

ENHANCING LEARNER AGENCY THROUGH SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: UM ESTUDO DE CASO NA UNIVERSIDADE TAY NGUYEN, VIETNAM

*FORTALECENDO A AUTONOMIA DO APRENDIZ POR MEIO
DA APRENDIZAGEM AUTODIRIGIDA: UM ESTUDO DE CASO
NA UNIVERSIDADE TAY NGUYEN, VIETNAM*

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Abstract

In the current context of higher education reform, fostering learner agency plays a pivotal role in developing a workforce equipped with independent thinking, creativity, and adaptability to the challenges of a knowledge-based society. This article focuses on analyzing the relationship between self-directed learning (SDL) and the development of learner agency among students at Tay Nguyen University (TNU) - a regional institution with a high proportion of ethnic minority students. This study draws on established theoretical foundations and empirical data from a stratified sample of 397 students across disciplines, supplemented by 12 semi-structured interviews, to examine how SDL contributes to the development of learner agency at TNU. It thereby

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underscores the essential role of SDL in cultivating core attributes of learner agency, such as autonomy, reflexivity, and a sense of social responsibility. The research findings contribute to proposing practical educational directions that are responsive to the distinctive needs of regional universities and aligned with the broader goal of fostering holistic human development.

Keywords: Learner agency. Self-directed learning (SDL). Tay Nguyen University.

Resumo

No contexto atual da reforma do ensino superior, o fomento da agência do estudante desempenha um papel fundamental no desenvolvimento de uma força de trabalho capacitada com pensamento independente, criatividade e adaptabilidade aos desafios de uma sociedade baseada no conhecimento. Este artigo tem como foco a análise da relação entre a aprendizagem autodirigida (Self-Directed Learning – SDL) e o desenvolvimento da agência do estudante entre os alunos da Universidade Tay Nguyen (TNU) – uma instituição regional com alta proporção de estudantes de minorias étnicas. O estudo apoia-se em fundamentos teóricos consolidados e em dados empíricos obtidos a partir de uma amostra estratificada de 397 estudantes de diferentes áreas, complementados por 12 entrevistas semiestruturadas, a fim de examinar como a SDL contribui para o desenvolvimento da agência do estudante na TNU. Dessa forma, evidencia-se o papel essencial da SDL na formação de atributos centrais da agência do estudante, tais como autonomia, reflexividade e senso de responsabilidade social. Os resultados da pesquisa contribuem para a proposição de direções educacionais práticas, que atendam às necessidades específicas de universidades regionais e estejam alinhadas ao objetivo mais amplo de promover o desenvolvimento humano integral.

Palavras-chave: Autonomia do aprendiz. Aprendizagem autodirigida (Self-Directed Learning – SDL). Universidade Tay Nguyen.

1. Introduction

In the context of the knowledge society and globalization, higher education increasingly emphasizes the development of learners' core competencies, with autonomy and the capacity to exercise agency at the center. The shift from transmission-based instruction to active learning models requires students not only to acquire knowledge passively but also to proactively direct, regulate, and take responsibility for their own learning processes. Particularly in educational environments with limited resources, fostering learner agency through self-directed learning (SDL) becomes a crucial condition for students to adapt and thrive sustainably.

Although SDL and learner agency have been widely examined in developed educational contexts (Candy, 1991; Garrison, 1997; Biesta, 2010), research remains scarce in regions facing significant socio-economic challenges, especially where ethnic minority students constitute a large proportion of the student body. The Central Highlands of Vietnam, characterized by cultural diversity and uneven educational infrastructure, provides a representative example of this research gap.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to clarify the relationship between SDL and learner agency within the distinctive context of Tay Nguyen University. Specifically, it explores how SDL contributes to the formation and strengthening of students' agency, while also illuminating the socio-cultural factors that either support or constrain this process, particularly for ethnic minority students.

This study offers significant contributions on both theoretical and practical fronts. Theoretically, it extends the concept of learner agency beyond an individual-centered perspective toward collective, cultural, and political dimensions, thereby enriching an academic discourse that has largely been shaped by Western viewpoints. Practically, it provides empirical evidence from a regional university with limited resources, offering insights into feasible strategies for enhancing students' autonomy and agency in similar educational contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Learner Agency in Contemporary Higher Education

In contemporary educational discourse, learner agency is not merely understood as an individual capacity for self-directed learning but rather as a multidimensional construct encompassing individual, collective, and socio-political dimensions.

At the individual level, agency manifests in students' ability to make decisions, regulate their own learning processes, and orient their actions according to values. At the collective level, agency is cultivated within learning communities, where students co-construct knowledge and provide mutual support. At the socio-political level, agency is embedded in broader social contexts, educational institutions, and policy frameworks, shaping the extent to which students can exercise their voice and role within both academic and civic life.

Biesta (2010) emphasizes that higher education should aim to nurture individuals who are capable of “acting with responsibility, making value-based decisions, and participating meaningfully in society” (p. 20). Thus, agency is not simply a learning skill but also a value-oriented and socially responsible practice. Similarly, Bown and White (2020) conceptualize agency as a multifaceted construct, comprising critical thinking, autonomy in learning behaviors, metacognitive competence, and the capacity for value-based decision-making. These abilities enable students to adapt to the growing complexity of contemporary social and professional contexts.

In the Vietnamese higher education context—particularly in regional universities such as Tay Nguyen University, where ethnic minority students account for a large proportion of the student body—learner agency must also be understood through the lens of collective agency. Many minority students develop autonomy and learning capacity not solely from individual efforts but through peer support in study groups, dormitory communities, or student organizations. This sense of community not only compensates for individual limitations (e.g., limited resources, language barriers) but also generates shared motivation that empowers students to assert their roles and voices in the learning environment.

Therefore, any analysis of learner agency in higher education today must address its individual, collective, and socio-political dimensions, rather than confining it within the boundaries of individual capacity alone. This is especially crucial in regional and multi-ethnic university contexts, where agency is shaped not only by the learner as an individual but also by the wider community and socio-structural environment.

2.2. Self-Directed Learning (SDL)

The concept of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) was defined by Knowles (1975) as a process in which “individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, choosing and implementing strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (p. 18).

This definition underscores the learner's autonomy throughout the entire learning cycle—from preparation and implementation to reflection—thereby fostering a sense of responsibility for both the process and outcomes of learning.

Building on this foundation, Garrison (1997) developed a comprehensive model of SDL comprising three core components:

Self-motivation: the willpower and intrinsic goal orientation that sustain persistence and confidence in one's capacity for growth.

Self-management: the ability to organize the learning environment, allocate time, select resources, and implement appropriate learning activities.

Self-monitoring: the ongoing process of tracking learning progress, engaging in reflection, and adjusting strategies when necessary.

A key feature of Garrison's model is that these three elements do not exist independently but rather interact dynamically within an active learning process. For example, intrinsic motivation (self-motivation) drives the creation of study plans (self-management), while monitoring and reflection (self-monitoring) provide feedback that strengthens motivation and informs adjustments to management strategies.

This approach aligns with Zimmerman's (2000) perspective on self-regulated learning, in which the entire learning process unfolds through a continuous feedback loop. Learners begin by setting goals, then implement and monitor their actions, followed by reflection and adaptation to improve subsequent cycles. It is precisely this iterative loop that renders SDL developmental, adaptive, and self-correcting.

Thus, SDL is not merely a set of individual skills but a dynamic, interactive process in which Garrison's three core components operate within a continuous feedback loop (Zimmerman, 2000). This mechanism constitutes a foundational pathway through which learners cultivate and strengthen agency in contemporary higher education.

2.3. Relationship Between SDL and Learner Agency

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is regarded as a foundational mechanism for the formation and development of learner agency. Candy (1991) emphasizes that SDL is not merely a learning method but a pathway through which learners become independent subjects, capable of shaping the knowledge process and making value-based decisions. Similarly, the OECD (2018) identifies SDL as one of the core competencies of twenty-first-century citizens, as it equips learners to navigate complexity, sustain resilience, and exercise autonomy in both education and broader

social life.

However, a major challenge in the development of agency lies in the gap between intention and action commonly referred to as the intention–action gap. Ajzen (1991), in the theory of planned behavior, argues that behavioral intentions do not always translate into actual actions due to the influence of perceived control and environmental conditions. Along similar lines, Kuhl (1985) highlights motivational barriers and behavioral procrastination, which prevent learners from carrying out their goals in practice, even when those goals are clearly articulated.

SDL can play a crucial role in narrowing this gap. Through self-management, learners establish plans and organize resources to transform intentions into concrete actions. The process of self-monitoring enables reflection, identification of obstacles, and timely adjustment to sustain progress. Most importantly, self-motivation reinforces commitment and willpower, thereby reducing the risk of procrastination or disengagement.

In this sense, SDL serves not only as a foundation for the development of learner agency but also as an effective mechanism for overcoming the intention–action gap. It is precisely the integration of personal goals, management strategies, and continuous feedback loops that enables learners to evolve into autonomous, responsible actors whose actions are grounded in and oriented toward social values.

2.4. Mechanisms of Developing Learner Agency through SDL

In the context of contemporary higher education, Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is regarded as a concrete operational mechanism through which learner agency is cultivated and developed. SDL generates a cyclical learning process in which successive steps interact dynamically, enabling learners not only to acquire knowledge but also to foster autonomy, critical thinking, and social responsibility. This mechanism can be summarized in five key stages:

Goal-setting Learners actively define their personal learning objectives, aligned with value orientations and aspirations for self-development. As Biesta (2010) points out, this is the moment when learners grapple with the question: “What kind of person do I want to become, and why?”—a foundational starting point of agency.

Planning and Execution

Once goals are established, learners select appropriate strategies, resources, and learning methods. According to Garrison (1997), this stage exemplifies self-

management, where learner autonomy is translated into organizational behaviors and concrete actions.

Monitoring and Adjustment

Learning is not a linear process but requires continual reflection and recalibration. Self-monitoring allows learners to evaluate progress, identify obstacles, and apply corrective measures. This corresponds to the “feedback loop” described by Zimmerman (2000), which ensures sustained development and adaptability.

Social Participation and Collective Engagement

Agency extends beyond the individual and is nurtured within collective contexts. Participation in group discussions, community projects, or extracurricular activities helps students strengthen collaboration, social responsibility, and collective agency. In regional and multiethnic universities such as Tay Nguyen University, peer support within classrooms, dormitories, or learning communities plays a crucial role in sustaining motivation and engagement.

Applied Learning and Integration

Through experiential learning, professional internships, or community service projects, students apply SDL capacities to real-world contexts. This is the stage where agency becomes actualized—learners not only demonstrate autonomy in their studies but also engage meaningfully and contribute positively to society.

In sum, the mechanisms of developing learner agency through SDL go beyond individual skills to encompass collective learning communities and socio-cultural contexts. This is particularly significant in resource-constrained, multiethnic higher education settings, where agency is shaped and nurtured through a dialectic of personal autonomy and collective engagement.

2.5. Empirical Research on SDL and Learner Agency

Recent international empirical studies have reaffirmed the central role of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in the formation and development of learner agency. Lee and Lee (2021), in a study conducted in South Korea, demonstrated that SDL is not merely an individual learning skill but rather a process that integrates cogni-

tive, emotional, and social dimensions. When SDL is supported by peer learning and digital platforms, students exhibit significant gains in self-efficacy and value-based decision-making—both of which are critical indicators of agency. Similarly, Loyens, Rikers, and Magda (2021) emphasized that SDL functions as a “pedagogical accelerator” for agency, particularly when combined with formative assessment and dialogic teaching. The OECD (2021) further affirmed that in the digital age and amidst conditions of uncertainty, agency constitutes an essential capacity for learner adaptability, and SDL provides the primary pathway to actualizing agency through personalized, competency-based, and inquiry-driven learning models.

In Vietnam, research on SDL and agency remains at an early stage and has primarily been concentrated in large universities. Nguyen Van Phat (2020) argued that self-learning capacity constitutes the foundation for cultivating student subjectivity in contemporary education. Tran Thi Hai Yen (2021) highlighted the importance of embedding SDL into curriculum design to foster agency within the context of digital transformation. Likewise, a report by the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences (2023) revealed that while students demonstrate positive perceptions of SDL, their practices remain limited—particularly in areas such as time management, motivation maintenance, and self-assessment.

Nevertheless, most of these studies have been situated within urban universities or national flagship institutions, while regional universities—where ethnic minority students constitute a substantial proportion of the student body and face significant resource constraints—remain largely underexplored. Consequently, investigating the relationship between SDL and learner agency in regional, multiethnic contexts such as the Central Highlands is not only academically significant but also carries practical implications for promoting educational equity and fostering sustainable human resource development.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This study was designed using a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative strategies to capture both the breadth and depth of the phenomenon. The quantitative component was employed to measure students’ readiness for self-directed learning (SDL readiness) and to examine factors associated with learner agency on a broad scale. In parallel, the qualitative component, con-

ducted through semi-structured interviews, provided insights into students' concrete experiences, thereby illuminating the socio-cultural mechanisms that shape the formation and development of agency. The integration of these two approaches not only enabled triangulation that is, cross-validation and mutual enrichment of data but also mitigated the limitations inherent in relying on a single methodological tradition.

The study protocol received ethical approval from Tay Nguyen University's Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection.

3.2. Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted at Tay Nguyen University (TNU), a public higher education institution located in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. TNU represents a distinctive context, where students come from diverse ethnic backgrounds—including Kinh, Ê Đê, M'nông, and Gia Rai—and the majority originate from rural or socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Compared with major urban universities, the university's learning infrastructure, such as libraries, shared study spaces, and digital facilities, remains underdeveloped. This context provides a critical lens through which to examine how students construct and sustain learner agency under resource-constrained conditions.

The study sample consisted of two groups:

Quantitative component: 397 students were selected using a stratified sampling strategy, ensuring representation across academic years, fields of study, and ethnic groups. This sampling design enhanced both the reliability and the generalizability of the quantitative findings within the university.

Qualitative component: 12 students were recruited for semi-structured interviews. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2006), whereby recurring themes emerged and no substantially new information was obtained. At the same time, diversity in gender, discipline, and ethnic background was ensured, enabling a more nuanced exploration of students' experiences with self-directed learning and learner agency.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

Quantitative Instrument – Adapted SDLRS

To measure students' readiness for self-directed learning, this study employed an adapted version of Guglielmino's Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), tailored to the Vietnamese higher education context. The adaptation process followed several systematic steps:

Translation and linguistic adjustment: The original SDLRS was translated into Vietnamese using a forward-backward translation procedure to ensure semantic equivalence.

Expert consultation: The translated version was reviewed by a panel of three experts in higher education and educational psychology to verify its contextual and cultural appropriateness.

Pilot testing: A preliminary version of the scale was administered to a pilot group of 50 students at TNU to assess clarity, comprehensibility, and item relevance.

Reliability testing: Data from the pilot were analyzed, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients computed for each subscale. All coefficients exceeded the 0.70 threshold, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Validity confirmation: Beyond statistical reliability, the instrument underwent expert validation to confirm content validity and ensure its theoretical soundness.

Qualitative Instrument – Semi-Structured Interviews

Complementing the quantitative survey, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences of self-directed learning. The interviews focused on key barriers to SDL, including:

Dormitory conditions: limited study space, noise, and the lack of common learning areas.

Technological infrastructure: weak internet connectivity and inadequate access to personal learning devices.

Teaching methods: reliance on traditional lecture-based instruction, with limited opportunities for active and creative learning.

By integrating these two instruments, the study ensured that quantitative and qualitative data triangulated and enriched one another, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between SDL and learner agency within the multi-ethnic context of a regional university.

3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis of data in this study followed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative strands to capture the breadth and depth of students' experiences with self-directed learning (SDL) and learner agency. The quantitative component provided generalizable patterns across a large sample, while the qualitative component offered rich, contextualized insights into the mechanisms and challenges underlying those patterns. Together, the two strands complemented each other, allowing for triangulation of findings and a more comprehensive understanding of how SDL operates as a foundation for learner agency within the specific sociocultural context of Tay Nguyen University.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the adapted SDLRS were processed using SPSS. The analytical steps included:

Descriptive statistics: Mean scores, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were calculated for the key variables—self-motivation, self-management, and self-monitoring. This provided an overall picture of students' readiness for self-directed learning.

Correlation analysis: Pearson's correlation coefficients were employed to examine the relationships between the components of SDL and indicators of learner agency. This analysis allowed for the identification of the strength and direction of associations, thereby offering empirical evidence for the role of SDL in fostering learner agency.

Qualitative Analysis

Data from the 12 semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

Familiarization with the data through repeated reading and note-taking of the interview transcripts.

Generating initial codes to capture salient features of the data.

Developing candidate themes by clustering related codes.

Reviewing and refining themes to ensure internal coherence and consistency.

Defining and naming each theme with conceptual clarity.

Presenting the findings, supported by direct student quotations, to highlight

barriers and strategies related to self-directed learning.

By integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses in a complementary design, the study not only measured the extent of SDL and learner agency on a broad scale but also illuminated the nuanced experiences and contextual factors shaping these processes. This approach provided a holistic and context-sensitive understanding, thereby enhancing both the reliability and validity of the findings.

3.5. Research Timeline and Scope

The study was conducted over a six-month period, from February 2025 to July 2025, at Tay Nguyen University (TNU). The quantitative survey phase was carried out between March and April 2025, while the qualitative interviews were conducted in May and June 2025. The process of synthesizing, analyzing, and integrating the findings was completed in July 2025.

This research focused exclusively on full-time undergraduate students at TNU during the 2024–2025 academic year. The results reflect the particular characteristics of a regional university in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where the proportion of ethnic minority students is high and learning conditions remain more limited compared to urban universities. Consequently, the findings of this study should be understood as context-specific to TNU and are not intended to be generalized to the entire population of Vietnamese university students.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Learner Agency among Students

Survey results from 397 students indicate that the overall level of learner agency among students at Tay Nguyen University is generally at an upper-medium level. The mean scores of the main dimensions ranged from 3.2 to 3.6 on a five-point scale, suggesting that students have demonstrated certain manifestations of agency but still face significant limitations in fully realizing this capacity. Specifically, in terms of autonomy, students achieved a mean score of 3.5, reflecting a tendency to take initiative in setting personal learning goals; however, their ability to sustain and consistently implement long-term plans remains limited. For critical thinking, the mean score was 3.3, indicating a moderate level of analytical and evaluative ability, which has not yet developed into a prominent competency. Most notably, decision-

making confidence recorded the lowest mean score of 3.2, underscoring students' difficulty in translating intentions into concrete actions.

The qualitative data from 12 semi-structured interviews provide deeper insight into these quantitative findings, particularly concerning the phenomenon of the “intention–action gap.” Many students reported that although they intended to participate in class discussions or express their opinions proactively, they ultimately remained silent due to a lack of confidence and fear of negative evaluation from peers or instructors. One ethnic minority student shared: “I want to speak up in class, but I am afraid of making mistakes, so I keep quiet to be safe.” Another student commented: “I planned to study in the library, but when friends in the dorm invited me out, I usually gave up halfway.” These illustrations vividly highlight the gap between intention and action, consistent with the arguments of Ajzen (1991) and Kuhl (1985) on the intention–action gap, in which psychological barriers (lack of confidence, reluctance to speak) combined with social contexts (peer pressure, disruptive learning environments) weaken the actualization of agency.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that while students at Tay Nguyen University have developed a foundational level of learner agency, it has not yet reached a robust stage—particularly in their ability to transform intentions into concrete actions. This situation underscores the need for interventions at both the individual level (e.g., building self-confidence, enhancing self-management skills) and the collective level (e.g., fostering participatory learning environments, strengthening social support), in order to effectively promote the development of learner agency in the specific context of a regional, multi-ethnic university.

4.2. Students' Self-Directed Learning Capacity

The quantitative survey results reveal that students' capacity for Self-Directed Learning (SDL) at Tay Nguyen University is generally at a moderate level, with notable differences across its components. Among the three main dimensions, planning recorded the highest mean score (3.6/5), indicating that students are relatively capable of identifying learning goals and developing study plans. However, motivation had the lowest mean score (3.1/5), reflecting a lack of sustained drive for long-term learning. The dimension of self-monitoring scored at an intermediate level (3.3/5), suggesting that while students have made efforts to evaluate their learning progress, such practices are neither frequent nor systematic.

The qualitative data from interviews further illuminate the practical barriers

affecting SDL capacity. Many students reported that noisy dormitory environments often disrupted their ability to follow through with self-study plans; one student noted: “I want to read books at night, but since my room is crowded and noisy, it is very difficult to concentrate.” In addition, the lack of stable internet connectivity and limited access to personal devices posed significant obstacles, particularly for students from economically disadvantaged families. Furthermore, several students pointed out that feedback from instructors was often delayed and insufficiently personalized, which hindered their ability to effectively adjust learning plans.

Comparative analysis highlights differences across student groups. Kinh students generally achieved higher SDL scores, especially in the area of motivation, whereas ethnic minority students faced greater challenges due to language barriers, socio-economic constraints, and the pressures of adapting to academic culture. When compared by year of study, first-year students tended to display stronger motivation but weaker skills in planning and progress monitoring, while fourth-year students demonstrated greater planning and monitoring ability but a noticeable decline in learning motivation, often attributed to graduation pressures and career orientation concerns.

Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that while students at TNU have begun to develop SDL capacity—most notably in planning their motivation and perseverance remain limited. The disparities across ethnic groups and academic years indicate that SDL development is not solely an individual matter but is deeply intertwined with socio-cultural conditions and the structure of academic training. These insights provide a crucial basis for designing differentiated support strategies that both strengthen students’ learning motivation and mitigate environmental barriers, particularly in the context of a regional, multi-ethnic university.

4.3. Relationship Between SDL and Learner Agency

Quantitative analysis indicates a strong correlation between students’ capacity for Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and their level of learner agency. Specifically, self-management shows a significant positive correlation with learner agency ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$), while self-monitoring also demonstrates a substantial relationship ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$). These results confirm that the better students are at managing and monitoring their own learning processes, the more likely they are to exhibit agency—manifested through confidence, initiative, and decision-making ability.

The qualitative findings from interviews further reinforce these results. Stu-

dents with higher SDL levels often reported actively seeking and selecting learning materials beyond official lectures. They also engaged more proactively in classroom discussions, willingly posed questions, and expressed personal viewpoints. As one third-year student remarked: “I usually look for English materials to read on my own, which gives me more ideas to contribute during discussions.” Conversely, students with lower SDL levels tended to participate less in discussions, only completed minimum requirements, and relied heavily on direct instructions from lecturers.

Interview data also highlight the critical role of community support and mentoring, particularly for ethnic minority students. Many participants noted that peer support or individualized guidance from faculty members helped them sustain motivation and encouraged them to express themselves more confidently. An Ede student explained: “When I receive personal guidance from my teacher, I feel more confident to speak up without worrying about being laughed at by my classmates.” This suggests that learner agency is not solely an outcome of individual effort but is strongly shaped by the learning environment, social networks, and faculty engagement.

In sum, the findings indicate that SDL functions as a foundational mechanism for the development of learner agency, with self-management and self-monitoring playing pivotal roles. However, to bridge the intention–action gap, particularly among ethnic minority students, collective support mechanisms are essential. These include fostering collaborative learning environments, expanding opportunities for participation in learning communities, and implementing effective mentoring systems.

4.4. Discussion

The findings of this study once again confirm the foundational role of Self-Directed Learning (SDL) in the formation and development of learner agency. As previous research has highlighted (Candy, 1991; OECD, 2018), SDL equips learners not only with the capacity to set goals and manage their learning processes, but also with a mechanism to make autonomous decisions, articulate personal perspectives, and participate actively in learning communities. The quantitative results of this study showing significant correlations between self-management, self-monitoring, and learner agency provide robust empirical evidence to substantiate this claim.

A key contribution of this research lies in offering insights from the context of a regional, resource-constrained, and socio-culturally diverse university, namely Tay Nguyen University (TNU). Most prior studies on SDL and agency have been conducted in urban contexts or at well-resourced universities with relatively homogenous

student populations. By contrast, the context of TNU presents a range of challenges: a high proportion of ethnic minority students, limited learning environments (e.g., lack of quiet study spaces, unstable internet connectivity, underdeveloped digital library systems), and significant disparities in academic preparedness among student groups. Within such conditions, sustaining learning motivation and enacting agency becomes a highly demanding and easily disrupted process. Thus, the findings of this study not only reaffirm the importance of SDL but also underscore the contextual embeddedness of agency that is, agency should not be understood as an isolated individual trait, but as a capacity shaped and constrained by specific cultural and social conditions.

In addition, this study integrates a discussion of liberal education as a critical philosophical foundation for fostering SDL and agency. The principles of liberal education including active learning, the cultivation of critical thinking, reflective capacity, and social responsibility align closely with the goal of nurturing learners with strong agency. However, implementing these principles in a resource-limited context such as TNU requires creative and feasible adaptations. Examples include developing community-based learning spaces as substitutes for modern libraries, establishing peer mentoring systems between senior and junior students, and designing project-based learning activities linked to local community issues.

Finally, this study acknowledges its limitations. In terms of scope, data were collected from a single university, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Vietnamese higher education system. In terms of methodology, although a mixed-methods approach was applied, the degree of integration between quantitative and qualitative data could be further strengthened, particularly in analyzing the complex interactions among variables. Moreover, the study primarily described the relationship between SDL and agency without delving into potential mediating or moderating factors such as digital competence, faculty support, or disciplinary academic cultures.

These limitations open up directions for future research. Subsequent studies could expand to other universities with comparable conditions for cross-institutional comparisons, or explore the bidirectional mechanisms between SDL and agency across specific student groups (e.g., by ethnicity, gender, or field of study). Furthermore, designing experimental pedagogical interventions aimed at enhancing SDL and measuring their effects on agency represents a promising avenue, with both theoretical significance and practical implications.

5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is closely interconnected with the development of learner agency. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses confirm that when students possess strong capacities for self-management, planning, and monitoring their learning processes, they are more likely to display autonomy, decision-making ability, and a heightened sense of responsibility in their academic engagement. Notably, the findings reveal that ethnic minority students—who often face disadvantages related to economic, social, and linguistic conditions—can still develop robust SDL and agency when situated in supportive learning environments with appropriate mentoring and opportunities to participate in diverse learning communities.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to extending the conceptual framework of learner agency by emphasizing the significance of regional and multiethnic contexts, which have often been overlooked in international scholarship. The case of Tay Nguyen University (TNU) provides compelling evidence that agency is not merely an individual attribute but is deeply embedded in the cultural-social conditions and infrastructural resources of educational environments. Analyzing SDL and agency within this distinctive setting thus enriches international academic discourse, which has predominantly focused on urban or globally connected universities.

Looking forward, the study underscores the necessity of integrating SDL with the principles of liberal education to foster the holistic development of students. This integration entails encouraging active learning, cultivating critical thinking, and strengthening social responsibility. Only then can SDL and learner agency extend beyond the individual level to become a driving force for students' active participation in community and societal development within the context of Vietnam's ongoing integration into the global landscape.

6. Recommendations

To effectively promote learner agency among students—particularly within the unique socio-cultural and institutional conditions of regional universities such as Tay Nguyen University—this study proposes a multi-level strategy built upon the following key recommendations:

6.1. A Four-Pillar Model for Developing Learner Agency

Based on the research findings, the authors propose a Four-Pillar Model for fostering learner agency in regional, multiethnic higher education contexts such as Tay Nguyen University (TNU). This model not only emphasizes the enhancement of individual learning competencies but also highlights the social and professional dimensions, enabling students to cultivate autonomy while remaining meaningfully connected to their communities.

First, strengthening SDL skills. Students need to develop the ability to articulate clear learning goals and construct appropriate study plans. Tools such as reflective journals can be integrated into coursework to help students monitor their progress, evaluate outcomes, and adjust learning strategies. This constitutes a direct foundation for learner agency, as students learn to take responsibility for their own educational trajectories.

Second, expanding opportunities for critical thinking development. Pedagogical formats such as thematic seminars, group discussions, and problem-based learning create spaces for students to practice analysis, critique, and solution generation. In doing so, students not only consolidate knowledge but also cultivate the ability to ask questions, defend positions, and engage in democratic academic dialogue.

Third, enhancing mentorship and socio-emotional support. Establishing structured systems of academic advising and peer mentoring plays a pivotal role in nurturing students' confidence and capacity for action, particularly for ethnic minority students. The accompaniment of faculty and peers reduces feelings of isolation while building a supportive social network that sustains long-term learning motivation.

Fourth, connecting learning with community and professional practice. Activities such as service learning and internships provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge in real-world contexts, thereby translating intentions into action. This step is crucial for fostering agency at a socio-civic level, as students learn not only for personal growth but also to contribute to their communities and prepare for their future careers.

Taken together, the Four-Pillar Model outlines a comprehensive pathway for developing learner agency by integrating self-directed learning, critical thinking, socio-emotional support, and community engagement. Implementing this model in regional universities such as TNU may help bridge the gap between intention and action, while laying the foundation for the sustainable development of students in multicultural and resource-constrained contexts.

6.2. Institutional and Faculty Roles

The development of learner agency cannot rely solely on students' individual efforts; it requires active engagement and support from both institutions and faculty. The findings of this study indicate that, for SDL and agency to become sustainable competencies, institutional and pedagogical changes are necessary across three key dimensions.

First, faculty development. Instructors need to be equipped with active learning methodologies that position students at the center of the learning process and encourage exploration and self-discovery. Professional development programs should focus on techniques for facilitating discussions, implementing project-based learning, and cultivating democratic classroom environments in which students feel free to express their views without fear of negative evaluation.

Second, curriculum reform. Program structures should be designed with greater flexibility, allowing students to select courses aligned with their needs and personal orientations. The inclusion of electives, interdisciplinary seminars, and opportunities for independent research empowers students to shape their own learning pathways, thereby fostering agency closely tied to self-determination.

Third, improving the learning environment. For regional universities such as TNU, where resources remain limited, investing in small-scale digital libraries and providing quiet study spaces is of particular importance. Such conditions are essential for sustaining learning motivation, mitigating the negative effects of disruptive environments (e.g., noise, lack of resources), and enabling students to focus on developing SDL competencies and agency.

In sum, institutional policies and faculty roles are decisive in constructing a learning ecosystem that supports agency. The integration of innovative pedagogical practices, curriculum reform, and improved infrastructure not only strengthens SDL but also contributes to the formation of a generation of students who are critical thinkers, autonomous learners, and active contributors to community development.

6.3. Policy Implications for Regional Higher Education

Developing learner agency in the context of regional and multi-ethnic higher education requires not only innovations at the institutional level but also clear guidance from macro-level policy. Based on the findings of this study, several key policy implications can be identified:

First, prioritizing investment in digital infrastructure for ethnic minority re-

gions. Given the constraints in facilities and resources, expanding and upgrading digital infrastructure (e.g., high-speed internet, digital libraries, online learning platforms) is a foundational solution to bridging the learning gap between students in remote areas and those in urban universities. Investment in digital infrastructure not only supports SDL but also helps create equitable learning environments in which ethnic minority students can develop agency on par with other groups.

Second, piloting personalized learning programs for first-year students. The initial stage of university is critical for shaping learning habits and fostering autonomy. Therefore, personalized learning initiatives—such as academic advising, flexible study pathways, and needs-based support—should be piloted for first-year cohorts. This approach would enable students to cultivate SDL skills early, strengthen self-confidence, and narrow the intention–action gap from the outset of their academic journey.

Third, integrating agency as a criterion in higher education quality assurance. Rather than assessing outcomes solely on disciplinary knowledge and professional skills, quality assurance frameworks should incorporate criteria for the development of learner agency. This includes students' capacity for self-directed learning, critical thinking, independent decision-making, and active participation in communities. If adopted as a benchmark of quality, agency would serve as a driver for institutions to design curricula and learning environments that foster the holistic growth of learners.

In summary, these policy implications suggest a strategic approach: investing in infrastructure to promote equity, innovating pedagogical approaches to nurture SDL and agency from the outset, and adjusting quality assurance systems to encourage liberal and holistic education. Such measures are essential for enhancing the quality of higher education in Vietnam, particularly in regional contexts with limited resources.

6.4. Toward a Personalized and Autonomous Learning Ecosystem

To foster learner agency in a sustainable manner, higher education must move toward cultivating a personalized and autonomous learning ecosystem. At the heart of this ecosystem lies the recognition of the diversity in students' abilities, needs, and circumstances, from which flexible and adaptive learning pathways can be designed.

First, developing flexible learning pathways combined with adaptive learning technologies. Instead of imposing a uniform curriculum for all, students should be able to choose courses, learning pace, and modalities that align with their individual

goals and orientations. Adaptive learning systems, supported by learning analytics, can personalize the learning experience by helping students maximize their potential while addressing their specific limitations.

Second, fostering a culture of empowerment. A learning ecosystem is not merely a set of tools and pathways, but also a cultural environment that encourages students to make confident decisions, take risks, and assume responsibility for their choices. Such a culture should be nurtured through learner-centered pedagogies, academic advising systems, and the recognition of students' individual efforts as well as their social contributions.

If implemented holistically, a personalized and autonomous learning ecosystem will enable Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and learner agency to develop not only as academic competencies but also as civic qualities in modern society: the capacity for self-orientation, reflection, creativity, and active participation in community development. This represents an essential trajectory for Vietnamese higher education to move toward international standards while maintaining sensitivity to regional and multicultural specificities.

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