



Effects of Independent Learning on AUI students

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### Abstract

This research project tries to know the effects of independent learning on AUI students. Therefore, it was important to know both students and teachers perception of independent learning and their expectation from each other. The tools that have been used to investigate this issue were two different surveys addressed to both teachers and students. Doing so will determine whether they both have the same perceptions and expectations or not and if teachers are aware of the effects of independent learning on AUI students. Additionally, two interviews were conducted with the university counsellor in order to whether there are any psychological effects of the issue on the students and the reasons behind their responses in the survey. Also, this research will find out whether independent learning goals were met at AUI or not.

## Introduction

Independent or self-directed learning is defined as “a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes” Knowles (1975, p. 11). It offers students the opportunity to develop their social and educational abilities and get new knowledge by involving them in their own education.

This paper provides an analysis of students’ experience of independent learning at Al Akhawayn University. It presents the potential to improve the context in which independent learning is implemented. How this can be achieved depends on how students perceive and assimilate this learning system. The objective is to clarify key concepts and different aspects of independent learning in order to foster students’ involvement in the system.

This study explores how teachers and students perceive independent learning and what are the variables that affect a successful performance of the learning process. The problem is that a majority of the AUI student community were engaged in a teacher-directed learning which focuses more on the teacher rather on the student. Consequently, it involves a certain dependence on the teacher. In such a context, the challenge is to encourage the student’s transition to a self-directed learning that stimulates students’ independence.

Independent learning is considered as an important issue at Al Akhawayn University. AUI adheres to an American system that posits the implementation of independent learning as a process and method of education. The university aims at teaching students to take their responsibility, having a sense of self-management and enhancing their autonomy. The prime focus is to ascertain how this method of learning has been put into practice at AUI. This paper

argues that students who are not familiar with this issue may face difficulties while adopting it.

Another focus of the study is to assess whether the concept has been clearly explained to students to improve their understanding of the specific issue so as to meet its expected goals. The concern in this research paper is to discover students' and teachers' expectations of each other in an independent learning environment. In relation to the general issue, this study hypothesizes that there is a gap in teacher/student perception of independent learning.

Conducting this research will find the effects of independent learning on AUI students and will attempt to answer the following questions:

- Does students' familiarity with independent learning affect their perception of it?
- What is teacher/student perception of independent learning?
- How do students' statuses affect their perception of the learning method?
- What are teachers' and students' perceptions of each other in terms of independent learning?

#### Literature review

Students need to have a previous knowledge about independent learning in order to accept the responsibility of their learning and achieve a greater order in thinking. If learners are to be motivated and actively involved in their learning process, it is crucial that they clearly understand independent learning requirements. Some studies have found that students need to explore issues that have meaning and relevance for them (Kesten, 1987). Kesten suggested that students are not motivated if the learning activity is not significant and if the knowledge is useless unless the desired goals are clear. Research has documented the necessity to take into consideration that "there is a pedagogical gap in the transition from school to university" (Candy, 1991, p1). Students that come from a teacher-directed learning need an explanation about the new learning method as it is an attribute of the learner. Doing

so permits the acquisition of self-confidence and the awareness of their duty towards their learning process. In his study, Hubbal (2003) argued that students need to be familiar with subjects and methods of independent learning so as to acquire its skills. Students cannot achieve independence unless they enlarge their understanding of it.

One of this study's concerns is the expectations that teachers have of students and vice versa. Students' expectations from their teachers depend on the role they play in an independent learning setting. According to the literature, they are considered as guides to initiate students in the autonomous learning by encouraging them and providing them with feedback. Therefore, teachers can create opportunities that stimulate students to show motivation and self-management. Abdullah declared in his study that "educators should encourage study skills, inquiry, questioning, and an atmosphere where errors are acceptable during the process of arriving at correct answers" (2001, p. 1). There has been significant amount of research exploring teacher/student roles in the learning process. As a matter of fact, teachers are perceived as facilitators rather than engaging in teacher-directed learning. In independent learning environments, individual learners are expected to maturely take the responsibility for their learning and teachers can assist them "mastering the decision making processes" (Kesten, 1987). Independent learning involves interaction between teachers and students for a constructive learning.

This study examines the effects of both students' and teachers' backgrounds in the achievement of independent learning goals. It has been established that teachers' and students' backgrounds have an influence on the teaching and learning styles (Dupree, n.d.). According to Mitchell (2002, p3), "teachers must take into consideration what kind of students he or she is teaching and how they will respond to certain techniques and approaches. It is essential that the highest level of learning occurs." Lack of communication

between teachers and students may lead to a gap in both their perceptions of independent learning.

As far as the cultural aspect is concerned, teachers can face incapability to transmit independent learning skills and to transfer a sense of responsibility to learners if they are unaware of the teaching process. According to (Buchler, 2003, p.6), “not only we teach the way we were taught but we usually learn the way we were taught to learn. Many current teachers didn't have the opportunity to learn in an independent environment during their pre-service education.”

Another important point concerns independent learning fostering. It is important to consider the self-directed learning as a process and a goal to be achieved. If independent learning goals are to be transmitted, teachers need to master its skills since they are the model for their students. In a study conducted by Corno and Randi (1997), teachers need to be motivated, self-regulated and creative in their teaching methods if they want their students to acquire it. Educators perceive students as “empty vessels to be filled with knowledge” (Buchler, 2003, p.6). This seems to be the philosophy in the Moroccan context. Hence, some students struggle to adapt the new learning process since they do not know how to manage their own education as well as some teachers have difficulties adopting the coaching role (Boekaerts, 1992, 1997). As a result, this may restrain students' responsibility for their learning.

In short, “when we fail to take control of our education, we fail to take control of our lives. Self-directed inquiry, the process of taking control of your own education... is the lifeblood of democracy” (Hayes, 1998, p:xiv).

### Design

The research project investigates the effects of independent learning on AUI students. To do so, both methods of academic enquiry are needed to measure the relevance of the

assumptions. The qualitative method will afford deeper understanding of the issue and conveys detailed information about the data collected. The quantitative method will provide statistical data used to answer the research question. The study is also descriptive since it illuminates both students' and teachers' perception of independent learning and their expectation from each other.

#### Data gathering tools

Materials used to conduct this research were two surveys and two interviews. All the tools were introduced by a short and understandable definition of the subject matter to familiarize participants with the issue. Both surveys used English language since they are both destined to AUI community. Questions' order is vital to ensure the logical succession of ideas. Questionnaires were supplemented with two interviews with university's counsellor.

Surveys consist of open/ closed questions that allow respondents feel confident while expressing their opinions and provide the research with information. The first questionnaire was oriented to students from different schools, backgrounds, gender and status, since this research is investigating the effects of independent learning on AUI students' community. The questionnaire was designed with seventeen questions. The three first ones were general information. The other questions held twelve multiple choice and three yes/no; two of them contained sub-questions. Also, one open question was included to know students' definition of the research topic. Additionally, in some questions students had the opportunity to add additional possible answers.

Since this research examines both students' and teachers' expectations from each other and their perceptions of independent learning, its goals and whether they have been met or not, a second survey was conducted and oriented to teachers. It contained nine questions designed in the same way as students' questionnaire.

Questionnaires were designed in a well-organized format to be easily read. Questions covered only main points relevant to the topic to avoid time consuming for the participants. Affording enough time to pre-test the questionnaires was part of team's priorities in order to have a foresight of the misunderstandings that may occur when filling up the surveys. This was done online, where peers could afford their feedback useful to the improvement of the quality of the questionnaire.

Because the purpose of this research project is to know the psychological effects of independent learning on AUI students, two interviews were conducted with the university's counsellor. The first one aimed to know whether there are psychological effects of independent learning among counsellor's patients. The second one was needed to have the counsellor's feedback about the results.

Making observations within classes, taking into consideration professors' backgrounds as well as the taught courses would be useful to illuminate the amount of teachers' and students' talk, asked questions and techniques used by teachers while giving the lecture. However, doing so would not be possible since observations require huge amount of time. What is more, many observations are needed to have sufficient results to draw relevant conclusions. Additionally, observing specific situations would not guarantee fair generalization to other courses. For all these reasons, observations will be of no use for the research project.

### Subjects

Concerning the questionnaire oriented to students, subjects were chosen randomly so that everyone has a chance to be included. As the study is covering ten percent of AUI students' population, one hundred is the suitable sample size. The sample ensures that both genders would be represented. Also, it covers different nationalities as well as the three schools since this research concerns students' experience with independent learning as regards

their backgrounds. For the second questionnaire destined to teachers, there was an unplanned selectiveness. Taking into consideration the smallest number of teachers, twenty subjects were satisfactory sample size. They were randomly selected from the three schools, the language center as well as the Centre for Academic Development.

### Procedure

Surveys' distribution was split between team members. Each member handed out simultaneously thirty three copies in different places. Questionnaires were distributed in dorms, library and labs. It was vital not to disturb busy students which need concentration especially when writing papers in labs. Hence, the time in which the surveys were distributed was taking into consideration. They were not given to be filled in the cafeteria considering that it is a place where students have fun and will not take the fact of filling a survey as a serious thing. While distributing the surveys, two students refused to participate because one have an assignment to submit and the other one refuse the fact of filling in any questionnaire.

Concerning the interview, the team sent an e-mail to the counsellor to set an appointment. It was conducted in the game room on Friday evening according the counsellor's request. In the first interview, which lasted 35 minutes, the team members introduced an overview about the research project. The counsellor was asked to give her own definition for the issue. Questions were specific and related to the psychological effects of independent learning. The interview was recorded using MP3 recorder to ensure the reconstitution of information. After gathering the data, a second interview will be conducted to know the reasons behind the students' responses.

### Results

In order to better know about the effects of independent learning on AUI students, two surveys were conducted to provide reliable data about the issue, satisfy the research question

and verify the assumptions. The first step in understanding effects of independent learning is to uncover students' perception of the studied issue.

Students need to have previous knowledge about independent learning in order to be fully involved in their learning process. In the first survey, they were asked whether they had already heard about independent learning before coming to university or not. Given that fifty five percent of them revealed yes, it can be assumed that they were using it in high school.

Since this research project investigates students' perception of independent learning, one of the surveys' outcomes showed that this system has a positive connotation among AUI students. Results are as follow in table 1.

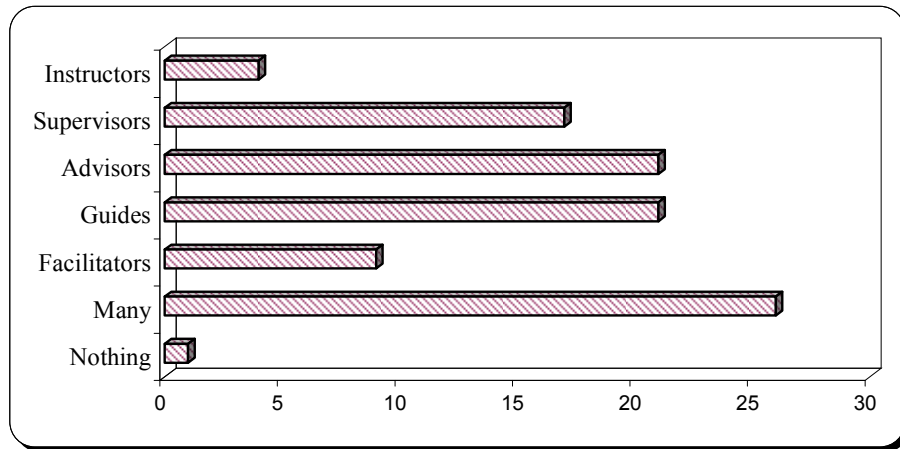
Table 1: Independent learning connotation among AUI students

| Connotation | Positive | Negative | Between | None |
|-------------|----------|----------|---------|------|
| Number      | 87       | 7        | 3       | 3    |

N=100

In order to illuminate students' expectations from teachers, they were asked what teachers' roles in independent learning are. A large number of students believe that teachers accomplish many roles. They consider them as instructors, supervisors, advisors, guides as well as facilitators. Results of this evaluation confirm the first assumptions. Students expect their teachers to guide them in their learning and assist them in their decision making process not only providing them with knowledge. Figure 1 below outlines students' perception of teachers. In both Figures 1 and 2, multiple choices were accepted from respondents.

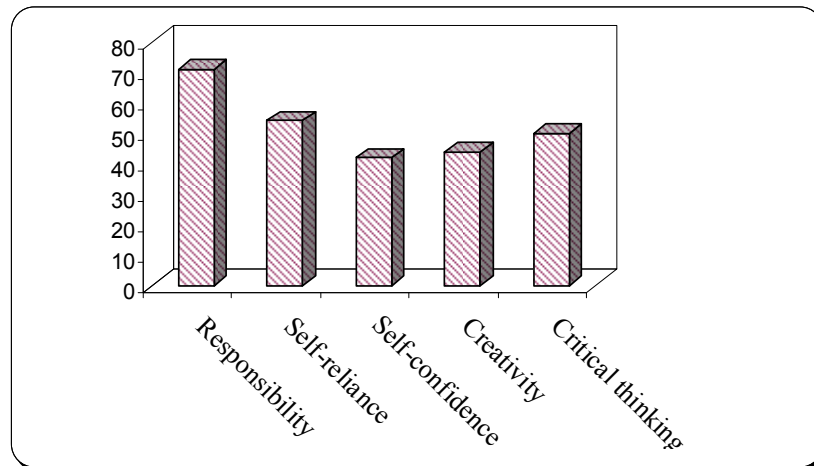
Figure 1 : Teacher's role in independent learning



N=100

The results of this investigation revealed significant information. The outcomes indicate that independent learning has positive effects on AUI students. They believe that it enhances, at a first scale, their responsibility, self-reliance and critical thinking. Figure 2 demonstrates what the positive effects of independent learning are.

Figure 2 : Positive Effects of Independent Learning



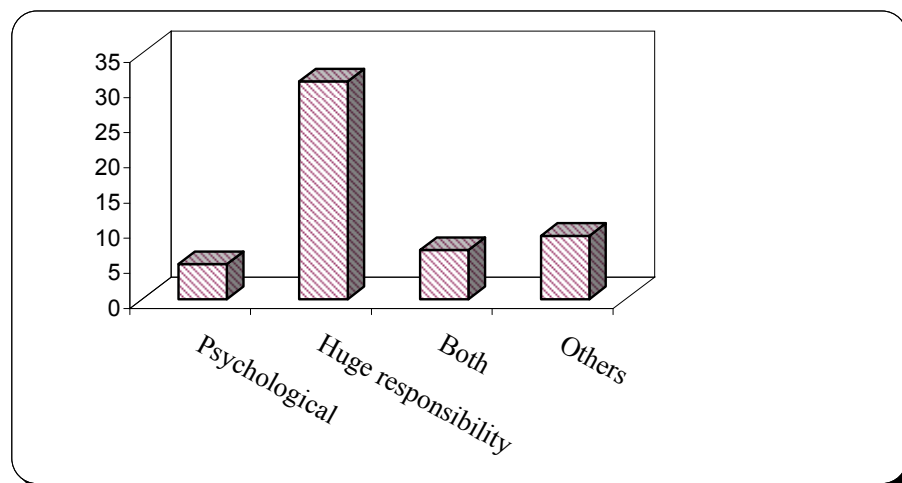
N=100

Students unfamiliar with independent learning may be confused when they have to take the full responsibility for their learning. They can face psychological difficulties and a huge responsibility for their own education. Students were asked if they face difficulties with

independent learning; if yes, they were given choices about the kind of the difficulties faced. Results of the survey proved that more than half of AUI students face difficulties with independent learning.

A majority of students who revealed facing difficulties with independent learning announced having huge responsibility for their own learning, they are supposed to work on their own and assume the responsibility of covering all courses; however, this constitutes a marginal percentage of the interrogated population. In Addition, some students revealed having other difficulties with independent learning such as managing their time and organizing their work. This can be explained by the amount of hours per week students spend studying alone. Figure 3 shows difficulties that AUI students may face with independent learning.

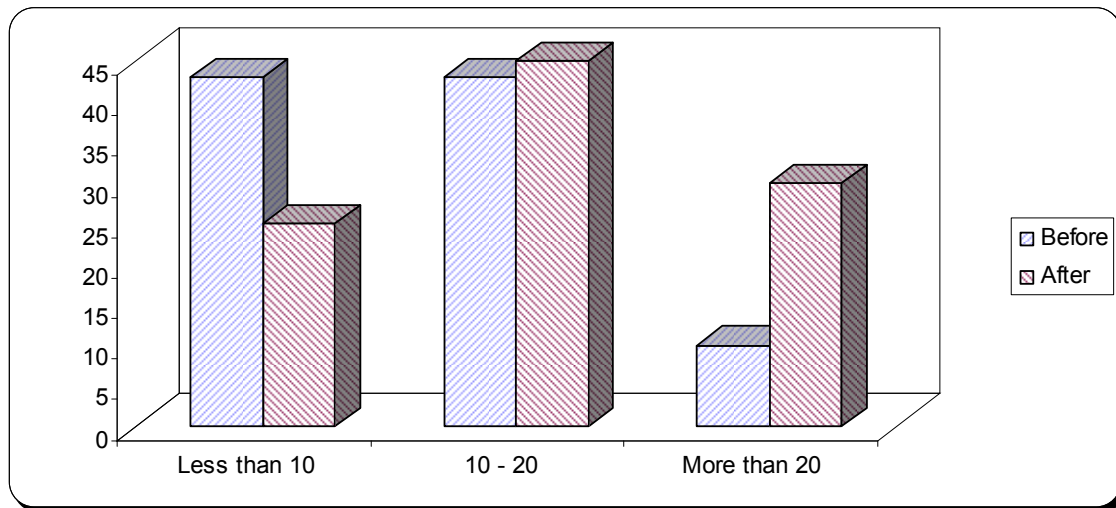
Figure 3 : Independent Learning Difficulties



N=100

From the graph below, it is observed that approximately half of the students kept the same workload, whereas, some learners increased their working hours' number from high school to university. It can be deduced that the huge responsibility that students face for their own learning may originate from this increase.

Figure 4: Number of Hours Students Spend Studying Before and After University



N=100

It was previously hypothesized that learning styles may be affected by learners' backgrounds. Table 2 shows how AUI students' backgrounds affect their ways of dealing with independent learning.

Table 2: IL\* connotation and difficulties among AUI students from different backgrounds

| High School System | Heard about IL before |    | Connotation |          | Difficulties |    |
|--------------------|-----------------------|----|-------------|----------|--------------|----|
|                    | Yes                   | No | Positive    | Negative | Yes          | No |
| N=72 Moroccan      | 38                    | 34 | 68          | 4        | 37           | 35 |
| N=28 Exchange      | 16                    | 12 | 23          | 5        | 12           | 16 |

Results reported in the table above showed that the differences between local and international students' perspective of independent learning were marginal. What became apparent is that Moroccan and foreign students have the same perception of self-directed learning. It can be noticed that the samples for exchange background was small compared to

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\* IL : independent learning

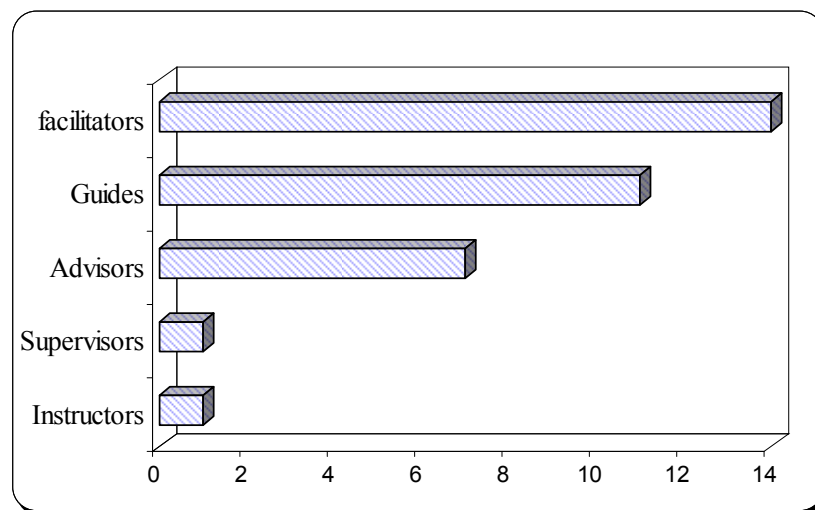
the Moroccan one. This can be explained by the fact that the Moroccan community is larger than the foreign one.

The second survey was addressed to teachers so as to discern their perception of independent learning and their expectations from students.

They were asked about whether they had already used independent learning in university. Data derived from questionnaires shows that eighty five percent of the twenty teachers interrogated were using the independent learning skills while studying at university.

Since teachers' role is an important element in independent learning, this evaluation tried to find their roles from their own view. Results are illustrated in figure 5.

Figure 5: teachers' role from the teachers view



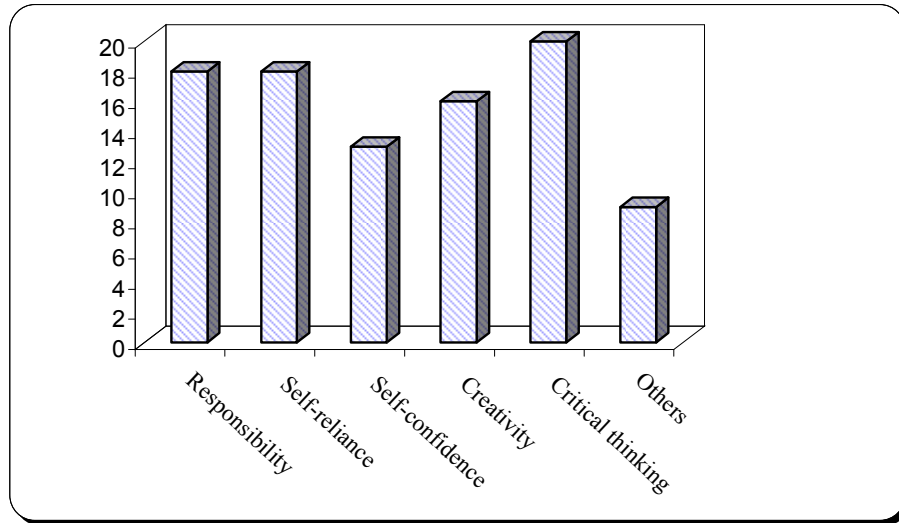
N=20

According to the outcomes of the figure above, teachers perceive themselves, to a great scale, as facilitators and guides. This confirms first hypotheses mentioned in the literature review.

To better understand teachers' perspective of independent learning, they were asked about its positive effects. The results show that teachers believe that independent learning

mainly enhances critical thinking, responsibility, and self-reliance. Figure 6 shows the positive effects of independent learning according to teachers.

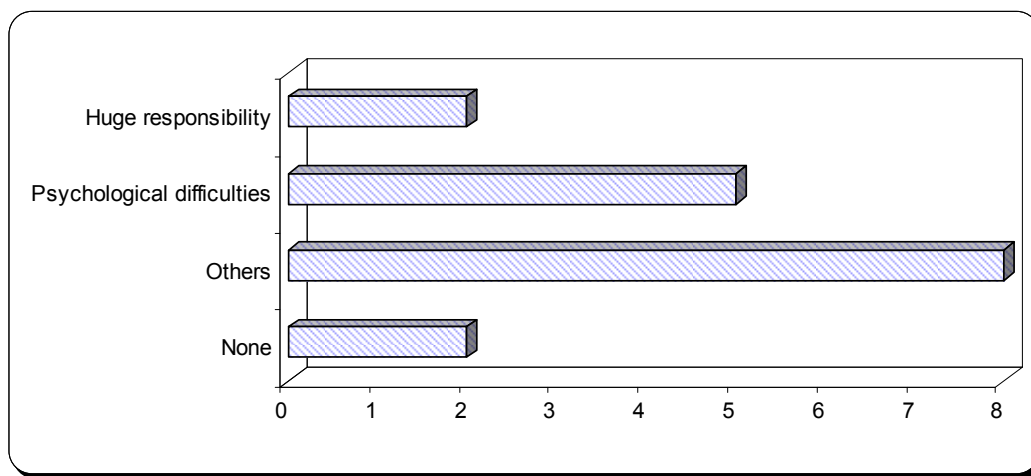
Figure 6: Positive effects of independent learning



N=20

Another main point in this evaluation deals with difficulties or negative effects of independent learning that students might face from teachers point of view. The outcomes demonstrate that a great number of teachers identify difficulties other than those revealed by students.

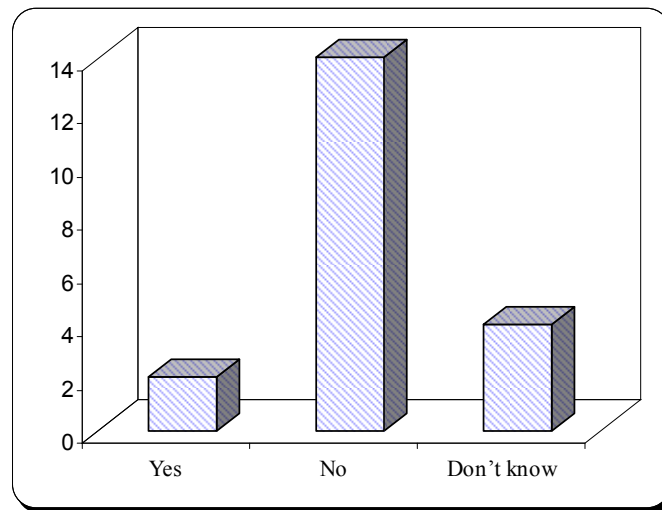
Figure 7: Effects of independent learning according to teachers



N=20

Of greatest concern was whether independent learning goals have been met at AUI, that is, if AUI students have benefited from the positive side of independent learning. Almost all the teachers affirm that independent learning goals are not met in AUI. Some of the teachers argued that they considered independent learning goals are not met at AUI since students cannot guarantee transferability of its skills to other subjects.

Figure 8: Have independent learning goals been met at AUI?



N=20

Beside the surveys, an interview was conducted with the university's counsellor to determine the psychological effects of independent learning among AUI students. Students unfamiliar with independent learning, especially those who were used to the directed system, may be confused when they get the full responsibility of their learning. As a result, they can face psychological difficulties.

The counsellor was asked to give a definition of independent learning. She defined it as a critical thinking issue based on analyzing and creating ideas on one's own. The counsellor was addressed a vital question about the psychological difficulties related to independent learning. The answer was unexpected since it was different from the assumptions. The counsellor argued that the difficulties students face are not only related to

their academic life as it was presumed but also have a close relationship with changes in their social environment, moral life, their career and many external factors.

The team members derived interesting information about the issue. It was added that the problem is not independent learning but the transition to university, since every area of student's life has been changed. Because of the challenges that students are facing, they are more prone to failures, fear and anxiety. However, with support, these challenges become more reasonable.

The counsellor was asked about the long term effects of independent learning. While dealing with independent learning, students acquire critical thinking and become more independent especially when becoming seniors. It can be deduced that these are the positive effects of the self-directed learning. Finally, during the second interview, the counsellor perceived the huge responsibility, that was considered as something negative in the first assumptions, as a positive thing.

### Discussion

At the beginning of this research project, a number of assumptions were elaborated about teachers' and students' perception of independent learning. It was first hypothesized that students did not hear about independent learning before coming to university. Interestingly, half of the students revealed being familiar with it. It is important to mention that the sample included graduate students who might already have experienced independent learning. However, the majority of undergraduate Moroccan students were engaged in a teacher-directed learning in secondary school that focuses on the teacher rather on the student. This restrains students' opportunity to become more autonomous.

Results in table 1 showed that independent learning has a positive connotation to a large number of AUI students. This refutes the study conducted by Hubbal (2003) in which he argued that students need to be familiar with subjects and methods of independent learning so

as to acquire its skills. Students cannot achieve independence unless they enlarge their understanding of it. Indeed outcomes showed that even if the half of students did not hear about independent learning before coming to university, a large number of the respondents confirmed that it has a positive connotation.

As it was assumed, students expect teachers to be their guides in the learning process and go beyond the instructor's role. Since independent learning is a new concept for many students, they may lack the understanding in the subject matter to get involved. They necessitate a continuous supervision from their teachers to initiate them in this autonomous learning. Teachers are also considered from many students as advisors. The reason behind this may lie in the fact that, once at university, students coming from a teacher-directed learning encounter the entire responsibility for their learning. Consequently, they expect their teachers to assist them in the decision-making process. Results confirmed what Candy (1991) argued in his study in which he justified that "too little direction can cause frustrations for the learner".

As it was initially assumed, independent learning encourages students to be actively involved in their own learning, determine their goals, make efforts to achieve them and establish priorities. It enhances students' self-reliance, self-confidence and critical thinking. Figure 2 demonstrates that learners are aware of the positive effects that independent learning brings to them. At first scale, they believe that it enhances their responsibility. This can be justified by the fact that independent learning has a positive connotation to a majority of AUI students.

The outcomes showed that half of the students declared facing difficulties with the system. This can be explained by their unfamiliarity with this learning method regarding that the sample included freshman students. The counsellor explained that having responsibility is a positive thing. She argued that everyone is seeking more responsibility that reflects a higher

and privileged status. However, students' transition from high school to university in terms of an increased workload may lead them to face huge responsibility for their own learning. When we consider that only half of the students face difficulties with independent learning, those who revealed having huge responsibility for their own learning constitute just a minority of AUI students.

It was earlier assumed that students coming from a foreign system would have heard about independent learning and used it in high school, but this idea was disproved for the reason that a reasonable number among them declared facing difficulties. This is because university is different from high school. To clarify this point, the counsellor emphasized the many factors affecting the transition from high school to university. This shift marks a crucial turning point in which students experience changes in their social environment, learning system besides homesickness. All these may affect their productivity.

Another point that needs to be discussed is the variation of the workload from high school to university. The first assumption was supported by the fact that a reasonable number of students increased their workload to adapt the new system. This sustains the fact that students actively took a huge amount of responsibility especially those who are not prepared to assume it.

Teachers consider themselves as facilitators and guides in independent learning system. However, there is no single role for teachers to accomplish. In reality, they accommodate their roles according to students' needs. Teachers facilitate students' initiation to the learning, guide them in the decision making process and transmit them the knowledge. From their view, students are supposed to seek their own learning.

According to them, independent learning has many positive long term effects and they perceive it as an opportunity for students to change their way of learning and to achieve academic improvements such as critical thinking and self-reliance. They consider having

responsibility as being positively seen in university life regarding its negligible percentage comparing to other negative effects.

The main point that was discussed concerned whether independent learning goals have been met at AUI or not. The greatest majority stated that they are, unfortunately, not yet achieved and that AUI still needs to improve its transferability.

### Conclusion

The aim of this research paper is not only finding out effects of independent learning on AUI students but also analyzing their experience on it. It aims as well to know how it is perceived by both teachers and students and their expectation from each other.

Results showed that students' familiarity or not with independent learning does not affect their perception of it since it changes with the transition from high school to university. Indeed, there are many additional factors that mark their social environment and learning style in addition to the increased workload that may affect their productivity.

It was demonstrated that both students and teachers have the same perception of independent learning. They perceive it as a method that necessitates research and evaluation of learning techniques. Also, they see it as the fact of setting goals, establishing priorities, scheduling and evaluating one's progress.

In terms of independent learning, teachers and students have different perceptions of each other. Concerning teachers, they perceive themselves as being just facilitators for this learning process. On the other hand, students consider teachers as having many roles in the same time such as supervising and guiding the student.

When conducting the study, it was considered that it will let students be more aware about the studied issue as to deal with it in an effective way and improve their outcomes. On the other hand, this will help teachers be more attentive to the difficulties faced by students and take into consideration the transition from high school to university.

However, there were some uncovered points in the research project. Because of the lack of reliable information, we could not find out whether or not students who think that independent learning has a positive connotation is due to the fact that it was clearly explained to them once coming to university. Additionally, the results show that most teachers used independent learning while studying at university, yet we cannot determine if they are applying in it in their classes or not.

Once at AUI, the first token courses are the CAD ones. In order to face the difficulties encountered with independent learning, it is essential to explain this issue in these courses and make sure that it is fully understood. Also, teachers can encourage their students to see them during the office hours as to give them feedbacks and explanations if needed. Another important way to help students deal with the huge responsibility for their own learning is to afford more tutoring sessions and encourage the team work.

After conducting this research paper and finding all this information about the effects of independent learning, we are looking forward to know if teachers would take the initiative to guarantee the transmission of independent learning concepts and whether its goals will be met.

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## Appendix 1



Please read questions carefully. Your answers will help with understanding the “effects of independent learning on AUI students.” Answers will be treated in anonymity.

---

- Gender:  Female  Male
- School:  SBA  SSE  SHSS
- Status:  Undergraduate  Graduate  
 Freshman  Sophomore  Junior  Senior
1. What is your background?  
 Moroccan  Foreigner
  2. Which high school system do you come from?  
 Moroccan  American  French
  3. What are your grades?  
 Mostly ‘A’  Mostly ‘B’  Mostly ‘C’
  4. What do you mean by independent learning?  
.....  
.....
  5. Have you already heard about independent learning before coming to university?  
 Yes  No
  6. Does independent learning have:  
 Positive connotation  Negative connotation
  7. What is the teachers’ role in independent learning?  
 Instructors  Supervisors  Advisors  Guides  Facilitators
  8. In high school, how many hours per week were you spending studying **alone**?

Less than 10       10 – 20       More than 20

9. How many hours do you spend studying **alone** at AUI?

Less than 10       10 – 20       More than 20

10. How often do you see your teachers in their office hours?

Less than 1time/week       1time/week       More (please precise)

11. Do you depend on teachers for:

Explanation       Feedback

12. When you were first at AUI, was independent learning perspective clearly explained to you?

Yes       No

13. What does independent learning bring to you?

- Enhance responsibility
- Enhance self-reliance
- Enhance self-confidence
- Enhance creativity
- Enhance critical thinking
- Others: .....

14. Have you faced any difficulties with independent learning?

Yes       No

• If yes:

- Psychological difficulties
- Huge responsibility for your own learning
- Others: .....

Thank you for your participation

**جامعة الأخوين**  
**AL AKHAWAYN**  
**UNIVERSITY**

Please read questions carefully. Your answers will help with understanding the effects of independent learning on AUI students. Answers will be treated anonymously.

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Gender:  Female  Male

School:  SBA  SSE  SHSS  
 Language Center  CAD

15. What is your background?

Moroccan  Foreigner

16. Did you use independent learning while studying at university?

Yes  No

17. What do you mean by independent learning?

.....  
 .....

18. What is the teachers' role in independent learning?

Instructors  Supervisors  Advisors  Guides  Facilitators

19. Are teachers needed for:

Explanation  Feedback

20. What do you expect from students?

.....  
 .....

21. What are positive connotations of independent learning?

- Enhance responsibility
- Enhance self-reliance
- Enhance self-confidence
- Enhance creativity
- Enhance critical thinking
- Others: .....

.....

22. What are negative connotations of independent learning?

- Huge responsibility for their own learning
- Psychological difficulties
- Others (please specify): .....
- .....

23. Have these goals been met in AUI?

- Yes
- No

Thank you for your cooperation

## Appendix 2

### Interview with the university counselor

#### First interview:

1. SSK 1202 requires from us to conduct a study and we choose independent learning and its effects on AUI students. To begin our interview, how do you define independent learning?
2. Do you often have students who often come and talk about some difficulties they find because of the independent learning system? And what are they?
3. Are there any psychological difficulties related to independent learning?
4. What are the long term effects of independent learning?

#### Second interview:

1. After reading the results of both surveys, what could be the reasons behind respondents' answers?