally, the chapter gives a brief description of the institution where this study was conducted.

2.2 The Cultural Context

From birth onwards, human beings, to varying degrees, come under the influence of the surrounding 'culture(s)' and the social context(s) where they live and grow. Therefore, when groups of people from different geographical locations think and behave differently, one explanation could be that these groups are influenced by various socio-cultural factors. This does not mean that no differences exist within the members of a particular cultural group and that no deviations from social and cultural norms and values can exist; there are possibly individual variations and discrepancies within one cultural context. The concept of culture or cultural differences has been a much-debated issue (Atkinson, 2004). Hence, discussing the cultural aspects of the context under investigation cannot escape broader discussions around cultural issues.

According to Atkinson (2004), the term 'culture' has been one of the most disputable notions within academia and has been understood differently by different people. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) collected 160 different definitions of culture. For them, concepts like 'culture' are the hardest to be confined to specific denotations or

understandings. For the same reason, Williams (1983) classifies 'culture' as "one of the two or three most complicated words" (p. 87). According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), one famous definition of culture belongs to Tylor (1871) who defines 'culture' as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (cited in Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952: p.43). Moreover, Kneller (cited in Palfreyman, 2003: p. 5) defines culture as "the total shared way of life of a given people, comprising their modes of thinking, acting and feeling". According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), these definitions of culture and many others share a distinctive feature of identifying culture as a comprehensive totality. Holliday (2011) calls this "an essentialist view of culture" (p. 66) whereby culture tends to be categorised as whole nations, regions, religions and so on. This view also looks at culture as a 'causative agent' that determines and constrains the ways people think and behave within a given context. For Holliday (2011), one serious implication of this could be that "people are not allowed to step outside their designated cultural places" (p. 5).

Keesing (1990) argues that the essentialist notion of culture seems so powerful that has infiltrated our thoughts and everyday discourse. Likewise, Atkinson (1999) points out that this conceptualisation of culture has become a 'received view' which typically regards cultures "as geographically (and quite often nationally) distinct entities, as relatively unchanging and homogeneous, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine personal behaviour" (p.626). Elsewhere, Atkinson (2004) highlights that such understanding has led to the conflation of cultures "with big-picture political groupings like nation states and ethnic communities" (p. 280). The idea of 'national culture', also strongly related to essentialist thinking, appears to be a highly contested notion which assumes that despite the existence of individual differences and subcultural variations within a society, every nation or ethnic group shares a unique national culture (McSweeney, 2002). National culture has been widely critiqued and attempts have been made to completely overthrow this concept; because, for some, national cultures are simply 'imagined' or 'legendary' communities created for political and ideological agendas (McSweeney, 2002; Holliday, 2011).

An influential work, which employed national cultures as basic units for finding cultural differences, tends to be attributed to Geert Hofstede (Holliday, 2011). Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010: p. 6). Depending on the data collected from a survey of around 116,000 IBM (International Business Machine) employees from over fifty countries, Hofstede tried to present a model of classifying cultures based on certain ‘national traits’ or what he calls ‘national culture dimensions’, including power distance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs short-term orientation and indulgent vs restraint (Hofstede et al., 2010). These dimensions are considered as cultural values and constructed with the intention to identify and explain cultural differences. Hofstede (1980) claims that the results of his study “have the power to uncover the secrets of entire national cultures” (p. 44).

Despite ongoing criticisms (e.g. McSweeney, 2002; Voronov & Singer, 2002; Holliday, 2011) of Hofstede’s model of national cultures, the systematic nature of his work has attracted great attention and as Sondergaard (1994) showed, many researchers have replicated Hofstede’s study and applied to various contexts and various areas ranging from management and commerce to psychology, sociology, anthropology and education. The critiques raised against the essentialist perspective of culture are equally applied to the national culture model proposed by Hofstede. As mentioned above, one major problem with this line of thinking is related to the fact that national cultures are dealt with as homogeneous and unified bodies. One concrete example of this could be Iraq which Hofstede (1980) considered as a homogeneous country overlooking the fact that there are multiple social groups (i.e. Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians, Yazidis, etc.) (Hassan, 2015) which constitute the country of Iraq and, within each, smaller cultures or subcultures may exist. On this account, Hofstede’s findings cannot be simply applied to various factions of Iraqi society.

Interestingly, Hassan (2015) adopted Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and conducted a research with 743 Kurdish university students. The main purpose of the study was to identify features of ‘Kurdish culture’ as well as to expand Hofstede’s cultural model

which does not cover 'Kurdish culture'. Given that Hassan completely replicated Hofstede's cultural model, his study can be criticised on similar grounds addressed earlier. Hassan's study seems to have been grounded on the same assumption of Hofstede that cultural homogeneity exists within Kurdish society and all members of this society carry uniform characteristics of the same national culture (McSweeney, 2002). Hassan (2015) only included university students who belong to a certain age group. Therefore, assuming that the results can be generalised to the entire population of Kurdish society sounds simplistic; because there are obviously variations within Kurdish society. Thus, when using Hofstede or his replications, one has to be aware not to fall into the trap of categorising an entire society as a homogeneous group based on certain 'cultural dimensions'.

According to Voronov and Singer (2002), the cultural qualities used by Hofstede to classify cultures are somehow inevitably dichotomous and may simplify the socio-cultural complexities. Among the cultural categories, individualism-collectivism dimension "has generated the most research, and, as some scholars fear, has become a catchall default explanation for cultural differences" (Kagitcibasi cited in Voronov & Singer, 2002: p. 462). Holliday (2011) reveals that there are claims that individualism and collectivism are neutral labels for two prototypes of national cultures. People from individualist cultures are presented as North Americans of European backgrounds, North and West Europeans, Australians, New Zealanders who define themselves as autonomous, they give priority to personal goals over group goals and value personal achievement, self-reliance, dominance and being open to new experiences. These could be the reason that individualism tends to be more typically attached to autonomy and that people from 'individualist cultures' including learners are often conceived as autonomous and self-reliant. By contrast, people from 'collectivist cultures' are distinguished as Latin Americans, Southern Europeans, East and South Asians and Africans. They are defined as group-oriented who value stability where norms and obligations do not change (Triandis, 2004). Holliday (2011) argues that "individualism represents imagined positive characteristics and collectivism represents imagined negative characteristics" (p. 9).

Based on this polarised division, 'Kurdish culture' falls under the category of 'collectivist cultures'. Depending on the findings from his study, Hassan (2015) makes the same claim and ranked 'Kurdish culture' as highly collectivist. Further claims have been made about the purportedly collectivist nature of Kurdish society. Sweetnam (2004) states that there are clear indicators of collectivism within Kurdish culture. The author continues to argue that within Kurdish society "interdependence . . . is highly valued, while personal independence and individualism are not emphasised to that extent" (Sweetnam, 2004: p. 149). Likewise, Izady (1992) points out that "most Kurds, even the highly educated ones, still preserve their strongest loyalties" (p. 192) to their families and tribes. Observations like these which have been made long ago about Kurdish society seem less relevant to the present situation for various reasons. First, Kurdistan-Region has undergone unprecedented socio-political, economic and educational shifts which according to Morrison (cited in Hassan, 2015) are strong factors to bring changes to cultural traits like collectivism, power distance and so on. Urbanisation can be another factor that may pull people and societies from collectivist orientation towards more individualistic tendencies (Hofstede et al., 2010). During the past twenty years, urbanisation has been a widespread phenomenon within Kurdish society. This does not mean that those who move to urban areas automatically shift from their 'presumed collectivist identity' to become more individualistic. This, however, does mean that urbanisation may break or loosen social ties as individuals become more detached from the members of their extended family¹.

So far, the discussions indicate that cultures are not fixed and discrete units but are rather "fluid, ever-changing, and nondeterministic" (Atkinson, 1999: p. 630). Cultural changes seem to have been accelerated by globalisation which has created new cultural combinations and constructions (Appadurai, 1996). Consequently, individuals may associate themselves with different social and organisational groupings at the same

¹ Extended family means the relations extend beyond parents and children to include second and third degree relatives, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins (Hofstede et al., 2010).

time (Holliday, 1999) not just within their immediate social context but even outside that circle. This implies that people may count themselves as part of different interacting small, middle-sized and large cultures (Atkinson, 2004). This also means that the cultures that people align themselves with are not necessarily bounded but can transcend national boundaries (Appadurai, 1996; Holliday, 1999; McSweeney, 2002). This view tends to undermine a strictly black-and-white dichotomy of culture.

Taking the above logic, one can suggest that the appropriateness or inappropriateness of learner autonomy cannot be based on certain socio-cultural variations. Perhaps, for similar reasons, many researchers (Dickinson, 1996; Aoki & Smith, 1999; Little, 1999; Smith, 2001; Sinclair, 2000; Oxford, 2003; Holliday, 2003; Lamb, 2004) define learner autonomy as 'cross-culturally' appropriate. These researchers, however, agree that there cannot be 'one-size-fits-all' approach to learner autonomy; instead, different forms of learner autonomy may be relevant to different social and educational contexts. The findings of the present study shed more light on cultural elements and their relation to learner autonomy.

2.3 An Overview of Kurdistan Education System

The Kurdistan education system was an integrated part of the educational system of Iraq until the early 1990s when Kurds attained a semi-autonomous state and when they started to establish their own governmental entities and educational institutions somehow independently from the central government. At that time, the major priority of Kurdistan-Region was to rebuild the educational infrastructure after immense damages resulting from war and conflict. During this period, the movements towards educational change and reform were slow and limited due to the lack of resources available. However, after 2003, when the whole country witnessed some major political developments, better opportunities for educational change and progress have emerged. As a result, more serious efforts have been put together to elevate the quality of education and to keep pace with both internal and external demands and changes.

According to Vernez, Culbertson and Constant (2014), an ambitious and more inclusive educational reform goes back to 2007 when an educational conference was held with

the participation of many local and international educational specialists and advisors. The conference proposed a holistic project to become a foundation upon which the educational system of Kurdistan could be transformed. This reform movement has intended to “forge the way ahead towards preparing and educating the next generation to become loyal citizens to the homeland with the capacity to think analytically” (Vernez et al., 2014: p. 6). Moreover, the project emphasises that schools have to encourage and create an educational environment where students can develop as responsible and autonomous individuals so that they can positively contribute to the improvement of human conditions within their society (MoE, 2008). More specifically, the reform project has also aimed to modernise the old curriculum, expand school capacities, and improve the quality of instruction. Saeed (2008) describes this intended reform plan as an important push towards a better and thriving education system which may have desirable effects on the overall process of education.

The aforementioned reform plans and proposals tell us that there are voices here and there who call for turning around our education system. These voices, however, seem to assume that a ‘Western’ model of education can solve our educational problems. For instance, over the past few years, attempts were made to replicate Swedish education system in Kurdistan regardless of the possible situational and contextual differences. Apart from this critical issue which we do not have enough space here to elaborate, the reform initiatives have already led to some positive changes and progresses, at least quantitatively. Among them are the declining figures of illiteracy from 37% to 16% between the years 2000 to 2010 (Morgan-Jones, 2012), the endorsement of compulsory basic education and the expansion of student and school numbers throughout the Region². Alongside these developments, certain pedagogical changes have also been proposed. For instance, school teachers have been expected to “revise and reform their

² Figures from Ministry of Education show a dramatic increase of student population from 780151 in 2003 to 1512590 students in 2012. Similarly, the number of schools built has substantially increased from 3140 in 2003 to 5921 schools in 2012.

classical teaching methods . . . and to adopt student-centred teaching techniques, emphasising the development of creative and analytical skills” (Vernez et al., 2014: p. 6).

Despite certain changes across various levels of the educational system, there has been a widespread fear that the plans for reform could remain as rhetoric. Wahab (2014) demonstrates that alongside the existing plans, policies and continuing efforts to boost the education sector, there are still serious challenges ahead to be encountered. Wahab argues that Kurdistan education system has not yet escaped the marks of a traditional and centralised system Iraq. For him, even the changes that have been made are not radical and are limited to certain technical, administrative and policy changes (Wahab, 2014). Saeed (2008) associates the failure of educational reform in Kurdistan to a number of factors, such as the lack of educational experts, especially at the level of decision-making, the absence of effective mechanisms to implement reforms, and the continuous and negative intervening impact of political parties on education. These are strong factors to undermine or at least to weaken the desire to change and reform the education system. As a result, the system continues to follow a traditional approach where rote learning and teacher- centredness are still widely practiced which only reinforce student passivity; instead of creating a “base necessary to produce higher order thinkers who can move the societal knowledge forward” (Baban, 2012: p. 76).

2.4 An Overview of Kurdistan Higher Education

Kurdistan-Region does not have a long history of higher education. The establishment of the first university dates back to 1968. This was part of a broader policy to expand Iraq’s higher education institutions. The period starting from 1960s to 1970s has been considered as a ‘golden era’ for universities of Iraq when many of them flourished and enjoyed celebrity for the high quality education they provided (Harb, 2008; Baban,

2012). However, as Baathists³ gradually came to power; they tried to impose their dominance over every sector of life, including higher education which was exploited as a tool to serve political and ideological purposes (Harb, 2008). According to Harb (2008), this has strongly hit the institutions of higher education which started to lose their dynamism and potential for progress.

Part of the Baath regime policy was to prevent opening more universities within the Kurdish region. The reason behind this was to force Kurdish students to travel to other parts of Iraq to complete their university degree (Krieger, 2007). Therefore, despite the need for more universities throughout the Region, Salahaddin remained the only university until 1991. However, as mentioned earlier, the 1991 Kurdish uprising has given the Kurds a better chance to re-establish their institutions and to eliminate the dark shadow cast on educational establishments. Unlike school education system, the higher education system needed to be essentially built from scratch (Krieger, 2007). A year after Kurdish self-rule, two other universities were opened so that each main city had an institution of higher education to cover the local demands. At present, Kurdistan-Region hosts 15 public universities and 15 private ones. The focus of these institutions seems to be more on teaching and learning and less on research. While, more recently, research has received more attention, there are still big concerns about the effectiveness and efficiency of the research studies conducted (Khoshnaw, 2013).

The expansion of higher education institutions can be associated with two main reasons. First, since 2003, the number of students has dramatically expanded mainly because most students graduating from high school now intend to continue on higher education (Vernez et al., 2014). Second, many students from the rest of Iraq have flocked to study at Kurdistan universities. Figures related to 2013 show that 115, 000 students were enrolled. This number tends to increase year after year. A larger proportion of students go to public universities not just because students get their

³ Iraqi Baathists are identified as Arab nationalists who ruled Iraq between 1968-2003 and established an authoritarian regime which tried to suppress opposition voices who stood against their ideology. Their rule ended with Iraq facing many economic, social and political crises.

university qualifications for free, but also because they are paid during the course of their study. This could also be a good incentive for more people to join higher education.

Besides the above figures which generally show the quantitative growth of Kurdistan higher education, a series of attempts have also been made, especially from 2003 onwards, to enhance the quality of university education. On that basis, Harb (2008) highlights that the Kurdish region has developed a modern system of higher education which can be partially related to the good relationship Kurdistan universities have built with academic centres around the world which has contributed to the enhancement of the higher education sector. Besides certain improvements which institutions of higher education have achieved, their troubles are far from over (Krieger, 2007). For this reason, since 2009, further attempts and more strategic plans have been undertaken to put Kurdistan higher education on the right track (Ala'Aldeen, 2012; Ali, 2012; Ahmad, 2015; Vernez et al., 2014).

The strategy came as an urgent call for a more radical and comprehensive change from within different sections and entities of higher education institutions. The reform plan concentrated on wide-ranging areas: (1) implementing a system of quality assurance and accreditation; (2) modernising curricula with an emphasis on self-learning and critical thinking; (3) developing academic research and training capacities; (4) investing in higher education infrastructure and human resources; (5) rearranging institutional structures, promoting decentralisation and expanding the use of information technology; (6) safeguarding human rights and ensuring social justice (MHE, 2011; Ala'Aldeen, 2012; Ali, 2012). One cannot doubt the necessity and importance of this reform process for Kurdistan higher education; but one should also bear in mind that such plans for reform are often easier said than done, especially within contexts where the traditional forms of education are deeply rooted. Ala'Aldeen (2012) himself, who was the leading figure of the reform campaign, acknowledges that the path to reform was 'bumpy' and 'thorny'. For Ali (2012), the reform process, especially at the initial stage, had to confront some major political and administrative constraints and opposition from students, teachers, administrators and politicians which consequently

slowed down the process. Despite the barriers, Ala'Aldeen (2012) maintains that some historic milestones were achieved and a "foundation for a modern and evolving higher education system was laid" (para. 18).

Regardless of whether the reform process has achieved the intended goals, there has been a relative consensus that the reform plan has somehow shaken up the existing system of higher education. As a consequence, universities seem to operate more independently, students' voices are better heard and faculty members have had greater chances to pursue higher levels of education either inside or outside Kurdistan- Region. Apart from these, for reform plans to succeed within the Kurdistan higher education system, changes are also needed throughout the social, political and educational systems. The latter seems particularly important as there have been widespread concerns that school education and higher education in Kurdistan are almost entirely isolated from each other. As a result, students are not adequately prepared for university education (Mhamad & Shareef, 2014). As the previous section indicated, our school system tends to socialise students into a passive mode of learning to heavily rely on memorisation and regurgitation. So assuming that students enter higher education with these deeply entrenched learning habits are more likely to preserve them and less likely to be able to manifest strong desires, at least initially, to engage with other forms of learning which require more autonomous efforts and initiatives (Breen & Mann, 1997).

2.5 The Institutional Context

The present study was undertaken at Soran University. This university is a relatively small public institution of higher education in Kurdistan-Region. From 2004 to 2009, Soran University was a constituent part of Salahaddin University-the biggest university in the Region. Since 2009, when the colleges gained a university status, a number of other colleges and departments have been opened. At the moment, the university has five major faculties with several language, research and academic centres. The university hosts over four thousand students and has around three hundred staff members, both local and international.

The selection of this university as the research site for the present thesis belongs to two main reasons. First, as a university staff member, I found that addressing an important issue like learner autonomy within my university is essentially needed, especially at this stage when the university is still young and when better plans and actions can be taken to create a more supportive environment for learner autonomy. The other reason for selecting this institution was pragmatically motivated. As a faculty member, I had smooth access to the site and participants and there was a lot of support and cooperation from the insiders which I could not expect elsewhere.

3. Chapter Three: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This research aimed to understand the current situation of learner autonomy within the context of higher education. To proceed with this study, a review of the existing literature was necessary. This review, therefore, intends to present detailed theoretical and empirical accounts that are pertinent to the topic and purpose of this thesis. As for the theoretical part, discussions are made around the concept of learner autonomy and the way this notion has emerged and developed within the field of education. Along with that, this chapter also discusses the different ways learner autonomy has been interpreted and conceptualised within the literature. The theoretical part ends with addressing learner autonomy and the importance of this notion within the context of higher education.

Concerning the empirical part, two main aspects were found relevant to be reviewed around learner autonomy. Firstly, the review highlights what previous research has revealed regarding the roles learners and teachers play with respect to learner autonomy. Secondly, a reference will be made to studies addressing the way learners and teachers understand learner autonomy. The studies included here were tried to be among those that have been carried out within higher education and that belong to different socio-cultural contexts so as to gain a picture of how learner autonomy has been viewed and also to see how learner autonomy has been investigated within these contexts.

One last point to make about this review relates to the fact that a great deal of the literature included here belongs to 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. That was mainly because most of the work done on learner autonomy goes back to these times. Whereas important debates took place over the issue of learner autonomy, particularly within the Western world during these periods, there are contexts (e.g. this research context) within which these debates have been completely overlooked.

3.2 Defining Learner Autonomy

Understanding learner autonomy cannot be isolated from the understanding of the broader concepts of autonomy and personal autonomy. According to Benson (2008), the idea of learner autonomy draws significantly on the notion of personal autonomy. Like personal autonomy, learner autonomy has also sparked considerable controversy and scholars seem to have failed to reach a consensus regarding what learner autonomy really entails (Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012). Despite ongoing disputes over the interpretation and conceptualisation of this term, learner autonomy has still been widely accepted, for decades now, as a worthwhile educational goal. According to Benson (2001), the rise of learner autonomy has resulted from the increasing demands for learner-centredness and other educational changes and reforms suggested by educational philosophers, particularly within the so-called 'Western' world. It is, perhaps, partly for this reason that learner autonomy has been recognised as a construct originating from the 'West' (Benson, 2001; Palfreyman, 2003). Whether learner autonomy emerged from the West or elsewhere, which again has been subject to intense debate, learner autonomy has become a pervasive and 'global' construct endorsed by many educational systems, at least at the discourse or policy levels, across the world (Pennycook, 1997; Benson, 2007).

According to Little (1991), learner autonomy has become a 'buzz-word'. Since 1980s or even before, a substantial body of literature has been devoted to defining and examining the applicability of learner autonomy within different educational and socio-cultural settings. A close look at the literature, however, shows that a great deal of work done on learner autonomy can be attributed to language researchers and educators. This does not mean that the idea of learner autonomy should be confined to language learning and education, as learner autonomy can be equally relevant to the processes of learning and education within various academic disciplines (Boud, 1988). Despite the availability of immense theoretical and empirical accounts on learner autonomy, this concept, as Little (2004) argues, remains as a 'problematic term' and a 'slippery concept' with various philosophical, theoretical and practical issues still unsettled. This could be due to the 'semantic complexity' of the notion of autonomy (Little & Dam, 1998) which

“encompasses concepts from different domains such as politics and education, philosophy and psychology” (Blin, 2005: p. 16). This could be one reason why scholars have approached learner autonomy differently. As a result, varying definitions of learner autonomy have emerged.

One key contribution to the idea of learner autonomy belongs to Holec (1981) who defines learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). Benson (2007) highlights that this definition remains as the most remarkable and oft-quoted one. Although Holec wrote that with reference to adult education and language learning, his definition could be equally applied to learning across disciplines. Besides, Holec himself does not confine autonomy to learning per se, but more importantly, autonomy is seen as a means through which the learner can develop “abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives” (Holec, 1981: p. 1). This view of learner autonomy has explicit political roots and political implications for (adult) education to become “an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation” (Janne as cited in Holec, 1981: p. 3) among people so that they feel empowered to change and shape their society and environment. This view also entails a need for learners to become “more responsible and critical members of their communities” (Benson, 2001: p. 1). This political dimension of learner autonomy will be elaborated further when discussing the political version of learner autonomy below.

Following Holec, many other definitions of learner autonomy have been put forward. Dickinson (1987) refers to learner autonomy as “the situation in which learners are totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with learning and the implementation of those decisions. In full autonomy there is no involvement of a “teacher” or an institution. And the learner is also independent of specially prepared materials” (p.11). This view of autonomy seems to be compatible with an extreme form of ‘self-instruction’ or ‘teacher-less’ learning (Thanasoulas, 2000). Little (1990) identifies this as one of the misconceptions about autonomy which he tries to deconstruct when saying that “autonomy is not a synonym for self-instruction, in other words, autonomy is not learning without a teacher” (p. 7). Moreover, Benson and Voller (1997) explain

that Dickinson uses autonomy as an equivalent to the idea of learning alone and 'independence'. While this seems to be relevant to independent learning that could take place beyond the classroom and institutional contexts, this may go against the situation within formal educational settings where autonomous learning or exercising autonomy cannot and does not necessarily need to occur independent of teachers and institutions.

This leads us to another issue related to the use of 'learner independence' as a synonym to 'learner autonomy'. Benson (2001) and Pinkman (2005) show that there are examples within the literature where these two terms are used interchangeably. These two writers agree that this has caused confusion as the two terms carry distinct connotations. Benson (2001) illustrates that one problem with the use of 'independence' as a synonym of autonomy could be that the former can be understood as the opposite of 'interdependence', which implies working together with teachers and other learners and taking collective responsibility for common goals (Benson, 2001; Palfreyman, 2003). Benson points out that, for many researchers, "autonomy does imply interdependence" (2001: p. 14). Those, who counter the view which equates autonomy with 'independence' and 'individualism', argue that 'interdependence' constitutes a necessary part of autonomy. This argument has been substantiated through the idea that humans, as social creatures, cannot operate as independent, detached and 'lone organisms' (Little, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Marsh et al., 2001); instead, as Little (1990) maintains, we are social beings and "our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence" (p. 7). On that account, a decade later, Little (2000) highlights that the growth of learner autonomy could be supported by learner interdependence. More recently, Benson and Cooker (2013) put a similar argument forward that learner autonomy as a social capacity "develops through 'interdependence' rather than 'independence'" (p. 8).

While the above views resonate with the notion of 'relational autonomy' which emphasises interdependence over independence (Benson, 2006), they do not seem to deny that autonomy includes elements of both independence and interdependence. This has been articulated through the so-called Bergen definition which recognises

learner autonomy as entailing “a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person” (Dam, 1995: p. 1). According to this, autonomy requires learners to work both independently and interdependently at the same time. These two attributes are seen as mutually indispensable rather than as mutually exclusive.

Besides ‘capacity’ which has been widely associated with learner autonomy, the above definition adds ‘willingness’ as another important ingredient of learner autonomy. Sinclair (2000) highlights that the inclusion of ‘willingness’ suggests that irrespective of their capacity, learners also need to have the willingness to act autonomously. For Littlewood (1996), these two lie at the heart of learner autonomy and are interdependent on one another. Littlewood further goes to explain that while ability or capacity includes the possession of the knowledge and skills necessary for taking autonomous actions, willingness encompasses motivation and confidence. Whereas the former seems to comprise the cognitive aspect of learner autonomy, the latter refers to the affective factor. This understanding of learner autonomy aligns well with what Ponton (as cited in Derrick, Ponton & Carr, 2005) proposes that “learner autonomy is a psychological characteristic within the realm of cognition and affection” (p. 117). Both the cognitive and affective variables are seen to be internal to the learner; therefore, identified as ‘psychological or individual attributes’ (Hsu, 2005).

Despite the fact that these internal factors are important components of learner autonomy, autonomy cannot be simply conceived as an internal process; because there are social and contextual factors (i.e. external factors) that influence learner autonomy. According to Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000), these external variables influence autonomy at three interrelated levels: the formation of desires, beliefs and attitudes; the development of the capacities necessary for autonomy; and the ability of a person to act on autonomous desires or to make autonomous choices. This suggests that there are external dimensions to the internal capacity and willingness that learners may have for autonomy. Candy (1991) and Benson (2009) regard that capacity for autonomy as innate which tends to be suppressed or distorted by educational, social and political conditions and institutions. To consider autonomy as an inborn capacity implies that

learners generally have the capacity of becoming autonomous. Nevertheless, the oppressive social, political and institutional forces may inhibit students from experiencing and realising that capacity. This could be the reason that the idea of 'struggle' has been incorporated into the notion of autonomy.

This can be clearly noticed through the definition introduced by Pennycook (1997), which seems to represent a critical view of autonomy. According to him, autonomy requires learners to "struggle to become the authors of their own worlds, to be able to create their own meanings, to pursue cultural alternatives amid the cultural politics of everyday life" (1997: p.39). This describes autonomy as something to be 'hard-won' which involves conflicts and not as a gift that can be bestowed by the teacher (Little, 1991). Without doubt, the teacher can play a great role to help students to win this fight. For Benson (2000), teachers can work as a 'bridge' or 'mediator' "between the learners' right to autonomy and the socio-institutional constraints on autonomy" (p. 40). On that account and similar to the last definition of learner autonomy, teacher autonomy has also been referred to as a struggle to confront and "manage constraints within a vision of education as liberation and empowerment" (Vieira, Barbosa, Paiva & Fernandes, 2008: p. 219). For this reason, learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are seen as interdependent (Little, 1995) or "as two sides of the same coin" (Raya & Vieira, 2015: p. 22). As a result, Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2007) have tried to come up with a broad and common definition to capture both learner and teacher autonomy. They see autonomy as "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation" (p. 1). This view again emphasises the political-critical aspects of autonomy.

On the whole, the discussions of this section make evident that learner autonomy remains as a complex and multi-faceted concept, open to diverse interpretations (Little, 1991; Benson, 1997; Nunan, 1997; Smith, 2003). The fact that learner autonomy has been interpreted differently has allowed researchers to see distinct facets of this construct (Murray, 2017). The several definitions of learner autonomy introduced here seem to capture a variety of perspectives on learner autonomy. The perspectives

revolve around three major aspects, namely the technical, psychological and political-critical. These will be broadly addressed below under the versions of learner autonomy.

3.3 Versions of Learner Autonomy

As the previous section highlights, the variations of views about learner autonomy seem to result from a complex and multidimensional nature that learner autonomy has. Benson (2001) describes autonomy as “a multidimensional capacity” (p. 47) who then tried to consider different dimensions of this construct. Benson (1997) suggests a three-dimensional conceptualisation of learner autonomy which includes the *technical, psychological and political* dimensions. Whereas these versions of learner autonomy have been proposed to the field of language learning, the fact that these types of autonomy correspond to the major theories of knowledge and approaches to learning, namely positivism, constructivism and critical theory (Benson, 1997), they seem to be equally applied to other academic domains.

According to Ecclestone (2002: p. 35), “no typology can capture the complexity and overlap between different types of autonomy”. Nonetheless, the classification introduced by Benson (1997) seems useful, particularly with respect to the match he found between the versions of learner autonomy and the different approaches of knowledge and learning; because, this helps us understand why different people conceive learner autonomy differently. This means that these versions can provide some theoretical basis to which the varying views of autonomy could be traced back. This classification also encourages us to remain open to different interpretations and be critical of attempts to depict learner autonomy as a ‘monolithic’ term (Smith, 2003). The typology indicates that as there are variations of autonomy, there are also different ways that people can be autonomous (i.e. they can be technically, psychologically and/or politically autonomous) with each having their own implications. The categorisation importantly intends to uncover the strengths and limitations of each version of autonomy or as Ecclestone (2002) highlights “to differentiate between autonomy as a broader educational and social goal and the processes and conditions

that enable people to act autonomously” (p. 35). The following sections will explain what these versions of learner autonomy mean.

3.3.1 Learner Autonomy from Technical Perspective

Within the technical perspective, autonomy tends to be defined as the ‘act’ or ‘behaviour’ of learning taking place “outside the framework of an educational institution and without the intervention from a teacher” and also as ‘situations’ within which “learners are obliged to take charge of their own learning” (Benson, 1997: p. 19). This indicates that the technical version of autonomy focuses on two main aspects, namely the ‘behavioural’ and ‘situational’ (Murase, 2015). While the latter emphasises the situational conditions, such as self-access centres or other created conditions where learners need to function independently, the former seems to be related to the use or development of learning strategies (Oxford, 2003; Murase, 2015) which are also referred to as ‘tactics’ (Cotterall, 1995), ‘skills’ (Littlewood, 1996), or ‘skills and techniques’ (Benson, 1997) necessary for ‘unsupervised learning’ or ‘independent learning’ (Palfreyman, 2003). According to Oxford (2003), this technical perspective matches with the way Dickinson (1987) defined learner autonomy above.

The technical version of autonomy has been associated with the positivist approach which assumes that “knowledge reflects an objective reality” (Benson & Voller, 1997: p. 14). Positivism posits that knowledge, whether discovered or still awaiting discovery, already exists within the objective world (Benson, 1997). Benson (1997) further illustrates that the positivist position advocates the model of ‘discovery learning’ which suggests that knowledge can be more effectively acquired when “it is ‘discovered’ rather than ‘taught’” (p. 20). Drawing on this assumption, the technical perspective contends that for learners to be able to independently pursue knowledge learning and discovery, they need skills and strategies. The technical version treats (autonomous) learning strategies as tools that can be passed on to learners through ‘learner training’ or ‘strategy training’ (Benson, 1997; Sinclair, 2012). The training, therefore, tends to merely focus on helping students with acquiring the same skills and strategies so that they be able to manage their learning beyond the classroom. This puts teachers as

‘technical experts’ (Vieira, 2012) whose role involves transferring certain technical skills and strategies to learners (Sinclair, 2012). This implies that autonomy or better to say the techniques and strategies required for autonomous or independent behaviours are seen as the product of classroom training, but are expected to be mainly applied outside the classroom (Carter, 2006). This appears to be an apparent paradox of the technical perspective.

Despite the importance of learning strategies, which according to Oxford (2003) cannot be simply handed over to learners, but rather, their development requires active and full participation of learners, this version focuses on technicalities and reduces learner autonomy to mere strategy use (Schmenk, 2005). For this reason, the technical approach has been identified as ‘narrow’ and ‘reductive’ primarily concerned with equipping learners with specific strategies which enable them to learn independently (Benson, 1997; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The counter argument, therefore, seems to be that autonomy cannot be reduced to a technical ability of using a set of learning tactics or strategies (Benson, 2001); instead, as an inherently complex construct, autonomy entails essential psychological and political dimensions that should not be overlooked.

3.3.2 Learner Autonomy from Psychological Perspective

Unlike the technical perspective, the psychological perspective puts emphasis on the psychological attributes of the learner (Benson, 1997). The psychological approach considers autonomy as an essentially ‘individualistic’ process (Candy, 1991). Learner autonomy has, therefore, been “attached to the psychological and ‘progressive’ concepts, such as ‘learner-centredness’ and ‘learning how to learn’” (Benson & Voller, 1997: p. 15). According to Pennycook (1997), both the learner-centred version of education and the psychological version of learner autonomy chiefly focus on the psychological development of the learner. Both learner-centredness and learner autonomy consider the learner as an active and central entity within the learning process who needs to develop a combination of cognitive, motivational and emotional characteristics necessary for his/her learning efforts, management and gains (Bell & Kozlowski, 2009). This echoes with what Little (1994) argues that learner autonomy

requires the learner to develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. What also binds learner-centredness and learner autonomy together seems to be the idea that they are both premised on constructivist learning theories (Reid & Ewing, 2017). On that account, it is safe to say that learner-centredness and the psychological version of learner autonomy are two sides of the same coin. In a broader sense, though, learner autonomy has been dealt with as an umbrella term that incorporates the idea of learner-centredness. The latter primarily focuses on the activity of learning. Perhaps, for this reason, David Nunan, who strongly advocates this approach, tried to change the notion of 'learner-centredness' to a related concept of 'learning-centredness' (Nunan, 1988). This approach tries to gear the teaching and education processes towards the learning needs and achievements of the learner (Holliday, 2006). It is worth noting that learner-centredness only represents one aspect of learner autonomy and as Pennycook (1997) argues, allows little or no place for more political versions of autonomy and of education more broadly.

Returning now to the psychological version of autonomy, Benson and Voller (1997) point out that the attention this psychological variant gives to the capacities of the individual makes this version of autonomy more compatible with constructivism which sees knowledge as socially constructed (Carter, 2006). Constructivists assume that individual learners construct their own knowledge and understanding through personal experiences (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Drawing on this constructivist view, Candy (1991) holds that "learning is an active process of constructing meaning and transforming understandings" (p. 251). Candy, therefore, further argues that "knowledge cannot be taught but must be constructed by the learner" (1991: p. 252). These make the constructivist principles of knowledge and learning to be consistent with the psychological version of autonomy.

The psychological variant views autonomy as "a construct of attitudes and abilities which allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning" (Benson, 1997: p. 19). According to Murase (2015), this psychological type of autonomy consists of "metacognitive, motivational and affective sub-dimensions" (p. 44). This, somehow, corresponds to what Candy (1991) outlines that the psychological version includes

attitudinal, motivational and emotional components. These are considered as essential psychological factors that can significantly affect learner autonomy. For that reason, and contrary to the technical version which places enormous attention on technical or methodological training, the psychological approach emphasises “psychological training for autonomy” (Carter, 2006: p.33). This seems to involve promoting psychological dispositions necessary for learner autonomy.

Within the psychological model, being autonomous or exercising autonomy tends to be viewed as dependent on the possession of certain psychological characteristics, such as high motivation, positive attitudes, self-esteem and so on. Taking motivation, for instance, several studies, thus far, have displayed that there exists a strong link between learner autonomy and motivation (e.g. Dickinson, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Fazey & Fazey, 2001). Dickinson (1987) maintains that learners with high motivation can exhibit sustained and greater degree of autonomy. Likewise, Fazey and Fazey (2001) describe motivation as a prerequisite for autonomy.

Learner autonomy also tends to be influenced by the kind of attitudes learners hold. Dickinson (1995) describes autonomy as an “attitude towards the learning” (p. 166). Attitudes, according to Knapper and Cropley (1991) can affect not only the degree and nature of autonomy, but also the learning styles, strategies, contents, and personalities of learners. Therefore, when learners stand out as autonomous, they become so not just because they have attained the knowledge and strategies required, but also because they have developed certain positive attitudes which allow them to use these resources effectively and autonomously (Wenden, 1991). There are concerns, though, that learners often form “non-productive attitudes with regard to learning autonomously” (Wenden, 1991: p. 59). For this reason, Scharle and Szabo (2000) suggest that the process of promoting learner autonomy should be devoted to changing attitudes and raising awareness. These go under what Carter (2006) calls ‘psychological preparation’ which according to her should simultaneously concentrate on promoting motivation and awareness and changing attitudes.

The above discussions indicate that the psychological version has added or uncovered an important psychological component to learner autonomy which, therefore, could be

seen a step beyond the technical version. However, regardless of the fact that the psychological version has provided interesting insights about learner autonomy, this understanding merely interprets autonomy from the psychological perspective and tries to confine the concept of autonomy to the level of individual (Benson, 1997). This means that the technical and psychological perspectives elude the social and political aspects of learner autonomy. Benson (1997) describes this as a “depoliticisation” (p. 30) of a “politically dangerous” (Marshall, 1996: p. 90) concept like autonomy. This distinguishes them from the following version of autonomy which assumes that autonomy has an overt political character.

3.3.3 Learner Autonomy from Political Perspective

Due to the limitations associated with the above two versions, which according to Pennycook (1997), confine learner autonomy to the technical and psychological development of the individual and avoid social and political matters that are believed to lie at the heart of learner autonomy, there are writers (e.g. Hammond & Collins, 1991; Brookfield, 1993; Benson, 1997; Pennycook, 1997; Schmenk, 2005) who strongly advocate a political version of autonomy. This form of autonomy has sprung from critical theory which shares with constructivism the idea that knowledge tends to be constructed rather than acquired. However, unlike the constructivist approach, the critical perspective gives far greater attention to the social and political contexts and conditions within which learning occurs (Benson, 1997). Contrary to the technical and psychological perspectives which, as Benson (1997: p. 31) argues, “encourage students to assimilate themselves to established methodologies and ideologies of learning”, the critical version tends to “help learners to recognise and thus emancipate themselves from various cultural, historical and social forces that influence their lives and inhibit their ability to behave autonomously” (Mezirow & Associates as cited in Candy, 1991: p. 261). This political-critical sense of autonomy resonates with what Kumaravadivelu (2003) calls ‘liberatory autonomy’ which seeks to empower learners to be critical thinkers and realise their potential to fight socio-political impediments.

Within this approach, both learning and learners are seen as inevitably surrounded by issues of power, control and ideology; therefore, being politically conscious of the power structures and systems is a necessity (Hughes, 2003; Masouleh & Jooneghani, 2012). According to Reinders (2011), central to the notion of political autonomy is consciousness of the socio-political world within which learners live and of their roles within that world. Through political autonomy, Brookfield (1985) maintains, learners come to a realisation that they can act on their world at both the individual and collective levels and that they can contribute to the transformation of that world. This version of autonomy, therefore, has a dual purpose of transforming not only the understandings and positions of individuals as social beings but also transforming social situations and structures (Blin, 2005). Congruent with this argument, Benson (2013) stresses that “the political and potentially transformative character of autonomy” (p. 60) cannot be ignored as that appears to be the case within the technical and psychological versions which centre on the personal gains and betterment of the learner. Individual growth, transformation and learning development are viewed inseparable from the betterment of society within the political-critical perspective. According to Nicolaidis and Fernandes (2008), political autonomy focuses not only on how learners become responsible for their individual learning but mainly on how they can use their knowledge and ability responsibly to serve the needs and wellbeing of their society. This can also be clearly seen through the argument put forward by Hammond and Collins (1991) that this critical version has an ultimate goal of “empower[ing] learners to use their learning to improve the conditions under which they and those around them live and work” (p. 14). This indicates that this political-critical version of learner autonomy offers “alternative political frameworks for learning purposes” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003: p. 141).

Following the arguments presented above, taking a political stance seems to be an uncomfortable and uneasy path. As Oxford (2003) highlights, this political version involves struggling against internally established beliefs and behaviours and externally powerful forces and structures. What distinguishes the political version from the non-political one once again here appears to be that, the former supports a collectivist approach. This means that the critical perspective believes that the struggle or fight that

this variant of autonomy demands cannot be won by individuals acting alone; instead, this requires students, teachers and concerned others to come together working collectively and collaboratively towards achieving this goal (Benson, 1996). As a result, the roles that teachers are expected to take on as technical experts and facilitators within the technical and psychological approaches fundamentally change to that of acting as 'radical educators' within the critical domain (Moreira, 2007). Advocates of this critical line put emphasis on liberatory, emancipatory, empowering and transformative roles of teachers. For instance, Hart (1990) points out that critical educators have a "concern for forms of education which are liberatory rather than merely adjusting, and which point to new possibilities of thought and action rather than fixate the learner to the status quo" (p. 125). Similarly, Pennycook (1997) argues that educators need to provide their learners "with alternative ways of thinking and being" and also "to open up spaces for those learners to deal differently with the world" (p. 53).

As mentioned before, developing this political form of autonomy has the core purpose of encouraging and enabling learners to change and improve their life-world despite the inevitable challenges they encounter (Nicolaidis & Fernandes, 2008). To this end, critical pedagogues also need to create conditions within which learners can become critically conscious of their situations and feel empowered to act upon them. As regards empowerment, critical writers are cautious not to treat 'empowerment' as a gift that can be handed over to students by the teacher. According to Ruiz (1991), "teachers do not empower or disempower anyone, nor do schools. They merely create the conditions under which people can empower themselves, or not" (p. 223). On that basis, Vieira (2007) defines empowerment as "a relational phenomenon resulting from interpersonal responsiveness, rather than some good that an 'empowered agent' can do for a 'disempowered other'" (p. 27). Indeed, teachers can play an empowering role when they allow their students to exercise their power and autonomy. To do this, teachers may initially need to understand the complexities of power relations and structures and then struggle to deconstruct and reconstruct them with an aim to create a more empowering environment where a more equal distribution of power prevails. This suggests that the teacher has an essentially political relationship with learner autonomy (Lamb, 2008). Teachers are, therefore, expected to take on and maintain a political

stance towards learner autonomy and refuse to allow their roles and those of their students to be depoliticised both within their educational institutions and society at large (Freire, 1993); because as Benson (1996) claims, depoliticisation can lead to 'atomisation' and 'disempowerment' or as Freire and Macedo (1999) argue, can create a 'laissez-faire' situation.

On the whole, the discussions made around the three versions of autonomy help us conclude that the notion of autonomy could be divided into the non-political and political perspectives. Based on the arguments presented during this section, the political trend appears to be more important. However, as Schmenk (2005) highlights, the very non-political nature of the "technical and psychological versions of autonomy facilitates their global spread considerably, whereas political versions are more resistant to global promotion" (p. 110). This can be clearly noticed within the literature, especially the empirical part that pays far greater attention to the technical- psychological aspects of autonomy and overlooks the socio-political dimensions and effects. As has been highlighted in chapter one⁴, this political version and its philosophical assumptions which take roots from critical theory and critical pedagogy can help us understand both the political and non-political variants as well as the philosophies that underpin each category.

3.4 Learner Autonomy in Higher Education

Learner autonomy has long been seen as a desirable goal of elementary, secondary, higher and adult education (Candy, 1991). This suggests that learner autonomy cannot be restrained to one educational level (i.e. either to adult education or higher education) as this construct seems to be also relevant to the processes of learning and education at other stages of formal education. The degree of that relevance, however, may vary from one educational level or situation to another. For that reason, perhaps, there are claims that learner autonomy could be more easily attached to adult

⁴ See section 1.3

education and higher education (Percy, Ramsden & Lewin, 1980; Chene, 1983; Dickinson, 1993; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Nguyen, 2012). The major argument behind such claims seems to be that both adult and higher education treat learners as adults or 'emerging adults' (Arnett, 2000) who, unlike children and adolescents, are expected to behave more responsibly and autonomously towards their learning and education as well as towards other life issues and affairs.

Chene (1983) highlights that adult education researchers show consensus that adults are more autonomous than children and teenagers (Chene, 1983). This view could be traced back to the idea of 'andragogy', an adult learning theory generally attributed to Malcolm Knowles who has defined the term as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (1983: p. 55). Andragogy holds that the features of adult learners differ from child learners; therefore, assumes that as individuals mature, (1) they become more autonomous and self-directing, (2) they accumulate a reservoir of experience that becomes a rich resource for learning, (3) their changing social roles shape their learning readiness, (4) their learning orientation becomes more problem-centred, and (5) they become more internally rather than externally motivated (Knowles, 1983: p. 55; Merriam, 2001: p. 5). These principles of adult learning theory depict adults as agents of their own learning (Chene, 1983). On that basis, adult learning and education are seen as having "most compatibility and relevance to autonomous learning" (Higgs, 1988: p. 53). As a result, the concept of autonomy often overlaps with adulthood as "adults are assumed to be autonomous and autonomous people are defined as adults" (Candy, 1991: p. 299). Although, this does not necessarily mean that all adult learners are autonomous and all pre-adults are non-autonomous. The relationship between autonomy and adulthood appears to be more complicated than that.

The above account indicates the great prominence learner autonomy has gained within adult education which seems equally relevant to higher education. According to Boud (1988), both adult and higher education have shared goals and interests towards enhancing the sense of autonomy and responsibility among learners. Wilcox (1996) highlights that learner autonomy and responsibility embody the underlying features of higher education. Likewise, Fazey and Fazey (2001) note that learner autonomy is

viewed as “a valuable asset for achievement and an outcome of higher education” (p. 345). This could be one reason that, as Wilcox (1996) points out, learner autonomy has occupied the discourse and policy documents of many institutions of higher education. There are often doubts, though, that these simply remain as narratives. These echo the concern of Candy (1991) who concludes that the cultures of higher education institutions might not be very encouraging and responsive to learner autonomy despite their missions to do so. Railton and Watson (2005) suggest that learner autonomy cannot be “left to chance or seen as a natural attribute of higher education learning system” (p. 182); instead, the idea of autonomy should be considered as a fundamental component of the learning, pedagogical, educational and institutional practices.

There are concerns that students may often come to higher education without actual autonomous experiences (Boud, 1988; Cornwall, 1988; McNair, 1997; Ridley, 2000; Wingate, 2007). Respectively, there are two distinct views. One regards students as lacking autonomy which also implies that they have not been ‘taught’ the knowledge and skills necessary for autonomy (Railton & Watson, 2005). Drawing on this argument, Knowles (1988) emphasises that the programmes of higher education need to “be geared to developing the skills of autonomous learning” (p. 5) as soon as students join higher education. This could be related to the belief which assumes that “the skills and attitudes appropriate for independent learning are likely to be best promoted by allowing students to experience some autonomy as early as possible during a course of study” (Cornwall, 1988: p. 247). This takes us back to the non-political view of autonomy which holds that educational institutions and educators should help learners to become technically and psychologically prepared so that they be able to behave autonomously. One implication of this could be that higher education institutions are expected to teach students ‘how to be autonomous’.

According to Benson (2013: p. 124), “most researchers agree that autonomy cannot be ‘taught’”. This leads us to the second view which identifies autonomy not as skills to be taught or attitudes to be promoted but as a potential that students possess and can demonstrate to various degrees depending on multiple contextual, institutional and

socio-political factors (Benson, 2013). This line of thinking does not mark students as having autonomy deficit but as individuals who are already capable of autonomous thoughts and actions. According to this view, one key responsibility of higher education involves making possible for students to experience and “develop a sense of learner autonomy and to connect with sociopolitical processes” (Moir, 2011: p. 3). Learner autonomy within higher education could also be about students being allowed to rediscover their abilities and given enough freedom to practically demonstrate their capacity for autonomy within real life and learning situations (Perumal, 2010). This understanding of learner autonomy resonates with the political perspective of autonomy which assumes that the structural and institutional conditions can immensely shape and determine the degree and kind of autonomy that students could experience (Hughes, 2003). This possibly has led many researchers (e.g. Boud, 1988; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Carter, 2005; Railton & Watson, 2005; Nguyen, 2012; Bonneville- Roussy et al., 2013) to emphasise the importance of creating a supportive and inspiring environment for learner autonomy within institutions of higher education.

This section has pointed out that learner autonomy and higher education are strongly linked; and there exists a growing body of literature which asserts that university education should allow learner autonomy to flourish. At the same time, there are doubts that curriculum, teaching methods and rigid institutional frameworks become less facilitative of learner autonomy (Fazey & Fazey, 2001). Higher education institutions are criticised for merely providing certain courses or granting students with specific degree qualifications (Marsh et al., 2001; Gibbs, 2001). This indicates that higher education working towards learner autonomy still appears as a major challenge around the world (Knowles, 1988). Despite that, there are constant pressures placed on institutions to make learner autonomy their major goal and priority (Garrigan, 1997). This could be attributed to the growing importance the notion of learner autonomy has gained, particularly with reference to adult and higher education.

3.4.1 The Importance of Learner Autonomy in Higher Education

According to Reinders (2010), the past few decades have witnessed “a growing recognition of the importance of learner autonomy” (p. 40). Murphy (2011) points out that despite the lack of a universally accepted definition and theory of learner autonomy, there exists a widespread concurrence over the significance of learner autonomy. Along similar lines, Finch (2002) argues that “the general agreement on the value of autonomy in education has often hidden” (p. 4) the controversies surrounding the definition of learner autonomy. Oxford (2003) reveals that the ongoing disputes over the meaning and the theoretical framework of learner autonomy have somehow benefited the idea of learner autonomy; because, consideration of varying relevant perspectives, perhaps, has provided a more nuanced understanding of learner autonomy.

The fact that there are diverse views about learner autonomy seem to have led researchers to ascribe different values to this notion. The values could be distinguished as ‘personal’, ‘academic’ and ‘socio-political’. As regards the personal and academic advantages of autonomy, they seem to be closely related. They are, therefore, discussed together. A great amount of work has highlighted that autonomy can vitally contribute to effective and dynamic learning (Dickinson, 1987; Candy, 1991; Little, 1995; Benson, 2001). Many of these researchers have connected better learning to autonomous learning which Ponton (cited in Derrick, Ponton & Carr, 2005: p. 117) defines as the ‘subsequent manifestation’ of learner autonomy. For example, Little (1995) stresses that “genuinely successful learners have always been autonomous” (p. 175) either within or outside formal educational settings. The high potential for success among autonomous learners, compared with their counterparts, tends to be linked to effective approaches autonomous learners develop (Tait & Knight, 1996). To elaborate, the idea of autonomous learning often includes learners becoming more actively and personally engaged and making use of different skills and strategies to direct, evaluate and monitor their own learning and performance (Lublin & Boud cited in Garrigan, 1997). These advantages, according to Kumaravadivelu (2003), go under ‘academic autonomy’ which

enables students to be effective learners and allows them to gain certain personal and academic achievements.

Part of these personal and academic advantages of autonomy also includes enabling students to become lifelong learners. This appears to be another aspect upon which the importance of learner autonomy has been justified. Through developing the skills, strategies and abilities of autonomous learning, learners are likely to become capable of sustaining their learning as a 'lifelong activity' outside formal education (Derrick, 2003; Carter, 2005). According to Little (1995), sometimes, the importance of learner autonomy can be construed through "a positive relation between present and future learning" (p. 176). By this, Little explains that learners who exercise their autonomy and assume the responsibility for their own learning are expected to obtain learning goals better; and when they attain these goals, they are expected to uphold positive attitudes towards their future learning. Candy (1991) describes the relationship between autonomous learning and lifelong learning as a 'reciprocal' one which means as learners, through autonomous learning, can pursue their learning during the course of their lives, lifelong learning principally aims to equip them with the essential skills and capacities to continue their learning after their formal education. Candy (1991) further argues that, within the existing world where knowledge grows and changes so rapidly, the need for autonomous and lifelong learning has significantly increased.

Due to the above reason, perhaps, Knowles (1988) suggests that educational institutions, including those of higher education, should be centrally concerned with helping learners develop as "autonomous lifelong learners" (p. 4). This argument seems to also originate from the belief which assumes that it is unlikely for students "to complete the learning of a particular discipline within four years" (Qian cited in Pierson, 1996: 57). Higher education institutions are, therefore, expected to equip students with the means of autonomous and lifelong learning. The focus here seems to be largely on how, through autonomous and lifelong learning skills and strategies which higher education institutions are required to provide students with, students can achieve certain personal and academic gains. Part of these gains also include employment opportunities which are believed that graduates with autonomous lifelong learning skills

have a greater chance of winning them (Perumal, 2010); because, they are expected to 'reutilise' these skills within the workplace. Gibbs (2010) notes that the 'skills talk' of employment has taken centre stage within institutions of higher education. This market model of education and of higher education ((Little, 2000; Giroux, 2003; Gibbs, 2010) seems to have become a dominant trend which tends to reduce autonomy to certain market-oriented qualities and which values autonomy for 'instrumental' reasons (McNair, 1996) which contributes to the formation of 'white-collar workers' capable of adjusting themselves to work markets (Nicolaidis & Fernandes, 2008).

The above view regarding the importance of learner autonomy seems to be at variance with a rather socio-political position which appreciates autonomy based not merely on personal, instrumental and academic grounds, but more broadly, on how autonomy as an "emancipatory practice" can also contribute to the good of society (Ciekanski, 2007: p. 112). This value of autonomy takes roots from the political-critical perspective which "has the aim of social transformation" (Paiva & Braga, 2008: p. 444); and which therefore, considers autonomy "as a culturally legitimate goal in the sense that autonomous learners are likely to be the most able to contribute to the cultural development and transformation" (Benson, 2001: p. 57). Consistent with the political implications, learner autonomy also tends to be seen as an alternative to and transgression of conventional lines deeply established within educational institutions (Cornwall, 1988). This suggests that autonomy can serve as an important step towards changing and reforming traditional and authoritarian systems of education. To put differently, autonomy could become an 'anti-authoritarian' approach (Benson & Voller, 1997) that could manifest within institutional and socio-cultural contexts. Compared with other values of autonomy, this critical value seems to require a great deal of effort, dedication and struggle on the part of students, educators and educational institutions. However, the very political nature of this form of autonomy seems to have been a major factor that its importance has been underestimated. This could be noticed during the following sections within which the focus mostly goes to the non- political version(s) of autonomy.

3.5 Learner autonomy: Roles of Learners and Teachers

Many researchers (e.g. Higgs, 1988; Wenden, 1991; Broady, 1996; Voller, 1997; Scharle and Szabo, 2000; Weimer, 2002; Chan, 2003; Little, 2004; Lacey, 2007) agree that learner autonomy requires “a re-evaluation of the roles of both learner and teacher, the relationship between them, and the relationship of both to institutions of learning” (Benson & Voller, 1997: p. 93). This section, therefore, tries to review how the roles of various parties are conceptualised with respect to learner autonomy.

3.5.1 Learner Roles

Without question, students constitute a central part of the process of learner autonomy. As a result, the roles they play can immensely influence the idea of learner autonomy within an educational context. An important step, therefore, for those who are keen to investigate, introduce or develop learner autonomy could be to understand the roles students undertake. According to Smith (as cited in Doyle, 2008), what has remained relatively unchanged for so long within higher education are the ‘traditional’ roles of both students and teachers. Therefore, given the argument that learner autonomy essentially requires learners to assume new roles and responsibilities (Thanasoulas, 2000; Weiner, 2002; Lacey, 2007; Doyle, 2008, etc.), the concept of autonomy could be seen as an important innovation that challenges some established preconceptions about the processes of learning, teaching and education and the roles students, teachers and others need to take on (Cornwall, 1988; Benson, 2001).

According to Boud (1988), “the main characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning” (p. 23). For this to happen, students possibly need to understand their position. When learners come to the recognition that learning and education demand essential efforts and initiatives to be made by learners themselves and that while their teachers have crucial roles to play, they, by no means, are solely responsible for their learning, then this itself could be a major step for students to accept more responsibility (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). This also suggests that students, who overcome the idea that their

teachers are not “walking encyclopedias, dispensing the information that they need; take greater responsibility for their learning and do not rely exclusively on the teacher to provide direction” (Ang, Gonzalez, Liwag, Santos & Vistro-Yu, 2001: p. 6). Students who develop such attitude may come to redefine their roles and those of their teachers. However, as Doyle (2008) argues, university students, especially those who have been exposed to teacher-directed learning for years, may resist accepting new roles for themselves and their teachers.

From this point onward, the discussions will focus more on some empirical evidence which deals with how students perceive their own roles as regards their learning and learner autonomy. The perceptions students hold about their roles possibly affect the kinds of roles they adopt (Cotterall, 1995) which may also shape the situation of learner autonomy within different contexts of research. To begin with, Chan (2001a; 2001b) carried out two subsequent investigations within the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The two studies mainly relied on questionnaires to explore the perspectives of students in relation to learner autonomy and their views about their roles as regards autonomous learning. The results of the first study (2001a) suggest that students held conflicting attitudes regarding their roles and the roles of their teachers. Students considered the role of the teacher as an expert and source of knowledge important. On the other hand, students displayed certain degree of readiness and preparedness to work and learn autonomously. Altogether, the results underlined that students were positive about seeing changes to happen with regard to their roles and those of their teachers in autonomous classrooms.

As for the second study (2001b) , the results show that students strongly desired to constructively and productively contribute to their learning. Students highlighted the importance of their involvement with respect to selecting course contents as well as learning tasks and activities. Students also thought that their ideas about learning should be incorporated into the learning programmes. Overall, a vast majority of students (95%) exhibited responsible attitudes about their learning and they wanted to be given the opportunity to play their part within the learning process. According to Nunan (as cited in Kirovska-Simjanoska, 2015), classroom autonomy includes providing

students with “opportunities to make significant choices and decisions about their learning” (p. 52). This possibly requires certain teacher attitudes. Elsewhere, Nunan (2003) argues that this requires some sort of ‘partnership’ between learners and teachers. This puts learners not as “passive receivers of intellectual material with little or no responsibility” (Brockbank & McGill, 2007: p. 39) but as ‘partners’ to whom learning roles and responsibilities are delegated to (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). One conclusion to be made here seems to be that student roles significantly depend on to the degree that their teachers allow them to enact their roles.

A research by Brackenbury (2012) somehow touched upon the above point. This study was conducted with 24 American students. The research tried to examine how they perceive learner-centred teaching approaches. The participants viewed that there were important changes took place as the teachers moved towards student-centred approaches. They felt that they were allowed to play an active and effective role for their learning, such as developing and selecting specific assignments, assessments, and research topics. These, for them, were empowering experiences and were also important steps that the teacher took towards sharing power and responsibility with the participants. For this reason, this research emphasises the importance of allowing students to exercise power and responsibility; because, this can expand the roles of students and increase their sense of responsibility (Doyle, 2008). This can encourage students to pay greater attention to their learning, because they realise that they are held accountable for at least part of their learning outcomes.

Moving now to another study, Rungwaraphong (2012) examined the way students viewed their learning roles at a Thai university. The findings revealed that students were not certain of what roles they should play. The researcher links that with passivity and carelessness, two characteristics she argues were found among students which may hold students back from taking autonomous steps and which contradict with taking active and responsible roles. Apart from that and somehow contradictorily, the study found that more than 90% of the participants considered themselves as responsible learners and they viewed being responsible as a contributing factor to their learning. For this researcher, however, students may take responsibility for their learning not

because they are intrinsically responsible, but they may be forced by some extrinsic factors, such as gaining high marks and performance. This indicates that students with intrinsic responsibility may take greater roles and hold more responsible attitudes towards their learning.

More recently, Rushidi and Rushidi-Rexhepi (2015) investigated the attitudes of 50 graduate students and 10 university teachers about learner autonomy and about their roles with this respect at South East European University, Macedonia. The majority of the student-participants of this study agreed that their roles are key to learning and autonomous learning. The participants highlighted that their role includes making use of self-study materials, finding ways to practise their English and evaluating their own learning and progress. Of these three, the first (i.e. self-study) seems to be more related to autonomous activities outside the classroom. This resonates with a study by Ellili and Chaffin (2007) carried out with a group of Emirati university students. The findings revealed that students considered teachers as more responsible for classroom learning. These students, therefore, thought that the roles and responsibilities they need to take are more relevant to outside classroom learning activities. This, perhaps, suggests that the student-participants were not allowed to exercise their autonomy; because, their teachers confined all the key roles and responsibilities within the classroom to themselves and left students with no major roles to play. This could be the main reason that the participants thought that their roles were pertinent only to out-of-class learning. Whereas as Benson (2007) points out, out-of-class learning could be one application of learner autonomy, learner autonomy entails learners taking roles and responsibilities both inside and outside the classroom.

According to Doyle (2008), for students to readily accept their learning roles and responsibilities, there need to be rationales clearly communicated to them. That could be mainly because “when we ask our students to adopt new roles as learners and take on new responsibilities, we are asking them to have the courage to give up some of the security and familiarity of their past learning behaviours” (Cohen cited in Doyle, 2008: p. 18). Therefore, students who do not “understand the reasons and benefits of autonomous learning, . . . may refuse the extra responsibility for and involvement in the

learning process” (Chan, 2001b: p. 515). This indicates that it is important for students to recognise the effectiveness and implications of autonomous learning; and also to become aware that their roles and contributions can take their learning an important step forward. This brings the position of the teacher to the fore who can “set the stage” (Weimer, 2002: p. xvi) for their students to be able to accept new roles and to experience and develop their autonomy during the course of their higher education studies.

3.5.2 Teacher Roles

The idea of learner autonomy has clear implications not just for students to accept new roles, but also for teachers to change their roles and positions within the teaching-learning and education processes (Riley, 1999; Weimer, 2002; Little, 2004; Carter, 2005). This, however, by no means, implies that the teacher becomes redundant (Thanasoulas, 2000); because, as Chene (1983) writes “the teacher cannot disappear without reappearing in another form” (p. 43). This means that the teacher continues to play a crucial role within that process. However, one of the turning points also associated with the idea of learner autonomy seems to be that the focus somehow shifts from teaching to learning (Lacey, 2007). Looking more closely at this, this has resulted from the so-called ‘paradigm shift’ proposed by Thomas Kuhn which includes a shift from the ‘instruction paradigm’ to the ‘learning paradigm’ (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Whereas the first tends to focus on the transfer of content or knowledge from the instructor to the learner, the second views learning as an active process that needs to be supported and facilitated by the teacher. For this reason, teachers within the instructional paradigm are called ‘transmission teachers’ as opposite to ‘interpretation teachers’ compatible with the learning paradigm (Barnes & Shemilt, 1974).

This paradigm shift also seems to represent a change from the teacher-centred instruction to the learner-centred approach. We should be careful, though, not to assume that the instruction paradigm or the instructor-centred approach places no value on student learning. The thing about this model appears to be that the emphasis mostly goes to the activity of teaching (i.e. the transmission of knowledge from the

teacher to the learner). This contrasts with the learning paradigm or learner-centred model which concentrates on the activity of learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). These two models or paradigms can essentially determine the role and position of the teacher. While the former puts the teacher as knowledge transmitters, the latter regards the teacher as a mediator, facilitator and counsellor of student learning. These last mentioned roles seem to align well with the notion of learner autonomy, particularly the non- political version of autonomy. They are, therefore, given significant attention within the literature.

Many studies about learner autonomy have stressed that teachers could be an important contributing factor to learner autonomy. Boud (1988) considers autonomy as an indispensable element for learning in higher education; therefore, teachers have the responsibility to do whatever they can to set up learning conditions for students to flourish their autonomy. Likewise, Masouleh and Jooneghani (2012) describe teacher roles as critical in preparing and maintaining learning settings where students can increasingly enhance their autonomy. Ryan (as cited in Nguyen, 2012) characterises supportive learning environments as the ones where teachers provide positive support and resources for students. More specifically, Perumal (2010) identifies autonomy-supportive teachers as those who listen to and respect students' ideas and preferences, encourage students' learning initiatives and respond to their demands and queries. Besides, 'autonomy-supportive' teachers also allow students to make their own choices and decisions (Bonneville-Roussy, Vallerand & Bouffard, 2013). This does not imply that students are entirely left on their own; yet, there exists a 'safety net' which does not let students to drown throughout the process of experiencing their autonomy (Cornwall, 1988).

The results of the study conducted by Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2013) with 144 international students of music at a Canadian university show that students with the impression that their educators are always present to support their autonomy tend to be more inclined towards autonomous learning activities. Sheerin (1997) reminds us that one paradox of autonomous learning could be that "almost all learners need to be prepared and supported on the path towards greater autonomy by teachers" (p. 63).

However, Sheerin alerts that teachers should be wary not to dominate students and their learning through the intended support they may think they need to provide; otherwise, they may jeopardise the autonomous thinking and learning abilities of their students. The evidence from a longitudinal study by Ramnarain and Hobden (2014) carried out with a group of South African students and teachers supports the above claim by Sheerin that although the teachers intended to provide students with continued support, they either directly or indirectly, maintained their control over the students. Consistent with this, the findings also revealed that the teachers were reluctant to share control and power with their students and to allow them to make autonomous choices and decisions during the investigations they were carrying out.

Supporting learner autonomy could essentially involve sharing control with learners and treating them as equals not because they are equally experienced, but because they possibly have equal learning capacities. Harrison (cited in Candy, 1991: p. 227) notes that learner autonomy “requires a fundamental shift in the locus of control in the classroom, and this shift is difficult for many educators to make”. According to Weimer (2002), the fact that power and control have long resided with the teacher, any movement that could lead to a more equal distribution of power and control could be a challenging step for teachers to take. Trebbi (2008) points out that, for some teachers, the development of learner autonomy means losing more control which could be seen a threat that challenges their authority (Clifford, 1999). This could be one of the main causes why some teachers tend to oppose learner autonomy and that there are still classroom environments that are largely teacher-dominated (Weimer, 2002). With respect to this, the findings introduced by Rungwaraphong (2012) showed that the majority of classroom activities were taking place under the direct control of the teacher.

Apart from the aforementioned reason, there are possibly other reasons why some teachers are not ready to share control or to give up their conventional roles. According to Weimer (2002), as far as students are viewed as passive and unprepared to take responsibility for their learning, lecturers feel compelled to interfere and take full charge of their learning. This could result from some ‘deficit views’ that teachers hold

about their students that they are incapable of autonomous learning. This may provide a justification for teachers to assume that student learning remains as their sole responsibility (Cornwall, 1988). A study undertaken by Üstünlüoğlu (2009) with 320 students and 24 teachers at a Turkish university showed that the teachers considered themselves as primarily responsible because they perceived their students as lacking the capacity to take responsibility for their learning. However, according to Allwright (1979), teachers who assume exclusive responsibility for everything taking place inside the classroom are 'professionally irresponsible', because "a serious weakening of the value of the classroom experience for the learners is virtually inevitable" (p. 105). By the same token, Allwright argues that responsible teachers are the ones who try to find ways to share classroom and learning responsibilities with their students. This suggests that it is important for teachers to know where their "responsibility ends and the student's responsibility starts" (Weiner, 2002: p. 103). Whereas responsibility sharing could have desirable learning and educational outcomes, teachers may need compelling reasons "before they will risk off-loading any part of their burden of classroom responsibilities" (Allwright, 1979: p. 117).

The above paragraph, once again, indicates that the movements that teachers need to make to support learner autonomy, including responsibility sharing, are not smooth steps. On the contrary, for teachers to relinquish some of their perceived responsibilities and let students to take more responsibility may "cause anguish" (Shao & Wu, 2007: p. 101). Likewise, Weiner (2002) highlights that engaging with the ways of teaching that facilitate learner autonomy and allow learners to move towards exercising more autonomy could be difficult and complex which require flexibility, patience and determination. To identify what roles university teachers need to play with regard to learner autonomy, Fumin and Li (2012) conducted a large quantitative study which surveyed 2685 students from eight Chinese universities. The results, which merely relied on student viewpoints and which lack teacher perspectives, generally displayed that learner autonomy pushed teachers to undertake more diverse and challenging roles. The findings particularly highlighted the roles of teachers as 'study guide', 'resource facilitator' and 'learning regulator'. Other researchers have found identical results. Xhaferri, Waldispühl, Xhaferri and Eriksson – Hotz (2015), for example, carried out an

investigation at two universities (one from Switzerland and the other from Macedonia) which together involved 139 students and 12 teachers. The teacher-participants mostly perceived that teachers should act as 'assistants', 'guides', 'motivator' and 'role models' to foster learner autonomy.

The roles the aforementioned studies ascribed to teachers seemingly resonate with multiple other roles the literature introduces, such as, the teacher as 'manager' (Higgs, 1988), 'trainer', 'coach', and 'helper' (Candy, 1991), 'facilitator', 'counsellor' and 'resource' (Voller, 1997), 'guide' and 'designer' (Weimer, 2002) and 'observer' and 'advisor' (Little, 2004). Some of these roles (e.g. trainer-coach and counsellor-advisor) seem to be overlapping and interchangeable. These proposed roles also represent a degree of consensus among these researchers who suggest that teachers need to overcome the ways they are traditionally positioned and should act differently so that they can encourage learner autonomy. Accordingly, teachers no longer remain as the source and transmitter of knowledge and the sole controller and authority of the teaching-learning context. Fox (cited in Weimer, 2002) makes an interesting comparison between the teacher and the gardener "who prepares the ground, tills, and cultivates, but whose plants do the growing. And although the gardener may take some credit for a beautiful garden, the real accomplishment belongs to the plants. They grow, bloom, and bear fruit" (p. 75). By analogy, teachers are expected to give adequate support and attention to learners so that they can grow as autonomous beings.

The above roles of the teacher are believed to have a great compatibility with learner autonomy. However, to be more precise, the roles seem to be more compatible with the technical and psychological perspectives of learner autonomy while they somehow downplay a rather political role that the political version of autonomy demands teachers to uphold. The political view repositions the teacher not as a learning guide and facilitator, but as an agent of change and empowerment (Heaney, 1996; Auerbach, 2007; Moreira, 2007; Vieira, 2012). This suggests that teachers here need to transcend merely providing students with some methodological and psychological support, characteristics of a rather depoliticised role of teachers, to become "reflective practitioners and critical intellectuals, struggling for autonomy as a collective interest"

(Vieira, 2012: p. 3671). The pursuit of learner autonomy becomes a socio-political project underpinned by principles of empowerment and transformation. The former entails constructing an environment which could be empowering for the teacher and the learner. As regards the latter, the teacher becomes more concerned about changing personal attitudes and understandings as well as social conditions (Heaney, 1996).

3.6 Perspectives on Learner Autonomy

The previous section addressed the multiple roles that students and teachers are expected to play with respect to learner autonomy. This section will focus on the perspectives that students and teachers hold regarding learner autonomy. Without doubt, the way students and teachers understand learner autonomy and the way they see themselves and their roles can have significant implications on the process of learner autonomy. For this reason, a growing body of research has focused on how students and teachers see learner autonomy. While investigating this area, researchers have made use of various terms, such as ‘perspectives’, ‘attitudes’, ‘perceptions’, ‘understandings’, ‘beliefs’, ‘views’, etc. which despite their relative differences seem to have been used interchangeably.

3.6.1 Learner Perspectives

Since the idea of learner autonomy places learners at the centre of the teaching-learning process, their views and attitudes about autonomy itself and the nature of knowledge, learning and education significantly matter. This means that their understandings can be useful while approaching learner autonomy within a specific context. For Benson (2001), understanding learner perspectives could be the first and most important step towards fostering autonomy. Chan (2001a) points out that for teachers to successfully promote autonomy, they initially need to discover how their students view autonomy. According to Broady (1996), central to the ideas of learner autonomy and self-direction is “an attitude which positively disposes learners to

assuming control of their learning” (p. 216); because negative attitudes and beliefs could impair the development of learner autonomy (Chan, 2001a).

Turning now to empirical evidence, Broady (1996) examined the attitudes and beliefs of 46 British undergraduate students whose major was language education. The study relied on a 45 item questionnaire designed to scrutinise the beliefs and attitudes of students about different aspects of self-directed or autonomous learning within higher education. The students generally agreed that responsibility for learning principally resides with learners. The results also demonstrate that students acknowledged the importance of autonomous learning and their openness to independent work. With regard to the role of the teacher, the results show conflicting views. While around half of the participants considered that language learning can be undertaken without teacher involvement, a similar number considered teacher presence and support necessary for their learning and progress. One discouraging result of this study, which was also seen as a major obstacle to autonomous learning, was associated with the lack of confidence among students.

A similar study by Breeze (2002) who used the same questionnaire developed by Broady (1996) tried to study the attitudes and the degree of readiness for autonomous learning among 57 Spanish university students studying English at a university language centre. Given that this study reproduced the same questionnaire, comparisons were made between the results of the two studies. Similar to the learners of the previous study, the Spanish students agreed that learners are the ones who should take charge of their learning. Unlike the participants of the former research, these students exhibited confidence and abilities to engage with problem-solving tasks and exercises. Also, contrary to the respondents of the previous research who placed high value on external assessment as a source of motivation, the Spanish students did not look at examination as the only motivating force for learning. That was an indication that intrinsic motivation existed among students towards autonomous self-directed learning. On the other hand, the tendency towards teacher dependence was still high. Most students favoured reliance on teacher explanation and supervision, especially with respect to selecting material and content for their classes. Perhaps, one major criticism

that could be directed at these two studies relates to the employment of a questionnaire as the sole method as this could limit the nuances that may come out from the beliefs and attitudes of research participants. On that account, Wenden (1991) argues that when addressing the attitudes, feelings and experiences of people, qualitative methods tend to be more appropriate. This does not mean that switching to qualitative methods can automatically solve the problems as qualitative methods have their own limitations.

Moving on to other studies, Broad (2006) explored the understandings of independent (autonomous) learning of 181 students aged 16-19 enrolled on further and higher education studies at Selby College-England. Unlike the studies above which merely relied on questionnaire, this research employed a mixture of questionnaires and focus group interviews. The findings revealed that the majority of students appreciated the benefit of independent learning both for their study and career. Moreover, students from both the higher education and further education courses shared common and good understandings about autonomous learning. Whereas these students were positive towards independent learning and aware of their roles, they highly valued the support and guidance their tutors offered to enable them develop their learning independence. Nevertheless, students confined autonomous learning to the classroom and, within the classroom context, a great number of students perceived that independent learning can be best accomplished through research and least through other class-based tasks.

To better understand how students see autonomous work, Todd, Bannister and Clegg (2004) tried to explore the perceptions of 93 third-year social sciences students enrolled on a research project module at a British university. The main purpose of the module was to allow students experience real situations where they had to function autonomously. Based on their experience of the research as a form of autonomous practice, the students valued the sense of autonomy, authenticity and ownership associated with their project. Therefore, despite the challenges and uncertainties they encountered and despite the responsibility placed on them, many students considered their research paper as highly useful, particularly with regard to developing and

demonstrating their personal abilities and the kind of learning they engaged with which they recognised as deeper and more meaningful.

Marsh et al. (2001) investigated the perspectives of a number of students who were part of an undergraduate programme developed by the Faculty of Education at Nottingham Trent University. The main goal of the programme was to promote autonomous learning among students. The researchers (who were also the team of teachers responsible for delivering the courses of the programme) arranged discussions with students to find out how they view autonomy. The students were divided into two groups. One group defined autonomy quite positively and believed that autonomy gives them freedom to pursue their learning needs and interests. The other group was more skeptical about their capabilities of being autonomous and considered that as 'developmental and difficult'. Many students generally rejected the idea of autonomous learning; because autonomy had no practical meaning for their actual experiences and only existed at the discourse level.

The studies presented so far were all conducted within European contexts with students mainly from British background. A longitudinal research carried out by Perumal (2010) at the University of East London included 105 entry-level students from diverse ethnicities. The study mainly aimed at measuring the potential for learning autonomy among students. The conclusions drawn from the survey data regarding the perceptions and attitudes of students showed that students entered university with a high propensity to become autonomous learners. Nevertheless, students from Asian geo-ethnic groups (i.e. Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani) had the lowest tendency for autonomy and control over their learning. Based on that, ethnicity was identified as one of the factors that can influence and determine learners' perspectives of and readiness for autonomy. This could be one reason why sometimes learner autonomy is conceived less applicable to Asian cultures and contexts.

As discussed earlier (see section 2.2), the issue of culture and cultural differences has triggered immense controversy within the field of learner autonomy. This debate has mainly sprung from the question of whether learner autonomy exclusively suits the so-called 'Western cultures' as the notion of learner autonomy allegedly has Western

origins (Benson, 2001; Palfreyman, 2003) or that learner autonomy can be applied to other 'non-Western cultures'. There are arguments which assume that learner autonomy has no place beyond the Western world. For instance, Jones (1995) argues that "the concept of autonomy is laden with cultural values, particularly those of the West" (p. 228) and warns against "assuming that autonomy has an intercultural valid objective" (p. 233). On that basis, Jones calls for "a retreat from autonomy" (1995: p. 230) within non-Western countries or "many countries between Morocco to Japan" (p. 229). On the other hand, there are researchers (e.g. Dickinson, 1996; Aoki & Smith, 1999; Little, 1999; Smith, 2001; Oxford, 2003; Holliday, 2003) who regard this view as 'cultural stereotyping' and provide evidence from within diverse non-Western contexts to support their argument that learner autonomy can be a legitimate and appropriate pedagogical and educational goal within all cultural settings.

The argument which sees autonomy incompatible with learners from (East) Asian backgrounds has pushed several researchers to investigate students' perspectives of and potential for autonomy across different Asian contexts. To re-examine this argument, Dickinson (1996), for example, surveyed 180 Thai students on their attitudes towards learning autonomy within three different departments at King Mongkut's Institute of Technology. The results indicated that this group of students held more positive attitudes to autonomous learning than expected. Over 83% of the respondents agreed that "students do not have enough choice over what and how they study; and 89% agreed that they would like to set their own goals" (p. 46). On the whole, students sought more opportunities to work autonomously. These results seem to contradict the ones introduced by Perumal above. One explanation for this could be that the student-participants of these two studies belong to different socio-cultural backgrounds; therefore, they cannot be treated as a homogeneous group under broad terms like Asian or East Asian.

Chan (2001a) reports some interesting findings of a study conducted with 30 first year undergraduate students from Hong Kong doing a bachelor of English. Out of the 30 respondents, half of them believed that they have the ability to function autonomously without much direction from their teacher. Second, a large percentage (70%) of subjects

appreciated the opportunity that allowed them to operate more autonomously. Moreover, the researcher was also eager to know how students interpret autonomous learning. Respectively, the results suggested that a vast majority (95%) of students recognised the importance of learning autonomously. Participants generally agreed that learner autonomy should be integrated into the secondary level education so that when students join university, they already have autonomous learning experiences. Based on the rich insights students had about learner autonomy, they were labelled as reasonably autonomous given the fact that they were first year undergraduates and came from a traditional authoritative background.

Moreover, an action research was conducted by Humphreys and Wyatt (2013) which intended to help Vietnamese university students to become more autonomous. This study first tried to discover the way students perceive and experience autonomy and the meanings they associate with learner autonomy. The results from the questionnaire revealed that students had low level of awareness of autonomy. Among the 83 participants, most of them did not have a thorough understanding of what learner autonomy means. Regarding the focus group discussions, students expressed mixed feelings about autonomy. While most of them understood the value of autonomous learning, some others expressed rather negative views. For instance, a number of students considered autonomy as difficult and boring or even unnecessary for their learning.

Of the studies cited above, one can conclude that the attitudes and beliefs students hold about learner autonomy are undeniably important and which can also greatly shape their positions towards learner autonomy. One has to be careful, though, not to assume that positive attitudes automatically lead to appropriate autonomous actions. This implies that there are possibly cases that students, despite their favourable views about learner autonomy, take least initiatives to translate their attitudes into autonomous behaviours. Based on her study which examined the perceptions of Thai university students and teachers with regard to learner autonomy, Wongphothisarn (2009) found that “the students perceived positively many aspects of learner autonomy, but their behaviours lag behind their perceptions” (p. 2). This resonates with what

Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) concluded that even students with reasonably positive attitudes towards learner autonomy might not always take charge of their learning. It is simplistic to assume that this solely results from certain internal factors related to students themselves; because, there are diverse socio-cultural, political and educational causes that allow or prevent autonomy within a specific context. With particular reference to East Asian students, Littlewood (1999) argues that the problems of learner autonomy are more related to the cultural and educational conditions than to individual students who according to him “have the same capacity for autonomy as other learners” (p. 88) from other contexts.

3.6.2 Teacher Perspectives

Having discussed student perspectives of learner autonomy, this section introduces the views and beliefs of teachers which seem to equally influence the situation of learner autonomy. Teacher understandings of learner autonomy can shape their support and contribution to the development of learner autonomy. According to Al-Busaidi & Al-Maamari (2014), teacher views of learner autonomy seem to crucially orient their teaching approaches and practices. On that account, Candy (1991) encourages researchers to explore the way teachers perceive learner autonomy; because, this can subsequently determine how prepared and committed teachers become to learner autonomy as an educational goal. Moreover, Palfreyman (2003) argues that researching teacher perspectives can also reduce or eliminate the gulf that exists between the theoretical explanations of learner autonomy and the actual understandings teachers have for the concept. Such research can also help educators reflect on their views about learner autonomy and perhaps to change undesirable attitudes which may constrain learner autonomy.

A preliminary work on teacher perspectives was undertaken by Camilleri (1999) to find out the attitudes of 328 teachers on learner autonomy in six European countries (Malta, The Netherlands, Belorussia, Poland, Estonia and Slovenia). The questionnaire used was designed to cover areas related to classroom activities and experiences. On the whole, teachers turned out to have relatively similar attitudes and mentality with regard to

learner autonomy. Most of the teachers had positive outlooks towards learner autonomy and they showed their strong support to encourage learners and allow them to be an active part of different aspects of their classroom experiences, such as selecting material, classroom management, self-assessment and other areas like, learning procedures and strategies. On the other hand, teachers showed resistance about learners being involved in selecting textbooks and deciding on the time and place of lessons. These results were seen as the outcome of several factors. One reason was that, teachers themselves were operating under the control of some higher authorities; therefore, they felt constrained by the system and found some decisions beyond their control.

Camilleri's research instrument was adopted by Balçıkanlı (2010) to examine the perspectives of 112 student-teachers on learner autonomy at a Turkish university. To better understand the views of the participants regarding learner autonomy, the researcher also conducted five focus group interviews with 20 volunteers. The findings from the interviews revealed that the participants had "a well-constructed notion of learner autonomy including responsibility, awareness and self-assessment" (p. 98). Consistent with such views, learner autonomy was seen as a major precondition for effective learning. As for the questionnaire survey, the results look very similar to the previous research. Student-teachers seemed quite positive to share with learners decisions about different aspects of the classroom except for the decisions related to the time and place of lessons and textbook selection which were rather considered as part of the professional responsibility of the teacher.

Similar to her study about student perspectives of learner autonomy, Chan (2003) conducted another research to investigate how teachers view learner autonomy; how they perceive their roles and responsibilities; and how they see students' decision-making abilities. Forty one teachers were included from Hong Kong, China, Australia, Britain, and the USA. The findings indicated that although teachers regarded autonomous learning as vital and found students as capable of making certain decisions about their learning, they still considered themselves as chiefly responsible for many issues. The teacher-participants reported that they never asked students to select their

own materials, tasks, learning objectives or to make any other decisions about their learning. This was an indication that they preferred to play a dominant role and give students a subordinate one. This also makes clear that despite the positive attitudes teachers expressed, their instructional practices still reflect teacher- controlled models.

Earlier, Wilcox (1996) conducted a two-phase study with 305 faculty members at a Canadian university to examine the extent to which their instructional practices and attitudes support self-directed learning. The first phase was intended to find the attitudinal support of staff members for self-directed learning. The results of the questionnaire showed that from the total of 139 respondents, the majority (87%) reported that instructional beliefs, values and expectations were not supportive to self-directed learning. This group of teachers disregarded the necessity of instructional support for self-directed learning. The remaining small sample 18 instructors, who held supportive instructional beliefs, values and expectations, then became subjects for the second phase of the research. Through some informal interviews, the researcher tried to determine how teachers' supportive attitudes to self-directed learning reflected their instructional practices. The instructors unanimously valued the desirable effects of self-directed learning; and they labelled self-directed approach as "unconventional, difficult to enact, but worthwhile in a university" (p. 170). This teachers were strongly committed to self-directed approach and they demonstrated that through different instructional practices.

More recently, a number of studies were conducted in some Middle Eastern countries addressing teacher beliefs and practices in relation to learner autonomy. To begin with, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012a) intended to explore the beliefs and practices of a large number of teachers from over 25 nationalities at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. A questionnaire was developed and distributed to 200 teachers teaching at the language centre. Of this number, only 61 teachers completed the survey. Consistent with most of the findings discussed so far, teachers and their views were generally inclined to the idea of learner autonomy. Teachers referred to learner autonomy as the freedom and/or ability of learners to make learning decisions and choices. Moreover, teachers described autonomous learners as more motivated, committed and focused learners

who are better prepared to take risks and to benefit from learning opportunities. Despite the fact that the teachers considered autonomous learning as a desired goal, they found that as practically infeasible. Teachers identified certain challenges hindering the application of learner autonomy within their context, such as learner factors (e.g. lack of skills and motivation for autonomous learning), teacher factors (e.g. lack of teacher autonomy and underestimating what learners can achieve), and institutional factors (e.g. lack of resources for promoting learner autonomy and curriculum overload).

Following the questionnaire survey, the above research also conducted interviews with 20 teachers to further explore the ways they understood learner autonomy. The findings of this phase are introduced by Al-Busaidi and Al-Maamari (2014). The researchers found that teachers held multiple views about learner autonomy. For some, learner autonomy was related to instructional practices, such as teaching methodology and developing assessment procedures and materials. Few teachers associated the meaning of learner autonomy to concepts like control, capacity and freedom. Lastly, for a group of teachers, learner autonomy was matter of having rights and duties. The different conceptions attributed to learner autonomy were partly related to the different sources from which their views originated, such as teacher education programmes, classroom practices and experiences, and professional development programmes. Furthermore, this research also highlighted that teachers from distinct backgrounds had varied interpretations of learner autonomy.

Similarly, Al-Asmari (2013) looked at teachers' notion of learner autonomy together with their practices and prospects at Taif University in Saudi Arabia. The sample comprised 60 language teachers from various countries. Teachers generally described the current situation of learner autonomy as frustrating assuming that students were mesmerised by high performance and grades while lacking motivation to engage in autonomous learning. Teachers also assumed that within a culture (e.g. Saudi Arabia) where teacher-dependence seems to have become a norm, students might not be interested to welcome autonomous initiatives. This could be one reason that teachers were reluctant to allow autonomy during their classroom teaching practice. Another

reason could be related to the lack of sufficient training and expertise on the part of teachers.

Lastly, Shahsavari (2014) investigated the way Iranian students and teachers viewed learner autonomy. The teacher sample consisted of 150 teachers. The researcher acknowledges that her study has taken a great advantage from Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012a) research; therefore, the findings, from both the questionnaire and interviews, are discussed accordingly. Whereas teachers again believed that learner autonomy can have significant advantages for student learning, most of them saw learner autonomy as more desirable than feasible. The participants pointed out some constraining factors which hindered the feasibility of learner autonomy. Many teachers repeatedly referred to learner-related factors as major barriers to the promotion of learner autonomy. These teachers had the sense that their students did not understand how valuable autonomy could be for their learning. Some other teachers put the blame on the present institutional systems which hindered the development of learner autonomy.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has approached areas related to the focus of this thesis. The chapter shows that learner autonomy occupies an important place within the literature which attracts increasing attention and continuing debate. The review also highlights the relevance and compatibility of learner autonomy particularly to higher education and to the wider educational spectrum. Following this general review, a great deal of research has been reviewed with the focus on studies that addressed the roles and perspectives of learners and teachers in relation to learner autonomy. The key observation made has been that the majority of these studies tried to investigate the roles or views of one party (e.g. learners or teachers with few studies focused on both). However, given the complexity of learner autonomy, especially within formal educational systems where several actors get involved with each having their own influence, gaining a clear picture of the condition of learner autonomy seems to require considering the roles and perspectives of the major players. On that account, this thesis intends to cover the roles learners, teachers and institutions/authorities play and the perspectives they hold

regarding learner autonomy. This probably helps the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the situation of learner autonomy within the context of this study.

Another important conclusion drawn from the review of the literature has been that no prior research has been conducted to examine the issues of learner autonomy within the context of Kurdistan Region. This accelerates the need for more research efforts and investigations within this particular context.

4. Chapter Four: Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to describe and discuss the methodological aspects of this study. The sections included are logically ordered to show the methodological integrity and the designing process of the research components. The first section introduces the research questions. This then leads to discussions around the paradigmatic nature and the research design adopted together with the rationales behind these paradigmatic and methodological choices. The chapter moves on to address the research methods and the processes of data collection and analysis. Following this, the description of the research participants is presented. Afterwards, the issues of quality criteria are discussed. The chapter ends with introducing the ethical considerations.

4.2 Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis was twofold. Firstly, the thesis attempted to explore how different parties understand learner autonomy within the context of higher education. Secondly, the study aimed to understand the realities and complexities of the situation of learner autonomy within an institution of higher education in Kurdistan. With these in mind, the thesis more specifically addressed the following research questions:

1. What meanings and values do different parties attribute to learner autonomy?
2. What roles do different parties play or are expected to play with regard to learner autonomy?
3. What autonomous experiences/behaviours and autonomy-supportive practices are displayed by different parties?
4. What challenges are there that constrain the exercise and development of learner autonomy within higher education?

4.3 Research Paradigm

Research studies, either consciously or unconsciously, work within certain philosophical assumptions and frameworks (Creswell, 2013). These philosophical beliefs are commonly referred to as 'paradigms'. According to Lather (1986: p. 259), "research paradigms inherently reflect our beliefs about the world". Likewise, Guba and Lincoln (1994: p.105) define research paradigm "as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways". More specifically, Guba and Lincoln (2005) identify that paradigms are concerned with four major issues of ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), methodology (the process of research), and axiology (the role of values in research). Grix (2004) highlights that ontology and epistemology establish the building blocks of research upon which other methodological issues and processes can be determined. No doubt, these paradigmatic and methodological components are strongly interconnected; therefore, decisions about any one of these could have implications on the others.

Our paradigmatic views are undeniably important and could significantly shape our research directions. However, our research projects not often proceed with philosophical stances as a starting point (Crotty, 1998). Instead, our research may typically start with an "issue that needs to be addressed, a problem that needs to be solved, a question that needs to be answered" (Crotty, 1998: p. 13). According to Pring (2000), the nature of one's research focus and aim decides what theoretical framework and design to be adopted. As for this study, regardless of the fact that my research interests and understandings seem to better situate within an interpretive framework, the selection of the interpretive approach was predominantly made based on the compatibility of this approach with my research topic, aim and questions.

Interpretivists assume that human actions and experiences have inherent meanings (Schwandt, 2007). Interpretive researchers, therefore, aim to grasp these meanings and interpretations that people attribute to certain situations and phenomena (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This implies that, for interpretivists, "the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the individual actors" (Candy, 1991: p. 431).

Interpretivism entails particular ontological and epistemological views. Interpretivism rejects the existence of a single and objective reality. According to this approach, there exist multiple forms of reality which are socially and experientially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This means that individuals may interpret one particular phenomenon or situation differently depending on their circumstances and experiences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). On that account, Cohen et al. (2007: p. 21) suggest that researchers “need to examine situations through the eyes of different participants”.

Congruent with this ontological stance, this research intended to investigate how different participants see learner autonomy and how they see the current situation of learner autonomy within their context. Since learner autonomy has been characterised as complex and multidimensional, making sense of the meaning and state of learner autonomy within a specific context possibly requires examining the perspectives of different parties together with their respective roles, positions and experiences. Cohen et al. (2007) point out that understanding complex situations and phenomena essentially require ‘thick description’. According to Taylor and Medina (2013), interpretive approach allows researchers to make deep and rich account of the social and educational situations under investigation by drawing on the views and experiences of the individual actors involved.

Interpretivists hold a subjective epistemology. They assume that “people create and associate their own subjective and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them” (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991: p. 5). Here, people are viewed as constructive and autonomous agents (Garrick, 1999; Troudi, 2010) who have the capabilities of creating meaning and knowledge through their activities (Blumer cited in Cohen et al., 2007). This epistemological position “respects the differences between people and the *passive+ objects of the natural sciences” (Bryman cited in Grix, 2004: p. 65). Moreover, the interpretive approach involves conducting research “with people rather than on people” (Blumer cited in Garrick, 1999: p. 150). This indicates that understanding the meanings individuals ascribe to certain events and experiences should basically come from the individuals themselves rather than being imposed by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007). Interpretive researchers, therefore, try, through

interactive means, to create these meanings co-constructively with the participants of their research.

Consistent with the above epistemological views, this research heavily relied on the participants' personal experiences and interpretations of the meaning and situation of learner autonomy. According to Candy (1991), subjective understanding of the situation can considerably shape the ways different parties deal with and respond to autonomous learning. Candy highlights the importance of investigating learner autonomy from different perspectives. This could be one reason that he strongly advocates the adoption of the interpretive approach and finds this compatible with the study of learner autonomy. Moreover, Candy (1991) notes that examining learner autonomy from the standpoint of different actors (e.g. learners, teachers and senior administrators) could bring about constructive and meaningful dialogue among these parties about several issues related to learner autonomy; because ultimately, educational phenomena including learner autonomy are inextricably linked to the decisions and actions undertaken by these different groups.

4.4 Research Design

Aligned with the above research questions and paradigmatic framework, this thesis adopted a qualitative approach. According to Ritchie and Lewis (2003), qualitative research design closely relates to interpretivism. Within the interpretive qualitative framework, certain methodological choices are available. Among them, a case study design seemed to appropriately serve the nature and aim of this research. Case studies are mainly associated with conducting qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 1998; Denscombe, 2007). This does not necessarily equate case studies with qualitative designs as "much qualitative research is not case study and case study can incorporate methods other than qualitative" (Simons, 2009: p. 14). The use of qualitative case studies has become significantly widespread across the field of education (Merriam, 1998; Gall et al., 2007). This could be because understanding educational situations and phenomena requires deep and rich description and analysis which researchers can gain through qualitative case studies.

As a research methodology, qualitative case studies allow researchers to deeply investigate situations and capture the meanings people make out of their real life situations and experiences (Cohen et al., 2007). Merriam (1998) emphasises that case studies are mainly used with an intention to provide “an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning of those involved” (p. 19). Accordingly, the employment of case study design to uncover the meaning and situation of learner autonomy within the context of higher education from the vantage point of different people could be partly justified. Brown (2008) points out that the use of case studies can effectively work for construing various issues within institutions of higher education.

Institutions of higher education can ideally serve as a ‘bounded system’ which several authors highlight as a basic principle of a case (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Punch, 2005; Cohen et al., 2007). They, therefore, encourage researchers to clearly determine and draw boundaries around their cases. Denscombe (2007) argues that without certain boundaries, a case study possibly loses the unique qualities of a case. The fact that this study was conducted within one institution of higher education, a clear circle around the case seemed to be present. Merriam (1998: p. 27) demonstrates that the case is “a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries”. So, the institution where this study was undertaken could be seen as a complex unit within which other sub-units exist (Yin, 2003). This suggests that further boundaries needed to be set; because, for practical reasons, only certain classes, disciplines and individuals could be included.

One major advantage of delineating boundaries could be that researchers can provide intensive and detailed accounts of individuals, groups, situations and programmes under investigation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Since one or few instances become the focus of interest, this enables the researcher to deal with the ‘subtlety’ and complexity of the situation (Denscombe, 2007; Cohen et al., 2007). On that account, case study was used with the aim to uncover the intricacies of the meaning and situation of learner autonomy. To achieve that, this case study tried to draw on the views, experiences and roles of various participants across different levels of an institution of higher education. Hamilton (2011) highlights that investigating a case from the perspectives and experiences of different individuals is an important characteristic

of case study approach. Punch (2005) considers that as “an explicit attempt to preserve the wholeness, unity and integrity of the case” (p. 145). Such kinds of case studies are described as ‘holistic’ which do not usually deal with ‘isolated factors’ (Yin, 2003; Denscombe, 2007). With respect to my research, the holistic feature was maintained through including the major parties (i.e. learners, teachers, and senior administrators).

Case studies are found considerably flexible when using multiple methods of data collection (Yin, 2003; Punch, 2005;). So, the fact that this study employed a variety of methods matches well with the case study design. Hamilton (2011) argues that the use of two or more means of gathering data and the incorporation of two groups or more can help researchers to arrive at a better understanding of the case. The methods used were believed to generate rich and thick description of the situations and issues under investigation (Yin, 2003; Cohen et al., 2007). For this reason, qualitative case studies are also characterised as ‘descriptive’ (Yin, 2003; Merriam, 2009). This type of case studies, as was the case for this research, are found appropriate to answer ‘what’ questions (Bickman & Rog, 2008). Whereas rich and detailed descriptions of a situation or phenomenon could be desirable (Merriam, 2009), this has been considered as a challenge of qualitative case studies which may make researchers feel overwhelmed by a mountain of details obtained.

Another challenge associated with case studies, also subject to much debate, has been the issue of generalisability. Generalising the findings from case studies has been seen as problematic (Gall et al., 2007). This argument has basically resulted from the fact that case studies often focus on a particular situation or phenomenon and may only include a limited number of subjects (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, the findings are assumed to be only applicable to that situation and to the small sample included.

4.5 Research Methods

Research methods are defined as “the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question(s)” (Crotty, 1998: p. 2). Research methods, therefore, mainly flow from research questions while they are also informed by paradigmatic and methodological frameworks. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), there are several methods employed within qualitative research design which include interviews, focus groups, document review, observation and critical incident reports. Among these, the current research adopted observations, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews as the sources of data collection. The selection of these methods was made based on the practicality and pertinence of these methods to my research questions and the overall nature and aim of this study.

As this research relied heavily on the views, experiences and positions of different participants, choosing methods that allow the participants to freely express themselves seemed imperative. Equally important, the application of multiple methods was also intended to triangulate the research data (Denscombe, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Triangulation refers to “the practice of viewing things from more than one perspective. This can mean the use of different methods [or] different sources of data” (Denscombe, 2007: p. 134). The use of triangulation probably enables the researcher to see the accuracy of his findings and to come to grips with a broader picture of the situation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Maxwell, 2013). Research methods undeniably have strengths and weaknesses; therefore, multiple methods were also adopted so that “weaknesses in one method can be compensated for by strengths in another” (Denscombe, 2007: p. 134). The following sections introduce the methods used.

4.5.1 Observations

One source of evidence and data collection used was observation. Qualitative types of observation are often referred to as ‘naturalistic’, ‘unstructured’ ‘less-structured’ and ‘participant’ methods which attempt to explore certain issues, behaviours and situations rather holistically and naturally (Punch, 2005; Foster, 2006; Denscombe, 2007). These

methods of observation contrast with the 'structured' and more systematic forms which tend to observe artificially created situations. Observational methods enable researchers to familiarise themselves with the central aspects of their research, such as the setting, the people, the activities and events (Gillham, 2000; Patton, 2002). To put it differently, researchers can initially gain a general overview of the situation and then to infiltrate deeper with the intention to uncover areas that are more relevant to the research aims and questions.

More specifically, Patton (2002) highlights that observations remarkably help researchers to: understand the conditions within which people behave and interact; be open to wider perspective and not merely rely on some preconceived views about the situation and setting; grab things that might escape other methods of data collection; learn things that people, for some reason, will not be ready to talk about; and go beyond the selective understandings of the participants. However, there are certain drawbacks associated with the use of observations. Besides the problems of being time-consuming and sometimes the difficulty of accessing certain social and institutional settings, another major disadvantage of observations relates to the way they may change the behaviours and reactions of the observed people (Denscombe, 2007; Foster, 2006).

This research utilised observations for two major purposes. First, observations were used as a preliminary or as a 'getting-to-know' stage to gain an overall sense of the situation (Gillham, 2000). Learner autonomy can be subject to the circumstances under which certain learning and institutional conditions are made and the ways learners, teachers and other members of educational institutions behave and interact. The observations conducted gave me a general picture and impression about the situations of certain classrooms. Secondly, observations were also used as an independent source to provide data related to the research questions 2 and 3. Yin (2003) encourages case study researchers to consider direct observations as another source of their evidence as they visit their research sites. However, Duff (2012) argues that observational methods seldom become the sole technique of data collection within qualitative case studies; instead, they are often combined with other methods, as was the case with this

research, both to complement each other with regard to the accuracy of data and to provide a more complete picture of the situation (Foster, 2006).

The process of data collection started with a number of classroom observations. Due to the scope of this research and practical issues, five distinct academic disciplines were selected within different existing faculties with the intention to observe various classroom settings. Within these five disciplines, only third-year classrooms were included considering that students at this stage have had sufficient experience of higher education and are capable of discussing and reflecting on different issues related to learner autonomy. Observing these classrooms turned out to be a good step towards recruiting participants both teachers and students for the subsequent interviews and focus group discussions.

Researchers are unlikely to observe everything through their classroom observations. To conduct my observations somehow manageably, few 'sensitising concepts' were used as a starting point and initial guide. According to Patton (2002), these concepts are necessary for the researcher not to enter the field without knowing what to look for. On that account, certain areas or guiding concepts were used and given more attention to during the classroom observations, such as the nature of the classroom environment, the nature of the teaching-learning process, classroom interactions and activities, learner-teacher relationships, learner-teacher roles and responsibilities, exercising power and authority. Apart from these, the researcher remained open to record other issues.

The extent to which researchers engage with the participants and the physical setting can significantly influence the way things are observed and recorded. My role was more like an 'observer-as-participant' who entered the classrooms to observe and gather data and not to interact with students (Gall et al., 2007). Prior to the classroom observations, the teachers voluntarily agreed to be observed. So, the classroom observations started with the teachers introducing me to the class and explaining what my role will be. This allowed me to obtain, at least, oral informed consent from the students. While such forms of observation are believed to disrupt the natural classroom setting and change the actions and behaviours of those involved (Hatch, 2002; Denscombe, 2007), no major

disruptions and changes were noticed during my observations. The researcher sat at the back of the classroom to have a better view of the class and be less distractive. Only brief notes were taken during the observations and a more detailed account was written afterwards. That was not to lose anything important throughout the observations.

4.5.2 Focus Groups

Focus groups have gained significant attention and popularity across diverse social science areas over the past few decades (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Beck, Trombetta and Share (1986) describe focus groups as discussions happening “among selected individuals about specific topics relevant to the situation at hand” (p. 73). Furthermore, Morgan (1996) considers focus groups as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction” (p. 130). Group interaction and discussion are seen as the distinctive features through which focus groups can be clearly distinguished from other qualitative methods (Brodigan cited in Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). For such group interaction to take place, the researcher has to create a permissive and dynamic environment where participants likely become stimulated to share and compare their feelings, perspectives and experiences (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). According to Morgan (cited Denscombe, 2007: 179), “this process of sharing and comparing is especially useful for hearing and understanding a range of responses” which could ultimately make focus group data richer not easily accessible through other methods (Brann & Clarke, 2013).

Focus group discussions also allow participants to draw and build on each other’s ideas (Berg, 2001). This may be particularly useful when not every member of the group has instant thoughts and responses about a specific issue or when the topic at hand appears complex to the participants. According to Macnaghten and Myers (cited in Daly, 2007), focus groups can be used as appropriate means for understanding complex situations and issues on which participants have mixed views and feelings. This was one main reason behind using focus group interviews for this research. To explain more, there was an assumption that the concept of learner autonomy could be complex enough that

some participants, especially students, might face difficulty discussing that during one-to-one interviews. Therefore, hearing from other members was assumed to spark their ideas. Patton (2002) asserts that focus group “participants get to hear each other’s responses and make additional comments beyond their original responses as they hear what other people have to say” (p. 386). As a result, participants may either reach some consensus or disagreements may arise. Either way the discussions may generate high-quality data as participants presumably engage with some kind of questioning, reasoning and reflection (Denscombe, 2007).

As for this research, the starting point of conducting focus groups began with preparing a ‘questioning route’—“a list of sequenced questions” (Krueger & Casey, 2015: p. 43). The focus group questions included were open-ended structured around the main research questions with an aim to produce data relevant to them. To ensure the clarity and logic of the focus group questions and to identify areas of weakness, one pilot focus group was undertaken with a similar group of students. The pilot focus group went well and an initial analysis showed interesting data emerging from the pilot interview. This made the researcher later include the data from the pilot with the overall data of the study. After few minor changes made to the questioning guide, the researcher was ready to carry out the actual focus groups⁵.

As mentioned earlier, classroom observations made the recruitment and arrangement procedures for focus groups much easier. After each observation, students were requested to voluntarily participate. So, five focus group interviews were conducted with third-year students from five different departments with the intention to capture potentially different perspectives and experiences. Morgan (1997) suggests that the number of focus groups could be between three to five groups per project. As the groups were made from the observed classrooms, such groups are often seen as pre-existing ones. Pre-existing groups mean that participants most likely know each other through working or living together as members of a particular community (e.g. classroom) (Kitzinger et al., 1999). These naturally-occurring groups are also chosen to

⁵ See appendices for the focus group questions

ensure that members are relatively homogenous and share certain commonality as another principle of focus group interviews (Vaughn et al., 1996). Kitzinger et al. (1999) argue that composing groups with people who have common experiences could be quite productive. One key advantage of these homogenous groups was that the members, as colleagues and/or friends, seemed comfortable expressing their views and engaging with each other (Brann & Clarke, 2013).

The focus groups were composed of groups of five or six participants each. These numbers were determined based on the practical reasons and relevant literature. Several writers (e.g. Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Patton, 2002) suggest groups of five or six to ten participants. The decision about including these numbers of participants was made to make sure that the groups are “small enough for everyone to have opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions” (Krueger & Casey, 2015: p. 6). Another way to ensure that diverse perspectives and experiences will surface among participants was to maintain a balance, as much as possible, between male and female students within each group. Morgan (1997) points out that focus groups ‘give voice’ to people who would not otherwise be heard. Due to the cultural and traditional factors, approaching female students through face-to-face interviews was difficult; therefore, focus groups proved suitable to convene female students.

Before starting the focus groups, the participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form. Focus groups were arranged at a convenient time and place for the participants. The latter was particularly important for the group members to feel relaxed and not distracted. The discussions began with an introduction explaining the purpose of my research and the nature of focus group discussions. Moreover, participants were reminded of their roles and my role as the moderator. My role was to make a comfortable atmosphere; listen and ask questions, keep the discussion on track; encourage active participation of members; avoid making judgments (Denscombe, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2015). My role was also to motivate participants to talk and interact with one another rather than myself becoming the ‘focal point’ of interactions (Denscombe, 2007). Whereas such awareness about these issues contribute to

conducting generally successful focus groups, there were certain challenges. As researchers often have less control over focus group discussions (Morgan, 1997), there were cases which few participants seemed more dominant over the discussions which negatively affected the participation of others. Furthermore, there were also times when group discussions led to irrelevant issues. However, the effects of these were minimised through my interventions to allow every participant to engage and to bring the discussion back on track. All the focus groups were conducted in Kurdish and two recording machines were used both to ensure clear recordings of the focus groups and to reduce the risk of potential data loss.

4.5.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Together with the focus groups, this research also made use of one-to-one interviews. According to Punch (2009), interviews are the most powerful devices to understand and access “people’s perceptions, definitions of situations, and constructions of reality” (p. 168). Interviews are a means through which researchers can enter the minds of others and to discover things that cannot be directly observed (Patton, 2002). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) consider interviews as some kind of conversations happening between two people. However, unlike everyday conversations, interviews are often structured around specific purposes to uncover how people see and make sense of their real life situations and experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Interviews are generally categorised as structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Merriam, 1998). The semi-structured interview lies ‘half-way’ along the structured/unstructured continuum and considered as the dominant form of interviewing (Merriam, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Within qualitative case study research, semi-structured interviews are seen as the most essential type of interviewing (Gillham, 2000). This could be mainly due to the flexibility and structure this kind of interviewing provides which allows researchers to remain focused through some predetermined open-ended questions while they can also modify the structure of the interview and add further questions to pursue the issues of interest and others which may arise during the interviews (Merriam, 1998; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Regarding this study, semi-structured interviews were held with teacher and senior administrator participants. Regardless of certain areas of difference, the two sets of interviews had identical aims and structure. To make sure that the areas related to teachers and senior administrators and to my research questions will be covered, two interview guides (i.e. one for teachers and the other for senior administrators) were formulated. The use of the interview guide was aimed to make certain that "the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed" (Patton, 2002, p.343). The interview guide contained several specific and open-ended questions developed from the relevant main research questions and the related literature. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) encourage researchers to pay great attention to preparing interview questions as a critical step towards conducting interviews. These authors also suggest that interview questions should have a direct relationship with the research questions. Concerning my interviews, research questions were used as a framework from which the interview questions were established. A matrix was constructed to ensure that the interview questions adequately cover the research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

To refine the interview questions, one pilot interview was conducted with a teacher from the same institution. Meanwhile, two senior administrators were approached to be the participants of pilot interviews, but they declined to become so. Due to this reason and to time constraints, no pilot interview was made with senior administrators. Conducting pilot interviews was important to try out my questions and to determine areas of confusion and weakness. That was also useful to practice interviewing and to improve my skills (Merriam, 1998). Whereas, overall, the pilot went smoothly, certain questions were found unclear and/or repetitive. Thus, necessary changes were made accordingly. Since similarities existed between teacher and senior administrator interviews⁶, some changes made to the former were also applicable to the latter. With specific reference to teacher interviews, few other changes were also made after the classroom observations and focus groups.

⁶ See appendices for the interview guide

As with selecting students for focus groups, classroom observations facilitated the recruiting process of teachers. Five interviews were held with the same teachers observed. This was a good opportunity to build rapport with the teachers prior to the interviews and to further examine issues found important during the observations. Following teacher interviews and as the last stage of the data collection process, five senior administrators were interviewed. This was consistent with what Nisbet and Watt (cited in Cohen et al., 2007) suggest that interviewing senior people are likely better to take place “later rather than earlier so that the most effective use of discussion time can be made, the interviewer having been put into the picture fully before the interview” (p. 259).

As usual, the interviews started with the participants reading and signing a consent letter. Following this, the researcher tried to describe the purpose of the study and the issues intended to be addressed. That was to guide the interviews towards the topics of discussion. My role was not simply to ask some predetermined questions and to record the responses, but was also to engage interactively with the interviewees and follow up the answers so as to obtain clear and comprehensive views of the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Unlike focus groups, one-to-one interviews were relatively easier to manage (Denscombe, 2007). However, there are limitations ascribed to them. Interviews are perceived to entail clear power differences. The interviewer possibly makes most of the decisions throughout the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Such unequal power relation might have negative influence on the style and atmosphere of the interview. The interviewee may feel intimidated and reluctant which may adversely affect the interview outcomes (Patton, 2002). Although, since my interview participants were teachers and senior administrators, the issue of power seemed less problematic. What was found more challenging was that a few participants turned out less articulate and cooperative which again had negative consequences on the quality of data.

All the interviews were conducted face-to-face except one with a senior administrator which was held via Skype. The interviews were arranged at times and locations that best suited the participants. Since among the participants, there were some who could speak English, options were given whether they want to use their native language or English.

Of the ten, half of them chose to speak English and the rest used Kurdish. All the interviews were tape recorded. To carefully follow the conversation and avoid causing distraction, notes were not taken.

4.6 Research Participants

Most research either qualitative or quantitative requires some kind of sampling strategy. Probability and nonprobability sampling are the two major types commonly adopted. The former is used with the goal to permit the researcher to make generalisations (Cohen et al., 2007). As qualitative inquiry seldom seeks to generalise the findings to a wider population, the use of probabilistic sampling is considered unnecessary and unjustifiable within qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). This makes evident that non-probability sampling, also referred to as deliberate, purposive and purposeful sampling, often becomes the choice for the majority of qualitative investigations (Merriam, 1998; Kothari, 2013). For Maxwell (2013), purposeful sampling is a strategy which deliberately selects “particular settings, persons, or activities . . . to provide information that is particularly relevant to your research questions and goals that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 97).

Like most of the qualitative studies, this case study research selected the participants based on purposive sampling. This type of sampling was applied to handpick those participants from whom a great deal about the meaning and situation of learner autonomy could be learned. For Patton (2002), this is where “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies” (p. 230). Field research generally involves sampling decisions about the setting, people, events and situations (Maxwell, 2013). The research site selected for this study was Soran University. This site was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, as a staff member of this University, recruiting participants within this institution was believed to be practically easier and more convenient. Secondly, the decision about site selection was also made based on my personal desire and responsibility to address the issue of learner autonomy within my place of work. After choosing the research site, selections were made both at the level of the case and within the case as well as the inclusion of the participants.

Within purposeful sampling, there are several strategies used. This study adopted 'maximum-variation sampling' to select participants across different academic disciplines. Saunders (2012) points out that this strategy intends to include participants from various "departments and across levels of the hierarchy" (p. 42). This maximises the possibility that the case will be fully described depending on the multiple perspectives participants hold (Creswell, 2013). This study included five academic departments. These departments were selected based on Smart, Feldman and Ethington's (2000) classification of academic disciplines which has been developed from Holland's theory or classification. Holland (1997) classifies six personality types (i.e. realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional) and assumes that people make vocational choices based on these types of personality. Holland (1997) explicitly argues that the basic assumptions of his theory "are also applicable to educational environments" (p. 149) like colleges and universities. On that account, Smart et al. (2000) used Holland's theory for academic disciplines within higher education. These authors, however, only include four categories (i.e. investigative, artistic, social, and enterprising) given that the other two are not found within traditional disciplines of higher education. Regarding this study, this classification was used as a 'guiding framework' to ensure that a variety of disciplines could be selected within different faculties of this particular institution. Accordingly, five academic disciplines were included, namely 'artistic' (English and Kurdish each from a different faculty), 'investigative' (Biology), 'social' (Psychology) and 'enterprising' (Law).

This classification was also used as a base to recruit student, teacher and senior administrator participants within these academic disciplines. To begin with, 28 third-year students (i.e. five or six students from each department) were selected. This number of students became 34 after the pilot focus group was included (Table 1 below explains the student-participants' pseudonyms).

The recruitment of the third-year students was made based on two main reasons. First, as third year students, they were assumed to have had sufficient experience of higher education and could, therefore, be better prepared to discuss issues related to their learning. Second, the researcher wanted to ensure that when these groups of students

Table 1: Description of the Student-participants' Pseudonyms

Initials ST + An assigned number to each student + Group name						
Group A GA	ST1GA Male	ST2GA Female	ST3GA Female	ST4GA Female	ST5GA Female	ST6GA Male
Group B GB	ST7GB Female	ST8GB Female	ST9GB Male	ST10GB Male	ST11GB Male	
Group C GC	ST12GC Male	ST13GC Male	ST14GC Female	ST15GC Female	ST16GC Female	
Group D GD	ST17GD Male	ST18GD Female	ST19GD Male	ST20GD Female	ST21GD Female	ST22GD Female
Group E GE	ST23GE Male	ST24GE Female	ST25GE Female	ST26GE Female	ST27GE Male	ST28GE Female
Group G GG	ST29GG Male	ST30GG Male	ST31GG Male	ST32GG Female	ST33GG Female	ST34GG Female

needed to be approached again, they would still be available. Another category of the participants included were five university teachers (with one pilot interview, their number became six) selected from the same academic disciplines. A criterion of three-year time limit was used to include only those teachers with adequate experience in higher education.

Finally, this study recruited five senior administrators (i.e. department heads and deans). Both the teacher and senior administrator participants were anonymised by assigning them numbers (i.e. for Teachers: **Teacher+ numbers from 1 – 6, for Senior Administrators: Initials SA+ numbers from 1 – 5**).

The inclusion of these participants was premised on the assumptions that they would be both adequate and appropriate. Regarding the adequacy of the sample, perhaps this study included reasonable number of the participants so that rich and adequate amount of data could be collected. As for the appropriateness of the sample, this research used

certain criteria to identify and recruit the participants who could possibly contribute to the aims of this research (Eide, 2008).

4.7 Data Analysis

Analysing qualitative data has often been one of the major concerns of qualitative research. Such concerns often result from the bulk and cumbersome data qualitative methods generate and the lack of “well-established and widely accepted rules for the analysis of qualitative data” (Bryman, 2012: p. 565). The absence of fixed rules and procedures has given much flexibility that every researcher might handle the analytic process somewhat differently (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). According to Merriam (1998), the analytic work of qualitative data “involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read” (p. 178). Undeniably, qualitative researchers substantially rely on the participants’ words, because “words are the way that people come to understand their situations” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994: p. 18); create their worlds; and explain themselves to others. The researcher’s analytic task, therefore, entails finding patterns, themes and categories within those words and presenting them to the reader.

The analysis of qualitative data does not often go as a linear and straightforward process, rather the process has been described as ‘iterative’ and ‘recursive’ full of back-and-forth steps and movements (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Denscombe, 2007). The analysis often simultaneously occurs with data collection (Merriam, 1998; Cohen et al., 2007). Merriam (1998) reminds us that “without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming” (p. 162). This does not mean that data analysis will soon end with data collection. Indeed, a more intensive analysis usually proceeds after the completion of data collection (Merriam, 1998). However, as mentioned earlier, qualitative researchers may approach the analysis of their data making use of distinct steps and techniques which tend to be predominantly undertaken based on the kinds of questions and goals researchers have. Whatever methods and procedures researchers take for analysing data, they are strongly encouraged to make clear how they are going to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

As regards this research, the analysis of data relied on the principles of thematic analysis. Mills, Durepos and Wiebe (2010) note that thematic analysis has attracted the attention of many qualitative and case study researchers across diverse fields. Furthermore, these authors make clear that thematic analysis could be particularly suitable for analysing a wide range of data sources, including interview transcripts, field notes, documents and several others. On that account, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) maintain that thematic analysis can be flexibly and usefully used to identify, analyse and interpret themes and patterns of meaning across the entire body of data which could eventually engender convincing answers for research questions.

The flexibility of thematic analysis also allows the application of both inductive 'bottom-up' and deductive 'top-down' approaches of analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Mills et al. (2010) show that thematic analysis seems typically more compatible with inductive form which allows themes and patterns to spring from the data. Unlike deductive approach, the themes emanating from an inductive thematic analysis are solidly grounded in the data and are not subject to the researcher's preconceived assumptions or certain pre-existing coding and thematising framework (Patton, 2002; Willig, 2013). For Patton, however, inductive and deductive approaches of analysis are not mutually exclusive and a research study can embrace elements of both strategies. As for this research, while the analysis heavily drew on the inductive logic, the research questions undeniably affected the analysis.

4.7.1 Stages of Thematic Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) propose six phases for thematic data analysis which are: (1) familiarising with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report (p. 87). These stages were the foundation upon which the data of my research was analysed. This framework was not used as "a linear process of simply moving from one phase to the next". Instead, the process was more 'recursive' where the researcher could "move back and forth as needed throughout the phases" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: p. 86).

Familiarising with the data: This was an initial and crucial step of the data analysis which began with data collection and continued alongside data analysis (Denscombe, 2007). This stage was more about immersing myself in the data to identify its depth and breadth (Braun & Clarke, 2007). Being personally and actively involved in the process of data collection was one way the researcher could achieve that. Moreover, the fact that this qualitative research vastly relied on verbal means to collect data, transcription became inevitable. For this reason, transcribing data was another important phase of data analysis (Bird cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006: p. 87). Apart from these, familiarising myself with the data also entailed an active and extensive reading and re-reading of the obtained data (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2013). This stage paved the way for embarking on the next step of generating codes.

Generating initial codes: After getting a deep sense of the detail and richness of the data, I started coding the raw material. This stage entailed the generation of some initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Creswell (2013), the process of creating codes “represents the heart of qualitative data analysis” (p. 184). Codes are ‘first impression’ words, phrases or labels assigned to parts of the data and which are constructed out of an open-ended process of coding (Merriam, 1998; Saldana, 2008). Coding often moves beyond simply assigning certain labels or ideas to pieces of data. More importantly, coding leads the researcher “from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea” (Richards & Morse cited in Saldana, 2008: p. 8). Regarding my analysis, coding was an interpretive and ‘cyclical’ process which means chunks of data were coded, uncoded and recoded several times (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The collected data was coded through MAXqda. According to Mills et al. (2010), such programmes have been “specifically designed for thematic analysis of qualitative data” (p. 926). This software assisted the researcher to keep the whole bunch of data together; meanwhile, the analysis and coding of the data became more straightforward and systematic.

Searching for themes: Following data coding came the task of identifying categories, sub-categories and themes which Ryan and Bernard (2003) consider as a fundamentally important step. Themes are “broad units of information that consist of several codes

[sub-categories and categories] aggregated to form a common idea” (Creswell, 2013: p. 186). After the whole dataset was coded, then codes which shared similar characteristics were organised and grouped together under sub-categories, categories and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Whereas the former were rather developed from the data, the latter were somehow influenced by the existing literature (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The construction of the themes was also guided by the research purpose and questions; because themes were principally developed to answers my research questions (Merriam, 2009). The following diagram taken from Saldana (2008) explains these stages of analysis:

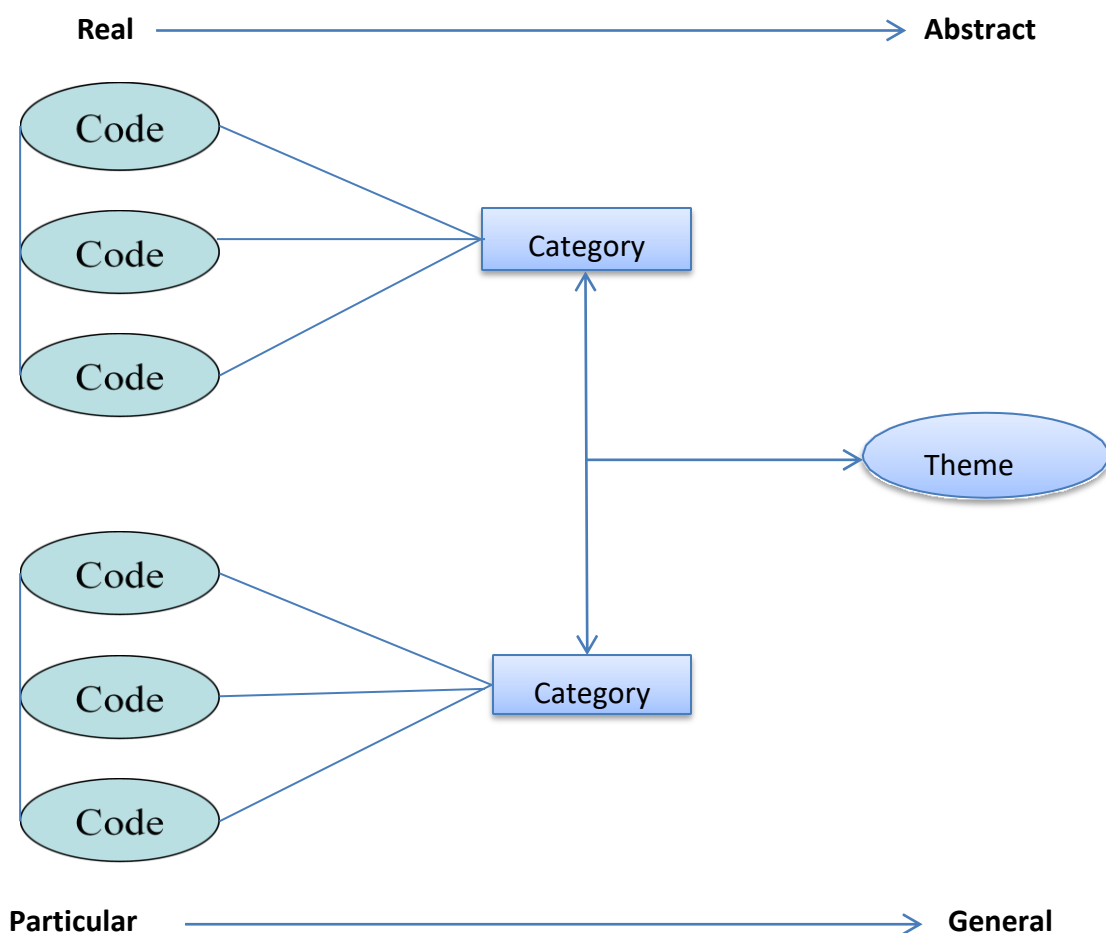


Diagram 1: Stages of Data Analysis

Reviewing themes: Initially, several tentative themes were created (Merriam, 2009). This stage was intended to refine the ‘candidate’ themes and to see which themes remain solid and which others need to be merged, separated or even removed ((Braun

& Clarke, 2006). Once certain themes were established, a further step was to make certain that the themes are strongly connected to the dataset. Reviewing at this stage also included another broad search through the data to discover any relevant data that could further enrich a particular theme (Merriam, 2009).

Defining and naming themes: This phase was directly related to the previous one where the refinement process of themes continued. At this stage, the descriptions and definitions of the themes tried to be more clearly designated. A great attention was given to ensure that the themes reflect the data they represent and that the story behind each theme tells a great deal about the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Producing the report: After identifying a set of workable themes, the write-up proceeded. This stage was still part of refining the analysis as the writing task could bring new ideas forward. The analysis and write-up need to provide “a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell – within and across themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 93). The writing-up phase contained sufficient evidence and extracts from the original data to expound, justify and underpin the established themes (Patton, 2002). Whereas the report presented a great deal of a descriptive account of the data, the researcher also tried to move beyond that to look “beneath the surface of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2013: p. 174) to construct and provide convincing answers to the research questions.

4.8 Quality Criteria

There are certain quality criteria introduced to establish the ‘trustworthiness’ of qualitative research. According to Merriam (2009), these quality measures are “based on worldviews and questions [which are] congruent with the philosophical assumptions underlying this perspective” (2009: p. 211). Guba and Lincoln (1985) were the pioneer researchers who proposed four alternative criteria for assessing the value of qualitative research. These include *credibility* (internal validity), *transferability* (external validity), *dependability* (reliability), and *confirmability* (objectivity). These are widely accepted among qualitative researchers (Merriam, 2009). There are multiple strategies that researchers can adopt to ensure aspects of these principles which purportedly lead to

more rigorous and trustworthy outcomes. As for this research, the following measures were taken:

Credibility: This criterion deals with whether the findings presented credibly and accurately represent the situation under scrutiny (Shenton, 2004; Merriam, 2009). Guba and Lincoln (1985) consider credibility as one of the most basic principles to achieving trustworthiness. This research, therefore, employed several strategies to increase credibility of the findings. Triangulation was the basic strategy to maintain the credibility of this research. Two types of triangulation were used (i.e. multiple methods and multiple sources of data) to cross-check data collected through different methods and from different participants. This research also drew on 'adequate engagement' to make close and intensive contact with the participants so that a good understanding of the situation could be achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Merriam, 2009). Another major strategy used was 'member checks' through which certain transcripts, not all, were returned to the participants to see whether they verify and recognise their intended words and experiences (Shenton, 2004). Guba (1981) describes this strategy as "the single most important action . . . [which] goes to the heart of the credibility criterion" (p. 85).

Transferability: Consistent with the tenets of qualitative research, this study was not intended to make generalisations. Alternatively, qualitative researchers address this issue through 'transferability'. Transferability can be better understood through what Patton (2002) calls 'extrapolation' which he refers to as "modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical conditions" (p. 584). The decision about whether or not the findings are transferable to similar situations or cases lies with the reader. For this reason, the researcher has tried to provide readers with a 'thick description' about the central aspects of this study so that they themselves could determine the extent to which the findings of this research can be applied to other situations (Shenton, 2004; Denscombe, 2007).

Dependability: "Dependability refers to whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret data" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008: p. 78).

Towards this end, this research gave detailed accounts regarding the steps and techniques undertaken from data gathering to data analysis.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are an essential and integrated component of the research design that could often arise during different phases of the research process, including selecting the participants, collecting and analysing the data and reporting and disseminating the findings (Denscombe, 2007; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Maxwell, 2013). Ethical issues could be of vital concern for both qualitative and quantitative approaches particularly when human subjects are involved (Robson, 2006; Punch, 2009). However, the 'interactive nature' of qualitative inquiry may raise ethical dilemmas that are less likely to concern quantitative researchers (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Stake (2005) notes that "qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manner should be good and their code of ethics strict" (p. 459). By and large, ethical considerations include respecting and protecting the rights, dignity and privacy of the research subjects and avoiding causing any physical and psychological harm (Denscombe, 2007; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). These certainly require necessary measures to be undertaken.

My ethical procedures started with gaining ethical approval from the University of Exeter. Following this, negotiations began with gatekeepers from Soran University to obtain an official permission and access to the research site and participants. To help the University authorities and research subjects make reasoned decisions about their permission and participation, the researcher provided sufficient and explicit details about the focus and purpose of the study. Along with this, gaining informed consent from the individual participants was the priority of this research. Before conducting classroom observations, focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews, students, teachers and senior administrators were requested to offer their voluntary participation and informed consent. Although the informed consent was used to anticipate the events that were likely to happen during the course of the study and also to tell the participants the kind of involvement we expected from them (Eisner, 2017), Malone

(2003) argues that “the inductive, emergent nature of qualitative design precludes researchers from being able to predict where the study will take them” (p. 800). Therefore, certain issues that arose attracted my attention to enter what Malone (2003) calls “political minefields” (p. 801). Had the gatekeepers of the institution known about this, they might not have given me the access. This does not mean that the researcher deliberately concealed aspects of this study — something that has been referred to as ‘deception’ within the literature (Tai, 2012); rather, these things were not clear to the researcher himself at the beginning. This indicates that there are ethical issues that may only begin to unfold during the writing-up process or after the completion of your research (Bishop as cited in Malone, 2003). This has led researchers like Malone (2003) to raise serious questions about the notion of ‘informed consent’ as a tool to deal with all the ethical problems within qualitative research.

Apart from the dilemmas related to informed consent, qualitative inquiry engenders other ethical concerns related to privacy, confidentiality, power relationships and so on (Shaw, 2003). As regards the first two principles, we as researchers according to Eisner (2017), are expected to “protect personal privacy and guarantee confidentiality, but we know that we cannot always fulfill such guarantees” (p. 225). However, we still have important ethical responsibility to avoid, as much as possible, revealing details that breach the promise of privacy and confidentiality. To protect the rights of the participants within this study, especially their identity, the researcher used pseudonyms. The researcher was well aware that using fictitious names or numbers might not necessarily safeguard the anonymity and privacy of the participants (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992); therefore, mentioning details or characteristics that could expose their identity has been avoided. Furthermore, measures have been taken to keep the data secure and confidential not accessible to people other than the researcher.

Part of the ethical problem which has been the subject of significant discussion within the literature is the issue of power relationships within the research process. Malone (2003) highlights that research studies are conducted within complex power relationships. On that account, McNess, Arthur and Crossley (2015) suggest that power relationships need to be given greater recognition. Researchers like Moje (2000) and

Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach (2009) emphasise that there exists an inherently imbalance of power between the researcher and the researched. There is a widespread belief that the former often has the upper hand over the latter within that research relationship (Riley, Schouten & Cahill, 2003). This view seems to assume that power differences and relationships between the researcher and the participant remain static. With this respect, Ritchie and Rigano (2001) put forward a counter view and argue that power relationships are rather fluid and dynamic; therefore, “researchers and participants occupy shifting positions” (p. 754) throughout the course of an inquiry.

Moving now to the question of power relationships within my research, there were things that I was aware of and tried to address them with caution. However, there were issues that only became clear after the completion of the thesis. The way the researcher approached senior administrators first, teachers second and students last represented hierarchical power distribution within the institution. This, as Malone (2003) observes, put some participants in a “vulnerable position”. This means that the researcher, somehow, took advantage from the uneven power relationships, especially when it came to recruiting the participants and observing the classrooms. This also raised the potential for coercion. According to Rossman (as cited in Malone, 2003), “all research may be coercive, especially when done at home” (p. 225). However, the participation, after all, was voluntary and there were cases when a few individuals declined to take part without any harm being caused.

The notion of ‘home’ here also seems to be problematic. On one hand, researchers tend to be thrilled by the fact that they carry out their research within their home department and home institution as this may grant easier access to the research site and participants. On the other hand, this probably causes problems related to power and coercion (Malone, 2003). Although the institutional setting where the present study was conducted is my workplace (i.e. home), this research was undertaken at a time when the researcher had already been away for almost three years. Therefore, the home that I returned to after these years seemed quite different (i.e. there were new students, staff and administrators). Such researchers are sometimes called ‘homecomers’ who “return to an environment of which they think they still have

intimate knowledge – although the home environment may have changed” (McNess et al, 2015: p. 303). For this reason, I encountered a feeling of not quite belonging to that place.

Since this study largely relied on one-to-one interviews and focus groups to collect the data, it is important to highlight the nature of power relationships within these research methods. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2005), the warm, empathic, and caring character of interviews possibly conceal the real power relations. For them, research interviews are not “dominance-free dialogue between equal partners”, rather the interviewer has the most power who “initiates the interview, determines the interview topic, poses the questions and critically follows up on the answers, and also terminates the conversation” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005: p. 164). Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) point out the power the researcher can exercise is only partial as the participants also possess the power to determine the level of cooperation, shift the focus of the discussion and end the interview. This takes us back to the idea that power relations are fluid and dynamic — something that I clearly noticed during the interviews and focus groups. For instance, there were participants during the data collection process that were less cooperative, and also participants who terminated the interviews and the researcher could not do much about them for ethical reasons.

It is worth noting that focus groups gave “a substantially different power dynamic than individual interviews” (Smithson, 2000: p. 111); because the participants collectively seemed to feel more powerful. The nature of interactions of the focus group participants not just with the researcher but among themselves appeared to minimise power asymmetries or perhaps helped them ignore power asymmetries between themselves and the researcher. That was another reason why the researcher avoided conducting one-to-one interviews with the student-participants. My assumption was that had the researcher carried out individual interviews with the student-participants the imbalance of power between the two could have been much bigger due to age difference, level of education and so on. One problem with focus groups though was that some participants came out more dominant during the discussions. With this

regard, the researcher tried to use his power to minimise the dominance of some group members and to bring about a more equal distribution of power among them.

Turning now to one-to-one interviews with the teachers and senior administrators, there were also differences between these two groups of interviews. As regards the latter, the participants tended to speak with authority and demonstrate their power granted to them due to the position they held within their institution. As a researcher, moderating these interviews was less comfortable when compared with the teacher interviews which were more comfortable as I shared more commonalities with this group of the participants than with any other group. We, more or less, treated each other as equal partners, at least during the conduct of interviews. That relationship seemed more strained and imbalanced during the class observations. This reminds us of the changing nature of the relationships between the researcher and participant and the shifting positions they occupy (Ritchie & Rigano, 2001). For me, power differences became particularly apparent after the data collection process when the researcher had utmost control over the data and the interpretation of that data (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). However, as a researcher, I was aware of the ethical responsibilities I had towards the participants not to cause them any harm and towards the research project not to fake or falsify the findings.

5. Chapter Five: Data Analysis and Research Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the findings obtained from the analysis of the data. As mentioned earlier, this research made use of MAXqda as a computer software to analyse the data which enabled the researcher to keep all the data together and to conduct a more organised, systematic and visualized form of data analysis. A worked example at the end ⁷ shows how the data was analysed.

The chapter has been organised around codes, sub-categories, categories, and themes. This chapter contains four main sections which represent the four major themes. Under each theme, there are sub-categories and categories that are presented through sub-sections. As for the codes which rather closely reflect the data, they are subsumed under the sub-categories and categories. Overall, the analysis follows a 'hierarchical coding scheme'. Codes locate at the bottom of the hierarchy upon which the other components (i.e. sub-categories, categories and themes) are built and developed. To avoid repetition and to make links between the different groups of the participants, the analysis brings their views together instead of dealing with them under separate sections. However, wherever necessary, the analysis tries to highlight significant differences emerging from within and across the various parties.

To make the reported findings more consolidated, triangulation was made at two levels. Since this study employed multiple methods of data collection (i.e. classroom observations, focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews), the different pieces of data obtained from these research instruments were used to add support to the research findings. Denzin (2017) calls this 'methodological triangulation' which includes two types: 'within-method' and 'across-method' triangulation. While the latter combines both qualitative and quantitative techniques of data collection, the former employs two or more methods of data-collection methods, either qualitative or quantitative (Flick, 2009). Accordingly, the triangulation method that this study adopted

⁷ See Appendix 'K'.

followed the first category (i.e. within-method triangulation), and there are many examples of this form of triangulation repeated throughout this chapter.

Triangulation was also made at the level of the various groups of the participants took part in this study. The researcher has tried to approach and address the findings not from one angle or from the perspective of one group; instead, multiple sources of data were used. This sounds consistent with what Cohen et al. (2007) say that triangulation intends to “map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint” (p. 112). Thus, drawing on the perspectives of different groups allowed the distinct views to be heard, helped substantiate the findings and enabled the researcher to capture a more detailed picture of the situation and also uncover deeper diverse meanings of learner autonomy. There were examples of findings came out from the data that could not be adequately triangulated, but were given paramount consideration due to their value and significance both to this research project and to the situation of learner autonomy.

5.2 The Meaning and Relevance of Learner Autonomy

The participants of this study were initially asked about their understandings of learner autonomy and the values they associate with this concept. That was mainly to find links between their conceptions of this notion and their perceptions of the existing situation of learner autonomy within their specific context. Under this theme, two major categories emerged. Within each, the views the participants held about the meanings and benefits of learner autonomy are presented.

5.2.1 The Meaning of Learner Autonomy

As this study included students, teachers and senior administrators, the emergence of multiple understandings of learner autonomy was expected. Their views of learner autonomy centred around some key ideas, namely ‘self-reliance’, ‘responsibility’, ‘personal decision’, ‘freedom’ and ‘complexity and multidimensionality’. These ideas did not come up from one particular group; but were scattered across the different groups.

While, on the surface, these ideas sound different, the degree of overlapping among some of them cannot be ignored.

Of the above concepts that emerged, 'self-reliance' was the one which was more widely associated with learner autonomy. Thirteen students with four teachers either directly or indirectly considered learner autonomy as self-reliance. This term was used with two distinct meanings. For the majority, self-reliance was used to refer to situations when learners do not solely rely on the teacher or on the limited material taught within their classrooms; but rather try independently to expand their knowledge and discover the things within their area(s) of interest. As ST32GG⁸, pointed out: "Learner autonomy means that the learner relies on himself/herself and tries to autonomously seek knowledge and information irrespective of the help s/he gets from the teacher with his/her own learning" (**Translated From Kurdish—hereafter TFK**). Accordingly, self-reliance was not used to imply total independence from the teacher as relying on others, especially the teacher was seen inevitable within formal educational contexts. The point made was concerned with learners trying to minimise the degree of dependence on the teacher or to exploit teacher-reliance as a means towards more self-dependence. With this regard, Teacher5 expressed his understanding as follows:

The words 'learner autonomy' remind me of independence and relying on oneself rather than being dependent on others. For me learner autonomy also means trying to go beyond what the texts give and trying to understand and solve the problems on your own and when necessary trying to get help from others not to become dependent but with the intention to work towards independence; because you as a human being or as a learner come across issues that might be out of your ability, so you may need to get help from

⁸ See Section 4.7 **Initials ST + An assigned number to each student (in the case of this student 32) + Group name (here Group G – GG)**

others especially your teachers and this does not mean that you are not autonomous.

The other view, however, which seems to contradict the one above, defined learner autonomy as complete reliance on oneself without any intervention from the teacher. For example, ST28GE described learner autonomy as “a situation where learners don’t depend on their teachers. Instead, they become totally dependent on themselves in the pursuit of knowledge” (TFK). Despite the differences between these two views with respect to the position of the teacher, they both place the burden of learning on the learner. This apparently raises questions as to what roles teachers are expected to play as regards learner autonomy. The analyses of the following sections shed light on this.

The second concept which came out important from the data was ‘responsibility’. Several participants across the different groups referred to learner autonomy as learner responsibility. According to ST5GA, learner autonomy “is about taking responsibility and taking charge of your own learning rather than considering your teachers responsible for what you learn”. This understanding of learner autonomy resonates with those of some teachers and senior administrators. For example, SA1 commented that learner autonomy means that “learners take responsibility for their own learning process. So they are taught, but they have to make sure that they learn”. This recognises that autonomous learners may receive some classroom teaching; but what distinguishes them from their peers could be their sense of responsibility which enables them to accept their crucial part within the learning process. Viewing learner autonomy as learner responsibility here looks quite similar to self-reliance presented above; because both these understandings assume that learner autonomy requires the learner to take the primary responsibility of learning.

For a few participants, learner autonomy with the sense of responsibility may sometimes extend beyond educational borders and learning-related issues and could resurge within the socio-political context. Teacher1 defined an autonomous learner as “a person who sees himself/herself responsible for the society where s/he lives and makes great and active effort to bring progress” (TFK). This clearly represents a broad and indispensable meaning of learner autonomy or learner responsibility. Taking

responsibility for learning does not seem to be counted as the end goal of being autonomous as being responsible and autonomous involves a far important element of taking responsibility for our shared destiny. This view makes a tacit but important reference to an imperative function of education to help people become more caring and committed towards their own lives and the lives of others.

The third notion which recurred several times throughout the analysis in relation to learner autonomy was 'personal decision'. This idea seemed to stem from the belief that accepting responsibility for learning lies on the personal decision learners can make. As ST19GD said: "Being an autonomous learner is a decision that belongs to individuals themselves and not something that can be imposed on them" (TFK). Similarly, ST15GC pointed out that "autonomy is not something given to us by the surroundings or society, rather an individual can decide whether or not to become autonomous" (TFK). This view chiefly attaches learner autonomy to the subjective will and determination of the learner and assumes that as far as these internal/psychological attributes are present; then the learner becomes capable of being autonomous. One has to remember though that decisions about being autonomous cannot be made separately from others or from your surroundings; as there are often unavoidable factors that can shape the way personal decisions are made. This point was slightly touched upon by ST5GA who argued that "becoming an independent learner is a personal decision but the environment affects you to a great extent". This quote explains that while the subjective choice of the learner has importance, there are always external forces, beyond personal control, that shape our (non)autonomous thoughts and actions.

This leads us to the concept of 'freedom' which also sprang from the dataset which seems particularly relevant to the idea of autonomy as personal decision. Several participants, mainly students, looked at learner autonomy as freedom through which learners gain the opportunity to make learning choices. Like self-reliance, two divergent views emerged with regard to the concept of freedom. Some participants referred to learner autonomy as absolute freedom or freedom without constraints. According to ST8GB, "learner autonomy is about learning freely without constraints" (TFK). Other

participants, however, associated learner autonomy with having a certain degree of freedom or partial freedom. As SA5 commented:

For me, learner autonomy means that students have some freedom or choice to do the kind of work they like. This does not mean that students have full freedom to do everything they like but they have some . . . role and power to make decisions regarding their learning.

This makes evident that learners are less likely to be totally free within formal learning contexts. Therefore, exercising autonomy should take place within the limited freedom available. However, the presence of such conditional freedom seems essential for learners to feel allowed to utilise their autonomous possibilities.

One interesting understanding assigned to learner autonomy that particularly surfaced among teachers and senior administrators was the idea of 'complexity and multidimensionality'. Several participants described learner autonomy as a process which entails a great deal of complexity and multidimensionality. Teacher1 had the following view:

Autonomy is a difficult and complex process which starts at the early educational stages and continues as individuals grow. This process also includes an ongoing struggle that human beings have to engage with to attain their autonomy which is achievable not only within the educational life but also outside that process. (TFK)

The above extract highlights part of the challenges that may accompany the journey towards autonomy. The journey itself was described as long and non-stop from which internal and external confrontations have to be encountered. Within this journey, there are certain interconnected dimensions that can influence one another and which together can shape the entire process. Multidimensionality as another feature of learner autonomy was illustrated by Teacher1 as follows:

Learner autonomy is a multidimensional process rather than a single-dimensional one. While the learner creates one of the key

dimensions of this process, the other dimensions are the teacher and the educational institution. Whenever a problem occurs to one of these major elements, there will be repercussions on others . . . as these elements are directly related to one another. (TFK)

Another teacher tried to explain this multidimensional process through an analogy as follows:

The process of autonomous learning is like a car. That is, if you have everything ready but if the tyres⁹ [learners] are not in a good position you cannot travel. If you have everything ready but there's no fuel (the educational facilities), then you can't do it. If everything is ready but the driver who is like the teacher in the case of learner autonomy isn't ready, then you can't do anything with the car. So this [learner autonomy] is a very interrelated process of learning which needs to be cared about and considered. (Teacher5)

The above statements, which interestingly came from the teachers and senior administrators, highlight that learner autonomy has an intricate and multi-layered nature that involves not one party but multiple interdependent parties. This understanding of learner autonomy tends to conflict with certain views presented above, specifically with those which regarded learner autonomy as total reliance on oneself, as absolute freedom or as purely personal decision/choice that learners can make. Altogether, the findings have covered significant theoretical areas which seem to be, more or less, related to learner autonomy. The findings reflect the combinations of various perspectives that came out from the different groups of the participants.

⁹ This participant was approached again to make sure what exactly he meant by 'tyres' and 'fuel'.

5.2.2 The Relevance of Learner Autonomy

Following the analysis of the meanings of learner autonomy, significant attention was given to the value of learner autonomy. The overwhelming majority of the participants placed different and positive values on learner autonomy. While there was a general agreement over the importance of learner autonomy, there emerged certain areas where learner autonomy was particularly strongly appreciated.

To begin with, a great number of the participants considered learner autonomy as an effective approach through which the learner, instead of being significantly reliant on the teacher, becomes an active participant within the learning process. Teacher4 described the value of learner autonomy this way:

The importance of learner autonomy lies in the fact that students through their personal and autonomous efforts try to make sense of and discover the things they aim for. As a result, students tend to assign different and special values to these things. (TFK)

Teacher4 continued to say that:

As a result of autonomous learning attempts, students may make mistakes along their way and this can greatly help them to learn from their mistakes and to find out new things. Overall, these tell us how important and effective autonomous learning could be. (TFK)

Whereas without question, autonomous learning requires more energy and persistence, the effectiveness that learners may experience from their autonomous endeavour and the sense of achievement that students may feel when reaching to knowledge on their own may overshadow the hardships resulting from such kind of learning. With respect to this, several students acknowledged that their autonomous learning experiences and activities have been quite influential, especially when compared with teacher-controlled learning. ST7GB described her experience as follows:

Autonomous learning can effectively shape your desires and abilities. Through a research project that I carried out independently, I felt that my learning desires have significantly

increased as during this time I came across so many things that I could never have learnt from the teacher as s/he may never bring these things forward and as you may never find them within the limited material we study. (TFK)

From this, one can see a form of learning which entails active involvement of the learner which could ultimately contribute to the process and quality of learning students engage with; and another form of learning which tends to be confined to knowledge transmission whereby the learner receives certain amount of information from the teacher. For many participants, teachers cannot be relied on as the only source to be learned and educated from as teachers themselves may have limited capacities. This was another reason that autonomy was found indispensable. As ST20GD pointed out:

Being autonomous is highly important because when you fully rely on the teacher, you may not acquire the necessary knowledge that you need as the teacher for different reasons might not be able to go deep into the subjects . . . For that reason, the student should seek and explore things independently and this enables him/her to obtain a good knowledge and experience as well as an ability to present new things. (TFK)

Although this view was more prominent among students, there were teachers and senior administrators who also acknowledged that. For example, SA2 highlighted that:

Despite the things students can get from teachers, for students to go out of this circle and to cast a wider net to learn autonomously can be really important as this way students don't entirely depend on their teachers whose knowledge could have limitations. (TFK)

The following quote by Teacher3 also illustrates that:

Teachers can't cover everything. This is why, in many cases, some clever students who rather work independently might be able to get to the information before the instructors themselves. This is

why, during the discussions, such students may come up with something that might even be new for the instructors.

Apart from being considered as an effective approach, learner autonomy was also seen as a means to cultivate creativity and critical thinking which possibly allow students to be more creative and critical with regard to the knowledge they learn and acquire. According to ST14GC, “autonomous endeavour essentially helps the learner to develop their own ideas and perspectives which may also lead to creativity which should be an integral part of university learning” (TFK). Along these lines, Teacher6 expressed her view as follows:

[Autonomy] is the most important thing about learning, because in autonomous learning you become more creative in many ways because you are depending on your own thinking and your own ideas. So you learn more and become more creative. You will have more questions and you try to look for these things independently.

Besides creative abilities which were thought can grow with autonomous experiences, several participants also believed that learner autonomy can help learners to open their minds and to think critically. For SA3, “a learner who has the ability to think autonomously always looks at different subjects with a critical eye and has his/her own views on different issues” (TFK). SA2 had a similar view, saying that:

Through autonomous learning process, students could transcend the restricted boundaries of their learning and could find themselves within a broader world of learning where they can expand their imagination, understanding and critical thinking which may enable them to question and critique the things they learn.
(TFK)

These abilities of being creative, open-minded and critical were seen as key features of being autonomous which altogether seem to incorporate creative and critical elements into the ways students think and learn. Along with these intrinsic benefits which students may reap during their formal learning, the value of learner autonomy was

extended to beyond educational domain to include other personal and social advantages.

For several participants, being autonomous could grant students better employment opportunities after their education. ST29GG reported that “while autonomous learning can increase your knowledge and information, it will also give you a greater opportunity to get a job and make a living” (TFK). Meanwhile, for students to efficiently manage their future careers, autonomy was also considered as playing a vital role. As ST21GD said:

As we all prepare ourselves for a future career, being autonomous at university is highly demanded; because without trying to rely on ourselves and to stand on our feet at this stage, we may not become such individuals who can properly run and serve their areas of work. (TFK)

Depending on the different subjects students study at university, their future careers and tasks may vary. ST16GC reported:

Our attempts to learn autonomously are quite essential; because tomorrow when we become teachers, our responsibility will be about educating a generation of students. Therefore, we should have adequate ability and knowledge to burden such a massive responsibility of preparing a thoughtful and well-educated generation that we and the whole society will be proud of. (TFK)

These comments illustrate that autonomous abilities and responsible attitudes students can develop during their university life will have consequential impacts on their qualification, performance and commitment within their work and social life contexts. This leads us to the last point of this section where learner autonomy was valued on social grounds.

Seven participants regarded learner autonomy as socially relevant. ST9GB demonstrated that “students who pay great attention to autonomous learning don’t simply leave university with a degree but also with extensive readiness to make positive and

productive contributions to their society” (TFK). Talking about this, Teacher1 argued that “bringing about a more vibrant society and eliminating socially and politically undesirable phenomena can only be achieved by a generation of students who can think autonomously and take autonomous initiatives” (TFK). This attributes a rather social and political character to autonomous learners without whom a society may struggle to develop and to overcome existential challenges. As ST29GG underlined: “The lack sense of responsibility on the side of students towards their learning will have negative impacts on social progress” (TFK).

Overall, similar to the analysis of the previous section which indicated that, as a concept, learner autonomy accommodates different interpretations, this section showed that there are multiple values that can be attributed to learner autonomy within higher education. Learner autonomy was valued for practical and personal motives as well as for educational and socio-political reasons.

5.3 The Roles and Practices/Experiences of Different Parties

Under this broad theme, different categories and subcategories emerged, particularly with relation to the roles and practices/behaviours of the different parties. Under each category below, the expected roles of students, teachers and the institution will be presented followed by certain actual roles/experiences and practices/behaviours of each party.

5.3.1 Perspectives on Students and their Roles

5.3.1.1 Students’ Expected Roles

When asked about what roles students currently play with respect to learner autonomy, many participants made reference to expected roles students are deemed to play. Within these, two ideas turned out important: *students as responsibility takers and students as initiators of their learning*.

Responsibility taking was one of the key issues which extensively emerged throughout the data and was previously addressed with respect to the meaning of learner

autonomy. Regarding this section, responsibility taking was conceived as part of the expected roles of students. The idea of students as responsibility takers was mainly used to denote that students are ultimately expected to take charge for their learning. As ST21GD said: “The prime responsibility rests with the students; therefore, they shouldn’t totally depend on the teacher and on the syllabus, but should rather try willingly and autonomously to study and learn” (TFK). Likewise, Teacher2 had the following view:

Students should take care of their own learning and feel that they have the responsibility for what they learn. They shouldn’t think that only teachers are responsible for their learning. They can depend on their teachers as a guide as someone that tells them the right way but then they should be the ones to lead.

The above comments do not exempt teachers or concerned others from the responsibilities they have; but make clear that responsibilities may vary according to the positions different parties hold. The fact that learners occupy the central position within the learning process, the utmost responsibility was ascribed to them. On that account, Teacher1 emphasised that:

Students need to be aware of their duties and responsibilities as well as their rights; because once they realise these things, they will certainly play a positive and vital role within the learning process and will take steps towards autonomy. (TFK)

This implies that the higher level of awareness students have about their roles and responsibilities, the more likely they are to take responsibility for their learning. On the contrary, students who fail to recognise their learning responsibilities, they possibly consider their teachers as primarily responsible for their learning which seems to conflict the idea of learner autonomy. Interestingly, however, among the students interviewed, around half of them acknowledged that learning requires students to take the responsibility and not to account others responsible. For example, ST15GC maintained that:

When students graduate without being able to successfully benefit from their university experience, then no one puts the blame on their teachers; instead, students are themselves blamed for this as they, first and foremost, are responsible for their own learning. This suggests that students should carry the burden of their learning. (TFK)

The above comments, which represent the perceptions of many participants, seem to mainly look at responsibility from the perspective of learning which can undeniably be important. Nonetheless, there were few participants who perceived responsibility from a different angle. These participants turned out to be oriented towards broader and more critical dimensions to learner responsibility – responsibility for a shared future and for bringing constructive change to the institutional and social conditions. Respectively, ST14GC argued that:

University students have an important responsibility towards the society. This means that those who come to university should feel that they have a burden on their shoulders and that they are expected to go back to the society with a kind of knowledge and education that enable them to actively participate in community building and development. (TFK)

More specifically, ST24GE focused on the critical role of students within the institutional context as follows:

When there are doubts and concerns about our entire system of education and the roles teachers and institutions play, then students shouldn't become part of that system; rather, they should try to play a more responsible and constructive role to make positive change. (TFK)

These apparently place learners not as individuals who are only concerned about their learning responsibility, but as responsible agents who take necessary actions and initiatives to improve their conditions within their institution and beyond. Without

question, both these dimensions of taking responsibility are important; and when combined, they may have greater implications on the personal, educational and social circumstances.

Similar to the two distinct views about students as responsibility takers, students were also expected to be the initiators both of their learning and of the institutional changes. These two views mainly surfaced among students. Some believed that steps towards autonomy significantly depend on the personal initiatives students take. As ST12GC said: “When students start to take initiatives for their learning, the situation of learner autonomy will certainly improve” (TFK). The emphasis here was more on students taking independent initiatives so that they can effectively achieve their learning goals. On the other hand, some others understood taking initiatives more broadly. For example, ST30GG noted that “enhancing the quality of learning at university requires self-initiated acts and attempts from students to bring changes within themselves first and then at the institutional level with regard to the constraints that exist” (TFK). Here, students are not expected to remain inactive assuming that initiatives come from others or that they only take initiatives for their learning; but along with that, initiatives need to be taken by students to bring personal transformations within themselves as well as transformations at higher institutional levels.

5.3.1.2 Autonomous Learning Experiences and Behaviours

Under this category, the findings were derived from the stated and observed autonomous experiences and behaviours of the students. The former mainly came out when the students were asked to reflect upon their autonomous learning experiences during the course of higher education. Respectively, many students compared their autonomous learning experiences at university with those of school. Regardless of what was argued earlier that most students enter higher education without adequate practical experience of autonomy, of the twenty students who commented on this, the majority declared that they have comparatively had positive autonomous experiences

within higher education. Below, ST15GC describes how different her experience has been since she has joined the university:

There are many differences between school and university education especially with respect to the fact that students at university have a better chance for autonomous learning than school . . . and my university experience tells me that I have been far more autonomous with my learning and decision-making. (TFK)

This view found resonance among many other student-participants. For example, ST5GA revealed the extent they relied on their teachers at school and how their experience has changed at university:

In school, you just let yourself in the hands of teachers and they teach you whatever they want; but here you feel you come first and you let yourself go and there is enough freedom for this and when you fall you try to stand up again which means you learn how to be a responsible and to do things by yourself.

According to these comments, there are two main reasons that the students felt that they are more autonomous at university. First, compared to school, the students thought that better opportunities are available at university for them to exercise some kind of freedom and autonomy. The second reason that the students turned out to be more autonomous seems to be related to the understanding that just because they are university students, who are customarily expected to be different from school students, they start acting more autonomously. Nevertheless, for some students, their early years of university were not remarkably different from their school experience. Therefore, for these students, their autonomous experiences started to emerge at later stages of higher education. ST6GA expressed his experience as follows:

When I came here, a lot of things happened that didn't happen in high school . . . First when I came here I thought everything I learn the university should direct me should tell me . . . but later on

after two years of my university experience . . . I learned how to be an autonomous student.

ST27GE shared a similar experience:

During the first two years, my whole attention was given to the material the teacher was giving to us. Therefore, whenever a question or a topic came out to be discussed, I had no clue and this made me feel really ashamed. But now since I try hard on my own to read and learn, I feel that my abilities have grown. (TFK)

One interpretation of this could be that students, at the beginning levels of higher education, are likely to perpetuate previous learning habits and a culture of dependence accumulated at school. However, as students continue their journey through higher education, they may undergo change and become more aware of their learning situations which may subsequently enable them to question and deconstruct their former learning traditions. The experiences mentioned before suggest that the student-participants, particularly towards the last two years of their university study, have gained the ability to make movements towards autonomous work.

To show clearer evidence of their autonomous acts and experiences, several students referred to certain autonomous tasks they managed to do on their own, such as preparing posters and conducting research projects. The following extract by ST29GG explains an example of this:

For one of the subject that we study, I tried to prepare a poster. Depending on my personal abilities and efforts, I was able to finish and present the poster. Later, I realised that I have learned many good things during preparing that poster. This proves the importance of autonomous learning and shows that students who seek and discover knowledge independently can learn more things than just relying on the teacher. (TFK)

Doing research was referred to as a significant manifestation of autonomous actions taken by students. There were indications that the desire for research has considerably

increased. On the one hand, this was linked to the growing interest for research on the part of students. As Teacher4 pointed out below:

Students within our department are really active. For example . . . our third year students have become three different groups to each carry out a research. They have come to us to help them with their research proposals. Now, they are doing their research with all the costs that they themselves cover but with research outcomes which seem to be at a very good level. (TFK)

The rising desire for research among students was also linked to the fact that both the individual faculties and the university itself have started to hold annual student conferences and events where students are expected to present their research papers and other projects. This was seen as a good step to encourage students to produce and carry out works on their own. As SA3 mentioned:

Four of our students have been accepted to present their papers at a big student conference that the university intends to open. This can be seen as a significant move towards motivating students to pay greater attention to autonomous projects. (TFK)

Apart from the autonomous learning experiences which mainly emerged from the focus groups and interviews, the classroom observations also revealed certain learning behaviours which seemed to embody autonomous behaviours among students. From the five classroom observations conducted, four of them displayed forms of behaviour where the students played an active and participatory role. The following extract shows an example of this:

Towards the second half of the class, one student took over the role of the teacher to present a seminar. While the student was presenting the seminar, the teacher became part of the classroom. The seminar was about the way teachers should act and behave within the classroom. While the student criticised those teachers who don't give the opportunity to learners to play their role, she

also encouraged the students to rely more on themselves and less on the teacher for learning. (Classroom Observation 5)

Another classroom observation revealed another example of students' autonomous learning behaviours: "After presenting some aspects of the classroom topic, the teacher gave the chance to a student to show his video presentation he had prepared to further explain a part of the classroom subject". (Classroom Observation 4). Whereas these two extracts could represent autonomous behaviours individual students exhibited, there were also examples of the students leading their own learning activities through more group-based and collaborative ways. Observations of both classrooms 3 and 4 demonstrated that a great deal of the classroom was about the students collaboratively engaging with each other through group works with little intervention from the teachers. While the teachers remained as facilitators and observers during these group-work tasks, the students worked together to reach certain answers and understandings they looked for. The autonomous behaviour here was more like the property of the groups rather than of the individual students.

Despite the fact that there were certain autonomous experiences and behaviours found among the students, there was a view particularly outstanding amongst the teachers that these autonomous actions and behaviours can only be noticed from a minority of students. As Teacher2 said:

There are few students who are active and autonomous in their learning and this can be seen from the ideas and knowledge they have and from the participation they have inside the classroom and from the critical questions they often ask.

This implies that the majority of students were considered by the teachers as behaving less autonomously and were rather dependent on their teachers for what they intend to learn.

5.3.2 Perspectives on Teachers and their Roles

5.3.2.1 Teachers' Expected Roles

As with students' expected roles, the descriptions that the participants provided about teachers and their roles significantly touched upon the roles teachers were perceived to play to enable students to experience their autonomy and assume their learning responsibility. The roles presented here are rather abstract or conceptual, but are also expected to be manifested through actual practices and behaviours. There was a widespread agreement among the participants of various groups that teachers have crucial roles and responsibilities to take. SA4 expressed a strong view on this as follows:

Teachers should take roles and responsibilities for everything related to students, ranging from enhancing their knowledge and learning, helping them becoming well-behaved and well-educated as well as developing their sense of awareness and responsibility. All these can help university students to be academically successful and to become conscious, vigilant and responsible individuals. (TFK)

One can see that enormous responsibilities placed on teachers here. The key argument made seems to be that teachers occupy a central position as regards the process of learner autonomy and responsibility. This view was largely supported by the teacher-participants. For example, Teacher1 explained that "as the whole learning-teaching process works within a multidimensional framework and as teachers constitute a major component within that, then they play a fundamental role with respect to directing the entire process of learner autonomisation" (TFK). Teacher1 added that this could only be achieved:

When teachers liberate themselves from the conception that they are the only source of information on which students should rely and also when they come to accept and respect learners as equal partners. This can then provide a thorough grounding for learner autonomy. (TFK)

The important attention given to teachers and their roles above seems to stem from an understanding that within formal educational contexts, learner autonomy cannot escape teacher influences; for teachers are always an important constituent of the multifaceted construct of learner autonomy. This should not be taken to mean that teachers are responsible for everything related to students as well as their learning and autonomy. The data revealed that the emphasis was on certain roles and responsibilities that were seen to enable teachers to take autonomy-supportive positions. Teachers were expected to act as ‘motivators’, ‘guides’, ‘facilitators’ and ‘awareness-raisers’. While these terms may have distinctive features, they also seem to be complementary and overlapping and there were cases where these terms were used together. As SA2 said:

Whenever, we, as teachers within the learning process, try to guide, support, motivate our students and facilitate and expand their learning opportunities, then they will try with a great deal of desire and enthusiasm to gather and learn information and knowledge autonomously. (TFK)

From this extract, one can see that autonomy-supportive teachers are perceived to enact a combination of roles. The roles ascribed to teachers here seem to collide with some traditional roles, such as teachers as ‘all-knowing experts’ and ‘knowledge transmitters’. At the same time, the roles assigned to teachers sound consistent with the ones attributed to students before from which students, not teachers, were conceived as chiefly responsible for their own learning.

Almost half of the participants believed that for students to take an autonomous stance, they need to be persistently motivated by their teachers. The role of the teacher as ‘motivator’ was given a special emphasis by the students. As ST27GE emphasised: “We expect that our teachers, instead of becoming a constraining factor, act as strong motivators to enhance students’ autonomy and their autonomous capacities” (TFK). Moreover, ST3GA commented that:

Motivation is very important that should be given by teachers. So the teachers should not only try to make us follow them and their

rules, but should try to motivate us so that we try to learn things more independently.

There was a feeling among the students that even learners who have a capacity for autonomy may still need to be motivated by their teachers to take autonomous actions; because, learners, sometimes for a range of reasons, may hold back or find unnecessary to act autonomously. Respectively, ST3GA added that “even when you have a desire, will and confidence to become independent, but when teachers don’t encourage you, then you may not work independently”. The comments made regarding teachers working as stimulating agents do not expect teachers to give autonomy as a gift to students; rather, teachers were demanded to support and encourage the (already) existing autonomous capacities among students that can be manifested through certain ways of thinking and behaving.

Along with the motivating role of teachers, a group of fourteen participants found that teachers should also work as ‘guides’. The role of teachers as guides was used to mean that they are responsible to provide students with necessary directions that can lead to autonomy. This point gained more attention by the student and teacher participants. According to ST20GD, “the teacher has the responsibility of guiding students to the right path of learning. Afterwards, the decision of whether or not to walk through that path belongs to students themselves” (TFK). From the same focus group, ST21GD added: “It is true that students are capable of autonomous work; but given that the teachers are more experienced, they can give students a helping hand and guide them through” (TFK). This implies that while students can take the journey towards autonomy, the journey should not necessarily be individualistic taken by the student on his/her own. This journey involves others, especially the teacher who was conceived here as a guide or navigator who can accompany and steer the journey to a right (educative) path.

The recognition by the students that teachers need to operate as guides seems to be important for one main reason. Those students who see their teachers as guides are less likely to expect their teachers to do everything for them. An equally important point belongs to teachers to accept playing such a role; because not all teachers might be comfortable with abdicating certain previously known roles and embracing new ones.

However, of the six teachers interviewed, five of them clearly suggested that teachers need to work as guides. As Teacher1 stated:

The teacher can play a major role in directing students towards autonomy . . . This doesn't mean that the teacher should play every role related to students' learning, but s/he has a very important role . . . of providing students with some guiding tools enabling them to take autonomous steps. (TFK)

Together with the above roles, teachers were also viewed as learning 'facilitators'. Teachers as facilitators were expected to facilitate the autonomous initiatives and actions students take. ST29GG highlighted that "when a student wants to work on an idea or a project autonomously, then the teacher has to facilitate such steps and provide his/her full support" (TFK). The role of the facilitator here overlaps with the one of the motivator previously addressed. Besides this, teachers as facilitators were also considered responsible for creating a facilitating environment within which students can feel that there are opportunities for them to become more active players and to make autonomous choices and that their teachers are present to facilitate these steps. For example, ST27GE argued that teachers have an important role of "creating opportunities for students to freely participate and express their views; because this can be a better way to inspire students and to make them feel that they are an effective part of the learning process" (TFK).

The previous comment was part of an explicit expectation that the students had from their teachers to create an atmosphere where students can feel enough freedom and space to fulfill their potential. The responsibility the facilitator was supposed to carry included facilitating or allowing students to take their roles rather than denying them of all the major roles and responsibilities which could have damaging impacts on students. As ST22GD highlighted: "When teachers keep everything for themselves without allowing students to take any role, then this can undermine students' interests and desires for learning" (TFK). For this reason, teachers were encouraged to permit students to assume their roles and responsibilities. This may also leave teachers free to concentrate and use their energy on other educational responsibilities.

Last but not least, teachers were further expected to function as ‘awareness-raisers’, helping students become more conscious of their potential for autonomy, the necessity of taking autonomous actions and also of their roles and responsibilities. The following extract represents the view of several teachers who shed light on this:

Teachers should also work on raising students’ awareness about the importance and benefits of autonomous learning. So once students are made aware of the advantages of autonomous learning . . . then they have to take the responsibility to respond positively to this . . . [and] become responsible for their own learning. (Teacher3)

Another teacher said something similar:

We should try to let the students be aware of the importance of independent learning because students are unaware of these things and they just want the degree and marks except few who say that we need improvement and be developed like other societies. (Teacher6)

These participants found a strong link between the feeling of responsibility students can develop and the degree of awareness they have. The fact that this was mainly raised by the teachers, one could argue that this possibly emanated from their belief that students lack awareness of learner autonomy. This seems to contradict with what was found earlier that the student-participants generally had a good understanding about the meaning and value of learner autonomy which could also be a good indicator of their level of awareness. This, however, neither indicates that students are equally aware of this nor does make the issue of raising awareness less important. Awareness raising could be an ongoing process led by teachers as part of their roles to support and encourage students to take ownership and accountability for their learning.

Overall, the data showed a clear acknowledgement of the vital roles teachers can play. The distinct roles identified were perceived by the participants to contribute to encouraging and supporting learner autonomy provided that they are practically

exercised as part of classroom and pedagogical practices and behaviours. The analysis of this will be presented next.

5.3.2.2 Teacher Practices and Behaviours

Following the previous section which identified certain expectations placed upon teachers, the analysis of this section will rely on the stated and observed practices and behaviours of the teachers as well as the other views expressed regarding how teachers have tried to practically fulfill these expectations. The six teachers interviewed made explicit reference to certain behaviours and practices that they endorsed with the aim of paving the way for students to drive their own learning. Noticeably, most of the things the teachers mentioned as part of their practices appeared to closely match the expected roles introduced above. The following extract shows certain aspects of these:

For me, students' participation is very important; therefore, I often encourage them to actively participate . . . This has made most of the students to have a good participation and to express their own ideas openly and freely. I encourage students to learn more independently. Sometimes, I ask them and give them books to read about the topics we discuss inside the classroom. I also ask them to do small research projects and to find answers to open-ended questions and scenarios. (Teacher2)

Based on his statement, one could see that encouragement seems to occupy a great deal of his practices not just inside the classroom where as he explained students are encouraged to be active players and are given the opportunity to become so, but also outside the classroom where they are encouraged to pursue reading and other independent tasks and projects that may allow students to have more control over their learning. Teacher4 described his teaching behaviours and practices this way:

I have really tried to give students a good freedom so that they criticise, question and participate. I continuously encourage them to critically look at the subjects we deal with inside the classroom.

Also, we often try to work as groups which has brought some liveliness to the classroom and which many times leads to debates and competition among the students. Besides, sometimes I ask them to prepare mini-projects and to write reports instead of exams so that students go and search for things and to be able to write them. (TFK)

While Teacher4 shared similarities with Teacher2, the former displayed other relevant aspects. For example, encouraging students to question and criticise things could be one way to help students develop abilities to think critically and to come up with their own ideas and insights on the issues that matter to them. Notably, Teacher4 seemed to be aware that giving students enough freedom constitutes a crucial factor that determines the level that students engage with these activities. Like Teacher2, Teacher4 was also aware of the importance of using other means of assessment which require students to take more active and responsible part instead of simply relying on traditional exams which may encourage rote-learning.

Apart from these, there were other stated practices and behaviours emerged from the data. For instance, two teachers described their ways of giving roles to students to help them realise that they play a central part as regards their learning. As Teacher3 pointed out:

I have tried to use different methods to make students become more involved in the classroom activities, such as giving them different roles to play and asking them to assess their participation and performance and that of their fellow students. So my focus has been on giving roles to the students and making them feel that they have a position and responsibility to take in the learning process.

While assigning such roles to students indicates that greater roles and responsibilities go to students, this could also be a sign of recognition on the part the teacher that his/her students are capable of assuming these responsibilities. For this reason, this teacher appeared to be more concerned with ensuring that students are provided with enough

motivation and facilitation to undertake such roles. Moreover, Teacher1 explained his role through an analogy as follows:

I have always tried to apply this Chinese proverb which says: Don't catch me a fish but teach me how to fish. I don't want to give fish to my students; instead, I try to show them how to catch for themselves. So among them, there are some who learn how to fish and there are others who still rely on me and want me to catch for them. (TFK)

When deconstructed, this analogy seems to indicate that the teacher has tried not to act as knowledge purveyor providing students with some content to be internalised and reproduced; instead, his focus has been on showing or guiding students to learn things autonomously. According to him, while this approach has enabled some to be major participants of their learning and to learn things on their own, there are still others who are unwilling to walk that road. What seems to be overlooked here was the recognition that students are already capable of being autonomous (or catching fish) in their own ways. The analysis above illustrates the practices the teachers mentioned they employ to encourage learner autonomy. An interesting finding was that there appeared consistency between the stated practices and the observed ones. Most teacher interviewees actually demonstrated such practices through their classroom teaching.

The examples mentioned earlier¹⁰ with regard to classroom observations displayed that the teachers were mainly acting as facilitators and role-givers. The following are other examples noted during the classroom observations which elucidate some other behaviours from the teachers:

Part of the classroom was allocated to discussing an independent project the students were carrying out. Students seemed to have many questions about this and the teacher was trying to explain

¹⁰ See section 5.3.1.3

and guide students to how to prepare the project. (Classroom observation 2)

The teacher brought some books to the classroom he had bought from an international book fair and showed them to the students. He asked the students whether they visited the book fair or not. Afterwards, the teacher started encouraging students to read books and he highlighted the importance of reading as the key to self-education. (Classroom observation 5)

Of these two extracts, the first depicts the teacher as someone who provides students with advice and guidance. Regarding the second, the teacher seemed more concerned about motivating students and elevating their awareness so that they pay greater attention to self-learning.

So far, the analysis of this section has been introduced based on certain classroom situations and the descriptions the teacher-participants provided about their behaviours and practices. The following part will bring to the surface the views other participants had about teachers. Apparently, there was some degree of consensus that there are two types of teachers within their institution. A group of teachers who care about learner autonomy and they work hard to help and encourage students towards this direction. On the other hand, concerns were raised that there are other teachers who are either unaware of or unwilling to pay attention to learner autonomy. As Teacher4 acknowledged:

We can divide teachers between two groups. One group includes an older generation of teachers who belong to eighties and nineties. This generation of teachers still adopt traditional styles and hugely rely on lecturing. These teachers keep most of the roles to themselves while they confine the role of students to memorising the stuff the teacher gives and then passing the exam. Without doubt, this is a very closed style and leaves no scope for the autonomous work of students. Yet, there are other teachers

whom I think comprise 40-45 per cent now, they pay important attention to autonomous learning and try to encourage students on this. (TFK)

Likewise, SA2 observed that “there are some teachers who give attention to and work on the idea of autonomous learning; but this can only be noticed from those teachers who are innovative and who always seek to bring forth new ideas” (TFK). These comments were echoed by the majority of students reaffirming the distinction made between the two categories of teachers. The following extract by ST24GE represents the views of several students:

We have two groups of teachers . . . There are some who have a positive role and always encourage students to become autonomous and self-reliant. Meanwhile, there are others who play a negative role . . . and they neither give any importance to learner autonomy nor do they encourage students towards this end. (TFK)

Students expressed their appreciation for some of their teachers and for the roles and practices they demonstrate which were believed to place various desirable impacts on their autonomy and the autonomous efforts they put. Nevertheless, the emphasis of the students appeared to be mainly on the motivating and supporting roles the teachers exhibited. Below, ST20GD described how some of their teachers behave:

Some teachers have made their lessons so interesting that students feel energised to persistently study, read and seek out for more things to learn. So the way they teach have become an important motive for students to love the subject and make a great effort. (TFK)

ST14GC gave an example to illustrate the crucial role some teachers play and how they have become a stimulating factor for students to eagerly pursue learning:

Our teachers have had vital roles and some of them have always tried to keep us motivated so that we seek knowledge and information and curiously pursue reading. For example, one of our

teachers has published a book entitled 'Cultivating a Reading Culture' which was a good incentive for us to read more and to chase information and learning. (TFK)

Some teachers, either for their positive or negative roles, were mentioned by name across the different focus groups. Of the six teacher-participants, four of them were referred to as supportive and facilitative to students and to their autonomous actions and initiatives. What ST27GE said below shows an example of this:

We need teachers like [Teacher2] who has created a healthy environment where students feel free. He has also tried to avoid exams as the only way of assessment allowing students to depend on their abilities and thinking to prepare small projects. Besides, he is always ready to help us and support our moves forward. (TFK)

Despite the fact that the majority of the students acknowledged that they are happy with the roles, practices and behaviours of some teachers, there was also a feeling of dissatisfaction expressed by the students concerning the ways some other teachers act and behave. This somehow draws a line between autonomy-supportive and controlling teachers. The latter group was perceived as part of the factors that create constraining conditions for learner autonomy which will be addressed later.

5.3.3 Perspectives on the Institution and its Roles

5.3.3.1 Expected Institutional Roles

Similar to students and teachers, the data also revealed a number of roles the institution/university was expected to take. The roles attributed to the institution(s) of higher education were more concerned with providing a suitable environment for the development of learner autonomy and encouraging both students and teachers to pay greater attention to autonomous learning and thinking. The majority of the participants believed that the institution has the responsibility of creating a convenient condition where learner autonomy can be exercised and developed. Some participants gave a

general description about the importance of an appropriate environment for learner autonomy that the university was required to create. For example, according to ST21GD:

The university plays a central and dramatic role as regards helping students with their learning through making a suitable environment. It is important for students to feel that the environment where they study is suitable and supportive for them to learn autonomously. (TFK)

Similarly, SA3 had the following comment:

Fostering the sense of autonomy for learning needs a convenient and healthy place and environment that suits university education where students can see opportunities for autonomous work. This issue matters significantly and should be among the major priorities. (TFK)

Other participants were more specific about what they meant by a convenient environment. For instance, several participants highlighted the need for providing good library services, reading spaces and good access to internet. As ST18GD emphasised: “The university is responsible to bring about an atmosphere with all facilities and services that are necessary for someone to learn autonomously. This includes providing a good library, proper reading space where students can study and read” (TFK). Likewise, SA2 stressed that:

The first step that the university has to take is to provide an appropriate environment for students to feel that university has really a different atmosphere from school. This could itself become a strong factor and motivator for self-study and self-learning. Along with this, students must be provided with a good library and place so as to spend their free time reading and educating themselves. (TFK)

Altogether, these comments make clear that building such a condition with the required facilities and services are the basic needs for learner autonomy which could have practical influences on both students and teachers. This also implicitly indicates that without these things being made available, exercising and/or developing autonomy within institutional contexts could face formidable challenges. Talking about this, SA5 described the current situation within their institution as follows:

The environment is suitable but not perfect as we have limited facilities . . . We don't have a very good internet network here and our library is not fully functioning . . . So there should be improvements done in terms of providing more resources, more books and better internet access . . . However, within the limited facilities we have, there is an opportunity for students to become autonomous because nowadays almost everyone has access to internet which could be used as a major source.

Part of what this participant said was at odds with what many participants concurred that the existing environment unfits learner autonomy. For example, ST9GB said: "Indeed, the present condition isn't reasonably suitable for university study; and talking about autonomous learning, I can't see enough room for students to be autonomous as they lack access to a good library and reading area" (TFK). The lack of a proper environment was considered as another major hindrance to learner autonomy and will be dealt with more broadly later.

Apart from the responsibility of creating a satisfying atmosphere for learner autonomy, the institution was also expected to encourage teachers to place greater emphasis on cultivating the capacity for autonomy among students. This expectation was mostly raised by the teacher-interviewees. According to Teacher4:

There must be mechanisms as part of higher education policy to distinguish between two groups of teachers. Those who give attention to and work on the development of learner autonomy should be better encouraged through concrete and/or abstract rewards; otherwise, such teachers may feel discouraged. (TFK)

Teacher2 put an equal emphasis on this and asserted that “the university has to give opportunity to those teachers who are willing to change and who work quite hard to help their students to be more critical and more independent”. There was a clear voice heard from the teacher-participants that they need more encouragement and support on the side of the institution and authorities so that they can stay determined to create possibilities for students exercise and experience their autonomy.

Moreover, several student and teacher participants assumed that the institution should also ensure that students, especially upon their entrance to higher education, are well aware of the university learning and the roles and responsibilities they are supposed to undertake. The following comment by ST13GC represents this view:

The university has the responsibility to raise students’ level of awareness when they first join the university so that students get a good understanding of why they have come to university and what duties and responsibilities they have towards their own learning.
(TFK)

On the whole, the institution was perceived to hold a two-fold responsibility. The responsibility of creating an appropriate physical environment that allows learner autonomy. Additionally, the institution was also required to put strategies and mechanisms to support both students and teachers towards this direction.

5.3.3.2 Institutional Practices

The previous section uncovered certain expectations placed on the institution. The analysis under this section centres around what practices and policies has the institution incorporated and how they have contributed to the development of learner autonomy. Only few participants tackled this issue and among them were mainly senior administrators. These participants slightly agreed that the institution has tried more or less, through certain practices and strategies, to serve learner autonomy. For example, when asked whether there are strategies and policies to support learner autonomy, one senior administrator replied this way:

There are definitely strategies and that is because the university wants to be innovative, it wants to do research and it wants to move forward and in order to do that, it demands that we have autonomy as learners both for teachers and students. (SA1)

This participant further said:

We have been able to change curriculum . . . to bring in subjects that encourage autonomous learning such as critical thinking, writing and research, research methodology, academic debate . . . and students are covering all the areas that they need in order to understand how to learn autonomously. So Soran university has been really effective and supportive to have these changes brought in. (SA1)

SA4 highlighted other areas which he considered as integrated parts of the institutional strategy to ensure that students are offered the chance to exercise their critical role and to be able to boost their autonomy:

There are strategies and we have seen practical measures taken such as holding student-led conferences, encouraging students to carry out research and organising seminars and workshops according to the demands and needs of students. These are all the outcome of the strategy we have adopted to encourage students to play a leading role in their learning and to start exercising more autonomy. (TFK)

Whereas the above extracts indicate that there are certain attempts at the institutional level intended to integrate autonomous learning with the way students learn at the university, there was also a fear that the existing plans and intentions often remain as narratives without being actually implemented. As Teacher5 said:

These plans are left at the level of draft and at the level of directives . . . Therefore, you can't expect autonomous learning to happen . . . So at the level of ministry and university, learner

autonomy should be dealt with more plans, with more care, with more knowledge and with more strategies to implement.

5.4 Constraints on Learner Autonomy

Within this broad theme, which recurrently emerged from the dataset, constraints on learner autonomy will be addressed. The data revealed various factors that could constrain learner autonomy. These constraining factors are introduced under the following categories.

5.4.1 Student-related Constraints

Given that students were viewed as major players of the entire learning process, it is unsurprising that part of the constraints on learner autonomy were associated with students themselves. The constraints which were believed to be caused by students were diverse ranging from the issues of escaping responsibility to the issues of learning habits and orientations students have. While these problems were largely coupled with students, some of them may also have their roots elsewhere.

As emphasised earlier, bearing responsibility was regarded as an essential ingredient of learner autonomy. Around half of the participants believed that students rather try to find ways to escape that responsibility. This was considered as a serious challenge for learner autonomy. The following extract by ST29GG encapsulates how several student-participants thought about themselves and their fellow students:

We as students have done nothing special towards the direction of autonomy. We are careless and not up to the responsibility expected from university students. We are not passionate and enthusiastic about learning knowledge and we somehow escape from that. (TFK)

Contrary to the expectation previously identified which required students to be responsible for their learning, this quote depicts a rather negative and irresponsible image of students who were therefore partly blamed for the problems encountering

learner autonomy. This seems to be an important acknowledgement which came from the students themselves. This was also clearly resonated with the teacher and senior administrator interviewees. For example, Teacher1 put forward the following picture:

We can see that students have a very low propensity for learning and they spend most of their time on things that have no relevance to their learning. This partly results from the weak sense of responsibility among students who are not such responsible beings to rely on themselves and to pursue learning autonomously. (TFK)

While the absence of responsible feeling was regarded as a major barrier to learner autonomy, few participants tried to provide reasons as to why students take less responsibility for their own learning. One reason was linked to the system of pre-tertiary education. As SA2 said:

We see that students prefer the easy way and ignore the difficult way which entails hard work and taking greater responsibility for developing the quality of their knowledge and education. The reason for that belongs to the kind of education students receive at secondary. (TFK)

Another reason was put forward by ST33GG, saying that “when students see that their teachers and the university itself are complacent about the responsibilities they are expected to carry, then this may consequently make students to be complacent and irresponsible towards their learning” (TFK). This implies that sometimes teachers or other institutional factors contribute to the irresponsible attitudes and behaviours students develop. Teacher1 went even further, arguing that:

All the social, political and party conflicts over the past years have created a state of chaos and complacency which undoubtedly have very badly affected the life and behaviour of this new generation both inside and outside the university life. This means that fleeing from responsibility and commitment towards the society and country has become a norm. The influence of this complacency and

irresponsibility can be obviously noticed within the realms of university education. (TFK)

The aforementioned reasons suggest that taking an irresponsible position on the part of students towards their learning cannot be viewed as an internal issue solely related to students themselves; because, as the participants pointed out, there are multiple external factors that could make them assume an irresponsible attitude and position towards their learning and also towards their social and political duties.

Part of taking an irresponsible position, particularly as regards their learning, seemed to be coupled with the kind of orientations students developed. Students' orientations was another issue that attracted the attention of many participants who viewed students within their institution as primarily oriented towards achieving marks, passing tests and obtaining a certificate instead of being concerned about their learning quality. This was regarded as another obstacle to learner autonomy. When referred to students within their departments, the teachers generally had the feeling that many students "don't care about their learning; they just want to pass the exams and get the certificate" (Teacher2). Additionally, Teacher5 shared that students aim not "to pave the way by themselves and to learn more but to get good marks, to pass and to get a certificate". Identical views were found among several students and senior administrators. According to ST26GE, "a general look at Kurdistan universities tells us that many people join university with the single intention to get a certificate" (TFK). Quite similarly, SA1 highlighted that students often "come to the university with the sole idea that they will receive a certificate at the end".

What participants considered really problematic was that these orientations have become major priorities which have overshadowed other important purposes of learning and of higher education. The argument was that when these things become the ultimate goals of students and of university education, then students are more likely to go for the easy way to obtain these goals and are less likely to take the trouble to try and learn things on their own. What SA2 commented below partly explains this:

When marks become the only goal to be achieved, then learning will be undermined; because students will make every effort to

memorise the limited content given and to repeat that verbatim for the exam to get high marks. Such students are unwilling to try learning anything outside this content. (TFK)

This extract tells that the thirst for marks and exam success may push students towards rote-learning and content-based learning. Such kinds of learning were seen to have become a tradition deeply ingrained within the educational system of Kurdistan which may also make students to be uncomfortable with and resistant to autonomous and self-directed forms of learning. As SA5 noted:

There is a culture here in Kurdistan which is the culture of memorising things. More than 90% of students rely on memorising things rather than trying to understand and critically analyse the subjects they study. So when the teacher gives them something, they will stick to that and try to memorise for their exams. So this culture of memorisation holds students back from stepping towards more independent learning.

Similar to that and with specific reference to content-oriented learning, Teacher5 said the following:

The majority of students don't want to go out of the content that they have and they don't want more than this from their teachers. Most students want to go for the easy things, they want to study easy subjects, they don't want extra stuff out of their content.

Whereas these quotes explicitly highlight the strong tendency students have for rote-learning and content-driven learning, they also implicitly indicate a more passive and dependent position of students. These issues seem to be closely tied to the ones mentioned before. Talking about themselves as students, ST1GA admitted that "we are more like passive receivers. We are just following what we are taught . . . we just read what we are given" (TFK). From the same focus group, ST6GA said: "We are expecting from the teachers to prepare and give us everything. On the other hand, the teachers are expecting us the same thing, they just want us to memorise the stuff that they give".

Based on the analysis of this section, students are the ones to be held responsible for the aforementioned factors which likely create conditions within which the development of learner autonomy could be substantially constrained. The following sections, however, make clear that these factors are interconnected with and influenced by several other pedagogical, institutional and cultural issues.

5.4.2 Teacher-related Constraints

The findings of an earlier section about teacher practices and behaviours established the fact that teachers within this specific context are generally of two groups (i.e. autonomy-supportive teachers and controlling teachers). The latter group of teachers and the way they teach and behave were perceived to bring hindrances to learner autonomy. The analysis of this section will basically introduce those constraints which were thought to be related to such teachers. Of the key obstacles traced back to teachers include the issue of traditional forms of teaching within which other aspects were identified problematic, namely content or textbook-oriented teaching and test-driven teaching.

Traditional teaching was used to refer to teacher-centred and/or teacher-controlled approaches which were considered to be antithetical to the principles of learner autonomy. Remarkably, most teacher and senior administrator interviewees acknowledged that such methods of teaching are still dominant among a percentage of teachers. With respect to this, Teacher3 argued that “we have old-fashioned instructors . . . who may find difficult to adapt themselves with new ideas or with everything new. These people cannot accept new things easily and they often want to stick to the old methods”. Likewise, Teacher6 maintained that “some teachers are only familiar with the conventional ways of teaching and are not aware of the latest methods of teaching”. This participant added that teachers “should avoid lecturing as the only teaching method; because this is a big problem. Sometimes, when I pass some classrooms I only hear teachers talk to the students while students only listen”.

From these, two key observations can be made. The first could be that while such conventional forms of teaching, which were seen as deeply rooted practices and conceptions, are likely to retain an unbalanced distribution of roles and powers between the teacher and the learner, they may also reinforce rote-learning, passivity and a subordinate position of the learner which obviously go against learner autonomy. Secondly and more worryingly, was the feeling that such traditional teachers and their mentalities are resistant to change and are less likely to accept and adopt contemporary ideas and forms of teaching that are conducive to learner autonomy.

As part of being obsessed with old-fashioned teaching methods, such teachers were also believed that they impose tough boundaries which neither allow themselves nor their students to step outside. Around half of the students across the six focus groups expressed their concern that some of their teachers are strictly tied to a limited teaching material (pamphlets¹¹) and they either directly or indirectly encourage students to stick to that and not to look for anything outside of what they teach. Such feeling can be noticed from what ST28GE said:

Another factor which has constrained learner autonomy belongs to the fact that our teachers have left no chance for students to search for information outside their pamphlets. For this reason, students largely concentrate on gaining certain marks and passing exams rather than equipping themselves with knowledge. (TFK)

Abiding students by the content of their booklets and slides was believed to strongly reflect the assessment practices of such teachers. Given that these teachers mostly concentrate on what they teach, they also expect students to reproduce the material taught verbatim during exams. As ST11GB pointed out:

The teachers ask students to make an exact reproduction of their words from their lectures and put them on exam papers. This leaves students with no scope to incorporate their views about the

¹¹ A small booklet that teachers prepare which includes the information students are expected to learn.

subjects they study and this consequently discourages students and makes them remain within a strict framework. (TFK)

This view was also reiterated by the teacher-participants. Talking about testing students, Teacher5 interestingly said that some teachers have left students with “no options except writing and repeating to the extent of full stops and comas of what the teacher has given”. Whereas these are tight expectations teachers place on students through testing, the overemphasis on testing was itself considered as another hurdle eclipsing autonomous capacities to emerge. Many participants identified that there are teachers within their institution who excessively focus on testing (i.e. they teach for the test) instead of trying to use other means of assessment which allow students to be more actively engaged and to exercise their autonomy. For ST21GD, many of their “teachers are preoccupied with testing and scores” (TFK). Talking about this issue, ST8GB highlighted that “all the focus of assessment goes to exams which means that teachers offer no other options to students and they do not negotiate with them to see which forms of assessment they prefer” (TFK). These quotes embody the feeling of many other participants who believed that the extensive attention given to testing and exams within their institution lies as a major obstacle ahead of learner autonomy.

There was reference that teachers have little control over the assessment system as decisions with this regard are controlled by higher authorities. As Teacher5 pointed out: “Teachers are not free to change things that are centralised either by the university or by the ministry of higher education like the examinations” This teacher- participant elaborated that “the way examinations are centralised in our context is contradictory to autonomous learning”. However, as was demonstrated earlier, despite the strict assessment system, some teachers have still been able to make use of assessment forms that grant students more freedom and choice. Perhaps, for the same reason, even Teacher5 who highlighted the strictness of assessment system still believed that “there is enough flexibility for the teachers to exploit and take steps towards more autonomy-oriented situations”. The implied meaning was that currently not many teachers seem to be determined to exploit that flexibility.

A closer look at what has been presented above indicates that students are somehow compelled or induced to focus on testing and exams. Therefore, having been characterised earlier as mark or test-oriented could not be considered as the fault of students as teachers were equally blamed for this. Indeed, many students were unhappy to see their teachers working primarily as knowledge carriers and transferers. This was looked at as a rather 'secondary' or 'technical' role which goes against the expectations laid upon teachers before demanding them to support, motivate, guide and facilitate the steps students take towards autonomy. This suggests that teachers need to set themselves free from certain traditional understandings which reduce teaching and teachers to passing some pre-existing information to students.

Taken together, these findings show that certain instructional models and practices adopted and preserved by some teachers can severely prevent students from acting and thinking autonomously. While the constraints introduced here were mainly associated with teachers, they also seem to have connections with multiple institutional, social and political variables that will be covered during the following sections.

5.4.3 Institution-related Constraints

The above two sections uncovered areas where both students and teachers were found to inhibit and/or negatively influence learner autonomy. This section will specifically focus on other constraints which were considered to be engendered by the institution. Respectively, certain aspects emerged from the data which were believed to pose challenges to learner autonomy within institutional settings, such as the lack of a satisfactory physical environment, the presence of a strong centralised system and the absence of proper plans to encourage learner autonomy.

One basic expectation placed upon the institution earlier was the creation of an appropriate condition that allows exercising autonomy. The failure to meet such expectation was seen as causing damage to the situation of learner autonomy. More than half of the participants admitted that the existing environment within their university, by no means, advocates or suits autonomous movements and they primarily

held the institution responsible for this. Interestingly, the senior administrators were among the other participants who acknowledged this reality. For example, SA3 said that “there are still many shortages exist and we haven’t been able to create such atmosphere within our university for students to feel that proper conditions are available for them to embark on more autonomous learning” (TFK). For two teachers, the absence of such convenient environment has resulted from inadequate attention their institution has paid to learning generally and to autonomous learning more specifically. Teacher2 explained this when he said:

There are no strategies and policies supporting and promoting autonomous learning within this university—something that could affect students’ learning and education . . . because I can’t even see services and facilities that can help students with their independent learning.

This issue also triggered an overwhelming discontent among student-participants which they believed has made a challenging situation for learner autonomy. According to ST19GD, “due to the current situation that exists within this university including the lack of a satisfactory environment and facilities, being an autonomous learner could be extremely difficult or impossible” (TFK). For this reason, SA1 rightly noted that “for students to actually become autonomous within the situation that we have within the faculty is a real testament to the students and their abilities”. This quote clearly articulates that any autonomous actions and initiatives taken by students under the existing circumstances should be accredited to students’ personal efforts and determination.

Another problem also emerged as part of the institutional constraints on learner autonomy was the issue of the dominance of a centralised hierarchical system still effective within the institutions of higher education. The institutional system was characterised as forcing both teachers and students to follow some tough instructions which are likely to suppress their autonomy. SA3 described that as follows:

The existing system has a direct influence and has become a real obstacle. We are subject to several rules and regulations here

which have confined both teachers and students. There are top-down administrative decisions causing harm to the teaching-learning process. So both teachers and students are surrounded by many problems and restrictions. (TFK)

This extract portrays both teachers and students as victims of the current operating system of higher education as their power and autonomy to make teaching and learning decisions and choices have been restricted. This particularly reminds us of the issue of teacher autonomy which brought to the fore some contradictions specifically among the teachers and senior administrators. Whereas many agreed that teachers within this institution possess enough autonomy regarding many aspects of their teaching, there was a feeling that teachers are still subject to certain centralised policies and there are areas beyond their control. For Teacher5:

Teachers at this university have autonomy to a good extent to make their decisions especially with regard to issues related to classroom teaching methods, activities and the way to deal with the students. However, there are still issues which aren't on the hand of teachers such as examinations and assessment.

Several participants emphasised that regardless of the current institutional constraints, there exists some degree of autonomy for teachers; therefore, they are the ones to decide whether or not to exploit and exercise that autonomy. According to Teacher1, "teachers do have sufficient autonomy provided that they themselves want to utilise that autonomy" (TFK). Likewise, SA1 stated that teachers "are given autonomy but whether or not they are able to take it is a different matter". From these, one could argue that the problem seems to be less about teachers being dispossessed from adequate autonomy and more about teachers being reluctant to use the amount of autonomy available.

Apart from that, the teachers believed that teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are closely linked. Indeed, there was an assumption that the more autonomy teachers enjoy, the more positive contribution they might be able to make to student autonomy. Teacher4 put his view this way:

For me, teacher autonomy is as important as learner autonomy and there exists a direct relationship between the two. So the more autonomous the teacher can be the better opportunity s/he may have to develop and find ways to work on and help students boost their autonomy. (TFK)

A few participants went a step further to connect learner and teacher autonomy to institutional autonomy. According to SA3:

Since autonomy has a multidimensional relationship between the teacher, the student and the university, the former must have autonomy to an extent that s/he could facilitate and help learners to be autonomous. This means that learner autonomy is linked to teacher autonomy and university autonomy. (TFK)

This shows that the three are subject to an interactive and interconnected relationship. Given that the institutional autonomy itself suffers from some centralised ministerial control, this can have detrimental implications on the autonomy of teachers and students. Talking about such hierarchical relationship, SA5 demonstrated that “there are things still centralised here. For example, the programmes students study are mainly designed by ministry of higher education. They tell us what subjects to be taught to the students”. This example shows part of the limits imposed on institutional autonomy which possibly prevent universities from setting out their priorities, plans and policies that they consider necessary for creating autonomy- supportive conditions for both students and teachers.

5.4.4 Culture-related Constraints

Together with the other constraining factors previously mentioned, culture was also referred to as another impediment to learner autonomy. Several participants believed that there are cultural constraints hindering autonomy both within educational and social contexts. According to SA3, another hindrance to learner autonomy results from “the social environment which we are all part of. The social environment together with

certain social traditions and phenomena often weaken the sense of responsibility among individuals which eventually reflects the learning process” (TFK). Talking about the cultural dimension of Kurdish society, Teacher4 generalised his comment to argue that “the cultural and psychological characteristics of Middle Eastern societies are such that even university students fail to take the responsibility and to direct themselves” (TFK). A similar feeling was also expressed by few student-participants. For example, ST28GE maintained that “as a society, we desire the culture of spoon-feeding” (TFK). Furthermore; ST8GB pointed out that “within our society neither families nor schools help and encourage children to build their personality and to be autonomous” (TFK).

The key argument put forward here was that there are socio-cultural factors that may go against the idea of being responsible and autonomous. The way individuals are raised and treated within their families and wider social surrounding and the existence or absence of certain social and cultural beliefs, values and practices could be important reasons of why some people become more autonomous and responsible for their learning and other aspects of their lives and why some others become more dependent and subordinate.

6. Chapter Six: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This research was based on the assumption that learner autonomy faces challenges within Kurdistan higher education system and institutions for many years now. This study was, therefore, intended to gain a more nuanced perspective of the situation of learner autonomy within a given institution of higher education not just for the sake of reaching a more subtle understanding of the situation, but more importantly, to help those who have real concerns about the current situation and also have the desire and courage to bring about change within themselves (i.e. as regards their understandings and roles in relation to learner autonomy) and within the overall situation. To this end, this study tried to answer four research questions with each serving a specific purpose towards the overall aim of the thesis. As for this chapter, the major findings will be interpreted and discussed with the intention to address the key research questions as well as to provide the rationale as to why these questions were asked and why answers to them are important. The chapter has been organised according to the four research questions. The discussions and interpretations made under each section are directly aligned with each of the research questions.

6.2 The meanings and values attributed to learner autonomy (Research Question 1)

6.2.1 Meanings Attributed to Learner Autonomy

The findings revealed different conceptions associated with learner autonomy. The emergence of these varying understandings likely resulted from multi-layered meanings learner autonomy entails (Marsh et al., 2001) and also from the fact that people may often come up with different interpretations, especially for a contested term like 'learner autonomy'. Together with this and given that this study has included different participants, namely students, teachers and senior administrators, the emergence of some distinct views of learner autonomy was expected. The key finding, as regards this

research question, was that direct but covert links were found between the multiple perspectives the participants had about learner autonomy and the different versions of learner autonomy, namely the technical, the psychological and the political versions the literature has identified. The following discussions, therefore, will be structured around these different understandings or variants of autonomy.

To begin with, learner autonomy was understood as a state that the learner becomes absolutely free and independent to take full responsibility for his/her learning. Such image of learner autonomy depicts autonomous learners as 'free-floating' individuals who can function independently and can detach themselves from external conditions and influences (Brookfield, 2000). This understanding conforms to the notion of 'full autonomy' proposed by Dickinson (1987) which entails "no involvement of a 'teacher' or an institution" and that the learner becomes "totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning" (p. 11). This view seems to assume that as long as the learner has certain technical skills/strategies and psychological capacities, which undeniably are crucial elements for being autonomous, then he/she can operate completely autonomously. This seems to be consistent with the 'individualised' version of learner autonomy identified by Pennycook (1997) which assumes that learner autonomy locates within each individual and can be established regardless of the instructional, institutional and social constraints. This assumes that the different worlds within which autonomy needs to be exercised are 'conflict-free'. For this reason, there appears to be an overlook of the fact that these various contexts whether social or educational "are never free from constraints" (Benson, 2008: p. 115).

Unlike the above which could be seen as an 'extreme view or version of autonomy', another understanding which was held by many participants revolved around the idea of 'relative autonomy' (Higgs, 1988) which implies that learners can only be relatively free and autonomous as respects their learning actions and decisions. The focus here was on learners taking greater responsibility rather than seeing their teachers responsible for everything related to their learning. Whereas this view, unlike the previous one, appeared to value the position of the teacher, learner autonomy was still perceived to entail the idea that the learner assumes the prime responsibility for

learning. This view possibly grounds on a belief which considers learning as the ultimate responsibility of learners and not as something that the teacher can do to them. This understanding of learner autonomy appears to closely match the idea of learner-centredness as they both put the learner on centre stage. Given the fact that learner-centredness lies at the heart of the constructivist approach, this perspective of learner autonomy also seems to take roots from the constructivist model of knowledge and learning. On that account, Benson (1996) identifies this as the 'constructivist or psychological version of learner autonomy'.

Whether learner autonomy was understood as a state that the learner becomes either fully or relatively autonomous, the above two views of autonomy seem to share an overt feature which possibly allows us to link them back to the technical and psychological perspectives of learner autonomy. Similar to these versions of autonomy, the two understandings discussed here seem to define learner autonomy as taking responsibility for learning alone, rather than or, at least, parallel to that taking responsibility for the wider social and political issues. Put differently, autonomy was perceived as the matter of learners focusing on personal learning gains. More than that, becoming an autonomous and responsible learner was looked at as an end goal itself (i.e. the goal of pursuing or achieving learning needs and desires), rather than a means towards the broader end of taking responsibility for public interests.

This leads us to a contrasting view of autonomy which only few participants touched upon. For them, learner autonomy involves not simply accepting responsibility for learning, but more importantly, taking charge to determine our shared educational, social and political futures. This understanding assumes that the purposes of learning and/or of becoming autonomous should go beyond obtaining private gains to be more concerned with enabling learners develop and realise their human potential so that they act responsibly "to improve the conditions they and those around them live and work" (Hammond & Collins, 1991: p.14). This represents a rather political view of autonomy strongly advocated by researchers like (Hammond & Collins, 1991; Benson, 1997; Pennycook, 1997, etc.) who believe that political autonomy constitutes the core part of being autonomous. This does not mean that the other types of autonomy (i.e. technical

and psychological) are not important; because as Kumaravadivelu (2003) points out they enable the learner to 'learn how to learn' which may consequently lead to effective academic achievements. However, without political autonomy, the influence of these two forms of autonomy may not really transcend the personal level to include moral, educational and social obligations.

Part of this political view of autonomy also seems to involve going beyond an 'individualised or psychologised' understanding of autonomy to recognise that there are various forces that can shape learner autonomy. This represents a nuanced understanding which came from a few teacher and senior administrator participants who looked at learner autonomy from a 'complex perspective'. They referred to autonomy as a situation or process within which there are various interconnected and interacting factors and agents, such as students, teachers, educational institutions and so on with each having their own role and influence (Paiva & Braga, 2008). To elaborate, learner autonomy was not seen as a unilateral process or merely as "a matter of one's own responsibility for learning" (Paiva & Braga, 2008: p. 445). This view of complexity explains that learner autonomy operates within a 'relational' process (Hughes, 2003) which avoids reducing the idea of learner autonomy to specific technical skills and psychological capacities to acknowledge that autonomy includes intricate relationships of power the learner has with other interrelated factors like teachers and institutions as well as with the outside world. This perspective matches well with the way learner autonomy has been described as a complex, multi-faceted and multidimensional construct (Little & Lam, 1998; Benson, 1997).

Through the above discussions, we tried to make sense of the multiple understandings associated with learner autonomy and also to uncover the links between these understandings and the concepts prominent within the literature. These together provide answers to the first research question. The question then arises as to why finding out the different ways people conceptualise learner autonomy could be important within the context of this study. One relevant answer to this could be that discovering what views different parties hold about learner autonomy may also help us understand their views of knowledge, learning and education. At the same time, as the

following sections will display, the overarching perspectives the participants had about learner autonomy also seemed to outstandingly shape their roles, behaviours and practices. Given that the findings revealed that the majority of the participants turned out to be oriented towards the technical-psychological version(s) of autonomy, they seemed to act accordingly. This partly exposes something about the situation of learner autonomy within which these types of autonomy are likely to receive more attention while the political variant seemed to be ignored. This suggests that attempts to improve the situation or to promote a particular form of autonomy (e.g. political autonomy) needs to initially aim at changing the way people conceive learner autonomy.

6.2.2 Values Attributed to Learner Autonomy

Parallel to the various meanings associated with learner autonomy above, the analysis also displayed that the majority of the participants valued learner autonomy on different practical, personal and socio-political grounds. These findings are similar to other research studies (e.g. Dickinson, 1996; Broady, 1996; Wilcox, 1996; Camilleri, 1999; Chan, 2001a; Chan, 2003; Broad, 2006; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a; 2012b; Shahsavari, 2014) which reported that their participants, either students or teachers, placed distinct values on and held favourable attitudes towards learner autonomy. Interestingly, the values attributed to learner autonomy seemed to be, more or less, the reflection of the multiple interpretations the participants had about learner autonomy. For this reason, the values can also be divided between two categories. While one set of the values appeared to be oriented towards private gains, the other one seemed to be concerned with public good.

One key advantage which many participants associated with autonomous learning was effective learning. This seemed to be premised on the belief that since autonomous learning requires learners to be active and responsible participants, learning outcomes tend to be more effective than when students entirely depend on their teachers. This was confirmed by several student-participants of this research who claimed that their autonomous activities and experiences have been far more productive. This adds to what Knowles (1975) and Dickinson (1995) claim that compelling evidence exists that

active and autonomous engagement of students with their own learning can increase learning effectiveness. While this study cannot provide ample evidence to support that, the use of 'effective learning' as an equivalent to autonomous learning by the participants needs to be scrutinised.

Effective learning was used to virtually connote 'discovery learning' whereby learners, instead of being directly taught, try to discover some existing knowledge on their own (Benson, 1997). Despite the fact that learning by discovery could be more effective as students possibly become mindful of what they learn and may develop learning interests and strategies (Kersh, 1965), a careful examination of this indicates that the value placed on autonomous learning here resonates strongly with the technical-psychological perspective. To elaborate, autonomy was reduced to learners making use of certain strategies and personal capacities that supposedly enable them to efficiently pursue some personally defined learning needs (Schmenk, 2005). Along with that, the idea of effective learning itself could be traced back to constructivist beliefs which assume that learning becomes more meaningful and effective when learners become an active part of the learning process. This view about the value of learner autonomy, which was widespread among many participants, represents the one that has an orientation towards the personal gain of the learner. This orientation was even more clearly expressed when some participants thought that autonomous learning efforts students put at university can help them later to achieve other personal goals, such as getting a good job.

Turning now to the other benefits attached to autonomous learning, several participants believed that autonomous learning could enable learners to develop creative and critical thinking skills and abilities. Creativity was used mainly to imply that autonomous students possess the capacity to construct their own thoughts and originate new answers and interpretations. Meanwhile, critical thinking was construed as the ability of autonomous learners to critically and consciously engage with the things they learn instead of passive and uncritical absorption of information. It is worth noting that both creativity (and creative thinking) and critical thinking were looked at as cognitive processes and abilities of the learner (Kong, 2007). This takes us back to the

idea of psychological autonomy which recognises the capacity for autonomy as part of broader psychological capacities (Benson, 1997; Ecclestone, 2002). Once again, the advantages linked to learner autonomy here circulate within the psychological perspective while neglecting the broader social and political relevance. Of these two processes, though, critical thinking, particularly, has inherent social and political underpinnings informed by critical movements (Davies & Barnett, 2015). Perhaps, for this reason, critical thinking ability is seen as an integral part of political-critical autonomy (Ecclestone, 2002).

This leads us to an interesting finding whereby the participants, although only few, leaned towards the social and political virtues of learner autonomy. This view about the value of learner autonomy contrasts with the previous one which largely appreciated learner autonomy on personal grounds. The benefit of being autonomous was viewed from the perspective that autonomous learners expectedly have the potential to function as socially responsible actors to positively shape their current and future life situations. This understanding of the value of learner autonomy has a strong resonance with the first initiatives towards learner autonomy motivated by political agendas (Legenhausen, 2009). This value seemed to emerge from the belief that our situational circumstances desperately need a form of education that empowers students to become critical autonomous citizens who are capable of transforming their current and future realities. There were implicit indications that the absence of such critical element within our educational system could be one major cause among others that we as a society currently suffer from certain challenging and undesirable social and political phenomena. Whereas this supports the idea that responsible and autonomous learners can contribute to social, political and democratic changes and progresses, the absence of such critically autonomous individuals within a particular social and educational environment could make transformations of such kinds more difficult or even impossible (Little, 2004; Veugelers, 2011).

The fact that only a few participants referred to this critical aspect of learner autonomy triggers questions as to why the recognition of this value of learner autonomy was overlooked by many participants. One reason could be that, views about the technical

and personal/psychological values of learner autonomy may rather spontaneously occur to people when compared with the socio-political values. This, however, may also result from the situation within institutional settings where the tendencies for the technical and psychological approaches are so strong that increasingly lead to disregarding political elements. Benson (1997) and Pennycook (1997) call this a 'depoliticisation' of learner autonomy. Another reason could be related to the current political context within which people may not feel happy to talk about political issues and concerns. There have been cases came to my attention where students and teachers were told to avoid discussing political issues. This tells us that there are possibly attempts to 'depoliticise' an inherently political nature of higher education and to systematically exclude political autonomy at the different levels of higher education. University senior officials, who are mostly political appointments, tend to become the custodians of such agendas. Intentions to eliminate political autonomy may have strong underlying reasons for powerful forces. Without doubt, the presence of political autonomy which may enable individuals to gain a sense of empowerment to become agents of social and political transformations can create enormous threats to oppressive powers and interests operating inside institutional contexts and beyond (Hammond & Collins, 1991; Brookfield, 1993; Benson, 1997).

Whatever the reasons, the findings revealed that both the meanings and values associated with learner autonomy tilted more towards a non-political form of autonomy. Valuing autonomy merely on non-political grounds may consequently reinforce or instill the idea that people can only be autonomous in a non-political sense. However, given that there were a few participants who understood and appreciated learner autonomy on political-critical grounds, one could argue that it is possible for people to be politically autonomous and responsible.

6.3 The roles different parties play or are expected to play with regard to learner autonomy (Research Question 2)

Before proceeding with the discussions regarding the expected roles of each party, it is necessary to look back as to why this research question was asked and to how the answers to this question contribute to achieving the overall aim of this study. This research question seems to be closely linked to the first research question and the following one. Given that the first research question was intended to identify the interpretations the participants held about learner autonomy, part of identifying these interpretations and making a better sense of them requires identifying the ways the participants perceived their own roles and the roles of other parties in relation to learner autonomy. For this reason, the discussions of this section need to take account of whether the expectations the participants expressed match or conflict with their interpretations of learner autonomy. The other aim of this research question relates to the next research question. To further explain, following the identification of certain expectations, the subsequent question tries to answer whether or not these expectations were practically achieved. While these together can influence the existing situation of learner autonomy, uncovering these aspects also help us to come to a better understanding of the overall situation.

6.3.1 Becoming Responsibility-takers and Initiators

To discuss the expected roles of students first, it is interesting to note that the views about what roles students were expected to undertake as regards learner autonomy seem to fall under the two major understandings (i.e. the political and non-political understandings) the participants generally had about learner autonomy. This markedly suggests that specific understandings of learner autonomy are likely to push people away or pull them towards certain expectations. To explain more, while this study found that the participants thought autonomy necessitates that students become responsibility takers and initiators, both these roles were used distinctly. On the one hand, the roles of taking responsibility and taking initiatives were viewed from a specific

learning perspective. On the other hand, these two roles were applied with political implications.

As far as responsibility taking is concerned, this has received an overwhelming attention within this research which, therefore, has repeatedly been discussed. Expecting students to accept significant responsibility for their learning reflects extensive literature which considers the idea of students assuming primary responsibility for learning as the bedrock of learner autonomy (Holec, 1981; Boud, 1988; Little, 1991; Dam, 1995; Szabo & Scharle, 2000). An interesting thing about this finding was that, among the different participants, a great number who viewed students as profoundly responsible for their learning was students themselves. This aligns with previous studies by Broady (1996) and Breeze (2002) who found that their university student-participants recognised that students are the ones who should carry the burden of their learning. More specifically, the participants of the present research who viewed that students have to be responsibility-takers also thought that taking responsibility should not be restricted to learning prescribed materials, but should go beyond that to include the construction and reconstruction of knowledge. This recognition itself could be a vital step towards the actual acceptance of learning responsibility by students. One important observation made regarding the student- participants of this research was that the majority expressed their willingness to take their share of responsibility and there were practical examples mentioned and observed with this respect. This conforms with the model of personal responsibility proposed by Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) who argue that responsibility as a personal characteristic has degrees and “each individual assumes some degree of personal responsibility” (p. 27). Until here, taking responsibility was viewed as a response students were expected to have mostly to their personal learning needs. This response was also expected to be ‘proactively’ taken which seems to be consistent with what Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) suggest that personal responsibility should have a proactive nature which also means that students should take a proactive approach to their learning.

Taking proactive responsibility for learning cannot be clearly distinguished from another expectation which demanded university students to become initiators of their learning.

Like responsibility, taking initiatives, on the part of students, was seen as a precondition for effective learning and also for being autonomous. This resonates with what Knowles (1975) argues that “people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn more things and learn better than people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners)” (p. 14). Taking initiatives here also corroborates the idea of ‘proactive autonomy’ identified by Littlewood (1999) as opposite to ‘reactive autonomy’. The former refers to a kind of autonomy which enables learners to initiate and create their own learning activities and act accordingly while learners with the latter form of autonomy tend to rely on the teacher to initiate and direct their learning, but once a direction has been initiated, then learners can organise their resources autonomously to achieve the prescribed goals. These forms of autonomy focus on whether or not the learner possesses the initiative capacity for learning. The student-participants of this study showed an explicit awareness of the importance of proactivity and taking initiatives for learning. Everything has so far been expected emphasises the need for students to take responsibility and initiatives for their learning which evidently are essential elements for effective learning outcomes.

A somewhat different expectation placed upon students was oriented not so much towards taking responsibility for personal learning goals as towards taking responsibility for building satisfactory institutional and social conditions. This expectation concentrated on students to be proactively and politically responsible which sounds congruent with the political-critical understanding of learner autonomy. This political form of responsibility centred on taking responsibility for ‘common concerns’ (Biesta, 2004) that are at issue within and beyond institutional settings. This also suggests that university students need to broaden their sense of responsibility and realise that part of their responsibility entails a struggle for common good, including taking actions to alter or improve the living and learning situations for themselves and others.

There are different ways to interpret why some participants looked at taking responsibility from a political perspective. One way to explain this may be that, at present, universities generally, including staff and students, have least political participation and influence; therefore, part of taking political responsibility was meant

to reclaim this political role. Another explanation could be that as there was a feeling of dissatisfaction with the current state inside and outside the institutional context, taking political responsibility by students seemed to be viewed as an answer, at least, to the problems directly related to the immediate institutional environment. The message intended to be conveyed may be that without taking political responsibility to challenge and change the status quo, the existing institutional climate seems to prevent or hold students back from taking even learning responsibility. This somehow implies that sometimes for students to be able to take their learning-related responsibility (or academic responsibility), they need to take political responsibility so as to create conditions which allow them to exercise their academic responsibility. This suggests that taking responsibility and initiatives for learning should not be separated from taking political responsibility and initiatives for common interests.

6.3.2 Becoming Facilitators

Like students, the expected roles of teachers attracted substantial attention. With this regard, two major points turned out to be important. The first was a widespread recognition among most participants that teachers occupy a central position with regard to the process of learner autonomy. By this, the participants perceived autonomy not as “a gift that can be handed over by the teacher to the learner” (Voller, 1997: p. 107), which has been considered as a paradox of learner autonomy (Sheerin, 1997); but as a process which has clear implications for teachers not to withdraw from the teaching/learning process, but to change their traditional roles and take on novel ones (Chene, 1983; Higgs, 1988; Boud, 1988; Little, 1995; Voller, 1997; Weimer, 2002; Hughes, 2003; 2005; Nguyen, 2012).

The identification of multiple roles of teachers was the second point inferred from the data. Respectively, teachers were expected to operate as ‘motivators’, ‘guides’, ‘facilitators’ and ‘awareness-raisers’ within autonomous learning situations. These findings are unsurprising given that the literature on learner autonomy has identified

similar roles¹² (Higgs, 1988; Candy, 1991; Voller, 1997; Weimer, 2002; Little, 2004; Fumin & Li, 2012). A closer look at this finding reveals that the kinds of roles expected from teachers are greatly informed by the psychological understanding of learner autonomy. On the one hand, this shows a close match between the widespread expectation the participants placed upon students and the ones ascribed to teachers here. Consistent with what was already discussed that students were expected to take charge and initiative for their learning, teachers were mainly expected to operate as motivators and facilitators to encourage and support students along these lines. On the other hand, the expectations put on teachers seem less compatible with a rather different role expected from students above underpinned by the political perspective of learner autonomy. To expect students to become politically responsible citizens concerned about the common good of the society also requires teachers to operate not just as learning facilitators but as ‘radical educators’ to implement a pedagogy that can create conditions under which they and their students feel empowered to try actively to shape ‘alternative possible futures’ (Ruiz, 1991; Lamb, 2008; Moreira, 2007; Sade, 2014). This makes clear that the expectations the non-political version of autonomy place on teachers differ from the ones the political autonomy demands.

Without doubt, for teachers to play such an agential and empowering role seems crucial, within our and possibly any other context. However, this expectation was totally absent throughout my data. One possible reason for this might be that the technical and psychological discourses of learner autonomy are so dominant that may not allow people to go beyond these understandings. Therefore, when thinking about what roles teachers need to execute regarding learner autonomy, people may assume that teachers are there only to provide students with some technical and psychological support. Another reason might be that given the existing institutional and political situations, people are possibly aware that teachers are under enormous pressure not to take a political stance that could cause disruption to powerful interests. Perhaps, for the

¹² See section 3.5.2

same reason, the participants of this study avoided referring to a political role that teachers may undertake. So whether this political position of teachers was found irrelevant or for whatever reason not articulated by the participants, for teachers to accept the expected roles found within this study seem to be important moves towards allowing students to exercise the types of autonomy which supposedly enable students to become effective learners.

Whereas the roles distinguished within this study were used with some distinctive meanings, they share some commonalities. Therefore, drawing clear-cut boundaries between them may be difficult. This also resembles the literature that some of these terms are used interchangeably. Taking the notion of 'the teacher as facilitator' which has been most widely used in connection with learner autonomy, Voller (1997) uses this as an umbrella term to encapsulate multiple other roles. The reason for mentioning this here relates to the fact that two of the expected roles (i.e. motivating and raising awareness roles) that came out from the analysis can be labelled under the concept of facilitator. According to Voller (1997), the facilitator fulfills two complementary roles: the provision of psycho-social support and technical support. The former includes the capacity of the facilitator to motivate learners first and to raise their awareness second. These sound consistent with the features the participants associated with the teacher both as a motivating factor and awareness raiser.

The first largely emphasised the imperative need for teachers to constantly stimulate the desire for autonomous work among students. This expected motivating role of teachers was given substantial attention by the participants, particularly the students. One way to explain this could be that autonomy and motivation were seen to be closely related. This supports the literature that finds an established relationship between autonomy and motivation (Dickinson, 1987, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Spratt et al., 2002; Lamb, 2008). Given that motivation was seen as a key factor that affects the degree to which students engage with autonomous learning activities, teachers were expected to ensure that students stay motivated; because, a lack or low-level of motivation may also lead to lack of autonomous actions. By this, the participants did not seem to imply that students have no motivation from within themselves for

autonomous endeavour and that they should entirely depend on their teachers to motivate them; instead, there was a sense that their motivation may vary or fluctuate over the course of their study (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). As a result, even students with high autonomous capacities may sometimes feel demotivated or unmotivated to act autonomously. On that account, the presence of the teacher as a motivating factor was viewed essential to help students develop and maintain a form and level of motivation necessary for sustained autonomous efforts.

Regarding the second, the focus was on two main aspects of awareness raising. One was related to the role of the teacher to help learners be aware of the benefits of or necessity for autonomous learning (Voller, 1997). The other was concerned with what Holec (1981) calls 'deconditioning', a process by which the teacher helps learners to question or deconstruct preconceptions they hold about learning and about the roles they and their teachers can play. Within this study, the need for raising students' awareness was mainly addressed by the teacher-participants. The notable finding, though, was that the student-interviewees generally exhibited certain levels of awareness, especially about the meanings and values of learner autonomy. Although this cannot be extrapolated to the entire student population, the existing evidence supports the idea that raising awareness should concentrate more on helping students to "break away from priori judgments and prejudices of all kinds that encumber *their+ ideas about learning" (Holec, 1981: p.22); and to come to a better understanding of their roles and abilities of learning (Wenden, 1991).

One common feature found to the expectations placed upon teachers was the need to deviate from transmission and controlling roles to embrace autonomy-supportive ones. The roles identified by the participants here were perceived to be more autonomy-friendly. These roles generally seem to be consistent with the ones attributed to 'interpretation teachers' (Benson, 2001) who consider learners as having natural and intrinsic abilities for learning and exploring their worlds. These teachers, therefore, believe that their roles involve setting up situations where learners find opportunities to do so. For the same reason, such teachers prefer to share responsibility for learning with their students. Unlike transmission teachers who position themselves as authority

figures, interpretation teachers consciously try to minimise status differences between themselves and their students (Barnes & Shemilt, 1974). As we said earlier, while embracing these roles could be an important step towards becoming a more supportive, facilitative and motivational factor to student autonomy, there are still questions as to what extent teachers fulfill these expected roles. This question will be addressed later¹³.

6.3.3 Creating Conducive Environment and Providing Services and Support

One key expectation associated with the institution was concerned with the provision of an appropriate environment where autonomous abilities can grow. By appropriate environment, the participants mainly referred to the institutional infrastructure that suits university education and that provides necessary facilities and services, such as a well-equipped library, proper reading spaces and adequate internet access. This finding seems unsurprising given that these expectations are often seen as taken-for-granted features of many institutions of higher education. While these basic requirements which institutions should ensure their provision cannot guarantee exercising autonomy, they can have a unique position, not just within institutional contexts but also within non-institutional ones, to assist (adult) learners to pursue their self-learning and self-education (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). The expectation was that, apart from the classroom context where students should be allowed to experience autonomy, the institution was found responsible for creating an appropriate and stimulating out-of-class environment (i.e. the wider physical institutional climate) for students to exercise their autonomy.

Despite the fact that there were indications that the policies and mission statements of our institutions of higher education emphasise the significance of learner autonomy,

¹³ See section 6.5.1

there were concerns about the practical achievement and implementation of the institutional goals and policies. The expectations, therefore, seemed to partly reflect the institutional failure to provide necessary facilities and a conducive climate for learner autonomy. One may argue, though, that the institutional failure to meet these expectations could be due to resource restrictions and financial problems which make the provision of these services difficult and not because that the authorities fail to understand the importance of these services. However, given the assumption that the lack of resources, which particularly recently has put institutions under severe pressure, has significantly resulted from the malfunctioning of the existing administrative and political systems, improving institutional conditions cannot be separated from changing these systems. This reminds us of the necessity for students, staff and others to become politically responsible and autonomous so that they feel empowered to fight for changing different undesirable institutional and political realities.

Along with creating a convenient environment which constitutes part of the institutional support for learner autonomy, the institution was also seen responsible for encouraging and helping both students and teachers differently to take the idea of learner autonomy with more consideration. The institution was perceived to have a special responsibility towards students, particularly when they first enter higher education to ensure that they have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities. There was a feeling of concern that students, during their first and second years at university, often lack awareness of what roles they should play. This was partly associated with the lack of coordination between schools and universities. This has implications for both schools and institutions of higher education to emplace proper mechanisms to assist students make a smooth transition to university.

Moreover, the teacher-participants specifically had their own expectations from the institution. As teachers were expected to motivate students along the line of experiencing and exercising autonomy, by the same token, the teachers found important that they be encouraged and supported at the institutional level so that they stay determined to open new possibilities for autonomous engagement of their students. The institution was demanded to allow teachers to exercise pedagogical

autonomy. This expectation seemed to assume that arguing for learner autonomy may fall short without arguing for teacher autonomy. The other expectation was more about rewarding those teachers who care about their students and exert their efforts to encourage them with their critical and autonomous learning and thinking. While reward principle could be important for some teachers to preserve or enact autonomy-supportive roles, one problem with this could be that teachers who seek to receive some personal rewards from their institution or from authorities for the efforts they put may stop doing so when they realise that no special rewards are given to them. A close examination of this indicates that the teachers looked for some personal interests. This possibly resonates with the non-political view which valued learner autonomy on personal grounds. Following that, it is unsurprising to see that there are teachers who expect some personal gains against the efforts they think they have exerted to encourage learner autonomy. This, however, appears to contradict the political perspective to which encouraging students to be politically autonomous and responsible has the intention that they eventually contribute to collective interests.

On the whole, the discussions around the expected roles of the parties reveal that the expectations were largely influenced by the technical and psychological versions of learner autonomy. The findings also allow us to infer that even making these forms of autonomy possible within an institutional framework necessitates relevant parties to take various roles and responsibilities. Besides the fact that each party was perceived to assume certain responsibilities, they were also expected to fulfill the responsibilities they have towards one another. For example, given that the institution was perceived as having certain commitments to accomplish towards students and teachers, the latter two were also seen responsible towards institutional change and improvement. Even more necessary for each party was the expectation that they need to recognise their own roles and responsibilities and those of others. On that basis, teachers were encouraged to acknowledge the capacity of students to be autonomous and responsible for their learning. Meanwhile, the institution was expected to allow teachers to take the responsibility and exercise their autonomy for the pedagogical decisions and choices they need to make. This possibly creates a situation which allows not one but all the major players to accept their share of responsibility without denying the responsibility

that others have for themselves (Whitehead, 2014). So when students, faculty and institutions take a joint responsibility for a common goal, the end results may be more effective and powerful (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

6.4 The autonomous experiences/behaviours and autonomy- supportive practices demonstrated by different parties (Research Question 3)

Under this research question, the discussions first focus on the actual autonomous experiences/behaviours students expressed and displayed. Afterwards, the discussions shift to address practical pedagogical and institutional behaviours and practices that were found to be supportive to student autonomy. This section also tries to expose (in)consistency between the expectations and the stated/observed autonomous experiences/behaviours and autonomy-supportive practices. Discussions will also be made around whether the autonomous experiences/behaviours and autonomy-supportive practices situate within the technical-psychological domain or political domain. Together with the other sections, the discussions here contribute to our understanding of the situation of learner autonomy within the context under investigation.

6.4.1 Autonomous Experiences/Behaviours

When reflecting on their experience of autonomy, many students indicated that they have been more autonomous during the course of higher education, especially when contrasted with their school experience which was rather seen as a suppressing factor to learner autonomy. There appeared to be the case that such a damaging effect of school experience cannot be easily avoided as students make their transition to higher education. An interesting point noticed from the analysis was that some students found that their early university experience was, more or less, similar to their school experience. This could be partly associated with the fact that past learning experiences, particularly during the beginning year(s) of higher education, are likely to continue influencing the way students perceive and approach learning. This finding agrees with

what Humphreys and Wyatt (2013) found about their university student- participants that, on their arrival, lacked prior autonomous learning experiences. Boud (1988) argues that students with little prior autonomous experiences may initially resist an approach of learning which places greater responsibility on learners. This has implications for teachers and institutions of higher education to help their students transform their experiences and examine their conceptions and ways of learning as early as possible.

This did not turn out to be the case for the student-participants as there were indications that their experience of autonomy mainly emerged towards the later stages of their studies. One conclusion drawn from this finding was that, engaging with autonomous learning experiences was portrayed more as a self-initiated act by students taking place outside the classroom. The autonomous movements by students seemed to share elements of proactive autonomy which also denotes, at least, a partial fulfilment of the expected roles ascribed to students above. There were hints that taking such steps towards exercising autonomy resulted from reaching an understanding that university learning cannot be simply about relying on teachers or on classroom, but should entail autonomous exploration of the areas of interest which may only genuinely occur when combined with autonomous learning plans and activities outside the classroom. This echoes previous research which noted that learners use various strategies and activities outside the classroom to enhance their learning (Littlewood and Liu, 1996; Hyland, 2004; Hwang, Lai & Wang, 2015). While learning activities beyond the classroom can be exploited as opportunities to develop and apply autonomous abilities (Benson, 2007; Balçıkanlı, 2010), exercising autonomy should not be confined to one specific context (i.e. either to inside or outside the classroom); because as Sinclair (2000) highlights autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom. Interestingly, the analysis also exhibited evidence of students' engagement with autonomous activities within the classroom both individually and collectively or collaboratively.

However, given that the autonomous experiences of students seemed to mainly occur outside the classroom or even outside the institutional realm, this needs a closer examination as to why that was the case. This could possibly be because neither the

classroom nor the wider institutional environment created opportunities and allowed students, to a satisfactory level, to make use of their autonomous abilities. Perhaps, for this reason, students sought alternative environments where they could exercise their autonomy. Whereas searching for opportunities to exercise autonomy can be considered as a display of proactive autonomy, this seemed to be specifically applied to the situation outside the institutional context; because the same students appeared to take a rather reactive position within the educational institution waiting for opportunities to be created for them to exercise their autonomy. This somehow conflicts with one key expectation presented above which required students to take proactive political responsibility which involves taking an active and responsible part for creating an institutional situation within which better learning and educational opportunities become available.

To take the discussion further, students seemed to take responsibility for their learning to some extent. However, for me and based on the political-critical perspective, taking responsibility here was, perhaps, limited to either learning what students were told to learn or learning some other content that they found interesting. We cannot deny that this could be one form of autonomy that students exercised. However, we should remember that this only comprises one aspect of being autonomous. Another element which seemed considerably missing from the autonomous experiences of students was the feeling to take responsibility to change and make positive contributions to the conditions within and beyond the institutional level. Whereas there were some students who displayed their awareness concerning the importance of taking this political-critical position, this did not seem to inspire concrete actions. This indicates that a real political sense of autonomy was absent; because the presence of political autonomy enables students to learn not just to question and become aware of their existing worlds but also to seek new possibilities and alternatives (Pennycook, 1997). We should remember though that the absence of this political version cannot be simply seen as the fault of students; because as the following section discusses, this critical positioning was also given least attention by other parties.

6.4.2 Autonomy-supportive Practices

This section focuses on the (actual) practices the teachers and the institution displayed to support learner autonomy. This study found that there were certain practices that the teacher-participants employed to enable their students to act more autonomously. This finding was reached based on certain observed and stated practices and behaviours the participants displayed and expressed. One could doubt that the observed teaching practices might be inconsistent and significantly influenced by the classroom observations. Despite the undeniable effect that the presence of an observer can place on teachers, no concrete evidence was found to confirm that the way the teachers behaved inside the classroom was significantly shaped by the observations. Indeed, what the student-participants said about some of the behaviours and practices endorsed by some teachers within their institution could stand as a testament that there are certainly teachers within this specific context who try to encourage and allow their students to act autonomously.

One important point about this finding was the feeling among the students that the autonomy-supportive practices/behaviours by some teachers have had positive influences on their autonomous stance. This matches the results of many studies (Black & Deci, 2000; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Barch & Jeon, 2004; Reeve, 2006; Perumal, 2010; Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013; Hofferber, Eckes & Wilde, 2014; Wang, Ng, Liu & Ryan, 2016) which concluded that students generally benefit from teachers who embrace autonomy-supportive teaching styles, especially when contrasted with other teachers who, for multiple reasons, were viewed to favour controlling styles of teaching which impair the autonomous functioning of students. Given that students who are supported by their teachers to behave autonomously are likely to display better learning and educational outcomes than students who are controlled by their teachers, one may expect teachers to enact behaviours and practices that are sympathetic to learner autonomy (Reeve, 2009). Whereas certain autonomy-supportive practices were noticed from some teachers (e.g. four out of the six teacher-participants), there were also indications that some other teachers, within the context of this study, belong to the opposite end of the continuum.

Indeed, an apparent distinction was drawn between autonomy-supportive and controlling teachers. Consistent with the results of other studies (e.g. Reeve, Bolt & Cai, 1999; Perumal, 2010), the present investigation identified that autonomy-supportive teachers were different from their counterparts, especially with respect to the nature and quality of their teaching. An essential practice associated with the autonomy-supportive teachers was related to the various means they used to motivate students towards autonomous behaviours. This corroborates the results reported by Reeve et al. (1999) which showed that autonomy-supportive teachers adopted a distinctive motivating style which entailed various conversational and behavioural strategies. From the eyes of the student-participants, teachers' supporting and motivating style cast strong desirable impact on their thoughts and actions. Besides the motivational behaviours which constituted a major part of autonomy-supportive practices, there were also instances where these teachers acted as guides, facilitators and role-givers (i.e. allowing students to play their expected roles). These actual practices or roles the teachers embraced appeared to be compatible with the expectations teachers were assumed to fulfill both within this study and the literature¹⁴ more generally and which have been, more or less, categorised under the concept of 'the teacher as facilitator'.

It is worth discussing that similar to the expectations placed upon teachers above, the actual practices and behaviours of teachers, which were identified as sympathetic to the non-political form of learner autonomy, seemed to lack a political dimension. As we have made clear earlier, teachers have wider moral and political responsibilities than just operating as learning facilitators or providers of some technical and psychological assistance to students. This leads us to question then why this critical element had no genuine place within the pedagogical practices of teachers. There are multiple reasons why many teachers may shy away from taking a critical/radical position that matches the political form of autonomy.

¹⁴ See sections 3.5.2

At first, there may be teachers who lack critical understanding and awareness of the inherent political nature of their work. Of the six teachers interviewed, the data revealed that only two teachers made explicit that their profession has political dimensions. Secondly, within our existing political system which tends to increasingly take an 'authoritarian form', teachers may find hard to embrace pedagogical practices that are critically and politically informed. The fact that working as a radical educator has been likened to 'guerrilla warfare' (Moreira, 2007) which requires enormous courage, dedication and sacrifice may further push teachers away from espousing a critical/radical stance and encourage them to take an easier and more comfortable path of becoming learning facilitators or knowledge dispensers – something that a significant number of students and authorities expect them to be.

Moreover, sometimes, even enthusiastic teachers who feel morally and politically responsible may avoid inspiring students to become critically conscious and politically committed for ethical reasons; because given the political climate, these students may ultimately need to encounter oppressive forces that are ready to use everything at their disposal to fight and suppress critical voices. Besides, there are teachers who mainly pursue their self-interests rather than public interests. Assuming that faculty members may enjoy professional privileges, they tend to favour institutional and political stability within which they may achieve their personal aspirations. That was probably true for some until 2014 (data collection process somehow coincided with the rise of the financial crisis which happened at the beginning of 2014) when teachers were receiving relatively high salaries and had great academic opportunities. However, since then, teachers only get a little amount (i.e. most of them receive less than half) of their actual salaries which has created deteriorating living conditions for teachers and others. While teachers might be extremely unhappy with the current situation, they have chosen to take no action, at least, within the institution where this study was conducted. This gives the impression that teachers are subservient to the authorities and lack a political will to fight for their own rights and the rights and interests of the public. As a result, one can hardly imagine that such teachers could inspire students to become more critically aware and politically engaged to stand against injustice.

Turning now to the institutional practices, only a few participants claimed that their institution has plans and strategies to support learner autonomy. However, given that these claims mainly came from the senior administrators, there was a possibility of bias; because, the data from the student and teacher participants illustrated the opposite. The institution was generally seen to have failed to provide proper conditions for learning autonomy. Despite the fact that there was reference to plans and policies which seemed to value and advocate learner autonomy both at the university and ministerial levels, the findings indicate that these policies remain as ink on paper due to the lack of implementation strategies. This adheres to the argument that the policies set out to support student autonomy within educational contexts are more likely to be discursal than becoming institutional priorities practically pursued (Candy, 1991; Wilcox, 1996). Given that the institution was found unsuccessful in creating a supportive climate for students to capitalize on their autonomous learning capacities and assuming that institutions including those of higher education are used by hegemonic powers to achieve their political ends, one may find even harder to imagine that such institutions encourage political-critical autonomy. This constitutes part of the challenges that learner autonomy generally but particularly the political version faces within institutional contexts.

6.5 The challenges that constrain the exercise and development of learner autonomy within higher education (Research Question 4)

Attempts to understand the situation of learner autonomy may fall short without uncovering the challenges facing learner autonomy. For this reason, this study also tried to identify the factors that create difficulties for learner autonomy. The findings related to this research question unearthed distinct yet interrelated constraints that were perceived to inhibit learner autonomy within the higher education sector. The constraints were identified as personal relating to students themselves as well as pedagogical, institutional and cultural. These constraints are commonly referred to as internal and external constraints within the literature (Benson, 2008; Trebbi, 2008).

Internal constraints are mainly associated with the personal beliefs, attitudes and positioning students hold about themselves and learning that could be antithetical to learner autonomy. External constraints, on the other hand, refer to outside factors that prevent learners from exercising their autonomy.

6.5.1 Internal Constraints

The analysis identified different internal barriers to learner autonomy. For many student and teacher participants, one major internal barrier was related to an inadequate sense of responsibility among students towards their learning. This somehow aligns with what Little (1990) argues that “autonomy and taking responsibility for learning may be the last thing *students+ want” (p. 12). While this could be true for some students, to apply this to the entire student population sounds unfair and unrealistic; because, as the findings revealed, there were students who displayed their desire for autonomy and were also willing to assume a certain amount of responsibility for their learning. One concern that these students raised was that their surroundings often suppress their autonomy and deny them the right to the responsibility they are expected to undertake. This suggests that embracing responsibility might not be a purely personal choice students can make, but also depends on, to what extent, students are allowed to take that responsibility.

Apart from that, there was a general view held by many participants that students are academically irresponsible towards their learning and education. For a few participants, the lack of ‘academic’ responsibility, on the part of students, was also viewed to have links with the absence of social and political responsibility. However, as the reasons provided by the participants suggest, students cannot be exclusively blamed for this; because their attitudes and actions either responsible or irresponsible cannot be separated from everyone and everything else. This means that their degree of responsibility towards learning and towards their shared future could be shaped by multiple external variables. There were indications that the kind of education students experience at school substantially influences their stance towards responsibility. Schools were perceived as forces that make students less rather than more responsible. To

explain more, when viewed and treated for years at school as individuals who are incapable of responsibility, then this may obliterate the idea that students are really capable of taking responsibility for their learning. One problem with this way of thinking could be that students may continue, even at the university level, to assume that they have least responsibility to take, while teachers and others may continue to deprive students from the responsibility they should be allowed to take.

The other reasons mentioned seemed to relate the lack of responsibility among students to the lack of responsibility at a larger level. There were two views came out with this respect. One focused on the institutional situation, which was not seen as very different from the situation within schools, and assumed that the fact that students are (viewed as) irresponsible for their learning also results from the failure of other institutional members, particularly teachers and authorities, to fulfill the responsibility they have towards students and towards the processes of learning and education more generally. Such crisis of responsibility possibly leads students to run away or feel constrained to take their responsibility. This implies that the responsibilities that the relevant institutional parties need to carry are complementary and interconnected. The other view tried to trace back the lack of responsibility for learning among students to the lack of social and political responsibility (i.e. responsibility for shared concerns). The argument here seems to be that those students who are politically responsible are more likely to be also academically responsible; probably because, political responsibility may inspire academic responsibility. While those who are only academically responsible may still take their learning responsibility, but may take little or no account of political responsibility. An interesting observation made with this regard was that of the few student-participants who appeared to be socially and politically concerned also seemed to be academically more responsible. The relationship between political responsibility and academic responsibility could be an important issue for future research.

Turning now to the issue of orientations which students were perceived to have, such as passing exams and gaining marks and qualification certificate, these were considered as another internal constraint to learner autonomy. Such orientations seemed to be informed by extrinsic motivations that push students to pay greater attention to surface

or rote learning often at the expense of more deep and critical learning. Research evidence has shown that students who are only extrinsically motivated may find making autonomous movements more difficult (Dickinson, 1987; Pierson, 1996). Whereas clear indications were found that these inclinations are deep-seated among students, they cannot be looked at as natural and inherent features of students. The situation seemed to be that there are different instructional, institutional and social factors which push and pull students towards this direction.

Indeed, students, within the context under scrutiny, by and large, are expected to go through examinations and gain qualifications rather than to seek deeper learning and thinking or to take the risk of assuming their educational responsibility, including their responsibility to the world. Whereas some students turned out to be willing to take that risk, there was an impression that students generally favour the things that their surroundings readily rewards, such as examinations, qualifications and so on.

The above discussion helps us conclude that qualification receives most attention within our educational systems and institutions. While qualification, according to Biesta (2013), does constitute one major dimension of education which expectedly enables students to become qualified to perform certain things, this should not become the ultimate goal of education; for education or higher education have other important goals to achieve. Biesta (2013) calls another important aim of education 'subjectification' which intends to allow and educate students to be autonomous subjects of action and responsibility. All evidence found during this study indicates an overemphasis on qualification at the expense of subjectification. This has influenced not just one aspect or one party but has rather filtered down to all levels of our (higher) education system and reflects the way our educational institutions, educators and learners function. From this, one can also infer that what tends to be considered as internal constraints to learner autonomy may not be squarely internal as a strong tie seems to exist between internal and external constraints.

6.5.2 External Constraints

Discussions about external constraints start with instructional constraints related to teachers. As discussed a bit earlier that qualification occupies a central position within our educational sphere, this seemed to drag not just students but also teachers to put enormous weight on this domain of education. There was a general feeling that teachers heavily focus on testing and exams which are often used for the measurement of skills and knowledge students are expected to achieve as respects the domain of qualification. Therefore, their teaching was also perceived, by many participants including some teachers, to be mainly centred on transmitting some content or knowledge to students and examining them to see whether or not they have acquired the transferred knowledge and are capable of reproduction. This form of instruction seems to take roots from 'banking education' (Freire, 1970) which according to Sleeter and Carmona (2017), "treats students as empty vessels into which knowledge is poured for retrieval later" (p. 101). Teachers who are mesmerised by this view of teaching are likely to use various means to control students towards the goals they are intended to achieve. Earlier, these types of teachers were labelled under 'transmission' or 'controlling' teachers (Barnes & Shemilt, 1974; Reeve, 2009) whose instructional behaviours and practices pose challenges to learner autonomy.

Perhaps, teachers behaved as 'transmissive' or 'controlling' due to various pressures coming from students, from administration and from teachers themselves (i.e. their personal beliefs, values and dispositions) (Reeve, 2009). To elaborate on the latter, which seems to play a crucial role regarding why some teachers become more supportive while others become constraining factors to learner autonomy, the present research found contradictory evidence. Whereas a great number of those teachers who valued and held positive beliefs about learner autonomy turned out to be also practically and behaviourally supportive, there were teachers who had similar positive views but displayed little or no concrete support to encourage their students to act and think autonomously. Previous studies have detected similar contradictions between teachers' positive attitudes and unsupportive actions (e.g. Wilcox, 1996; Chan, 2003; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012a; 2012b; Shahsavari, 2014). There are likely two causes for this.

One could be related to the theory-practice gap which suggests that positive attitudes may not always lead to desirable practices and behaviours. The other cause could be that constraining forces stemming from their surroundings may be so overwhelming that even teachers with positive beliefs about learner autonomy may find hard to resist them. One could ask, however, why then some teachers, despite the existing constraints, behave supportively towards learner autonomy. A possible explanation for this might be that teachers perceive and deal with common constraints differently and that not all teachers may feel trapped by the restrictions they face. The evidence derived from my data supports that there were teachers who, regardless of the current constraints, seemed determined to adhere to learner autonomy (i.e. at least to the technical and psychological versions of learner autonomy).

Another explanation can be that positive beliefs are sometimes built on a shaky foundation unable to fight established institutional regimes and dominant learning and instructional models. The positive views of few teacher-participants about learner autonomy appeared to be of this type. This conflicts with teaching for autonomy which, from a critical perspective, entails relentless struggle of “developing ways of fighting the status quo, or developing creative solutions to constraints when they seem insurmountable” (Moreira, 2007: p. 69). The evidence from the present study suggests that this critical pedagogical struggle seemed to be either considerably missing or virtually ineffective confined to few attempts here and there. Let alone, however, that behaving as radical educators to harness political autonomy seemed to have been overlooked, there were also claims came out from the data that many teachers have also been unsuccessful to fulfill the expectations which the technical and psychological versions of learner autonomy require (i.e. part of the expectations identified during this study). From these, it is safe to say that such teachers appear to have a marginal role and this could be part of the reason that the status quo, within our institution and beyond, has remained intact without any real positive change happening. The sad truth, though, could be that when teachers take a ‘sideling or apolitical’ position, then they choose, either consciously or unconsciously, “to bolster the oppressive structures” (Brookfield, 1993: p. 229). The consequence of this seems to be that our educational institutions have (been) turned into places to serve the agendas of the political elite and

establishment. For this reason, institutions could be looked at as inhibiting factors that systematically prevent political autonomy but may also unintentionally create hindrances to the other types of autonomy.

Based on the literature, the inhibitions imposed on learner autonomy by institutions comprise a major part of the so-called external constraints. According to Benson (2000), institutional constraints are related to the absence of a functional learning and educational environment, the presence of some tough rules and regulations and an overwhelming importance placed on certification, examinations and curriculums. The respective findings of the present study seem to significantly support that. A worrying observation made regarding the institution under investigation was that certification or qualification seemed to have taken centre stage while other realms of education are neglected. This probably has something to do with an established institutional culture which favours qualification over other domains of education. This, however, cannot be divorced from a wider global trend that pushes institutions of higher education to focus on vocational skills, professional training and awarding qualifications for market or employment purposes (Winch, 2002; McArthur, 2011; Delbanco, 2012). For this reason, there are voices of profound concern that our universities are increasingly turning into 'credentialing factories' (Knapper & Cropley, 1991). Given that qualification has become the major institutional priority indicates how depoliticised institutions have become within this research context.

Regardless of the fact that such institutions primarily focus on providing students with qualifications, there are unanswered concerns about the nature and quality of the qualifications students earn. The institutional conditions, which for most of the participants were poor, seem to have damaging impacts on qualification standards. The unsatisfactory institutional circumstances trigger other questions about whether or not such institutions are desperately needed to be established. There are certain basic needs the provision of which should be guaranteed before founding a university or an institution. Over the past two decades, several new government-controlled 'universities' have been opened within Kurdistan Region primarily to meet local demands. These higher education institutions heavily rely on the government to fill their needs. The

state seems to be either unable to provide sufficient support because of the increasing needs of these institutions and also more recently due to the financial crisis or unwilling to do so. This indeed has left very troubling consequences on quality which, for me, does not seem to be of much concern to the political elite of this Region; because, anyway, they never send their sons and daughters to our public schools and universities. People are well-aware that their children go to the 'best' schools and universities abroad. Along with this, there are other reasons why these politicians have no real concerns about the quality of our (higher) education. A high quality education, particularly the one that involves critical elements, never serves the ambitions of the powerful decision-makers; because they desire to create docile and powerless citizens feeling incapable of questioning or challenging their positions and interests.

The very fact that these institutions cannot support themselves means they need to operate under a close mandate of the government. Clear references were found within the data to indicate that this has made a really difficult situation for these institutions that they sometimes need to function simply as implementers of specific policies and agendas determined by higher authorities. Put differently, considering that these institutions are largely dominated by the powerful forces, they tend to be used as instruments to domesticate people. Meanwhile, this has also created a situation of dependency within which institutions need to be subject to a centralised system with limited autonomy to exercise. For instance, the evidence showed that decisions about curriculum, assessment and many other administrative issues are still centrally made. There was a feeling that the strict constraints imposed by the current system of higher education deprive institutions from exercising sufficient autonomy which consequently have repercussions for teacher and learner autonomy. Some participants, particularly students and teachers, expressed their frustration that the presence of various institutional constraints and the absence of autonomy-supportive environment may give further excuses to those who are already skeptical about the idea of learner autonomy to become even more resistant.

The last external constraint was identified as culturally-related. Several participants pointed out that there are beliefs and values within their society and 'culture' that

oppose the notion of learner autonomy. Although, compared to the other constraints discussed above, cultural constraints received less attention. This could be either because no explicit interview questions were asked about cultural issues or because constraints were seen to be more related to instructional and institutional dimensions and less to cultural factors. Whereas this finding may help us understand that there are socio-cultural dimensions that make the exercise of autonomy more difficult within our social and educational settings, the finding needs to be taken with caution basically for one main reason. When dealing with culture, one must take precautions not to make over-generalisations¹⁵ as there are possibly significant individual differences within a given culture (Palfreyman, 2003). Perhaps, these differences result from the fact that a variety of cultures and subcultures may exist within a geographical area (Oxford, 2008). Therefore, even within relatively small and “homogeneous societies, one can expect a certain amount of differentiation based on gender, class, age or ethnicity” (Andreatta & Ferraro, 2013: p. 36).

The concerns that the participants of the present study expressed were related to certain features assumed to be part of ‘Kurdish culture’, such as dependence on others, passivity, conformity, respect for authority and so on. These features are often labelled under broader cultural characteristics, namely collectivism, interdependence, collaboration, high power distance, etc. (Little, 1996; Littlewood, 1999; Palfreyman, 2003; Hofstede et al., 2010; Holliday, 2011). These are features upon which the arguments against cultural appropriacy of learner autonomy within group-oriented cultures like ‘Asian cultures’ or others are built (Nix, 2002). According to Palfreyman (2003), group-orientedness or collectivism could be one way that people within such cultures manifest their autonomy. Regarding other social values like collaboration and interdependence, researchers like Benson and Littlewood (cited in Smith, 2001) emphasise that no mutual exclusiveness exists between these values and autonomy. On the contrary, as Little (1996) highlights, pedagogical practices which favour interdependence and collaboration can effectively lead to capacity growth for

¹⁵ Section 2.2 broadly addressed the issue of ‘culture’ and its relation to learner autonomy

autonomous thought and action. Certain classroom observations conducted during my study displayed effective engagement of students with certain collaborative interdependent activities which could be interpreted as a demonstration of one form of autonomy on the part of students. This does not mean that no evidence of students working as autonomous individuals was found. Indeed, a good number of those interviewed and observed inside the classroom seemed to be really autonomous, at least, as far as the technical and psychological versions of autonomy are concerned.

Based on the above finding, even to assume that the aforementioned 'cultural characteristics' are still powerfully at work within Kurdish society, the way they influence different individuals and also different types of autonomy may vary. The argument here is that, within the existing socio-cultural context, exercising the technical and psychological forms of autonomy seems to be easier and less constraining, especially when contrasted with achieving and exercising political autonomy which appears to be extremely difficult. We should remember that the socio-cultural context cannot escape the political influences that powerful political forces always try to exert. There are social behaviours, norms and structures that may go against all types of autonomy. Hegemonic forces seem to have made attempts to preserve and reproduce these social forms and patterns, but particularly those that contain political autonomy for clear political purposes. Whereas political authorities typically want the social systems and orders to remain intact as this also leaves their powers intact and helps them to achieve their vested agendas.

On the whole, the discussions under this research question expose that there seems to be a strong and embedded political dimension to the major constraints on learner autonomy and also to the fact that why a specific type of autonomy could be more constrained while other(s) less constrained within a given institutional and social context. The paradox, though, seems to be that one important way to encounter these challenges could be through taking a political stance with regard to learner autonomy and education more generally.

7. Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

Following the previous chapter which discussed and interpreted the research findings, this chapter will present certain conclusions reached based on the discussions and interpretations previously made. Along with that, the chapter will also discuss the implications the key findings of the study could have for the overall situation of learner autonomy and higher education as well as for the major parties at the different levels of higher education. The chapter also includes discussions of the contributions this research has made to the situation of learner autonomy. Finally, suggestions for further research and limitations of the study will be introduced.

7.2 Theoretical and Conceptual Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study can be divided between those that have a rather theoretical and conceptual relevance and those that are rather practically and situationally relevant.

At the theoretical and conceptual level, this study has found that the interpretations, values and expectations associated with learner autonomy could be traced back to the technical, psychological and political versions of learner autonomy proposed by Benson (1996; 1997). A number of conclusions can be drawn from this. One could be that, given that these variants of learner autonomy represent different philosophical considerations of knowledge and learning, the various perspectives of autonomy came out from the participants do not seem to be random expressions; but seem to take roots from certain embedded world views which likely have resulted from different circumstances and experiences the participants have gone through. Another conclusion could be that learner autonomy cannot be confined to one particular variant as learner autonomy seems to entail all these distinct elements.

A related finding was that there were stronger conceptual references to the technical and psychological versions of learner autonomy, especially when compared to political

autonomy. This leads us to a further conclusion that the two former versions of autonomy, which are also referred to as the 'non-political' form of autonomy during this research, seem to more spontaneously occur to people. As a consequence, this non-political conceptualisation of learner autonomy, which focuses on equipping learners with certain technical skills and psychological dispositions so that they be able to gain specific personal and academic achievements, frequently recurred throughout this investigation. This can be clearly noticed with respect to the values ascribed to learner autonomy many of which were concerned with how autonomy could benefit the learner both personally and academically. This, perhaps, has resulted from a widespread depoliticised understanding of the processes of learning and education which seems to have precipitated the proliferation of the technical-psychological version of autonomy and undermines political autonomy (Benson, 1996).

One principal theoretical implication could be that a 'technologised and psychologised' (Pennycook, 1997) understanding of learner autonomy tends to continue to be widely held by individuals within different institutional and socio-cultural contexts. This form of understanding also continues to inform not just the way people view the roles of multiple parties but also their actual roles, behaviours and practices. This implies that conceptual views of learner autonomy have practical consequences. This leads us to another conclusion that one way to promote political autonomy or to strike a balance between the political and non-political versions of autonomy ought to proceed with changing the conceptions that people grasp about learner autonomy.

7.3 Practical and Situational Conclusions and Implications

Whereas the theoretical conclusions have revealed that the views of the participants about learner autonomy circulated around the technical-psychological (i.e. non-political) perspective and the political perspective, at the practical and situational levels, this research has made certain other conclusions that are still closely related to the theoretical ones. Given the fact that a great deal of understandings of learner autonomy centred on the non-political variant of learner autonomy, the manifestation of learner autonomy and the attempts to promote it both at the pedagogical and institutional

levels seemed to be mainly confined to this version of autonomy. To elaborate, the expectations and roles that were thought operationalised by the different parties seemed to largely serve the technical and psychological versions of autonomy; therefore, an underestimation of the political version of autonomy was inevitable.

The preceding paragraph suggests that the non-political variant of autonomy seemed more likely to be displayed and exercised within the existing situation. At the same time, teachers and institutional authorities were more likely to support this kind of autonomy. This could possibly be because this version of autonomy, first and foremost, puts emphasis on the personal learning gains of the learner which appeared to be the major source of attraction for students, teachers and senior administrators. This, however, does not mean that the non-political version of autonomy encounters no challenges within this research context. Indeed, this study found multiple internal and external factors that constrain the different versions of learner autonomy. One clear conclusion to be drawn here could be that learner autonomy inescapably faces various obstacles. These challenges, however, should not downgrade the importance of learner autonomy as a viable educational goal. The very existence of unavoidable constraints to learner autonomy suggests that learner autonomy necessitates an ongoing struggle (Pennycook, 1997; Moreira, 2007). This struggle seems unlikely to be won by individual students acting alone. On the contrary, this appears to be a matter of students, teachers and concerned others working collectively and collaboratively towards achieving this goal.

The last point made indicates that the struggle that learner autonomy requires seems to have both an educational and political nature which includes fighting for autonomy as a collective interest (Vieira, 2012). On that account, fighting for autonomy here seems to be inseparable from a broader fight to maintain and defend higher education as a 'public sphere' to serve public interests and not to allow exploitive forces to reduce higher education to a place that primarily serves private and market interests (Giroux, 2003). The latter trend appears to have become a powerful discourse within institutions of higher education, including the institution under investigation; therefore, people seemed to have surrendered to this kind of discourse. The findings clearly demonstrated

how qualification/certification has occupied the minds of students, teachers and authorities. As a consequence, our institutions increasingly tend to function more like training centres. This dominant trend has significantly determined the learning practices of students and has encouraged them to choose an easy path to acquire a degree. Meanwhile, this has also shaped the pedagogical and institutional practices to predominantly focus on helping students to gain a degree qualification.

While the findings revealed that the participants were generally unhappy with the situation of learner autonomy and that learner autonomy turned out to face enormous challenges at the different levels, this study found no evidence of concrete actions taken to change and challenge the status quo. The lack of action on the part of different actors could be related to the lack of a political sense of autonomy. This implies that bringing change to and improving the situation of learner autonomy within a specific context needs people, particularly students and teachers, to be politically autonomous. One important conclusion to be made here could be that even for the non-political form of autonomy to be effectively exercised within a particular institutional environment, the need for political autonomy seems to be still highly important. That could be because creating opportunities for learning or for academic autonomy possibly necessitates standing against certain established personal, instructional and institutional behaviours and practices. The evidence from this research has shown that whereas there were attempts both by some students to exercise their autonomy, particularly outside the classroom and institutional environment as well as by some teachers to create an autonomy-supportive climate, they seemed to be limited to specific individualised attempts. This indicates that there was not any systematic tendency at the pedagogical and institutional levels to provide an autonomy-friendly environment.

Indeed, compared with the political variant, there was some room for the non-political kind of autonomy. That was mainly because oppressive and powerful institutional and political forces appeared to starkly oppose the former and there were deliberate and systematic efforts to oppress political autonomy. Another reason could be that taking this political-critical path may bring about tremendous risk and hardship. For these reasons, perhaps, taking the political stance was almost entirely absent. The

implications of this can be seen within our institutions of higher education. One clear implication could be that these institutions have no or marginal influence on the existing social and political situations. The lack of public and social responsibility has given way to hegemonic political powers to use institutions of higher education as instruments to achieve their ends. To put differently, encouraging political autonomy could be an important part of attempts to reclaim the public and political role of universities.

7.4 Contributions

The findings from this research make several contributions. First of all, this study has been able to improve on Benson's three-dimensional conceptualisation of learner autonomy which provided an important theoretical basis to the present work. The current study, however, has taken the three versions of learner autonomy introduced by Benson (1996; 1997) a step forward by providing a situated analysis of how these variants of autonomy manifest themselves within real educational, institutional and life situations. In other words, this thesis has gone some way towards bridging the gap between the theoretical understandings of learner autonomy and the actual manifestations of this construct. Along with that, the study could situate the behaviours, actions and practices of students, teachers and institutional authorities within two major types of autonomy (i.e. the political and non-political) and tried to show the ongoing conflict between these two forms and the various political, philosophical and historical roots that underpin each category. The researcher argues that such deep combined theoretical and situational analysis of learner autonomy appears to be largely absent within the literature.

This thesis also makes a number of contextual, practical and theoretical contributions. On one hand, this work contributes both to the contextual knowledge of learner autonomy and also to the wider existing knowledge on learner autonomy. Given the fact that this study was probably the first attempt to investigate learner autonomy within this specific institutional and broader socio-cultural context, this research can serve as a base upon which future studies can be embarked. This study has identified

different views that people within this research context hold about learner autonomy. The importance of this appears to be not merely related to the identification of various perceptions per se but also to how these perceptions seemed to shape their behaviours, practices and eventually the overall situation of learner autonomy. That was part of the broader attempt to provide a deep understanding of the contextual situation of learner autonomy. This means that this research tried to unearth different and interrelated aspects of the situation of learner autonomy that seemed to be unknown to people within this context and beyond. Before this investigation, the researcher believed that one of the major problems of learner autonomy relates to students lacking autonomy. This research, however, has changed my views through introducing a different image of students not as people who have autonomy deficiency but as those who have the potential for autonomy but who are often prevented from exercising that capacity.

This study found that there are multiple personal, instructional, institutional and socio-political factors that obstruct the idea of learner autonomy. On that account, this research suggests that attempts to understand learner autonomy within a particular context may fall short without considering all the pertinent factors of the situation. This leads us to another important contribution that this study has made. The contribution here seems to be related to the way this study has tried to approach learner autonomy not from a unilateral perspective, but from a multidimensional perspective. The literature, especially empirical studies, seem to have largely addressed learner autonomy from one dimension. The consequence of this seems to have been an oversimplification of a complex issue like learner autonomy. As a result, learner autonomy has been equated to a process primarily concerned with the personal learning achievements of students. The implication of this appears to be that learner autonomy has been viewed as an end goal itself (i.e. the goal of pursuing or achieving learning needs and desires). The findings of this research adds to a growing body of literature which shows that this understanding of learner autonomy becomes more dominant among people. Consequently, the perspectives about learner autonomy and the roles and practices that were associated with learner autonomy were mainly confined to the technical and psychological versions.

This study, however, extends our understanding that learner autonomy should not be simply looked at from the personal and learning perspective but should be viewed from a socio-political angle as something that not only benefits the learner but more importantly the society at large. This study, therefore, also supports the need for a political model of learner autonomy which emphasises the need for a form of higher education that encourages and allows people to become both academically as well as socially and politically responsible towards changing and shaping their situations and future. The evidence from this study suggests that the promotion of the different types of autonomy, particularly of the political-critical variant necessitates crucial changes from the understandings that people hold about learner autonomy, higher education and the processes of education, learning and teaching. This research raises serious questions about the existing practical function of higher education which seems to be, first and foremost, concerned with providing students with a degree qualification. This study, therefore, calls for a pressing need for higher education policies to be reoriented from their focus on the provision of certification to pay greater attention to the moral, political and public responsibilities. Reshaping higher education towards this direction also requires students and teachers to abdicate their traditional roles and practices to embrace more critical ones.

Importantly, this investigation provides insights for those who have deep concerns about the current situation of learner autonomy and of higher education and who are courageous enough to take concrete steps to bring about changes to the status quo which tends to only serve the oppressive forces that aim to use higher education as a tool to achieve their private and party-political agendas. At the same time, this study can be an imperative step before undertaking critical action research with the intention to transform the existing widespread understandings of higher education and also to help people feel empowered to create alternative situations and not to shy away from their moral and political responsibilities as this appears to be the case at the moment.

7.5 Recommendations

Based on the findings, discussions and conclusions, the researcher makes several recommendations. The recommendations vary from those that are related to

institutions of higher education and authorities within them to those that are more specifically linked to teachers and students. This does not mean that these parties are quite apart from one another; the reason for this could be that learner autonomy probably needs different actions and interventions on the part of these major actors. Whereas the recommendations here are particularly relevant to the situation of learner autonomy, they are also more generally pertinent to the wider situation within the institution of higher education under investigation.

At the institutional level, one major recommendation could be that institutions of higher education need to reconsider their aims and roles. At the moment, their roles seem to be mainly restricted to providing students with degree qualifications or equipping them with certain market oriented skills. This has cast doubt on the public role of these institutions which appears to be very ineffective. On that account, one could recommend that institutions should attempt to reclaim their public and political role and influence. This necessitates a more active and critical positioning to be taken by these institutions so that they can make a positive difference as regards the existing social, economic and political issues within the society. However, as long as, these institutions are dominated by powerful political forces which attempt to use these 'academic establishments' for their private and political ambitions and as long as senior figures within these institutions are appointed by these political powers, one should not naively expect such institutions to take critical steps towards serving public interests.

The current institutional circumstances could be an indicator that top-down changes are difficult to happen. This suggests that changes could rather result from 'bottom-up' movements (Cornwall, 1988). This leads us to some other recommendations that are more germane to students and teachers. To begin with the latter first, teachers should overcome the idea that their roles are simply about passing on some content to students. More than that, even their role as learning facilitators which came out important within this study does not seem to meet the needs of the current state; because, this role still essentially focuses on the personal learning needs of the learner which may make little contribution to the public good. Given the fact that the existing

living, educational and socio-political situations seem to be appalling for teachers themselves (as they receive very low salaries) and for the public more generally, teachers should not remain indifferent. On the contrary, they need to take critical steps towards challenging and transforming the status quo. This, perhaps, could be done through working collaboratively with students and creating an educational climate within which they and their students feel empowered to stand up for their rights and the rights of others around them. This recommendation, which takes roots from the political-critical version of autonomy, may sound 'ethically questionable' (Benson, 1997) as this could cause tremendous risk to teachers and others. However, as Biesta (2013) argues, education cannot be 'risk-free' and to "take the risk out of education" (p. 1) means that "education becomes fundamentally uneducational". On that account, committing to the risk of education could be part of the educational responsibility that teachers, students and concerned others need to take.

As for university students and based on the conclusions made that they have the potential to act as autonomous beings, they need to realise that exercising this capacity and right requires an ongoing struggle as there are internal and external factors that create obstacles ahead of them. This suggests that fighting for autonomy cannot be separated from a bigger fight to bring about a better institutional and social conditions. This study, therefore, recommends that students need to use their capacity to develop as critical learners and thinkers so that they can have an active and conscious presence both within their educational institutions and beyond. Students should enter higher education with expectations not to simply get a degree but to invest their time and energy to become important participants of the learning and education processes as well as effective social agents. University students constitute a major proportion of our society but their role and influence seem to be absent. That could be because non-action appears to have become a norm. However, students should be aware that their stance during the course of higher education could importantly shape their present education and learning endeavour as well as their future life conditions.

7.6 Limitations

Research studies are generally subject to limitations. As for this research, there are three major types of limitations identified that could be labelled under methodological, contextual and political limitations, as follows:

- Given that this study employed multiple qualitative methods which had the advantage of gaining deeper insights of the situation, the processes of data collection and analysis were extremely time-consuming. Besides that, qualitative data itself may often have different and alternative interpretations. Another methodological limitation relates to the sample size. Despite the fact that this research included participants from five different academic disciplines, a choice of a relatively small sample makes the findings of this study less generalisable to other situations and other people.
- The findings of this study should, therefore, be looked at as specifically relevant to the context within which they have been generated. On that account, even though, the situation of learner autonomy within the institution under investigation could be representative of the situation within other institutions of higher education in Kurdistan, the researcher cannot make such claims. This decision, however, will be left for the reader to make.
- Research limitations could, sometimes, be political. Due to the political situation, the researcher had to avoid discussing some politically-sensitive matters that were believed to be pertinent to understanding the situation of learner autonomy, especially that of political autonomy.

7.7 Suggestions for Further Research

This study has examined important aspects of the situation of learner autonomy. However, after all, this research has only uncovered the understandings and experiences of a group of people within a particular institutional environment. Therefore, further work needs to be done around this important, yet under-researched, issue within this and other institutional contexts. This allows us to compare the way

different people conceive and experience autonomy within distinct educational settings which altogether can enable us to reach a better understanding of the situation of learner autonomy at a 'national level'. This study makes clear that understanding the state of learner autonomy within the context of present research or any other context should not be just for the sake of understanding. More importantly, this should lay a groundwork upon which necessary actions and interventions have to be taken with the intention to make some positive difference to the current state.

Following the above argument and given that this study has provided insights of the situation of learner autonomy, further research should be carried out with the aim to improve the situation. This could initiate with changing the perspectives people hold about learner autonomy and about learning, education and higher education more generally; because, this may subsequently change the way people act and position themselves with regard to certain issues, situations and phenomena. Future research, therefore, should particularly concentrate on promoting the political variant of learner autonomy for two main reasons. First, without political autonomy, the status quo more likely continues to remain intact and the existing situation provides little opportunity for students to exercise and experience their academic autonomy. Through action research, students could be enabled to regasp their power and agency so that they can be part of creating opportunities for themselves. Second, any action research which intends to stimulate political autonomy could have essential institutional as well as socio-political impacts — something the Region and the entire country seem to need most these days. A related and another possible suggestion could be that future research should be directed towards changing pedagogical practices. As the findings highlighted, teachers currently play a minor role possibly because they have confined themselves to certain traditional instructional behaviours or as Vieira (2012) says, they see themselves as “technicians of learning” (p. 1071). Further studies are, therefore, needed to change the way teachers position themselves with regard to issues within institutional and educational contexts and outside. This means that research has to convince teachers to accept that there are important critical, moral and social dimensions to teaching and their roles and that they should do justice to them.

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Appendices

Appendix 'A'

Certificate of ethical research approval

TITLE OF YOUR PROJECT:

Understanding the Situation of Learner Autonomy in a Higher Education Context of Kurdistan Region (tentative title)

1. Brief description of your research project:

Along with an unprecedented growth higher education witnesses in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in terms of the number of students and institutions both public and private, there have been serious questions and concerns raised about the quality of education and the way students learn within these institutions. No doubt that transitioning to higher education can be seen as one of the significant shifts students undergo at the personal, social and academic levels. The literature has established that students who take more responsibility for their learning and who try to learn more autonomously will possibly achieve better learning outcomes than those who merely rely on their teachers and classroom learning. This can be equally applied to students at educational levels other than higher education. However, the fact that higher education requires students to engage with a higher level of education and learning, learner autonomy seems more relevant and compatible to university education.

This research will focus on understanding the situation of learner autonomy within one of the institutions of higher education in Kurdistan Region-Iraq. Towards that end, the researcher will draw on the perspectives, experiences and roles of different parties involved within the higher education institution, namely students, teachers and senior administrators. This study tries to understand the situation from the eyes of different participants and the roles they play and how these altogether influence the state of learner autonomy. More specifically, this research will address the following research questions:

- What are the understandings of learners, teachers and authorities with regard to learner autonomy in higher education?
- To what extent, do learners see their experience in higher education as contributing to or constraining the development of autonomous learning?
- How do learners, teachers and authorities see the current situation of learner autonomy in higher education?
- What roles do learners, teachers and institutions/authorities play with regard to learner autonomy?
- What value and position has been given to learner autonomy within the learning, teaching and policy and decision making processes in higher education?

Chair of the School's Ethics Committee
updated: March 2013

2. Give details of the participants in this research (giving ages of any children and/or young people involved):

This thesis includes the following three types of participants:

- Third year undergraduate students (n=30)
- University teachers (n=5)
- Senior administrators (authorities) (n=7)

The participants will be selected purposefully by the researchers with the help of some colleagues working within the respective university. Within purposive sampling strategy, this research will apply maximum-variation sampling to select participants across various academic disciplines and across different levels of hierarchy. That is, their selection will be based on their being part of a particular faculty, department or classroom or holding some key position within this particular university. Regarding student and teacher participants, their participation in this study will begin with certain classroom observations. Following this stage, students will be asked to take part in focus group discussions. After that, face-to-face interviews will be conducted with the university teachers. Lastly, interviews will be carried out with a number of senior administrators.

Give details (with special reference to any children or those with special needs) regarding the ethical issues of:

3. informed consent: Where children in schools are involved this includes both headteachers and parents). Copy(ies) of your consent form(s) you will be using must accompany this document. a blank consent form can be downloaded from the GSE student access on-line documents: Each consent form MUST be personalised with your contact details.

Since this research makes use of several research methods and recruits different types of participants at the different levels of the institution, three informed consent forms have been prepared. This is to make clear for the participants what are the purposes of the methods used and why they are selected to take part in the study. The consent forms explain to the participants that there is no compulsion for their participation and they are free to withdraw from the research at any time. The consent forms will also ensure the participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of the data and their identity. For the participants to clearly understand the content of the consent forms, Kurdish versions of the forms will be provided.

In case that certain students will not consent to be included in the classroom observations, the things they say inside the classroom will be ignored on the recordings. That is the researcher will only use the data from those who will give their consent.

4. anonymity and confidentiality

The collected data of this research will not be used for purposes other than this study and therefore will not be accessible to people other than the researcher and the supervisors. To keep the participants safe and secure and to avoid causing them harm, the data will be strictly treated as confidential. The participants will be anonymized through pseudonyms and any identifying factors that could reveal the participants identity will be removed from the data and findings of the research.

5. Give details of the methods to be used for data collection and analysis and how you would ensure they do not cause any harm, detriment or unreasonable stress:

This research adopts four methods of data collection: observations, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. As mentioned earlier, observations will be conducted with both teachers and students in five different classrooms within different departments. My role will be restricted to an 'observer-as-participant' in the classrooms where I will not directly interact with the students and teachers. I am aware that my presence in the classroom possibly affects the participants' behaviour, but this kind of observation will give me the advantage to gain the participants' consent and will also help me to take notes and avoid making a lot of disruptions to the classroom setting. Reviewing and analysing documents is another means of data collection. This will possibly be a continuous process and could start once the researcher visits the field.

Following classroom observations, five focus group discussions will be conducted with 30 students (i.e. six students in each group). After that five face-to-face interviews will be carried out with five teachers. The last stage of data collection will be seven interviews conducted with five department heads and two other senior figures at the level of the University and Ministry of Higher Education. All the focus group and interview sessions will be recorded after the participants' consent will be obtained. The focus groups and interviews will be conducted at a time and place that best suit the participants. The participants will have full right to withdraw from the study at any time they wish to. The data analysis will be an ongoing process in this study but the actual process will start after the data collection will finish. This research will use thematic analysis to analyse the data. To make the analysis and coding more systematic and organized, Nvivo software will be used which has been particularly designed for this purpose.

6. Give details of any other ethical issues which may arise from this project - e.g. secure storage of videos/recorded interviews/photos/completed questionnaires, or

To prevent any potential loss, the data will be safely stored both electronically and in hard copies. The electronic data will be saved in the researcher's personal computer with virus protection software and private username and password. The transcribed data will be kept in a locked file cabinet only accessible to the researcher.

7. special arrangements made for participants with special needs etc.

8. Give details of any exceptional factors, which may raise ethical issues (e.g. potential political or ideological conflicts which may pose danger or harm to participants):


This research will take place at Soran University located in an area called Soran belonging to Erbil governorate, the capital city of Kurdistan Region-Iraq. Although, Kurdistan Region is currently in fighting with ISIS, the situation in the entire Region of Kurdistan is secure and safe particularly in the area where my fieldwork takes place since it is far away from the areas of conflict. During the time of my data collection process, I will be staying with my family in a smaller town nearby Soran which due to its safety and security has become a good place for hundreds of refugees fled the rest of Iraq.

To ensure that things go well in the research site and in the entire Region and to keep my supervisor updated about the ongoing situation there, I will contact my supervisor on a regular basis. I have also signed up for Foreign Travel Advice so that I can receive updates and advice from the UK government about the latest security developments and travelling issues.

This form should now be printed out, signed by you on the first page and sent to your supervisor to sign. Your supervisor will forward this document to the School's Research Support Office for the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee to countersign. A unique approval reference will be added and this certificate will be returned to you to be included at the back of your dissertation/thesis.

N.B. You should not start the fieldwork part of the project until you have the signature of your supervisor

This project has been approved for the period: 14/4/15 until: 31/8/16

By (above mentioned supervisor's signature):  date: 14/4/15

N.B. To Supervisor: Please ensure that ethical issues are addressed annually in your report and if any changes in the research occur a further form is completed.

Chair of the School's Ethics Committee
updated: March 2013

GSE unique approval reference: D/14/15/39

Signed: Jane Keale date: 14/4/15
Chair of the School's Ethics Committee

Chair of the School's Ethics Committee
updated: March 2013

Appendix 'B'

Consent Form for Classroom Observation

You are invited to participate in a research project I am currently conducting. The purpose of this research is to understand the situation of learner autonomy within this institution of higher education. This study will possibly help us to better understand the situation of learner autonomy and the roles different parties, including students, teachers and decision makers play. The study may also benefit any future necessary actions and decisions that need to be undertaken to improve the situation.

You have been selected to participate because you are part of a third-year classroom context which is the focus of this research. The purpose of the observation is to look at the nature of the classroom environment, the nature of the teaching-learning process, classroom interactions and activities, learner-teacher relationships, and the roles students and the teacher play inside the classroom. The observation does not intend to change the way your classroom functions, but the researcher may ask certain students and the teacher to take part in a focus group discussion and a face-to-face interview so that the issues observed in the classroom and other issues related to learner autonomy will be further discussed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to decline to be part of the classroom observation or to withdraw from it at any stage. The observation will not affect your grades and evaluation. The things observed and recorded inside the classroom will remain anonymous and confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone outside the classroom. The data obtained from the classroom will be solely used for this research purpose and will only be accessible to the researcher.

Your signature indicates that you have read the aims of this research and the information provided above and have decided to be part of the classroom observation.

(Signature of participant)..... (Date).....

(Printed name of participant).....

One copy of this form will be kept by the participant; a second copy will be kept by the researcher.

Contact details of the researcher **Karmand Hamad**: email: kah214@exeter.ac.uk mobile no.

07504666987

If you have any concerns about the project that you would like to discuss, please contact my supervisor:

Dr. Philip Durrant via: P.L.Durrant@exeter.ac.uk

Appendix 'C'

Consent Form for Focus Groups

You are invited to participate in a research project I am currently conducting. The purpose of this research is to understand the situation of learner autonomy within this institution of higher education. This study will possibly help us to better understand the situation of learner autonomy and the roles different parties, including students, teachers and decision makers play. The study may also benefit any future necessary actions and decisions that need to be undertaken to improve the situation.

You have been asked to take part due to your learning experience in higher education. So during the focus group discussions, you will be mainly asked to discuss your perspectives and experiences of autonomous learning in higher education and the roles you play.

Your participation is on a voluntary basis and you are free to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the focus group discussions at any stage. The discussion will be audio-recorded and the information provided will remain anonymous and confidential and cannot be discussed and shared with people outside of the group. The data obtained from the discussion will be solely used for this research purpose and will only be accessible to the researcher.

Your signature indicates that you have read the aims of this research and the information provided above and have decided to participate.

(Signature of participant).....

(Date).....

(Printed name of participant).....

One copy of this form will be kept by the participant; a second copy will be kept by the researcher.

Contact details of the researcher **Karmand Hamad**: email: kah214@exeter.ac.uk mobile no.

07504666987

If you have any concerns about the project that you would like to discuss, please contact my supervisor:

Dr. Philip Durrant via: P.L.Durrant@exeter.ac.uk

Appendix 'D'

Consent Form for Interviews

You are invited to participate in a research project I am currently conducting. The purpose of this research is to understand the situation of learner autonomy within this institution of higher education. This study will possibly help us to better understand the situation of learner autonomy and the roles different parties, including students, teachers and decision makers play. The study may also benefit any future necessary actions and decisions that need to be undertaken to improve the situation.

You have been asked to take part due to the role and position you have within this institution with regard to the teaching-learning process, institutional and academic policies and decision making processes . So during the face-to-face interview, the discussion will mainly focus on your understanding of autonomous learning within the higher education context and the roles you play in terms of the teaching practices and the policies and strategies that are in place to encourage the development of autonomous learning.

Your participation is on a voluntary basis and you are free to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the interview at any stage. The interview session will be audio-recorded and the information provided will remain anonymous and confidential. The data obtained from the interview will be solely used for this research purpose and will only be accessible to the researcher.

Your signature indicates that you have read the aims of this research and the information provided above and have decided to participate.

(Signature of participant).....

(Date).....

(Printed name of participant).....

One copy of this form will be kept by the participant; a second copy will be kept by the researcher.

Contact details of the researcher **Karmand Hamad**: email: kah214@exeter.ac.uk mobile no.

07504666987

If you have any concerns about the project that you would like to discuss, please contact my supervisor:

Dr. Philip Durrant via: P.L.Durrant@exeter.ac.uk

Appendix 'E'

Questioning Guide for Focus Groups

1. When you hear the words learner autonomy/autonomous learning, what comes to your mind?
2. How important do you think learner autonomy is for higher education?
3. To what extent do you think higher education should encourage the sense of autonomy among students?
4. Compared with your previous educational experiences, how autonomous do you think you have been since entering higher education?
5. As students, how do you see your roles within higher education in relation to learner autonomy?
 - To what extent do you think students are ready to act autonomously?
 - If you were to start your university education again, what changes do you think you would make to become more autonomous?
6. What teachers have done or can do to help students to become more autonomous learners?
 - To what extent do you think teachers are responsible to encourage and enable students to work autonomously?
7. In what ways has this institution tried to encourage and facilitate the development and exercise of autonomy among students?
 - What educational services and facilities are provided to support learner autonomy?
8. How do you generally describe the current situation of learner autonomy within your institution?
9. What challenges do you think are there that constrain the exercise and development of learner autonomy within this institution of higher education?
10. What do you think could be done to make the higher education environment more supportive and suitable for the development of learner autonomy?

Appendix 'F'

A sample of focus group scripts with student participants

تويۇزەر / سەربەخۇبۇون ياخود خۇ فيرکردن چيە و چۇن پېنئاسەى دەكەن؟

قوتابى 14 : سەربەخۇبۇون ھەولئانى مرۇقە بۇ وەستان لەسەر پېنئەكانى، مرۇقە ھەر لە كاتى لەدايك بوونى تا كۇتايى ھەميشە پېنئاستى بە كەسانى تر ھەيە تاكو يارمەتى بدن بەلام ئەگەر دواجار مرۇقەكە خۇى ھەل ئەدات ئەوہ زەحمەتە بتوانى پېنگات. چونكە ھەولئانى خۇتە كە زياتر دەبېتە ھۇى دروست بوونى كەسايەتتەكى بەھيزو خاوەن بېرۇكەو ديدگاي خۇت كە ئەمە رەنگە بېيتە ھۇى داھينانكردن كە ھەمووى لە ئە نجامى ھەولئى خودى تاكەكان خۇيان بەرھەم دېت، وە بەراستپش داھينان ئەبېت لە زانكۇ و وە لە قوتابيانى زانكۇوہ سەرھەلېدات.

قوتابى 13 : سەربەخۇبۇون بېرېتپە لە نازادكردى تاك خۇى بۇ گەران بۇ ھەولدان بە گەيشتنى ئەو نامانجەى كە ئەيەوېت پېنى بگات بەبى گويدانە دەورويەر.

قوتابى 15 : سەربەخۇبۇون شتېك نېە كە لە دەورويەرو كۇمەلگا بېرېت بە كەسېك ئەگەر ئەوكەسە خۇى سەربەخۇبى و سەربەستى ئەدات بەخۇى. بۇيە ئەگەر تۇ خۇت جەزى سەربەخۇبىت ئەبېت و ھەولئى بۇ ئەدەى ئەوہ پېم وانپە كە دەورويەر كارېگەريەكى ئەوتۇى ھەبېت جگە ئەوہى كە رەنگە بتوانېت بېيت بە جۇرېك لە ھاندەر.

تويۇزەر / تا چەند پېتان وايە سەربەخۇبۇون لە خوېندن و فيربوون بە تايبەتى لە قۇناعى زانكۇ گرنكە؟

قوتابى 15 : سەربەخۇبۇون لە قۇناعى زانكۇدا زۇر زۇر گرنكە چونكە ئەو زانباريانەى كە مامۇستا دەمداتى دەيان خوېنم بۇ ئەوہى دەرچەم، بەلام لە دەروەى ئەمە ئەوہ پېنئاستە ھەول بېدەم كە شتى تر فيرى خۇم بېكەم ئەمەش بۇ بەرەوپېش بېردنى تواناكانم وە پېش وەچونم وەكو كەسېكى كارا و سەرکەوتوو وە دواتر بتوانم لە شوېن ئەو چاوەروانپە دابم كە ھەم لە كۇمەلگەو ھەمېش لە بوارەكەى خۇم چاوەروانپە لېدەكرېت.

قوتابى 16 : ھەر يەك لە نېمە كە لېرە دەخوېنېن و فيردەبېن مەسەلەى خوېندى نېمە ئەگەر تەنھا پەيوەست بېت بەو مەنھج و بابەتەى كە دەمان درېتى ئەوہ بەس لە ئۇ دەرچوونى نېمە واتە شتېكى كەم وەردەگرېن و دەردەچېن بەلام ئەوہى كە ھەول بېدەى بۇخۇت زانبارى دەركى بەدەست بېنى زۇر گرنكە چونكە سبەو دووسبەى ئەمە دەبېن بە مامۇستا كە ئەوہيەك لەبەر دەستى نېمە پەرورەدە دەبېت، واتە زۇر پېنئاستە كە بايى ئەوہندە توانا و زانستت ھەبېت كە بتوانېت ئەوہيەكى رۇشەنېرو تېگەبېشت و پەرورەدە بېكەى وە لە داھاتوودا شانازى پېنئەبېكى و خەلكېش دەست خۇشېت لېبېكات.

قوتابى 15 : ئەگەر نېمە وەكو قوتابى زانكۇ سەربەخۇبانە ھەول ئەدەن كە زانست و زانباريەكانمان گەشە پېدەبېن ئەوہ بە پېشت بەستەمان بەو شتانەى كە تەنھا لە لايەن مامۇستاكانمانئەوہ باس دەكرېت و دەدرېت پېمان ئەوہ كەسانى زۇر فاشل دەردەچېن چونكە ئەوہى لېرە دەخوېندېت كەرستەيەكى زۇر كەمە بەشى ئەوہ ناكات كە قوتابى بتوانى بە تەنھا پېشتى پى بېستى بەتايبەتى ئەو سەردەمەدا كە زانست و زانبارى زۇر بە خېرايى زىاد دەكات بەردەوام شتى نوى دېتە گۇرى.

قوتابى 12 : كەمتەرخەمى قوتابيان لە ھەولئانپان بۇ گەران و نوېكردەنەوہى زانست و زانباريەكان و ايان لېدەكات كە تەنانەت ئەو شتانەى كە لە زانكۇش وەريان گرتووہ بېريان ئەمېنى بۇ دواى دەرچوون بۇ ئەوہى سوودى لى وەربېگرن چونكە لە ئەساسدا مەبەستەكە فيربوون نەبوہ. بۇيە زۇر گرنكە كە قوتابى

به بهر دوام هه نسه تگاندن بۆ خۆی بکات وه خویندنه وهی بهردهوامی هه بیته ههول بادات بۆ نهو زانست و زانیاریانهی که نه بهردهستن و وه ههولنی دهوله مه نکر دنیان بادات.

قوتابی 14: په ورده خوینه له ده مارا نه گهر بیته و ژهراوی بیته نه وه هه موو کومه لگه ژهراوی ده بیته. بویه نه گهر له قونای سهره تایه وه فیرت نه کهن و سبقت بۆ دروست نه کهن وه وات لینه کهن که پشت به خوت بهستی و وه هانت نه دن نه وه زه مه ته بتوانی که که سیکی سهرکه وتوت لیدهریچیت نه خویندندا. وه له نیستادا نهو مامه نه یه ی که له قوتا بخانه کان له گه ل قوتابیان ده کریت جیگه ی پرسیری زوره ده بی خه می جدی لیبخوریته چونکه به راستی نیمه په ورده یه کی فاشلمان هه یه.

قوتابی 13: ناما نجی سهره کی زانکو بریتیه له سهره خۆی نه فیربوون، به لام پرسیاره که لیره نه وه یه تا چهند زانکوکانی نیمه توانیویانه نهو تاکه دروست بکهن وه نایا کاریان له سهر نهو ناما نه چه کردیه که قوتابی هاته زانکو نهو وشیری و ههسته ی لا دروست بیته که به لئ نهو بهر پر سه له فیربوونی خۆی بایی نهو نازادی و سهره خۆی پیدهدریت وایانیش نهو ژینگه یه ی بۆ ره خساوه. نازانم زانکو چی کردوه بۆ قوتابیان تا نازادانه ههولنی فیربوون بدن نهو ی که بابته کان له چوارچیوهی مه نزه مه یه ک سنووردار ده کرین بواریکی و بۆ فیربوونی سهره خۆ ناهیلیمته وه. بویه نه گهر له زانکو ریگایه کت بۆ دانه نریت و ناراسته نه کریت به رهو سهره خۆی زیاتر، نیدی ناما نجی هاتنه زانکو چیه.

قوتابی 14: کیشه که نه وه یه که نه گهر له سهرتاوه فیرنه کریتی که له خویندندا پشت به خوت بهستی نهو دواتر بوت زه مه ت ده بیته چونکه رانه هاتووی له بهر نهو ناچاری ده گهر نیته وه سهر نهو ی که زۆرتر پشت به ست و بیته به ماموستا وه چوارچیوه یه کت بۆ خوت داناوه چه ز ناکه ی لی دهریچیت.

قوتابی 12: نهو ی که قوتابیانی به ناره زووی خویان نه هاتوون بۆ به شه که یاخود زانکۆکه نهو کاریگه ری نه رینی زوری هه یه له سهر چه زی قوتابیان له گرتگی دانیان به لایه نی فیربوونی خویان سهره رای نهو ی که نهو قوتابیانه من دن نیام که به هره ی تریان تیدا هه یه نه گهر دهرقه تان بۆ بره خسی.

تویژهر/ نهو جیاوازیانه چین که هه ن له نیوان قوناهه کانی پیش زانکو له گه ل قونای زانکو له رووی فیربوونی سهره خۆوه؟

قوتابی 15: به رای من جیاوازی زۆر زوری هه یه به تاییه تی له روانگه ی نهو ی که له زانکو بواریکی باشتر هه یه بۆ فیربوون وه سهره خۆیانه به دوای شتا بگه رتی به پینچه وانه ی قوتا بخانه که نهو مه جاله زۆر که مه. واته له زانکو تاکه کان سهره خۆن نه گهر بیانه ویت و ناره زوویان هه بیته که خویان فیربکهن وه به دوای سهرچاوه کانی فیربووندا بگه رین.

قوتابی 12: به بۆچونی منیش جیاوازی فراوان ده بینم له نیوان خویندن له زانکو له قوتا بخانه به تاییه ت له به ده ست هیئانی زانیاری که دهرقه تی گونجاو هه یه بۆ نه مه له زانکو به لام نه گهر بیینه سهر قوتا بخانه نهو وه من پیم وایه سوودو زانیاریه کان نه ک نهو ی که فه راهم نه کراون به لکو بگه ره قورغیش کراون، بویه ته نانه ت نهو قوتابیانه ش کهوا زیره ک دهرده که ون ته نها شته کان له به رده کهن که هیج مه به ست لئی فیربوون نیه ته نها تا کاتی نیمتجان به کاردیت، به لام له قونای زانکۆی نهو سوودو زانیاریانه نهو هنده زۆرن به به راورد به قوتا بخانه که له هه ژمارنایه ن هه مه ش له بهر نهو ی که زانیاریه کان سهره خۆن و به ناره زووی خوت وه ریانه گه ری به نیجیاری ناخریته سهری نه مه له کاتی کدا که به هو ی مناقشه وه شروقه ی زۆرتر بۆ بابته ته کان قوتابیان باشتر له بابته ته کان تیده گه ن.

قوتابی 13: ناتوانین بلین زانکۆکان به گشتی توانیبتیان خواستی قوتابی به دبیینن له رووی زانسته یه وه نه زمونی خۆم له زانکو بۆ ماوه ی سی سال وه به گویره ی نهو چاوه روانیانه ی که من هه م بوون پیم ده لین که نه خیر زانکو له ناستی پینوستدا نه بووه. چاوه روانی من نهو هبوو که ناکتیف تریبم، باشداریه کی باشترم هه با له پرۆسه ی فیرکردن و فیربووندا وه ههروه ها بمتوانیایه له بواره که ی خۆم به شیوه یه کی زانستی و نه کادی میانه ی مناقشه ی

بابەتەكان بىكەم ئە گەل ھاوريكانم. بۇيە دەتوانم بلىم ئەو ئامانجەي كە ھەمان بوو ئە زانكۆ تا ئىستا نەمان تۈانيوھ بېيىكىن. ۋە ھۆكارەكانىش يەكەم دەگەرئىنمەۋە بۇ خۇدى تاكەكان كە كارو ھەۋئاندىان ۋەكو پىيوست نەبوو، دووم ئەۋەي كە ئە زانكۆش شتەكان بەلاپىدا براون خۇيىدىن تەنھا بۇتە دەرخرىدىن بۇ بەدەست ھىئانى دەرجە فېربوون ۋەلانراۋە كە ئەمانەش ھەموويان بونەتە ھۇي ساربوونەۋەي قوتابى كەمووكورى ئە ئەداكەي.

قوتابى 15: تاكەكان نازان ئە زانكۆ ئەۋەي كە دەيانەۋىت چۇن خۇيان فېربىكەن، ۋە فېربوونىش ئە زانكۆدا ئە بنەرەت ھەرۋايە كە دەبىت تاكەكان خۇيان ھەۋلى بۇ بدەن تا بتوان خۇيان دروست بىكەن ۋە پىبگەيەنن ۋە زانكۆش ئەۋەي كە شەي رەخساندوھ كە قوتابىيان خۇيان دروست بىكەن.

قوتابى 16: مەسەلەي فېربوون چ ئە زانكۆ ياخود پىش زانكۆش بە شىۋەيەكى سەرەكى ئەۋەستىتە سەر تاكەكە بەلام ئەۋەي جىاۋاۋە ئەۋەيە كە قوتابىيان ئە زانكۆ نازادترن ئەك ۋەك قوتابىخانە كە شتەكان زىاتر سنوورداركران چ مامۇستاكەن ۋە چ قوتابىيان ئە چوارچىۋەي مەنج دەرنانچن.

تويۇر/ ئەۋە گۇرانكارىانە چىن كەۋا ئە ئىۋە روويىداۋە ئەۋەتەي ھاتوونەتە زانكۆ؟

قوتابى 15: مەن ۋەكو خۇم زىاتر پىشت بەستوۋ ۋە سەربەخۇبمە ئە فېربوون ۋە بىرىدان، ۋاتە خۇ فېربوون ۋە خۇ دروست كىردن ئەسەر تاكەكە خۇي ۋەستاۋە.

قوتابى 13: بە دىنيابى گۇرانكارى ھەبوو ۋە ھەندىكىشىيان گۇرانى گەۋرەبوون ئە زىانى ئىمەدا بەتايىبەت ئەۋە بۋارە زانستىيەي كە تىيىداين ۋە ئە ھەرۋە تىگەيشتەنمان بۇ شتەكان، بەلام ئەگەل ھەموۋ ئەمانەش بەئى زانكۆ نەيتۈانيوھ خواستەكانى مەن پىنىتە دى.

قوتابى 15: بە گۈيرەي ئەۋە پىناسەيەي كە بۇ مەنيان كىرد پىش ئەۋەي كە بىمە زانكۆ ئەۋەبوو كە زانكۆ شوينى رابۋاردن ۋە كات بەسەبىردنە، بەلام مەن دەلىم كە ئەۋە ھىچ ۋا ئىيە مەۋقە دەتۈانى ئە زانكۆ فېرى زۇر شت بىبىت كە ئە زىانىدا ئەي بىنيوھ ۋاتە شوينى ئەۋەيە كە مەۋقە بتۈانى پەرە بە تۈواناكەنى خۇي بەدات.

قوتابى 14: ئە قوتابىخانە زانبارىەكان قەتەيس ماون قوتابى ناتۈانى ئە دەرەۋەي ئەۋە زانبارىانە شتى تىر بىنىت تىكەل بە زانبارىەكانى بىكات ۋاتە ئەۋە دەرفەتە نەرەخساۋە، ئە زانكۆشدا ئەۋە يەك دوو سالى ئەۋە دواتر تۈزىك باشترە ئەگەر نا زانكۆش ھاۋشىۋەي قوتابىخانەيە. چۈنكە بەراستى ئەۋەي كە رىگە بە قوتابىيان بەرئىت سەربەخۇيانە بگەرئىت بۇ ۋەدەست ھىئانى زانبارى ئەدەرەۋەي چوارچىۋەكى دىارىكرادا ۋە دواتر تىكەل كىردن بەۋە زانست ۋە زانبارىانەي كە ئە مامۇستاۋە باس دەكرىت ۋە ئە قوتابىيان دەكات كە سىقەي بەخۇبىت، پىشت بەخۇي بەستىت، ھەۋل بەدات، ۋە كە زانبارى زىاترت ۋەرگرت ئىدى باگراۋندى رۇشەنبرىشت فراۋان دەبىت كۇمەلىك سوۋدى ھەيە بۇ مامۇستاش سوۋدى ھەيە چۈنكە ئەگەر مامۇستا تەنھا گىرنگى بەدات بەۋە كۇمەلە زانبارىەي كە خۇي ھەيەتە ئەۋە رەنگە زۇر مامدوۋ بىبىت ئە دروست كىردن كەسايەتى بۇ قوتابىيان، بەلام ئەگەر قوتابىيان خۇيان ھەۋل بەدەن ئەۋە ھەم ئە روۋى كەسايەتتەۋە ۋە ھەمىش ئە روۋى زانستىيەۋە باشتر پىدەگەن.

قوتابى 13: ئەۋەي ئىستا ئە زانكۆ پەيرەۋ دەكرىت ئەۋەيە كە مامۇستاكەن چەند مەنزەمەيەك ئەدەن بە قوتابى بۇ ئەۋەي بىخۇينن ۋە ئە دەرەۋەي ئەۋە مەنزەمانە قىبول ناكىرئىت قوتابى زانبارى خۇي بىخانە ئىۋو بابەتەكە ۋە ئەمەش ۋا ئە قوتابىيان دەكات ۋە ياخود ئىجباريان دەكات كە شتەكان دەرەخ بىكات ۋە ئەكاتى ئىمتەخان ئۇي بنوسىيەۋە تەۋاۋ. ۋاتە ئەۋە روۋەۋە جىاۋازىيەكى ئەۋەتۇ نابىنم ئە ئىۋان زانكۆ ۋە قوتابىخانە. بە بۇچۈۋى مەن ئە زانكۆدا، مامۇستاكەن پىيوستە سەرچاۋە بەداتە قوتابى، ئىدى ئەۋە نەركى قوتابى خۇيەتى كە بچىت بەدۋاي زانبارىەكاندا بگەرئىت ۋە ئەمەش ۋا ئە قوتابىيان دەكات كە ئەۋە شتەنەي كە خۇيان بەدەستى دىنن ئەلايان بە نىرخ بىن.

قوتابى 15: بەلام مامۇستاشمان ھەببۇو ھەولى ئەۋەى داۋە كە ئەۋ شىۋازە بەكارىنىت، بەلام بىنىمان كە قوتابىيان ئەۋ نامادەيەيان تىدا نەبۇو ۋە رازى نەبۇون لەسەر ئەمە، بۇيە ئەۋە پىمان دەلىت كە قوتابىيان خۇيان كەم تەرخەن ۋە ناستەنگ ئەخەنە بەردەم شىۋازى سەربەخۇيانە لە فېربۇون.

قوتابى 14: ھەتا ئەۋايەكانىش رەچاۋى ئەۋە ناكەن كە بتوانن لە ھەموو روۋيەكەۋە پىشەنگ بن ۋەكو لە بەشدارىكردن لە نىۋ پۇل، لە ھەئس ۋە كەوت لەگەن مامۇستا لە زىرەكىت لە دەربىرىنى زانىارى گشتى نىنجا ئەۋ زانىارىيانە كە مامۇستا پىت دەدات، واتە تەنھا لەبەركردن نەبى بەلكو فېربۇون پىت فېركردنەۋەى لەگەن پىت.

تويۇر / بە ھەرۋارد بە قۇناغەكانى پىش زانكو تا چەند لە نىستادا لە زانكو پىشت بەستوۋ سەربەخۇنە لە فېربۇوندا؟

قوتابى 13: مەن ۋەكو خۇم بە ھوكى ئەۋەى لە نامادەيى چەند مامۇستايەك نىتچاھەكى ئەۋھايان دا پىمان كە بخويننەۋە، نىدى لەبەر ئەۋ ھۇكارە لە نىستاشدا ھەرچەندە بە پىنى ئەۋ ھەل ۋە مەرجەى كە ھەمە لە زانكو ھەندىك ساردىومەتەۋە بەلام سەرەراى ئەمەش سەربەخۇيانە ھەول دەدەم ۋە پىشتىش بەخۇم دەبەستەم. بەلام دووبارە دەگەرئىمەۋە بۇ ئەۋەى كە مادام لە زانكو پەيوەست كراى بە مەلزەمەك ئەۋە خواستى سەربەخۇى لاي قوتابىيان لاۋادەپىت.

قوتابى 14: پىشت بەستەن بە خودى خۇت لە فېربۇون لە قۇناغى پىش زانكو دەست پىدەكات، بۇ نمونە بۇ مەن لەۋ كاتەۋە دەستى پىكرە كە يەكېك لە مامۇستاكەنم لە قۇناغى دوۋى ناۋەندى داۋاىكرە كە را پۇرتىك بنووسم.

قوتابى 13: سەراراي ھەبۇونى رىگرى لە ناستى زانكو لەبەرەۋ پىش چوۋنى سەربەخۇى، كەم ۋەكورى زۇرىش لە ناستى قوتابىيان ھەيە. بۇ نمونە مەن خۇم لە ناستى تمۇحى خۇم كارناكەم ۋە ھەول نادەم بەلام دەپىت لەۋ شتائە پىرسىن كە چىن بونەتە ئەمبەر لەبەر دەمەم كەوام نىدەكەكەن ساردىم لەسەر خويندن.

قوتابى 16: نىرە ئەگەر رىگرى لە قوتابى كراۋ ۋە ناستەنگەكى ھاتە پىش ئەۋە سست دەبەنەۋە لە ھەولداىيان بۇ فېربۇون ۋە ئەمە بە گشتى وايە نىرە، واتە ئەگەر ھەر ناستەنگىك بىتە پىشەۋە چ لەلايەن مامۇستاپىت، زانكۇپىت، مانەۋەپىت، كۆمەنگەپىت ۋە ياخود خودى خۇى پىت ئەۋە لە خويندن ۋە فېربۇونىدا سارد دەپىتەۋە ھەولى بۇ نادات بۇيە بىگومان خەتاكە بۇ تاكەكانىش دەگەرئىتەۋە.

تويۇر / پىتان وايە لە نەبۇونى ئەمبەرۋ رىگرىەكان، قوتابىيانى زانكو ئەۋ نامادەيەيان تىدايە كە خۇيان ھەولى فېربۇونى خۇيان بەن؟

قوتابى 13: بە رىزەيەكى زۇر زۇر كەم ئەۋ خواستە ھەيە، ۋە ئەماۋى ئەۋ سى سائەى كە مەن لە زانكۇم نەم بىنىۋە قوتابىيان ۋەكو پىنىست كار لەسەر خودى خۇيان بکەن بەمەستى زىاتر پىگەياندىنى خۇيان، واتە دەبىنن كە قوتابى ساردە، ماندوۋە ھىچ ھەول نادات ۋە زىاتر خۇيان سەرقالكردوۋە بە بابەتى لاۋەكى.

قوتابى 14: ئەمانە ھەموۋى بۇ ھۇكارى بى پلانى ئەگەرئىتەۋە لە قوتابى زانكۇدا.

قوتابى 15: ئەۋەى گرنەگە بۇ قوتابى زانكو ئەۋەيە كە سەرەراى ھەبۇونى ناستەنگەكان بەلام ئەۋ ھەر بەردەوام پىت تىبىكۇشپت لە ھىنانەدى خواست ۋە نامانچى خۇى چونكە خۇى لە ناست ۋە قۇناغىكى وايە كە ئەۋ توانايەى تىدايە ئەگەر بەگەرى بخات ۋە تام ۋە چىزى سەركەتنىش ھەر ئەۋەدايە. بۇيە ناپىت ناستەنگەكان بىنە رىگر ئەبەردەم ئەۋەى كە قوتابى ساردپىتەۋە ھەول ئەدات.

قوتابى 12: ژيان خۇي پاداشت و سزايه جا بۇيە ئەگەر قوتابى ئە كاتى كاردنى كارىكى باش وە ئە كاتى دەست پىشخەرى ئەو دەبىت پاداشت بىكرىن و ھان بىدرىن. بۇ نمونە ئەگەر قوتابىك سىمىنارىكى يان بەشدارى ئە چالاكىك كرد ئەو ھە گرنگە ئەلايەن كەسانى پەيوەندار كە دەست خۇشيان لىبىكرىت تاكو بىبىت بە پائىنەرىك بۇ ئەوان و كەسانى تىرىش ئە ئە نىجامدانى ئەو كارانە وە ھەولئدانى بەردەواميان بۇ فېرىبون.

تويۇر / ئەگەر سەر لەنوى خويىندنى زانكويى دەست پىبىكە ئەو ئەو چى دەكەن بۇ ئەوئى كە زياتر سەر بىخويىن؟

قوتابى 13: مەن ھەول دەدەم كە بە پلانكىكى نوى وە بە فەردەو نامانجىكى نوى بىمەو زانكۇ تەواوى ھەول و تواناكانى خۇم بىخەمە گەر ھەر ئە قوناعى بەكەمەو بۇ ئەوئى خۇم دروست بەكەم چونكە ئىستا بۇ مەن روونە كە قوتابى ئەگەر سەربەخۇيانە خۇي ھەول ئەدات ئەو چوار سالى زانكۇ برىتتە ئە بەفېرۇدانى كاتىكى زۇر بەبى ئەوئى پتوانى دەسكەوتى گەورە بەدەست بىنى ئە بوارى زانست و مەرىفە.

تويۇر / مامۇستاكانى ئىوہ چىانكردوہ وە ياخود دەتوانن چى بەكەن تا ھانى قوتابى بەدەن سەرىە خۇبىت؟

قوتابى 14: مامۇستاكانىمان رۇليان ھەبوہ وە ھەندىكىيان بە بەردەوامى ھانىيان داويىن تاوہكو بگەرئىن بەدواى زانست و زانىبارى وە بەردەوام بىخويىنەوہ. بۇ نمونە يەككە ئە مامۇستاكانىمان كىتېبىكى دانا بەناوى بە كەنتوركردنى خويىندەئەو كە ئەمەش ھاندەرىكى باش بوو بۇ ئىمە تاكو زياتر بىخويىنەوہ بەدواى زانىبارىدا بگەرئىن و فېرى بىن.

قوتابى 13: سەربارى ئەوئى كە مامۇستاي باشمان ھەبوونەو ھەولئى زۇريان ئەگەل داويىن بەلام ئە ھەمان كاتىشدا كەم و كورى ھەيە مامۇستاي خەم ساردىشمان ھەبووہ. جا بۇيە پىنوئىستە فلتەرىك ھەبىت بۇ ئەوئى ئەوانەئى دەبنە مامۇستا پىنىدا تىپەرن. چونكە بەراستى ھەموو كەس ناتوانىت بىبىت مامۇستا و ئەوانەئى دەبنە مامۇستا پىنوئىستە كەسايەتەكى تايىبەت و فەردەيەكى تايىبەت تىيان ھەبىت. بۇيە ھەبوونى مامۇستاي باش واتە بىنات نانى كۇمەنگەيەكى تەندروست و پىگەياندىنى تاكى كارا و چاوكراوہ و شىبار ئەو كۇمەنگەيەدا وە بە پىچەوانەكەشى ھەر راستە.

قوتابى 14: ئەبىت مامۇستا خۇي يەككە بىت ئەو كەسانەئى كە بەردەوام و بەبى دابران ھەول بەدات كە خۇي پىر زانست و زانىبارى بىكات چونكە دواچار ئەوئە كە دەبىتە نمونەيەكى بەرچا و بۇ قوتابىيان تاكو چاوى لىبىكەن، بەلام ئەگەر مامۇستا خۇي ئەو كەسە نەبوو كە ھەز بە خويىندىن و خۇ فېرىكردن بىكات ئىدى چون دەتوانىت قوتابىيان ئەسەر ئەو ھان بەدات و ئاراستەيان بىكات. بۇ نمونە ئە يەككە ئە راپرسىيەكان ئە پە نجا مامۇستا تەنھا پىنج مامۇستا كىتېبخانەئى ھەبوو وە ئەو پىنجەش تەنھا سى مامۇستا كىتېبى ئەخويىندەوہ.

بەئى مامۇستامان ھەيە كە نامۇزگارى قوتابىيان دەكات وە ھەول دەدات ئەو جەوہ بەرخسىنى ئە ئىو پۇلدا تاكو قوتابىيان ھەست بەكەن كە بەشىكن ئە پىرۇسەئى فېرىبون، بەلام دواچار ئەوئى ئە دەرەوئى پۇلدا كە قوتابى دەبىت سەربەخۇيانە ھەولئى خۇي بەدات دەگەرئىتەوہ سەر بىنات و بىروياوہرى قوتابىيان خۇيان، واتە قوتابى ھەيە قەت كۇنئادات و واز ناھىنى وە قوتابىش ھەيە كە زوو سست دەبىت و وازدئىت.

قوتابى 15: زۇرىەئى مامۇستايان ھەول دەدەن و ھەز دەكەن كە قوتابىيان رابىن ئەسەر ئەوئى كە خۇيان ھەولئى فېرىبونى خۇيان بەدەن زانىبارى گشتى يان دەرەكى كۇبەئەوہ، راستە كە رەنگە ھەموويان قەبولى ئەو شتانەيان ئەبىت بۇ ئىمتجان، بەلام ھەزى ئەوئىيان لا ھەيە كە قوتابىيان پىر زانىبارى بىن و ئەوئى رۇشەنپىرو تىگەيشت و بىن.

تويۇر / نايان تا چەند ئەو زانكويە توانىويەتى دەرەتتى گونجا و بەرخسىنى كە قوتابى تىبىدا پتوانى سەرىە خۇبىت؟

قوتابى 12: ئە رووى كىتېبخانە شويىنى خويندەنە مەن بە گونجاوى نابىنەم وە ئەوانەش واتە ھەم ھەبوونى كىتېبخانە يەكى باش كە قوتابى بتوانىت بە ناسانى دەستى بە سەرچاوەكان بگات وە ھەمىش شويىنى خويندەنە ھەيەكى گونجاو گىرگىن و كارىگەرن لە ھاندانى قوتابىيان بۇ بەرەو پىش بردنى فېربوونى سەر بە خۇ. بە لام سەرەراى ھەبوونى كىتېبخانە يەكى مامناو ھەند، زۇر بە دەگمەن قوتابى دەبىنەن كە بچىتە كىتېبخانە و بخويىنەتە وە كەس نابىنەن كە كىتېبى يېبى. كە مە ئەمە بە شىكى بۇ كە مەترخەمى قوتابىيان دەگە رىنەمە وە بە شىكىشى بۇ نە رەخساندى كە شىكى گونجاو لە زانكۇ.

قوتابى 13: ئە ھەي كە قوتابى ناراستە دەكەت بەرەو زانكۇ زۇر ھە ئەيە، واتە پىش ئە ھەي كە بىتە زانكۇ ئە و تىروانىنە ئە لا دروست دەكەن كە دەلەن برۇ كولىە ئىدى تەواو ئە ھەي ئىسراحت دەكەي وە زانكۇ شويىنى رابواردنە، ئە بەر ئە ھە دەبىنەن كە قوتابى دىتە زانكۇ زىاتر خەرىكى شتى لایە لایە ئە جىياتى ئە ھەي خەرىكى خۇ پىگە ياندن بىت زانست و رۇشە نىبرى خۇ بەرەو پىش ببات بۇيە ئەركى زانكۇيە كە ھەر لە سەرەتاو كە قوتابى دىتە زانكۇ ھەول بەدات ناستى وشىارى تاكەكان بەرزىكەتە وە تىيان بگە يەنى كە نامانچ ئە ھاتنە زانكۇ چىە و ئە ھە ئەرك و بەرپىسارىيە تانە چىن كە دەبىت ئە ئەستوى بگرن.

قوتابى 14: نامانچى ھاتنە زانكۇ برىتتە ئە بنىيات نانى كە سايەتى كە ئەمەش خۇ ئە گرتنە ئەستوى بەرپىسارىيە تى دەبىنەتە وە بەرامبەر بە كۆمە نگانەت. واتە ئە ھە كەسەي كە دىتە زانكۇ دەبىت بايى ئە ھەندە ھەست بە ھە بگات كە بە ئى ئەركى ئە سەرشانە وە ئە داھاتوودا چاوەروانى ئىدە كىرىت كە بە زانست و مە عرىضە و رۇشە نىبرى يەكى باش بچىتە وە ئىو كۆمە نگانە بە شداربىت ئە بنىيات نان و بەرەو پىش بردنى.

قوتابى 13: ئە راستىدا ئە ھە جەوى زانكۇ ئە ھە ئە ھە قەسەي خۇدى راگرى كۆلېز خۇيە تىشتى كە رۇژىك گوتى كە ئىرە كەشى زانكۇ ئەيە. وە زانكۇ بۇتە ناوەندىك بۇ كات بە سەربردن و خۇ نامىشكردن وە ئە ھە پىناسەي مە بۇ زانكۇ، واتە ئە ھەندەي قوتابىيان خەرىكى خۇ بازاندە ھەو نامىشكردن ئىو ئە ھەندە خەرىكى خويندەن و فېربوون نىن.

تويۇر / چ بگىرىت بۇ ئە ھە ناستى فېربوونى سەر بە خۇ بەرەو پىش بچىت؟

قوتابى 15: كە بە يانى ئە زانكۇ دەردە چىت وە كە سىكى سەركە وتوت ئىدەرنە چو ئە ھە كەس ئە ھەي مامۇستاكانت ناكات ئە زانكۇ، بە نكو ئە ھەي خۇت دەكرىت چونكە خۇت بەرپىسى يەكەمى ئە فېربوونى خۇتدا، بۇيە قوتابى دەبىت ئە ھە ئەركە ھە بگىرىت و ھەولنى خۇى بەدات و پىشت بە خۇى بە سىتتە.

قوتابى 14: پىيۇستە ئەمە وەكو قوتابى ئە خۇمانە وە دەست پىبەكەن، واتە پىيۇستە ھە موومان ھەول بەدەن كە بىرۇكەي فېربوونى سەر بە خۇ لای خۇمان و لای قوتابىيانى تر دروست بگەن وە ھەولنى زۇر بەدەن بۇ خۇرۇشە نىبرى كىردنى زىاتر ئە ھەك خۇ نامىشكردنى زىاتر. واتە پىيۇستە ئە ھە قۇناغە گىرگەي زانكۇ ھەول بەدەن عەقل و تىگە يىشتەمان فراوان بگەن و بەرەو پىشە ھەي بەيەن. وە ھەروەھا گىرگىشە كە وەكو قوتابى پلانمان ھەبىت بۇ خويندەن و فېربوونى خۇمان وە بە بەردەوام ھەلسە نگانەن بۇ پلانەكان نمان و ئە نجامەكان بگەن و ھەولنى باشتىر كىردنىان بەدەن.

وە زۇرىش گىرگە كە پىندا چو ھەي بەنەرتى بگىرىت بۇ سىتەمى پەرەردە يمان ئە قۇناغەكانى پىش زانكۇ بۇ ئە ھەي بناغە يەكى باش و تۆكەمە بۇ قوتابىيان نمان دابىنەن نامادە يان بگەن و يارمە تىيان بەدەن و رايان يىنەن ئە سەر پىشتە ستوويىيان بە خۇيان بۇ ئە ھەي كە دىنە زانكۇ تەواو نامادەن بۇ ئە مە. چونكە بە دىنبايە و ئە گەر خانۇيك بناغە كەي باش دانەمە زىابىت ئە ھە رۇژىك دىت كە دەروخىت.

قوتابى 16: پىيۇستە ھەركەس ئە خۇيە وە دەست پىيكات ھەست بگات كە ئىرە يە بەرپىسارىيە تەكى ئە ئەستوىە ئە ھەي كە خۇى پىر رۇشە نىبرى و زانست بگات سە و دووسەي بىگە يە نىتەي ئە ھەي داھاتو.

قوتابی 13: بیهکەم جار پیویستە ئە ناستی تاک کەسەکان پەرە بەخۆیان و تواناکانیان بدن، وه سیستم و ژینگەکە هاندەرو پاپشتت بیت و رینیشاندەرت بیت و نارەستەت بکات بەرەو نامانجیکی باش، چونکە ئەگەر تۆ خۆشت باش بووی و هەوتدا بەلام سیستمەکە رێگریوو ئەبەردەمت، ئەوه رەنگە ئەتووش ئەو خواست و نارەزووت لاواز دەبی.

Appendix 'G'

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. When you hear the words learner autonomy/autonomous learning, what comes to your mind?
2. How important do you think learner autonomy is for higher education?
3. To what extent do you think higher education should encourage the sense of autonomy among students?
4. What roles do you think teachers currently play with regard to learner autonomy within higher education?
 - To what extent do you think teachers are responsible to encourage learner autonomy?
 - How conscious are you of learner autonomy as a goal of your teaching?
 - What do you do to encourage students to become more autonomous in their learning inside and outside the classroom?
5. As a teacher, do you think you have enough autonomy to make your own teaching decisions and choices?
6. How do you see the role this institution plays with regard to the development of learner autonomy?
 - What strategies and policies are in place to support learner autonomy?
 - What educational services and facilities are provided within this university to allow students to work and learn autonomously?
7. What roles do you think students currently play with regard to learner autonomy?
 - For students to become autonomous, what roles and responsibilities should they take?
 - To what extent do you think students are dependent on or independent from teachers in their learning?
 - To what extent do you think students are prepared and have the potential to learn autonomously within this institution?

8. How do you generally describe the current situation of learner autonomy within your institution?
9. What do you think are the major challenges that constrain the development and exercise of learner autonomy within this institution of higher education?
10. What do you think could be done to make the higher education environment more supportive and suitable for the development of autonomous learning?

Appendix 'H'

A sample of interview scripts with a teacher participant

Researcher: When you hear the words learner autonomy, what comes to your mind?

Interviewee: For me learner autonomy is strongly related to student-centred approach which means students have to be at the centre of our programme, our curriculum and the whole education system because the purpose of education is to help our students educate themselves and learn new information when they come to the university. That is the teachers do not have to pour the information into the students minds.

But here we make a boundary for students. Students cannot go outside that boundary and if they cross that boundary, then they will be failed. This is the old fashioned way of education and we do not want that. We want our students to be open-minded, independent critical thinkers and ask for the authority. So while we discuss a new theory, the teachers has to encourage students to question and criticize the theory. In this way, the students can become more open-minded and develop their personal views and ideas about different issues. So it is very important that students become the centre of our programme not the teacher because students are the major part of the programme, but in our case it is the opposite.

Researcher: How important do you think learner autonomy is for university education?

Interviewee: Learner autonomy for university level is very crucial and there is no doubt about this because it is higher education. Compared to secondary and high school, university education is different because we expect our students to be researchers, scientists and theorists in the future. So it is very important for students at the university to be autonomous and critical thinkers and to take the responsibility to do their own learning.

Talking about our context, I don't think that our students are quite autonomous, because this kind of learning is not in our system. Everything is based on tests and examinations. The only independent work that students do is their final research project and in that students do not very much rely on themselves. Some of them try to cheat and pay other people to write for them. The reason for that is we don't help and prepare our students to become autonomous at the beginning. We rather encourage them to memorize information and to write the exact things we have given them during exams. So when students come to the university, we teach them exactly the same as in high school. The teachers give some pamphlets to the students, the students memorize what is in the pamphlets and are not supposed to look for anything outside these pamphlets and I say the teachers may not know much outside these pamphlets, therefore, they may feel embarrassed if students ask questions not found in the pamphlets. That is why the teachers do not want and let their students to be critical thinkers and autonomous for this reason which is the lack of information on the part of the teachers.

Researcher: To what do you think higher education should encourage the sense of autonomy among students?

Interviewee: One problem with our university education is that when our students come to the university, they do not know much about university education and what is about and what are their roles and responsibilities. That is they are not well-prepared for higher education. That is why I often ask our decision makers in the university that it is our responsibility to go to high schools and try to make connections between high school and university and explain to the students about the purpose of university education and what are the expectations for students at university.

The point here is that we should teach and encourage our students to become autonomous at the very beginning of their education and let them to do their own things. So it is important to give them some autonomy at the early stages and not to control them like dictators and put them under a lot of pressure. But there is not enough freedom and autonomy for our students in schools and I have noticed in many schools the parts of curriculum focusing on this aspect have been ignored by many teachers. Otherwise, I can say that the curriculum that we have in our schools has given attention to students' independent projects, but the way teachers teach is still the same which pushes students to memorize everything. That is why when we ask students here at the university to do some independent tasks, they find them very difficult, because they did not learn before and are not used to this kind of learning.

Researcher: What role do you think teachers currently play or should play with regard to learner autonomy?

Interviewee: The teachers have to give students enough freedom inside the classroom so that they can express themselves and the ideas and views that they have. The teachers should also respect what students say and not reject everything that the students raise. Making open discussions inside the classroom helps students to feel free to participate and to talk about their ideas about different subjects, but if you just give them some material to memorize for exams, then I do not think you can do anything. When it comes to evaluation, the teachers should play a good role and try to use different ways to assess the students such as taking home tests, seminars, papers and so on and not to focus only on the traditional tests, because tests are not everything. We can use other methods for evaluation especially doing research. So teachers should give roles and responsibilities to the students and making them practically engaged in their learning and not to push them to memorize what is on the paper which everybody can do it.

Researcher: To what extent do you think teachers are responsible to encourage students to become more autonomous?

Interviewee: From primary to high school, students do not know how to be autonomous learners and they do not want to be and many may resist that, because they have grown in a dictator system of education which does not encourage autonomous learning. We do not let our students to be

independent and open-minded, because they may ask for authority and power. That is why when students come to the university, they do not know anything about student-centred or autonomous learning. Let's put the question of teachers' responsibility aside, the problem is that many teachers do not believe in students' autonomy and they say that we have to put pressure on them and we should not give them a lot of freedom, otherwise they become cheaters and naughty students. Teachers always have these negative views about their students. In my view, teachers to some extent are responsible to teach and make students autonomous learners and to forget the old-fashioned way of teaching, but again students are part of the problem who still want the old-fashioned way so that they can make good grades through memorization which is easier for them. Therefore, such students when we ask them a question, they do not know how to answer, because they just memorize things for the time of the test. While there are other students who are very good when it comes to acting and real life practice, they are very intelligent students but not for the tests because they do not know how to memorize things. So it is our responsibility to find that intelligence among students and try to evaluate our students based on their action and real participation and not only on exam papers. The teachers should also try to change the mentality of students and make them aware that learning is more important than grades.

Researcher: How conscious are you of learner autonomy as a goal of your teaching?

Interviewee: I think I am really aware of that. Once I finished my master's degree, I made my decision to change my way of teaching. I have tried to give freedom to the students to express their views and attitudes inside the classroom and I often appreciate and respect what students say even if they are against the ideas I have about a topic and I never let them feel embarrassed for what they say even if it is not right; otherwise, they are not going to participate any more in my class.

Researcher: What do you do to encourage your students to become more autonomous?

Interviewee: For me students' participation is very important, therefore, I often encourage them to actively participate and give marks to the students also based on their participation inside the classroom not only based on the tests. This has made most of the students to have a good participation and to express their own ideas openly and freely. I encourage students to learn more independently, sometimes I ask them and give them books to read about the topics we discuss inside the classroom. I also ask them to do small research projects and to find answers to open-ended questions, case studies and scenarios.

Despite all the things I do, I think I still need to do more to make my students more autonomous, because having been part of this culture, I sometimes go to the old-fashioned way of teaching, because I have grown up in this culture and there are still things in my mind which I cannot change one hundred per cent. I can say that I have let my students to be 65% autonomous in their learning and the rest belongs to me as a teacher.

Researcher: AS a teacher, do you think you have enough autonomy to make your teaching decisions and choices?

Interviewee: Yes I do have autonomy in the subjects that I teach and I do what I want to do and I often ask the department at the beginning of the year that I am going to teach this subject, so you let me to make my own things, then I am going to teach, if not I am not going to teach. But the good thing is that I am given enough autonomy by the department. But not all the teachers have this kind of autonomy, because there are teachers if you let them to be too autonomous, they will be careless and will not care about students' learning and just go to class and will have fun. There are other teachers who want to be autonomous in their decisions, but the department does not let them and they give them a content to teach and they cannot go outside that content. So in general, teachers are not very autonomous here.

Researcher: How do you see the role of this institution with regard to the development of autonomous learning among students?

Interviewee: I hear many things on the internet, but I do not see that happening inside the university. In reality, I do not see the university encouraging or helping those teachers who try to help students to be more autonomous learners. The university has to appreciate the effort some teachers make to motivate students become more independent in their learning.

Researcher: What strategies and policies are in place to support learner autonomy?

Interviewee: There are no strategies and policies supporting and promoting autonomous learning within this university, something that could affect students' learning and education. So I believe that students and their learning have not been given enough focus within this university. Because I cannot even see services and facilities that can help students with their independent learning and I think this is similar to other public universities in Kurdistan.

Researcher: What role do you think students currently play with regard to learner autonomy?

Interviewee: Students are still very passive learners and there is no active learning and students do not want to be active learners, they still want spoon-feeding. They just sit down in the classroom and are often busy with their cell phones and are working on Facebook and they do not even listen to the teacher and only when it comes to the test, they memorize everything that is in the pamphlets and they get good marks. There are few students who are active and autonomous in their learning and this can be seen from the ideas and knowledge they have and from the participation they have inside the classroom and from the critical questions they often ask.

Researcher: For students to become autonomous, what roles and responsibilities should they take?

Interviewee: To be become autonomous, students should take care of their own learning and feel that they have the responsibility for what they learn. They shouldn't think that only the teachers are responsible for their learning. They can depend on their teachers as a guide as someone that tells them

the right way, but then they should be the ones to lead. Although, for students to be really autonomous, they first need to be well-educated and conscious of the importance of autonomous learning and what does it mean to be an autonomous learner. So they should be aware of the real meaning of being autonomous. And this starts with the way they are educated in schools and within the families. I mean have we taught our kids to be autonomous, because if we do not bring them up as autonomous beings, when they come to the university, they cannot be like that.

Researcher: To what extent do you think students are dependent on or independent from teachers in their learning?

Interviewee: In my case, students want to be dependent on me and I do not want that and I always tell them do not depend on me for everything and I do not let them do so. For graduation research, I encourage them to rely on themselves and to do their own things and not to rely on me for everything they do and write. But some students want to depend on other people outside and may ask them to write their research, because they do not know how to depend on themselves. Sometimes I ask them to read a particular book so that we discuss it together in the classroom, but after one week when I go to the class, I can realize only one or two students have read the book. This shows that students do not take the responsibility for their learning and are not eager to learn and they always want to be dependent on you as a teacher. The reason for that again belongs to the attention they give to marks and they think that if they do anything outside what the teacher has given them, then they may fail.

Researcher: To what extent do you think that students have the willingness or readiness to become autonomous, because some of them have told me that they want to be more independent but there are restrictions?

Interviewee: There is a difference between speech and action, because sometimes they tell me oh teacher please give us more freedom and independence, but you try to let them become more free and independent, they do not want that. That is why, I can say that students are not ready to become autonomous because they do not know how to use it. They think that being independent and being autonomous is: do not study, do not read, do not write just come to the classroom and afterwards take an exam and get a good grade. They do not know that being autonomous is about taking the responsibility and working hard for a better learning.

Researcher: How do you find the current situation of learner autonomy within your department and university generally?

Interviewee: What I have noticed and heard from students is that many teachers do not let their students to be autonomous and they just force their students to do what they want them to do even for their research project which students are expected to have some autonomy, the teachers do not let their students for example to use the methodology they want and they tell them you have to use this methodology but why, because the teacher does not know other methodologies. This means that

students are not free and autonomous to make their own decisions and there are strict boundaries drawn by the teachers and students are not allowed to go outside these boundaries. So students are taught the same way as 1970s, therefore, I am not satisfied with the situation.

Researcher: What do you think are the major challenges that constrain the development of learner autonomy?

Interviewee: The responsibility for this situation lies on the ministry of higher education, the universities, the faculties and departments, therefore they should make a plan and do something for the students. It is a challenge, but they should take some brave decisions to change the situations towards better. I should say that students are also responsible for this. Many of them do not care about their learning, they just want to pass the exams and get the certificate. So students need to change as well. They need to take greater responsibility for their own learning and not only depend on their teachers.

Researcher: What do you think could be done to make the higher education environment more supportive and suitable for learner autonomy?

Interviewee: I think we should first start with making a connection between university and pre-university stages. We have to educate and prepare our students from the beginning so that when they come to the university, they will be somehow ready to take the responsibility for their learning. When it comes to the university, there must be programmes for students just to make them more aware of the necessity of autonomous learning especially at this stage in their life. And we should also try to give some freedom to the students to make choices and not imposing everything on them. At the same time, actions need to be taken in order to make a better and more suitable environment in which students can feel that there is an opportunity for them to learn independently. The university has to give the opportunity to those teachers who are willing to change and who work quite hard to help their students to be more critical and more independent. And the students should try to take a bigger responsibility and play a greater role for their own learning.

Appendix 'I'

Interview Questions for Senior Administrators

1. When you hear the words learner autonomy/autonomous learning, what comes to your mind?
2. How important do you think learner autonomy is for higher education?
3. To what extent do you think higher education should encourage the sense of autonomy among students?
4. What has this institution done to encourage and facilitate the exercise and development of learner autonomy?
 - What strategies and policies are in place to support learner autonomy?
 - What educational services and facilities are provided to support students to work and learn autonomously?
5. What roles do you think teachers currently play with regard to learner autonomy within higher education?
 - How autonomous do you think teachers are to make their own teaching decisions and choices?
 - How prepared do you think teachers are within this institution/department to build on students' potential for autonomy?
6. What roles do you think students currently play with regard to learner autonomy?
 - For students to become autonomous, what roles and responsibilities should they take?
 - To what extent do you think students are prepared and have the potential to act autonomously within our institution?
7. How do you generally describe the current situation of learner autonomy within your institution?
8. What challenges do you think are there that constrain the development of learner autonomy within this institution of higher education?
9. What do you think could be done to make the higher education environment more supportive and suitable for the development of learner autonomy?

Appendix 'J'

A sample of interview scripts with a senior administrator participant

Researcher: When you hear the words learner autonomy/autonomous learning, what comes to your mind?

Interviewee: It is that learners take responsibility for their own learning process. So they are taught, but they have to make sure that they learn.

Researcher: How important do you think learner autonomy is for higher education?

Interviewee: I think it is the only way for them to actually learn, but I know that it is a very difficult process for them to take because they have not done it before. So it is difficult if they are not being taught how to become autonomous. That is they have to be taught that before so that they can start to learn how to become autonomous. And it is definitely the responsibility of the teachers to show them how to become autonomous.

So I think autonomous learning is the only way of learning within the university and if you are not learning autonomously, you are actually not in a university and you are just doing another version of school. So I see that within university, you should be able to think critically, you should be able to assess things and you should be able to do your own learning. And that is the whole point of university education to open your mind and not necessarily just to get a certificate at the end but it is actually to open your mind in order to learn things you did not know before and that you can use throughout the rest of your life.

Researcher: To what extent do you think higher education should encourage the sense of autonomy among?

Interviewee: Higher education should encourage autonomous learning among students without a question. We need to move away from get a student to memorize things just giving them a piece of paper that they can look at, memorize and regurgitate. The situation here was quite like that when I arrived, but now we do critical thinking classes, we teach the students how to read, how to analyze and how to think what they want to say the information they have gained. We are also trying very hard to move away from just giving the information, they have to find the information by their own. So the situation is changing but I am not quite satisfied with what is happening.

Researcher: What has this institution done to encourage and facilitate the development of learner autonomy?

Interviewee: I can only talk about this department. We have been able to change curriculum. That was for the start and it was a really important feature and then within curriculum change, we have been able to bring in subjects that encourage autonomous learning such as critical thinking writing and research,

research methodology, academic debate now called academic skills and students are covering all the areas that they need in order to understand how to learn autonomously. So Soran university has been really effective and supportive to have these changes brought in. These changes have created a definite impact on the overall process of learning and I can actually see that with fourth stage students obviously not all of them but in the majority of them the research project they have produced and that they have been doing far outstretched the things I have seen before and these are the students who have been taught by native speakers for the past three years who brought in new ways of teaching. So we know that the changes do have an impact.

Researcher: What strategies and policies are in place to support learner autonomy?

Interviewee: Definitely there are strategies, I do not know about the policies but there are definitely strategies and that is because the university wants to be innovative, it wants to do research and it wants to move forward and in order to do that it demands that we have autonomy as learners both for teachers and students. So the strategies are definitely in place what is missing is the ground work in order to make it happen.

Researcher: Do you think there are educational services and facilities available that can help students with their autonomous learning?

Interviewee: Not at the moment. I mean the facilities that we have and what we can offer the students even in terms of a classroom with a projector that works is very difficult. We have a beautiful new campus all electronic that is waiting for us, but right now for students to actually become autonomous learners within the situation that we have within the faculty is a real testament to the students and their abilities. It is absolutely down to the students. So the environment is not really suitable because of the issues that we have and there is nothing we can do about it. So we are making the best of what we have. But also with the students in their accommodation, for those staying in the dormitories, it is not conducive to their learning at all. But we are also working with the students to change that as well, to change the way they view their environment to see what we can be done to help them have a space for studying.

Researcher: What roles do you think teachers play or should play with regard to learner autonomy within higher education?

Interviewee: The teacher need to not give students a book to learn and not to give students slides with every piece of information on that they can regurgitate for the exam and teachers do not necessarily have to lecture the students but to use group working, to use seminar style classes where they give the students handouts and ask them to discuss among themselves to see what students think and encouraging students to be active players of their own learning.

Researcher: How autonomous do you think teachers are to make their own teaching decisions and choices?

Interviewee: I think they are given autonomy but whether or not they are able to take it is a different matter. So they definitely have it, but they do not know what to do with it because they are coming from a system that was non-autonomous. So it is there, but it will take some training for teacher in order for them to appreciate and to take on board that they have that.

Researcher: How prepared do you think teachers are to build on students' potential for autonomy?

Interviewee: We have had some old teachers and some new ones who have studied abroad and they are coming through. These teachers are encouraging students to learn autonomously. What we are trying to do within this department is to get those teachers to share with the local teachers who have not had those opportunities to share their knowledge and experience. So I know all the teachers are doing the teaching methodologies course, but it does not give them what they necessarily need in order to encourage autonomous learning or for themselves to learn autonomously.

Researcher: What roles do you think students currently play with regard to learner autonomy?

Interviewee: They try so hard to be passive, but within the classrooms where they have been told to be autonomous learners which I would say is a good half of the classrooms right now, they are running out of creative ways to bypass learning which is what a lot of students have done this. They spend so much time thinking of ways in which they can make shortcuts, but I and other teachers are trying to tell them let's not use this energy for shortcuts, let's use it for learning. They are really passive if given half a chance and it is down to the teachers to change this and to make them play a more active role in their own learning and it is possible. I am sick of hearing teachers saying that our students do not learn like that. That is rubbish. Students are students and what they tell me that our students cannot learn like that means that our students are not clever enough, and I take that as an insult. So I find really insulting of anyone here saying that our students could not learn in the same way as other students around the world.

Researcher: What roles and responsibilities do you think students should take to become more autonomous?

Interviewee: Students need to want to learn for starters and quite often I have seen that they come to the university with the sole idea that they will receive a certificate at the end. They do not care what happens in between. They have to want to learn and not to want to get marks and that is the thing we want to change within this department. We do understand that marks are important for them, but to earn those marks properly because they have learned something and because they could apply what they have learned in this classroom in this classroom over here. That is when we know they have learned. So they have to want to learn and then they have to be willing to put the work in not to get somebody else to do the work for them. So they should start to take the responsibility for their learning.

They can come back to us and check, but they have to start doing their own learning and it is for the teachers to encourage them.

Researcher: Do you think students are prepared and have the potential to act autonomously within our institution?

Interviewee: I am going to say 'yes'. Some of them will get their kicking and screaming but they will get there. I think with the correct environment, that is part of the way towards what we need. We need to raise students' levels and we need to raise teachers' levels, but it can happen and the right environment would be a really good start, but with lack of that it is got to be the right teaching methods.

Researcher: What challenges do you think are there that constrain the development of learner autonomy among the students?

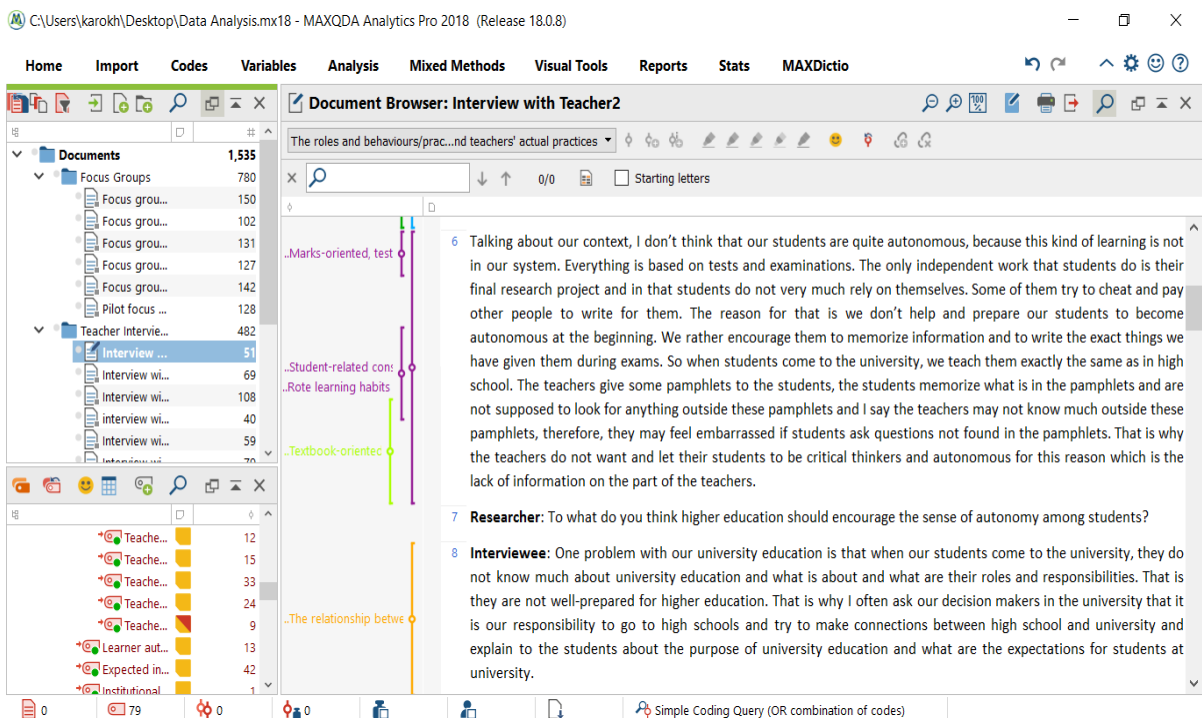
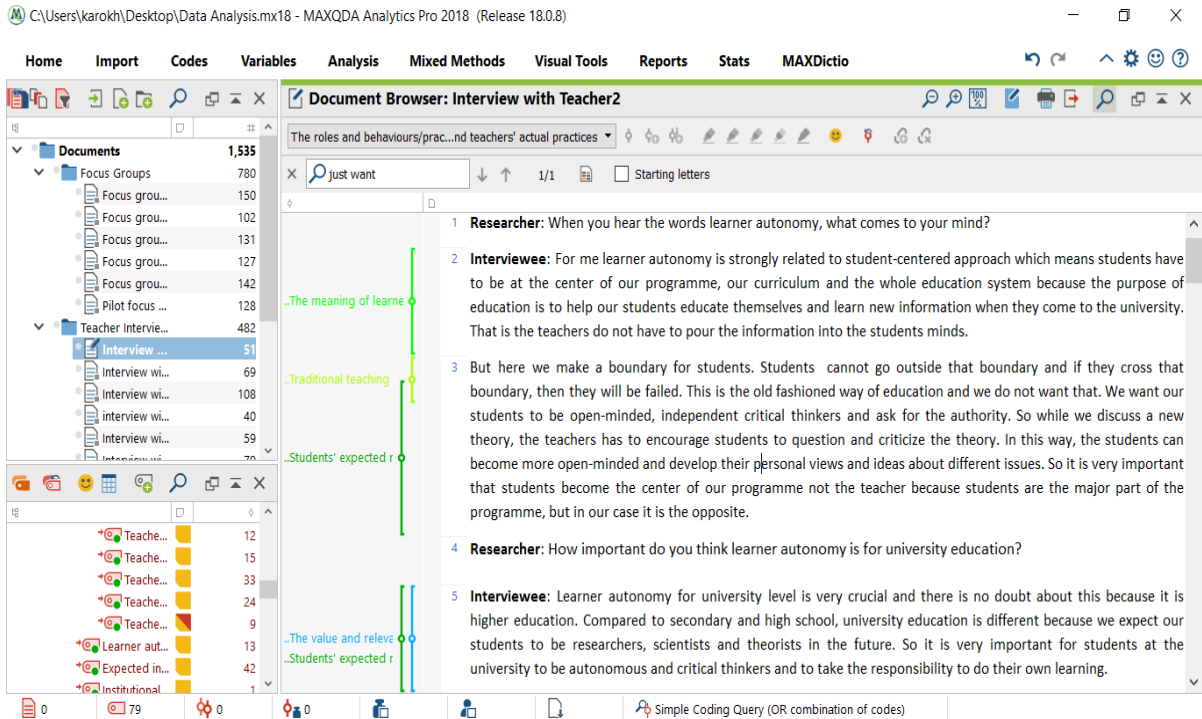
Interviewee: One of the main challenges is the teachers, because the teachers want to teach the way they have been taught. It is easier for them and quite often, the teacher do not know how to learn autonomously, so how can then they teach the students to do that. So that is probably the main obstacle, because once you have students in the first year and you taught them that you have to learn by yourself, eventually they are going to say 'ok' I have to do this myself. They will get that, but if teachers do not help with that, we cannot have autonomous students.

Researcher: What do you think could be done to make the university environment more supportive and suitable for learner autonomy?

Interviewee: I think the teacher training must be in a much higher level. I taught in the teaching methodology course last year and I see some weaknesses. So the teachers who fail in that course must be allowed to fail and not allowed to teach because it is important. And there has to be teacher continuous professional development and there have to be expectations of teachers. So going back to the idea of learner autonomy, many students do not want to put the effort in to learn, so they always want the easy way to learn. So they need to start changing the way they want to learn and understand that learning is not about memorizing some stuff and regurgitating that for the exam, but learning is a much difficult process which needs a lot of effort and hard work.

Appendix 'K'

A Worked Example of Data Analysis by MAXqda



Home Import Codes Variables Analysis Mixed Methods Visual Tools Reports Stats MAXDictio

Document Browser: Interview with Teacher2

The roles and behaviours/prac...nd teachers' actual practices

Documents 1,535

- Focus Groups 780
 - Focus grou... 150
 - Focus grou... 102
 - Focus grou... 131
 - Focus grou... 127
 - Focus grou... 142
 - Pilot focus ... 128
- Teacher Interview... 482
 - Interview ... 51
 - Interview wi... 69
 - Interview wi... 108
 - interview wi... 40
 - Interview wi... 59
 - interview wi... 74

Code list:

- Teache... 12
- Teache... 15
- Teache... 33
- Teache... 24
- Teache... 9
- Learner aut... 13
- Expected in... 42
- Institutional 1

Text content:

9 The point here is that we should teach and encourage our students to become autonomous at the very beginning of their education and let them to do their own things. So it is important to give them some autonomy at the early stages and not to control them like dictators and put them under a lot of pressure. But there is not enough freedom and autonomy for our students in schools and I have noticed in many schools the parts of curriculum focusing on this aspect have been ignored by many teachers. Otherwise, I can say that the curriculum that we have in our schools has given attention to students' independent projects, but the way teachers teach is still the same which pushes students to memorize everything. That is why when we ask students here at the university to do some independent tasks, they find them very difficult, because they did not learn before and are not used to this kind of learning.

10 **Researcher:** What role do you think teachers currently play or should play with regard to learner autonomy?

11 **Interviewee:** The teachers have to give students enough freedom inside the classroom so that they can express themselves and the ideas and views that they have. The teachers should also respect what students say and not reject everything that the students raise. Making open discussions inside the classroom helps students to feel free to participate and to talk about their ideas about different subjects, but if you just give them some material to memorize for exams, then I do not think you can do anything. When it comes to evaluation, the teachers should play a good role and try to use different ways to assess the students such as taking home tests, seminars, papers and so on and not to focus only on the traditional tests, because tests are not everything. We can use other methods for evaluation especially doing research. So teachers should give roles and responsibilities to the students and making them practically engaged in their learning and not to push them to memorize what is on the paper which everybody can do it.

Simple Coding Query (OR combination of codes)

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Text content:

12 **Researcher:** To what extent do you think teachers are responsible to encourage students to become more autonomous?

13 **Interviewee:** From primary to high school, students do not know how to be autonomous learners and they do not want to be and many may resist that, because they have grown in a dictator system of education which does not encourage autonomous learning. We do not let our students to be independent and open-minded, because they may ask for authority and power. That is why when students come to the university, they do not know anything about student-centered or autonomous learning. Let's put the question of teachers' responsibility aside, the problem is that many teachers do not believe in students' autonomy and they say that we have to put pressure on them and we should not give them a lot of freedom, otherwise they become cheaters and naughty students. Teachers always have these negative views about their students. In my view, teachers to some extent are responsible to teach and make students autonomous learners and to forget the old-fashioned way of teaching, but again students are part of the problem who still want the old-fashioned way so that they can make good grades through memorization which is easier for them. Therefore, such students when we ask them a question, they do not know how to answer, because they just memorize things for the time of the test. While there are other students who are very good when it comes to acting and real life practice, they are very intelligent students but not for the tests because they do not know how to memorize things. So it is our responsibility to find that intelligence among students and try to evaluate our students based on their action and real participation and not only on exam papers. The teachers should also try to change the mentality of students and make them aware that learning is more important than grades.

14 **Researcher:** How conscious are you of learner autonomy as a goal of your teaching?

Simple Coding Query (OR combination of codes)

Home Import Codes Variables Analysis Mixed Methods Visual Tools Reports Stats MAXDictio

Document Browser: Interview with Teacher2

The roles and behaviours/prac...nd teachers' actual practices

0/0 Starting letters

15 Interviewee: I think I am really aware of that. Once I finished my master's degree, I made my decision to change my way of teaching. I have tried to give freedom to the students to express their views and attitudes inside the classroom and I often appreciate and respect what students say even if they are against the ideas I have about a topic and I never let them feel embarrassed for what they say even if it is not right; otherwise, they are not going to participate any more in my class.

16 Researcher: What do you do to encourage your students to become more autonomous?

17 Interviewee: For me students' participation is very important, therefore, I often encourage them to actively participate and give marks to the students also based on their participation inside the classroom not only based on the tests. This has made most of the students to have a good participation and to express their own ideas openly and freely. I encourage students to learn more independently, sometimes I ask them and give them books to read about the topics we discuss inside the classroom. I also ask them to do small research projects and to find answers to open-ended questions, case studies and scenarios.

18 Despite all the things I do, I think I still need to do more to make my students more autonomous, because having been part of this culture, I sometimes go to the old-fashioned way of teaching, because I have grown up in this culture and there are still things in my mind which I cannot change one hundred percent. I can say that I have let my students to be 65% autonomous in their learning and the rest belongs to me as a teacher.

19 Researcher: AS a teacher, do you think you have enough autonomy to make your teaching decisions and choices?

Simple Coding Query (OR combination of codes)

Home Import Codes Variables Analysis Mixed Methods Visual Tools Reports Stats MAXDictio

Document Browser: Interview with Teacher2

The roles and behaviours/prac...nd teachers' actual practices

0/0 Starting letters

20 Interviewee: Yes I do have autonomy in the subjects that I teach and I do what I want to do and I often ask the department at the beginning of the year that I am going to teach this subject, so you let me to make my own things, then I am going to teach, if not I am not going to teach. But the good thing is that I am given enough autonomy by the department. But not all the teachers have this kind of autonomy, because there are teachers if you let them to be too autonomous, they will be careless and will not care about students' learning and just go to class and will have fun. There are other teachers who want to be autonomous in their decisions, but the department does not let them and they give them a content to teach and they cannot go outside that content. So in general, teachers are not very autonomous here.

21 Researcher: How do you see the role of this institution with regard to the development of autonomous learning among students?

22 Interviewee: I hear many things on the internet, but I do not see that happening inside the university. In reality, I do not see the university encouraging or helping those teachers who try to help students to be more autonomous learners. The university has to appreciate the effort some teachers make to motivate students become more independent in their learning.

23 Researcher: What strategies and policies are in place to support learner autonomy?

24 Interviewee: There are no strategies and policies supporting and promoting autonomous learning within this university, something that could affect students' learning and education. So I believe that students and their learning have not been given enough focus within this university. Because I cannot even see services and facilities that can

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25 **Researcher:** What role do you think students currently play with regard to learner autonomy?

26 **Interviewee:** Students are still very passive learners and there is no active learning and students do not want to be active learners, they still want spoon-feeding. They just sit down in the classroom and are often busy with their cellphones and are working on Facebook and they do not even listen to the teacher and only when it comes to the test, they memorize everything that is in the pamphlets and they get good marks. There are few students who are active and autonomous in their learning and this can be seen from the ideas and knowledge they have and from the participation they have inside the classroom and from the critical questions they often ask.

27 **Researcher:** For students to become autonomous, what roles and responsibilities should they take?

28 **Interviewee:** To be become autonomous, students should take care of their own learning and feel that they have the responsibility for what they learn. They shouldn't think that only the teachers are responsible for their learning. They can depend on their teachers as a guide as someone that tells them the right way, but then they should be the ones to lead. Although, for students to be really autonomous, they first need to be well-educated and conscious of the importance of autonomous learning and what does it mean to be an autonomous learner. So they should be aware of the real meaning of being autonomous. And this starts with the way they are educated in schools and within the families. I mean have we taught our kids to be autonomous, because if we do not bring them up as autonomous beings, when they come to the university, they cannot be like that.

29 **Researcher:** To what extent do you think students are dependent on or independent from teachers in their learning?

30 **Interviewee:** In my case, students want to be dependent on me and I do not want that and I always tell them do not

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30 **Interviewee:** In my case, students want to be dependent on me and I do not want that and I always tell them do not depend on me for everything and I do not let them do so. For graduation research, I encourage them to rely on themselves and to do their own things and not to rely on me for everything they do and write. But some students want to depend on other people outside and may ask them to write their research, because they do not know how to depend on themselves. Sometimes I ask them to read a particular book so that we discuss it together in the classroom, but after one week when I go to the class, I can realize only one or two students have read the book. This shows that students do not take the responsibility for their learning and are not eager to learn and they always want to be dependent on you as a teacher. The reason for that again belongs to the attention they give to marks and they think that if they do anything outside what the teacher has given them, then they may fail.

31 **Researcher:** To what extent do you think that students have the willingness or readiness to become autonomous, because some of them have told me that they want to be more independent but there are restrictions?

32 **Interviewee:** There is a difference between speech and action, because sometimes they tell me oh teacher please give us more freedom and independence, but you try to let them become more free and independent, they do not want that. That is why, I can say that students are not ready to become autonomous because they do not know how to use it. They think that being independent and being autonomous is: do not study, do not read, do not write just come to the classroom and afterwards take an exam and get a good grade. They do not know that being autonomous is about taking the responsibility and working hard for a better learning.

33 **Researcher:** How do you find the current situation of learner autonomy within your department and university?

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33 **Researcher:** How do you find the current situation of learner autonomy within your department and university generally?

34 **Interviewee:** What I have noticed and heard from students is that many teachers do not let their students to be autonomous and they just force their students to do what they want them to do even for their research project which students are expected to have some autonomy, the teachers do not let their students for example to use the methodology they want and they tell them you have to use this methodology but why, because the teacher does not know other methodologies. This means that students are not free and autonomous to make their own decisions and there are strict boundaries drawn by the teachers and students are not allowed to go outside these boundaries. So students are taught the same way as 1970s, therefore, I am not satisfied with the situation.

35 **Researcher:** What do you think are the major challenges that constrain the development of learner autonomy?

36 **Interviewee:** The responsibility for this situation lies on the ministry of higher education, the universities, the faculties and departments, therefore they should make a plan and do something for the students. It is a challenge, but they should take some brave decisions to change the situations towards better. I should say that students are also responsible for this. Many of them do not care about their learning, they just want to pass the exams and get the certificate. So students need to change as well. They need to take greater responsibility for their own learning and not only depend on their teachers.

37 **Researcher:** What do you think could be done to make the higher education environment more supportive and suitable for learner autonomy?

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37 **Researcher:** What do you think could be done to make the higher education environment more supportive and suitable for learner autonomy?

38 **Interviewee:** I think we should first start with making a connection between university and pre-university stages. We have to educate and prepare our students from the beginning so that when they come to the university, they will be somehow ready to take the responsibility for their learning. When it comes to the university, there must be programmes for students just to make them more aware of the necessity of autonomous learning especially at this stage in their life. And we should also try to give some freedom to the students to make choices and not imposing everything on them. At the same time, actions need to be taken in order to make a better and more suitable environment in which students can feel that there is an opportunity for them to learn independently. The university has to give the opportunity to those teachers who are willing to change and who work quite hard to help their students to be more critical and more independent. And the students should try to take a bigger responsibility and play a greater role for their own learning.

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