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UNVEILING LEARNER AUTONOMY: PERSPECTIVES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ONLINE EDUCATION

Research article

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UNVEILING LEARNER AUTONOMY: PERSPECTIVES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ONLINE EDUCATION THE TITLE OF THE ARTICLE

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of university students as to learner autonomy during the online education process. In the ever-evolving realm of higher education, the principle of learner autonomy has emerged as a fundamental tenet, empowering students to assume control of their learning. As traditional educational paradigms evolve upon the introduction of online education into the learning process, the concept of learner autonomy emerges as a cornerstone principle, fostering empowerment and self-directedness among students. Considering that university education is expected to prepare students for life, learner autonomy in higher education turns out to be a necessity rather than a preference. That's why, what university students perceive and experience about learner autonomy is significant to understand the concept in detail. The current study employed a qualitative research method. The participants were chosen via purposeful sampling. The study group was composed of 16 university students who had experienced online education. Study data was collected through semi-structured interviews, and content analysis was used to analyze the gathered data. At the end of the study analysis, the five themes that emerged were online education experience, planning, receiving support, motivation, and ways to support and improve learner autonomy. In line with the study findings, we presented some suggestions for future research and practice.

Keywords: online education, learner autonomy, higher education, university students

1. Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of higher education, the concept of learner autonomy has emerged as a cornerstone principle in empowering students to take charge of their own learning journey. In traditional educational paradigms, students are often perceived as passive recipients of knowledge, with educators playing the role of information providers (Wang, 2002). However, the shift towards learner autonomy points to a transformation wherein students become active agents in their education, driving their own learning processes and taking responsibility for their academic development.

The term “autonomy” derives from a Greek word signifying “setting law for oneself”. It is indeed a concept with historical roots. Galileo Galilei articulated the notion that a person cannot be taught, but one can only help a person reveal everything in oneself (Benson, 2001). Moreover, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas presaged the emergence of the construct of learner autonomy (Danilenko et al., 2018). Also, Rousseau advocated for a pedagogical approach wherein educators stimulate students' interest, present them with challenges and allow for self-directed problem-solving (Thanasoulas, 2000). He emphasized the importance of students

acquiring knowledge first-hand rather than passively receiving it from instructors, suggesting that errors should not be corrected immediately but rather serve as opportunities for learning.

In modern sense, the concept of learner autonomy first appeared in Nancy University Language Center in 1971 with respect to the project of the British Council for Foreign Language Learning (Danilenko et al., 2018). The centre was headed by Henry Holec, who is one of the leading researchers conceptualizing the idea of learner autonomy. The concept was first defined by Holec, particularly in the realm of foreign language education (Ribbe & Benazilla, 2013). Holec (1979) used various aspects of autonomy to describe an autonomous learner. According to him, an autonomous learner is one who is able to set his own learning objectives, define the content and progression during the learning process, select appropriate methods and techniques to use while learning, monitor the process and assess what he has acquired (p. 3).

David Little expanded upon the concept of learning autonomy by integrating it with learning theory. Little (2004, p. 20) posits that like other higher psychological functions such as thinking and speaking, our psychological autonomy stems from social interdependence. Therefore, while Holec's perspective on learning autonomy reduces the teacher's role to providing guidance on learning strategies, Little emphasizes that social interactions with both teachers and peers are crucial for the cultivation of learner autonomy. In that sense, Little (1991) describes autonomous learners as those who have the capacity to determine realistic and reachable goals, select appropriate methods and techniques to be used, monitor their own learning process and evaluate the progress of their own learning.

Since Holec's and Little's conceptualization of the concept, learner autonomy has been defined by many researchers. According to Dam (1990), an autonomous learner is characterized as an individual deeply engaged in the social dynamics of learning, actively interpreting new information based on their existing and distinct knowledge base. Similarly, Gharti (2019) states that learning autonomy refers to students taking the initiative to learn or complete tasks independently, without relying on direct instruction.

Autonomous learners have some distinct features. Firstly, they typically exhibit intrinsic motivation as they feel a strong sense of control over their decision-making processes (Ushioda, 1996, p. 2). They willingly assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Doyal & Gough, 1991). In that sense, the idea of learners' independence from teachers can be associated with the concept of self-regulated learning. As per Zimmerman (1989, p. 329), self-regulated students take personal initiative and oversee their own endeavours to gain knowledge and skills rather than depending solely on teachers, parents or other instructional agents. However, whereas self-regulated learning primarily focuses on managing the internal processes of the learner, learner autonomy encompasses efforts to both shape and manage the external reality (Holec, 1981; Lewis & Vialleton, 2011).

Considering the significant role autonomy plays in the process of learning, fostering learner autonomy is another domain that has been attracting attention recently. It requires the process of guiding learners towards increased independence in their learning journey. Dickinson (1992, p. 330) outlines six strategies for teachers to promote greater learner independence in language learning: (i) They endorse independence in learning by expressing approval as teachers and encouraging students to embrace autonomy. (ii) They build learners' confidence in their ability to learn independently by providing them with successful experiences in self-directed learning. (iii) They provide opportunities for learners to exercise their autonomy. (iv) They assist learners in developing learning strategies to facilitate their independent learning. (v) They enhance learners' awareness of language as a system, enabling them to comprehend various



learning techniques and grasp enough grammar to navigate simple reference materials. (vi) They equip learners with insights into language learning processes, providing them with a greater awareness of what to anticipate during their language learning endeavours and how to address challenges that may impede their progress. On the other hand, according to Yan (2012), the role of teachers in learner autonomy includes acting as an organizer, facilitator and counsellor.

Learner autonomy is a concept that has been studied for over 50 years. However, with the technological advancements accompanied by its difficulties, autonomy has become even more important. Ribbe and Bezanilla (2013) underlie those students engaged in distance education encounter unique challenges. Similarly, Hagel and Shaw (2006, p. 285) indicate that off-campus learners must now shoulder greater responsibility for their educational journey, necessitating a heightened level of motivation. Hence, effective digital learners are characterized by their proactive approach, autonomy and willingness to take initiative in both their learning endeavours and academic outcomes (Borges, 2007, p. 5). In this context, the learner assumes a central role in driving the learning process forward. Therefore, it is possible to say that learner autonomy plays a pivotal role in distance education by empowering students to take ownership of their own learning, fostering self-motivation and self-regulation. In the absence of direct supervision, the ability of students to autonomously manage their studies enables them to adapt flexibly to diverse learning environments and optimize their educational outcomes.

At the university level, the cultivation of learner autonomy is not merely a pedagogical trend but a vital aspect of preparing students for the complexities of the modern world. In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement and ever-evolving societal needs, the ability to navigate a vast sea of information, think critically and adapt to new challenges is indispensable. Hence, attending university necessitates students to develop autonomy in their learning (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001). Considering that one of the objectives of higher education is to empower students to cultivate the skills and characteristics necessary for lifelong learning, the capacity to evaluate the extent of a learner's autonomy and to foster the progression of autonomous learning becomes crucial for both students and their instructors (Scott et al., 2015). In fact, university educators often hold the belief that students in higher education should distinguish themselves from younger students by actively driving their own educational pursuits within the university setting (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Thomas et al., 2015). Consequently, universities are increasingly recognizing the imperative of nurturing learner autonomy to equip students with the skills and mindset necessary for success beyond the classroom.

In the context of higher education for distance learning in Türkiye, there exists a pressing need to address the concept of learner autonomy. As distance education continues to gain prominence, especially in the wake of global events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and national occurrences such as February 2023 earthquake hitting the country, remote learning solutions turn out to be necessary, making it necessary to explore the role of learner autonomy in this setting. However, existing literature in Türkiye often focuses on learner autonomy in language learning settings (Balçıklı, 2008; Ekinci, 2016; Erbil Tursun, 2012; Gömleksiz & Bozpolat, 2012; Karasu & Sarı, 2019). Likewise, there is a rich body of international literature focusing on autonomy in language learning settings (Joshi, 2011; Little, 2007; 2022; Liu, 2015; Najeeb, 2013). This leaves a notable gap in understanding the perspectives and experiences of university students regarding their autonomy in learning in different fields. In this context, the current study aims at investigating university students' perceptions and experiences of learner autonomy during online education. Given the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, technological access disparities and varying levels of prior educational experiences among

Turkish university students, investigating their perspectives on learner autonomy can provide valuable insights for designing more effective distance learning programs tailored to their needs. This study is expected to shed light on the challenges which students face in taking ownership of their learning process, the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges, and the impact of autonomy on their academic success and satisfaction. By addressing this gap in the literature, this study can contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of learner autonomy in Turkish higher education distance learning contexts, ultimately informing the development of more inclusive and student-centered educational practices.

Within this framework, we sought for answers for the following research questions in this study:

1. What are the experiences of university students regarding online education?
2. What are the experiences of university students regarding learner autonomy during online education?
3. What are the perceptions of university students regarding the ways to foster learner autonomy during online education?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study aims at analysing the experiences of university students regarding learner autonomy during online education. In line with the study purpose, we employed a qualitative research design. Among qualitative research methods, we adopted the interpretative phenomenological method. In the interpretative phenomenological method, researchers aim to understand, interpret and analyse participants' views on a specific subject depending on the context (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In this process of interpretation, they establish cognitive and emotional connections with the participants, which enables a better interpretation of the phenomena (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

2.2. Study Group

We employed purposeful and maximum diversity sampling methods to determine the study group. Purposeful sampling involves selecting participants with a specific aim to better understand the research problem and research questions (Creswell, 2017). With maximum diversity sampling, the aim is to achieve maximum variation in the study, increasing the likelihood of reflecting the diversity of participants, differences and different perspectives in the findings (Creswell, 2020). In this study, the primary inclusion criterion was having experienced online learning. The second criterion was ensuring diversity among these participants by selecting individuals with different educational backgrounds who would interpret the online learning experience according to their field-specific differences. Accordingly, we gave priority to including participants from various fields to maximize diversity in the study. As a result, the current study group is composed of 16 university students receiving education at a state university in Türkiye in 2022-2023 Academic Year Spring Term. Table 1 below presents the demographic information about the study group.

Table 1. *Demographic information about the study group*

Code	Gender	Age	Department
P1	Female	18	Turkish Language Teaching



P2	Female	19	Elementary Mathematics Teaching
P3	Male	19	English Language Teaching
P4	Female	18	Science Teaching
P5	Male	21	Science Teaching
P6	Female	20	Turkish Language Teaching
P7	Male	18	Elementary Mathematics Teaching
P8	Male	19	English Language Teaching
P9	Male	24	Biology Teaching
P10	Female	19	Physics Teaching
P11	Female	21	Primary Teaching
P12	Male	20	Computer Science Teaching
P13	Female	18	Biology Teaching
P14	Male	19	Computer Science Teaching
P15	Female	21	Elementary Mathematics Teaching
P16	Female	18	Primary Teaching

As is seen in Table 1, the participants were studying different majors at university. Also, 9 of the participants were female, whereas 7 of them were male. Lastly, the age of the participants varied between 17 and 24.

2.3. Data Collection Tool

In qualitative research, interviews are one of the most important tools used to gain an in-depth understanding of human perceptions, feelings and experiences (Merriam, 2018). In this study, we developed a semi-structured interview form to gather information about university students' perspective and experiences of learner autonomy during online education. To develop the interview form, we first reviewed the relevant literature thoroughly and worked with two field experts collaboratively to create a draft interview form. We revised the first draft form further based on the feedback from three experts in the fields of distance education and learner autonomy. Initially, the draft interview form included 13 questions, which was then reduced to eight questions with follow-up questions based on expert opinions. Thus, the form consisted of two sections. The first section included demographic variables related to the participant,

along with information about the date, medium/location of the interview and content related to the research. The second section contained main and follow-up interview questions reflecting the essence of the research.

Before fieldwork for the research began, we conducted pilot interviews with two university students. In qualitative research, pilot studies are conducted to ensure that interview questions are understandable to participants and accurately reflect the problem to the desired extent. Based on the pilot interviews conducted in this context, we made minor adjustments to the interview form to enhance the clarity of its content. Then we finalized the semi-structured interview form to be used as the data collection tool (see Appendix-1).

2.4. Data Collection Process

We collected the study data through interviews conducted with the study participants. In order to conduct interviews with the participants, we obtained necessary permissions to ensure that the research adhered to ethical processes. In accordance with these permissions, we conducted the interviews both face-to-face and over Zoom. The participants decided to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. In this line, we provided the participants with the information about the study before starting the interviews. We also informed them that they could stop the interview any time they wanted and that their identities would be coded (e.g., P1, P2, etc.) with privacy principles for confidentiality.

2.5. Data Analysis

We employed content analysis to analyse the study data in depth. Content analysis is the process of interpreting and conveying data within the context of the research (Merriam, 2009). In this process, we firstly organized the data using the MAXQDA program. Then, following the perspective of Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), we conducted the data analysis process as a three-stage procedure: (1) Data Condensation: We identified condensations of contextual meaning in the study data. (2) Coding: We coded these condensations. (3) Categorization: We categorized codes under common themes through an inductive method.

2.6. Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, researchers can employ various methods to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, confirming whether the data obtained from the research are accurately interpreted. In this study, we adopted the perspective of Merriam (2013) to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. In this context, we applied both internal and external validity practices as well as reliability standards. Regarding internal validity, after we transcribed the data obtained from the participants, we sent the transcripts to the participants for confirmation. Participants were asked to confirm whether the transcribed data accurately represented their perspectives. Any discrepancies or modifications requested by the participants were accommodated accordingly. Furthermore, the consistency of responses to the questions also confirmed that the intended questions were understood in the same context by the participants. Through these processes, the internal validity (credibility) of the research findings was enhanced by measuring their compatibility with the external world. Indeed, according to Miles and Huberman (2015), validity is also a strategy to establish alignment between the findings and the external world.

In terms of external validity of the study, we devised a strategy to ensure the transferability and generalizability of the study to different contexts. This strategy involves presenting participants' views in the form of raw data through quotations while reporting the study findings, thereby providing the reader with the opportunity to interpret the content within the scientific context presented. In the findings section where raw data is presented along with the



characteristics of the research group, the reader can independently interpret the content without relying solely on the researcher's interpretation. This opportunity enhances the external validity (transferability) of the research.

In terms of the reliability of the study, the research findings were analyzed by two different researchers using the raw data, and the consistency between these two analyses confirmed objective evaluations related to the research. Indeed, according to Gibbs (2007), reliability in qualitative research involves evaluating the research findings by different researchers to confirm the objectivity of the researcher's approach and the consistency in the study. Additionally, the researcher serves as a reliable tool for analyzing the data, both due to their knowledge of the research literature and their in-depth understanding developed within the fieldwork.

3. Findings

This section of the study presents the findings of the study which aimed at analysing university students' experiences of learner autonomy during the online education process. The study findings are categorized into three main sections: (1) Findings regarding university students' experiences of online education, (2) Findings regarding university students' experiences of learner autonomy in online education, and (3) Findings regarding university students' perceptions of ways to enhance learner autonomy in online education. The flow of the findings is designed based on the clusters of codes, subthemes and themes, which were derived from the responses of university students to the interview questions.

3.1. Findings Regarding University Students' Experiences and Perceptions of Online Education

University students' views on online learning experiences are gathered under one theme and three subthemes. The theme, online education experience, includes three subthemes, which are (1) advantages of online education, (2) disadvantages of online education, and (3) factors affecting the efficiency of online education. Table 2 below presents the related findings.

Table 2. *Findings about the experiences of university students regarding online education experience*

Theme	Subtheme	Code
Online Education Experience	Advantages of Online Education	Flexibility of time
		Flexibility of place
		Preventing waste of time and money
		Variety of teaching materials
		Sustainable green education
	Disadvantages of Online Education	Technological problems
		Difficulties faced during assessment and evaluation
		Lack of concentration
		Social isolation and lack of social interaction
		Design of the educational content

Factors Affecting the Efficiency of Online Education	Class interaction and participation
	Accessibility and flexibility
	Technological infrastructure

As is seen in Table 2, university students think online education is advantageous in terms of time and location flexibility, minimizing waste of time, reducing the cost of education and providing variety in instructional materials. Some of the views on the subject are as follows:

“Firstly, the home environment has always been my favourite. Therefore, attending classes from home was enjoyable for me. I could also easily attend classes when I was sick. Additionally, my expenses for accommodation and transportation were minimized. And having more time for myself due to the time saved during commuting was a bonus.” (P12)

“I believe that besides many advantages of online education, it also creates an environmental advantage. For example, my car runs on gasoline, so when I attend online classes instead of face-to-face ones, I reduce my carbon footprint by at least 70 km per day. This not only reduces my personal expenses but also makes me feel like I am protecting the environment and the world. I wish all theoretical courses that don't require practical application were always online.” (P9)

“Sometimes in face-to-face classes, I couldn't ask something about the topics I didn't understand; I used to feel embarrassed. But in online classes, sometimes our instructors record the lectures at their own discretion, and in some classes, I recorded them myself. This way, I can review and listen to the parts I didn't understand again, and I understand better. This is a huge advantage for me. Moreover, I encounter many interactive learning materials. Compared to face-to-face learning, it offers us richer learning material and variety.”

According to the participants, online education has disadvantages as well as advantages. These include problems with technological infrastructure, students' concentration, and social isolation and lack of communication as well as difficulties encountered in the assessment and evaluation of the learning experience. Related opinions are as follows:

“I am a person who spends a certain part of the day on the computer. But when distance education came into the picture, I started to spend almost all of my day on the computer. As much fun as this was, after a certain time, it started to feel like a necessity to be in front of the computer. No matter how much I loved being at home, this situation caused a social deficiency in me and the lessons started to tire me more and more over time. As far as I know, this situation is now called “Zoom fatigue” and I think I have experienced it.” (P16)

“I sometimes had internet problems in online education. There were times when my computer froze or the power went out. This created a problem for me to focus on the lesson. I was also worried that it would break again at any moment and that it would coincide with a moment when the lecturer was asking me a question.” (P3)

“When I attend class at home, there are many distractions. Knowing the home environment, there are people ringing the bell, my brother interacting with me from time to time, and sometimes I turn off my camera and go and take care of other things at home take me away from the learning environment. Rules in online classes

are not as strict as physical classrooms, which requires struggling with many distractions.” (P12)

P8 claimed that the design of the educational content still needs to be improved and that they used learning materials more richly in traditional, face-to-face education and therefore the effectiveness of online education experiences was weak. On the other hand, P2 stated that the way the instructors used technological teaching materials in online education attracted their attention more and that they learned better because they could discuss the subject with their friends on the online platform. The relevant opinion of P2 is as follows:

“I think the fact that the lecturers occasionally showed various interactive lecture videos in our online course and included very valuable lecturers from other universities live in our course enriched our lessons even more. In face-to-face education, it is impossible to include a lecturer from another university, but in online class, even a lecturer friend of our lecturer from the USA participated in our lesson and it was a great lesson.” (P2)

The views of P5 on accessibility and flexibility draws attention to the effectiveness of online education.

“I accessed many resources with off-campus access to the remote libraries provided by the university. I also attended the lectures with my computer. Although there were occasional internet cut-offs, I cannot say that I had problems. On the contrary, the online learning experience enabled me to access many databases and learn quickly by accessing the off-campus library immediately. If it was face-to-face, we would forget even what we would look for if we left the class and went to Google or online databases to look at the system. I can say that online learning created such ease of access, access to a rich knowledge base and learning flexibility for me.” (P5)

3.2. Findings Regarding University Students’ Experiences of Learner Autonomy in Online Education

University students’ views on online learning experiences are gathered under three themes and six subthemes in total. These themes, created by classifying the codes and sub-themes, include (1) planning, (2) receiving support and (3) motivation. Table 3 below presents the related findings.

Table 3. *Findings about the experiences of university students regarding learner autonomy*

Theme	Subtheme	Code	
Planning	Controlling the Learning Process	Identifying learning objectives	
		Deciding on learning pace	
		Time management	
		Self-discipline	
	Determining Strategies	Learning	Doing research efficiently
			Taking notes and summarizing
		Conducting groupwork	
		Support from friends	

Receiving Support	Individual Support	Support from family
		Support from teachers
		Online library resources
		Class materials
		Institutional Support
Motivation	Source of Motivation	Intrinsic motivation
		External motivation
	Challenges of Motivation	Loss of motivation
		Distracting factors

As is seen in Table 3, university students' views on planning their online education are related to controlling the learning process and determining learning strategies. The online learning experience provides students with autonomy in setting learning goals and pace as well as managing time. The opinions on the subject are as follows:

“My experience of controlling my learning process in online education has been a truly transformational experience for me. One thing I always struggled with in my student life was to clarify my learning goals and identify appropriate strategies to achieve them. However, with online education, I gained a great deal of freedom and flexibility in this regard. I also think my study discipline has improved.” (P10)

“At first, taking online courses was a learning challenge for me. But over time, I started to set learning goals for myself and adjust my learning pace. One day, I tried to put my goals in writing and create a plan. Being in complete control of your time is both an advantage and a disadvantage. But controlling and managing it motivates you in an incredible way. In the process, I proceeded in accordance with my learning pace within my own plan, and when I maintained my study discipline and followed my planning, I realized that online learning was more effective for me than traditional learning in many aspects.” (P7)

“Time management is a new area for me. Before, I had difficulty in planning when to allocate time for studying and I often had difficulty catching up with many things at the last minute. However, thanks to online education, I have learned to use my time more efficiently so that I can focus better on my lessons. By creating a daily routine, I divided my studying time into certain hours, I watch replays whenever I want, I think it is more efficient and self-discipline-enhancing to create and implement your own study plan yourself.” (P15)

The views of the participants show that online learning provides autonomy in planning such as the opportunity to conduct research to determine learning strategies, the ease of taking notes and summarizing for online learning, and more frequent group work and interaction. Various participant opinions on the subject are as follows:

“...Taking notes while watching the lecture videos and summarizing these notes later helped me understand the topics better and retain them in my memory longer.” (P8)

“Through online platforms, we can communicate effectively with my friends and discuss topics together. In this way, being exposed to different perspectives and finding solutions together strengthened my learning experience. Group work helped me learn different things about setting my learning goals and developing my learning strategies.” (P11)

“...Having access to online library resources and being able to conduct more detailed research using various digital tools was a great advantage in my learning process. I think online courses have also been a driving force for us to use technology more effectively in education.” (P2)

Under the theme of receiving support, the subthemes of individual and institutional support emerged based on the views of the participants. One of the participants, P3, stated that they collaborated more with their classmates in online courses, resource sharing was active and they had access to richer resources, and family support for the technological infrastructure related to the online course facilitated the process. P13 gave similar answers to the related questions and also stated that online learning was an important opportunity to access their professors. She stated that they could ask their questions comfortably after the lesson because everything was online and that it created a great advantage in terms of accessibility. The opinions of the participants in the context of the institutional support sub-theme are as follows:

“...The extensive digital library provided by our university has provided an excellent resource to deepen my research and support course materials. Thanks to these resources, I can easily access a variety of academic resources and further enrich my learning experience.” (P6)

“...The course materials carefully prepared by our professors increased the impact on my learning process and enabled me to learn more deeply. Moreover, there were online library resources. In addition, the special course materials and educational tools provided by our university enriched my learning experience even more. Thanks to these resources, I was able to prepare better for the lessons. I think online learning has increased the diversity in these subjects and expanded the boundaries.” (P14)

The participants expressed various opinions about the effect of online learning on their learning motivation. The view of P12, one of the participants who drew attention to the emphasis on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation sources, is as follows:

“In the process of taking online courses, it motivated me to create a culture to discuss many topics interactively with our classmates, to create a desire to learn and learn extra information about some of the topics discussed by saying ‘Oh, I didn’t know it exactly like this’. In our normal classes, there was a rush to go home as soon as the class was over, we would feel tired. However, since there is no time and transportation problem, I can take my coffee in my hand and learn extra things from my friends about the course on online platforms. This both motivates me for the lesson and makes me learn with pleasure.” (P12)

While there are opinions that online learning is a source of motivation, there are also opinions that it distracts and reduces learning motivation. P6 said, “It can sometimes be difficult to deal with distracting factors in the online learning process. Especially in the home environment, many external factors can distract me. Factors such as housework, family

members' voices, or social media can prevent me from focusing on the lessons." P6 drew attention to the distractions at home, while P3 said, "Studying at home may not provide the same discipline as in a normal classroom environment. While listening to the lesson, I can take care of the phone, which you cannot do in the classroom. This affects my motivation negatively and sometimes I have difficulty focusing on the lessons." Similarly, P3 stated that there may be distractions and that learning motivation is low in online learning.

3.3. Findings Regarding University Students' Perceptions of Ways to Foster Learner Autonomy in Online Education

University students' views on ways to foster learner autonomy in online education are gathered under one theme and two subthemes. The theme, ways to support and improve learner autonomy in online education, includes two subthemes, which are (1) strategies for providing information and (2) strategies for increasing motivation. Table 4 below presents the related findings.

Table 4. *Findings about the perceptions of university students regarding the ways to foster learner autonomy in online education*

Theme	Subtheme	Code
Ways to Support and Improve Learner Autonomy in Online Education	Strategies for Providing Information	Providing information about learner autonomy
		Providing information about online education
	Strategies for Increasing Motivation	Developing an effective guidance service
		Sharing good examples
		Keeping a learning diary

As is seen in Table 4, university students think that their universities should develop strategies to inform them about online education and learner autonomy. The relevant opinion of P7 on this issue is as follows:

"I think our university should produce content or provide information that will teach us the user interface of online education platforms and provide guidance so that we can better control our online learning process, at least improve ourselves in terms of access to resources and online learning strategies. I think managing our online education process is also a subject that requires skill." (P7)

The participants' suggestions for improving learner autonomy in online learning showed that they needed an effective guidance service, sharing good examples on the subject would inspire them and encourage their learning, and keeping a learning diary would also provide motivation to improve their learner autonomy.

4. Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

The aim of this study is to investigate university students' opinions about learner autonomy during the online education process at a university in Ankara in 2022-2023 Academic Year Spring Term.

4.1. Discussion of Key Findings

In this study, we conducted content analysis for the study data and concluded that the participants' opinions on learner autonomy are gathered under five themes. These themes can be listed as online education experience, planning, receiving support, motivation, and ways to support and improve learner autonomy. The first theme, online education experience, includes three sub-themes, which are advantages of online education, disadvantages of online education and factors affecting the efficiency of online education. The study findings show that university students think online education has both advantages and disadvantages, while there are some factors that influence the efficiency of online education. According to this finding, university students think that advantages of online education include flexibility in time and space, prevention of waste of time and money, and a chance to be greener in terms of environmental sustainability. On the other hand, disadvantages include technological problems, lack of social interaction, lack of motivation and difficulties in assessment and evaluation. This finding complies with previous study findings in the literature (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Malik & Rana, 2020; Moise et al., 2021; Sadeghi, 2019; Simonova, Faltynkova & Kostolanyova, 2021). Aiming to compare the advantages and disadvantages of online education, these studies came up with similar results as to online education. According to current study findings, university students experience both advantages and disadvantages during online education, which all affect the effectiveness of the process. This may be because online education is a multi-faceted process with various benefits and drawbacks which arise during the learning process.

Also, at the end of the content analysis emerged three themes - planning, receiving support and motivation – as to university students' opinions regarding autonomy during online education. The theme of planning includes two sub-themes controlling the learning process and determining the learning strategies. The second theme, receiving support, includes individual support and institutional support. The third theme, motivation, includes two sub-themes, sources of motivation and challenges of motivation. This finding is line with the results of previous studies in the related literature. Similar to the current study, Baru and others (2020) concluded that students had more control over their learning in online education. Similarly, many studies in the literature show that online education requires students to adopt autonomy in their learning journey, especially at higher education (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001; Octaberlina & Afif, 2021). Additionally, similar to the current study finding, some other studies in the literature show that motivation and self-discipline can be a challenge for students in online education (Adam et al., 2023), whereas they are motivated to learn when they have more control over their learning (Huand & Liaw, 2007). The current study findings show that online learning urges students to learn how to be an autonomous learner although motivation might arise as a difficulty in the process for some students and a strength for others. This may result from the differences in personality. Those who are self-disciplined might find online learning as an opportunity to practice autonomy, whereas those who lack self-discipline suffer from lack of motivation.

Lastly, there emerged a theme as to fostering autonomy in online learning. This theme, ways to support and improve learner autonomy, includes two sub-themes of strategies to provide information and increase motivation. According to this finding, students believe that it is possible to improve learner autonomy through interventions targeted at being informed and motivated. This study finding reinforces previous studies in the literature. In line with the current study findings, Eneau and Develotte (2012) concluded in their study that difficulties in online education as to autonomy can be overcome through social interaction and support from others. Likewise, Lee, Pate and Cozart (2015) state that university students' autonomy can be supported via motivation-enhancing practices. According to the current study finding, university students think that they can improve their level of autonomy in online education but

not alone. They need support from their friends, family members, instructors and institutions to enhance motivation and autonomy. This might be because the learning process can be tough and complex at times, which can make students feel lost. That's why, they may be feeling that they need a guide and support-giver to pave the way to learning.

4.2. Implications for Theory

The exploration of learner autonomy during online education at the higher education level carries significant implications for educational theory. It challenges traditional pedagogical models by emphasizing the learner's active role in shaping their learning experience. This shift aligns closely with constructivist theories, which posit that learning is a dynamic process shaped by learners' interactions with their environment. Moreover, it underscores the importance of socio-cultural theories, highlighting the role of social interactions and collaborative learning experiences in fostering autonomy. Additionally, the integration of technology into educational contexts necessitates a re-evaluation of cognitive theories such as connectivism, which emphasizes the importance of networked learning and digital literacies in today's knowledge landscape. Overall, the exploration of learner autonomy in online higher education enriches educational theory by emphasizing the dynamic interplay between learners, educators, and technology in the construction of knowledge and learning experiences.

4.3. Implications for Policy and Practice

Implications for policy and practice in fostering learner autonomy during online education at the higher education level are multifaceted. Firstly, educational institutions need to integrate learner autonomy as a core component of their curriculum design, providing ample opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning journey. This entails revising existing policies to prioritize flexible learning structures, allowing students to tailor their educational experiences to align with their individual needs and interests. Additionally, policymakers should invest in training programs for educators to enhance their capacity in facilitating autonomous learning environments effectively. Moreover, incorporating digital literacy and self-regulation skills development within the curriculum can empower students to navigate online learning platforms autonomously. Lastly, collaborative efforts between policymakers, educators, and students are crucial for establishing a supportive ecosystem that promotes and sustains learner autonomy in online higher education. By implementing these strategies, institutions can adapt to the evolving landscape of online education and empower students to become self-directed learners equipped for success in the digital age.

5. Limitations

The current study has some limitations. Firstly, the findings of this study are context-bound and cannot be generalized to other settings or populations. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced social desirability bias, where participants may have provided responses that they perceived as favourable. The study's focus on a specific aspect of learner autonomy within online higher education may have overlooked other potentially relevant factors contributing to the phenomenon. Finally, the study's qualitative nature inherently limits the ability to establish causality or determine the directionality of relationships between variables. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings and designing future research endeavours in this area.

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Appendix-1

Learner Autonomy in Online Education Semi-Structured Interview Form

1. What can you say about your online education experience during this period?
2. How much do you think you can control your learning process during online education? Do you feel autonomous?
3. What kind of strategies do you use when setting your learning goals during online education?
4. How do you access learning resources during online education? What difficulties do you encounter in this regard?

5. What kind of motivational resources do you use in online education? What kind of methods do you use to stay motivated during online training?
6. What kind of support do your teachers and educational institution provide you during online education?
7. What kind of initiatives would you like to see taken to support your learning process in online education?
8. What suggestions would you make for developing learner autonomy in online education?