Adopting Self-Directed Learning as an Approach for Enhancing Academic Achievement of University Students

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Abstract

The prevalence of self-directed learning (SDL) has increased significantly, contributing to crucial online learning platforms. SDL is an online learning platform in higher education that has ignited a transformation in the way students and lecturers interact and how they access educational resources. This study explored the use of SDL in higher education contexts to enhance students' academic achievements within the digital realm. The study employed an interpretive qualitative case study approach to explore the influence of SDL on students' learning experiences and their academic achievements. Focus group discussion and reflective essay writing were used to generate data that were thematically analysed. SDL was used to frame the study to explore the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that were used as drivers for adopting SDL to enhance the academic achievements of university students. The study found that SDL significantly enhances students' academic achievements by fostering active engagement, learning autonomy and self-regulation in contemporary higher education contexts. The study also emphasises the contribution of SDL to students' academic achievement, ultimately leading to improved institutional status.

Keywords: *Academic Achievement, Higher Education, Online Learning, Self-Directed Learning, University Students.*

Introduction

The South African higher education system has a new responsibility and challenge in shaping competent students with higher academic achievements to meet the global competency requirements in the world job market. With the rapid global change caused by COVID-19, it is a known fact that online teaching and learning leads to the non-facilitation of meta-cognitive skills, which required educational stakeholders to devise strategies and approaches to increase learning motivation and students' engagement in the learning process. Charokar and Dulloo (2022) and Sun et al. (2023) reported that the traditional instructor-centred teaching-learning approach is predominantly focused on knowledge transfer and acquisition rather than skills in various learning domains. The approach tends to limit the scope to transform the students' abilities to demonstrate skills and apply it to a real-world context (Khalid et al., 2020; Kinsella et al., 2023). Shifting from an instructor-centred teaching-learning approach in higher education contexts highlights the motives towards increasing a sense of reliance and active engagement to the students. Among the student-centric approaches in higher education contexts, the preferable approach for both instructors and students was mentioned in Tekkol and Demirel (2018) to be a self-directed learning (SDL) approach. SDL is an approach that focuses on increasing a sense of student autonomy (Mncube & Maphalala, 2023). Literature has revealed that SDL is the learning approach that places emphasis on students' accountability and responsibility (Morris, 2024; Singaram et al., 2022). Drawing from the millennium lifestyle and digital world living experiences, most students in higher education institutions use technology values to plan and shape their professions, and to explore options for their career choices. SDL is a learning approach that increases self-guidance and independence in students' decision-making (Mthembu & Gachie, 2024; Olivier & Wentworth, 2021). Hence, by leading their own learning and having a diverse choice of learning resources, students in higher education institutions are capable of navigating from institutional-specific recourse to the wide range of options of internet resources of their choice.

In the South African higher education context, digital accessibility has become a paramount consideration because of the nature and characteristics of students, which are influenced by their geographical location, infrastructure, social milieu and academic support they receive (Doo et al., 2023; Khalid et al., 2020). In

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connection to that, SDL has become a crucial approach for teaching and learning in South African universities because the approach plays an essential role in helping institutions to produce holistic and skilled graduates (Mahlaba, 2020). Recently, scholars such as Adigun et al. (2024) and Syafiqurrakhman et al. (2024) concurred by saying that learning outside the formal learning environment such as schools and universities can result in the development of feelings of loneliness and isolation, which may negatively affect students' academic achievement.

Lack of face-to-face interaction between the teacher and students was also mentioned as a source of poor academic motivation and performance (Bonk & Lee, 2017; Khiat, 2017). Psychologists such as Hua et al. (2023) and Tekkol and Demirel (2018) asserted that online learning increases the pressure and workload on students' working memory as they are exposed to multiple media at the same time. Given the current state of literature, this study aims to explore the attractiveness of SDL as an approach for enhancing students' academic achievements in South African universities. The study aims to address the current gaps in literature reporting on the lack of interaction between the teacher and students in a formal learning context, which leads to poor academic achievement. Thus, the study provides a practical recommendation for addressing the issue.

Literature Review

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) was introduced in the 1980s by two psychologists known as Deci and Ryan. The theory stipulates three fundamental psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In this theory, people's motivation is the central concern. According to Deci et al. (2013), SDT suggests a framework for the studies on students' learning motivation, personality and academic achievements. This study maintains that this theory is not only for framing learning motivation and academic achievements but also for defining a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors for academic performance. Contextually, SDT also focuses on cultural and social aspects (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004), while examining how these two aspects facilitate students' sense of volition, initiatives and well-being.

In educational contexts, SDT enhances students' autonomy, competence and relatedness by fostering the high-quality forms of engagement in their learning programmes (Bonk & Lee, 2017; Sun et al., 2023). Thus, the three psychological needs of SDT (autonomy, competence and relatedness) provide a crucial perspective for knowledge creation on adopting SDL as an approach for enhancing students' academic achievements in a selected South African university. With the lens of SDT theory, the current study maintains that the more students experience learning autonomously, the more their motivation improves, which leads to their active engagement in the learning process. As reported by Hua et al. (2023) that SDT is purposeful, influential active learning that produces more satisfactory academic achievements. Hence, this study sustains that satisfaction of strong autonomy increases students' academic achievements as it improves their motivation to continue exploring and solving complex academic problems.

The Ascendency of Self-Directed Learning (Sdl) in Improving Academic Achievement

Drawing from international literature, Charokar and Dulloo (2022) and Khalid et al. (2020) mentioned that SDL is, among other qualities, a good learning approach for academic performance. The approach intends to not only equip students with classroom skills, but also to engage them in active practices. The literature also affirms that SDL improves students' personal traits, such as conscientiousness, which significantly impacts their academic achievements (Singaram et al., 2022; Tekkol & Demirel, 2018). In essence, SDL pertains to students' abilities, motivation and attitudes that carry substantial weight in shaping their learning and their academic achievements. This study concurs that the SDL as a student-centric learning approach holds noteworthy, compelling motives for improving students' academic achievements by conferring authority to own their learning processes.

Adigun et al. (2024) and Sun et al. (2023) stated that SDL enables students to establish educational goals and help them to control their learning environment and resources to meet their distinct learning needs. Drawing from online learning platforms, SDL serves as a vessel for nurturing critical knowledge and skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and stress management (Hua et al., 2023; Mthembu & Gachie, 2024). It fosters a multifaceted skill required for the knowledge on contemporary issues that impact society and educational trajectories. Khiat (2017) and Olivier and Wentworth (2021) revealed that in the online learning context, SDL excels in stimulating students' engagement and active participation in learning processes. This study posited that SDL is a learning approach that critically integrates learning with students' motivation through multiple sources of information. Current research on SDL emphasises that collaboration and autonomy in the learning environment validate the application of technology in education, research as well as community in general (Mncube & Maphalala, 2023; Syafiqurrakhman et al., 2024). Therefore, SDL stipulates a higher range of autonomy and adaptability that is a persuasive catalyst for encouraging learning motivation and active engagement. As a result, the approach serves as a drive for successful academic achievements.

Interrelation Between Self-Determination Theory and Self-Directed Learning on Improving Academic Achievements

Some scholars have pointed out the interrelation between the SDT and SDL approaches on improving academic achievements. They accompany both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learning that influence deep understanding and application of knowledge in real-world contexts (Morris, 2024; Olivier & Wentworth, 2021). SDT stipulates satisfaction of competence to students, which increases their active participation on online learning platforms. Thus, with the SDL learning approach, students are nurtured with a sense of achievement during the learning process. According to Bonk and Lee (2017) and Charokar and Dulloo (2022), both SDT and SDL specify the responsibilities for learning autonomy, whereby students are entitled to the mandate to select, manage and assess their own learning programmes.

SDT and SDL were reported to allow students to analyse their learning needs, demonstrate their learning objectives and identify both contextual and material resources for their learning with greater independence (Hua et al., 2023; Khiat, 2017). Independence traits have been mentioned in Tekkol and Demirel (2018) as one of the important psychological structures for learning outcomes evaluation. It was also mentioned to be the best strategy for choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies that guide students to take initiative with or without the help of others. Sun et al. (2023) also affirmed that independence in learning emphasises the role of intrinsic motivation and determination of students' efforts to achieve their academic goals.

In fact, both SDT and SDL demonstrate the principle of self-learning, whereby the students can learn through their own reactions and situations. Thus, the learning process that is influenced by these two components is known as autonomous learning, in which students assume their primary responsibilities and plan their learning from the beginning to the end. Khalid et al. (2020) and Mahlaba (2020) mentioned that both SDT and SDL view students as managers of their own learning process and that they take full responsibility of their learning outcomes. In the context of this study, both SDT and SDL are viewed as crucial components in enhancing students' academic achievements because they gradually empower students with a great deal of independence in setting their learning goals and making decisions on how to approach the learning processes.

SDT and SDL jointly provide this study with theoretical and methodological contributions in adopting SDL as an approach for enhancing the academic achievements of university students. SDT stipulates the impact of its three psychological needs, which support SDL as learning approach. SDL provides satisfaction of autonomy and inspires students' motivation towards their academic achievements. Hence, together, these two components guided the authors in exploring the facilitative role of SDL as learning approach for enhancing academic achievements.

Research Questions

- What are the motivations for adopting self-directed learning (SDL) as an approach to enhance academic achievement?

- How does adopting self-directed learning (SDL) influence academic achievements?

Methodology

Research methodology designates the techniques used to generate data and the procedures employed to identify and analyse information regarding a specific research problem (Snyder, 2019). The methodology provides the details that researchers employ in their research study to ensure its reliability and validity (Leavy, 2022). It includes all the important components of research studies, such as research approach and design, data collection methods and data analysis methods. Research methodology was explained in (authors, 2024) as a logical and systematic plan of explaining the whole research process.

Research Paradigm, Approach and Design

The interpretive paradigm is a worldview that is concerned with understanding the world from multiple perspectives. Interpretivist researchers assume that "reality is subjective, multiple and socially constructed" (Padgett, 2016, p. 20). The qualitative research approach describes the research problem by using words, not numbers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This approach intentionally concerns describing the understanding of phenomena through participants' experiences in the research context. A qualitative case study is a research design that explores specific phenomena through diverse sources of data and perceptions and experiences of participants. It intends to reveal multiple aspects of researched issues within the real-time context (author et al., 2024).

Selection of Research Participants and Context

The research context and participants of the study were selected using purposive and convenient sampling methods. We purposely selected the research site (South African university) and eight participants (two lecturers and six students) because they were easy and convenient to access. Flick (2019) described purposive and convenience sampling as non-probability sampling in which participants are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the research study. They are also known as availability sampling methods (author, 2022). Both participants and research contexts were beneficial as they provided the current study with denser information regarding the researched issue. The participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Participant pseudonym	Position	Age (years)	Gender
Lecturer 1	Lecturer	35–40	Female
Lecturer 2	Lecturer	45–50	Male
Student 1	Honours student	20–30	Female
Student 2	Honours student	20–35	Male
Student 3	Master's student	30–40	Female
Student 4	Master's student	30–40	Male
Student 5	PhD student	35–45	Female
Student 6	PhD student	35–45	Male

Data Generation Techniques

Data generation is a process in which researchers plan and implement techniques to gather information regarding the research issue (Flick, 2019). In the qualitative approach, the common techniques to generate data include focus group discussions, interviews, observation and diverse visual methods such as drawing, collage-making and photo-voice. This study employed two data generation methods, namely focus group discussion and reflective essay writing. Focus group discussion is a method of generating data that are flexible and loose as participants are allowed to share their perspectives freely (author, 2018). Some research has asserted that focus group discussion is a cheap and quick method for obtaining valuable data, as all participants have opportunities to share ideas and produce dense information on researched issues (Scheelbeek et al., 2020). As acknowledged earlier, the participants were chosen due to their easy accessibility, proximity, their willingness and availability to participate in the study. Thus, all the participants (lecturers and students) were engaged in focus group discussions. The timeframe for each focus group discussion was between 15 and 30 minutes. After the focus group discussion sessions, participants were asked to write their reflective essays regarding the research issue and its impact on the students' academic performance. Reflective essay writing was a maximum of two pages, in which each participant was asked to reflect on how SDL can be employed as an approach to enhance students' academic achievements.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was employed to analyse data generated from the focus group discussion sessions and reflective-writing essays. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), thematic analysis highlights identifying, organising and interpreting patterns (themes) in the data generated (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This data analysis method is often used in qualitative studies to explore the explicit and implicit meaning within the data (Braun et al., 2023). Hence, this study utilised this analysis method to make sense of the data generated on participants' perspectives regarding SDL as an approach to enhance students' academic achievements. Deductive reasoning allowed us to identify codes in the data and to allocate them into two main themes that are used as an umbrella for the presentation of the findings of the study.

Findings

This section presents the learning experiences, thoughts and perspectives of participants on the process of adopting SDL as an approach for enhancing the academic achievement of university students. The findings of the study are presented in the following themes that emerged from the data.

Motivations for Adopting Self-Directed Learning

This theme specified the internal and external motivations driving SDL as an approach to enhance the academic achievements of university students. This study found that the academic achievements of university students thrive from both internal and external motivation factors. The SDL approach was mentioned in Charokar and Dulloo (2022) as a crucial component that inspires university students to take full control of their learning processes. Doo et al. (2023) also stated that the SDL learning approach leads to academic success. Findings from this study reveal that there are internal motivation and external motivation that drive SDL to be the best approach for enhancing the academic achievements of university students. Participants' responses affirm that these motivations help both lecturers and administrators to foster a learning environment that is conducive to SDL and improves students' overall academic performance.

Intrinsic Motivations

Intrinsic motivations drive students to engage in certain activities only because of the satisfaction they bring (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Hua et al., 2023). In the context of this study, findings reveal that SDL is a learning approach that gives students a genuine curiosity and interest to learn new concepts. The following excerpts stipulate some intrinsic motivations to support this theme.

"Self-directed learning is more a preferable approach in university contexts because it is more likely to engage students in self-regulated learning habits … in return, they allow students to invest more time in exploring and mastering new concepts." (Lecturer 2)

"University students often desire independence and personal control over their learning journey; therefore, with SDL, our students become responsible with tailoring their learning processes." (Lecturer 1)

This opinion was supported by students who mentioned that the sense of autonomy received from SDL empowers them to take full ownership of their academic journey. Students commented as follows.

"As postgraduate student, I believe passion for study comes from within self-concept; therefore, with freedom, we get from this approach, we are able to set our own goals and work towards them. Such autonomy increases our commitment and responsibility in our education." (Student 5)

"Curiosity towards the autonomous makes self-directed learning a suitable approach for us to be more focused on higher academic achievements." (Student 6)

"For me, the crucial intrinsic motivator for adopting self-directed learning is the growth of our self-efficacy and confidence in learning process." (Student 3)

"True! Self-directed learning provides us with high self-efficacy and confidence when facing complex challenges and ability to tackle them independently." (Student 1)

Research by Adigun et al. (2024) and Mahlaba (2020) also mentioned that students who manage their learning are more likely to take on challenging tasks, persevere in difficult situations and achieve higher academic results. This study also found that the SDL approach provides university students with confidence that significantly impacts on their abilities to manage academic pressures and excel in their academic journeys. Hence, another intrinsic motivation that was mentioned by the participants is personal goal-orientation. Findings reveal that students are internally motivated with a clear vision of their academic and career aspirations. This opinion was supported by the participants as follows:

"Self-directed learning helps us to set clear and specific achievable goals and craft actionable plans to accomplish them." (Student 2)

Indeed, clear academic goals provide university students with a sense of purpose, commitment and responsibility to stay focused and organised (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Khalid et al., 2020). These internal motivations are crucial for students as they progress through their studies with targeted goals in their academic journeys.

Extrinsic Motivations

Extrinsic motivations come from external sources such as praise, recognitions, social status and grades. This study found that extrinsic motivations play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of SDL and the extent to which it affects university students' academic achievements. Participants' responses support this as follows.

"First and foremost, extrinsic factor to adopt self-directed learning is the desire to achieve higher grades." (Lecturer 2)

"Yaah! That's true, our students are motivated by the desire to achieve good grades. This external motivation drives self-directed learning to be the most crucial approach for them to take full ownership of their learning as a pathway to academic success." (Lecturer 1)

In addition, this study found job market readiness as another external factor that motivates students to adopt SDL. Participants' comments support this as follows:

"Motivation to adopt self-directed learning into university learning is due to the fact that this approach allows us to acquire knowledge and skills that expand our career intentions and increase our employability." (Student 5)

"That's true! Self-directed learning approach improves our academic performances with high-valued competencies to compete in the professional world markets." (Student 6)

Furthermore, this study found that SDL is a preferable learning approach in university contexts because it simplifies workloads.

"Lecturers always encourage independent learning since they are overwhelmed with workloads." (Student 2)

Eventually, this study also found that SDL helps university students to develop a sense of ownership of their academic journey, leading to successful academic achievements. Also, SDL is the approach that allows university students to personalise their learning experiences and makes learning processes more convenient and flexible.

Influences of Self-Directed Learning on Academic Achievements

This theme mainly discusses the effects of adopting SDL as an approach to enhance the academic achievements of university students. During the focus group discussion sessions, the participants' responses indicated that they all believed there is a strong association between SDL and academic achievements. Data from focus group discussions and reflective essay writing reveal that participants believed that SDL appears to be beneficial for the students as they can study while working to support their families. This opinion is supported by the following participants:

"Self-directed learning is the basis of all types of learning; therefore, with this approach, our students are capable of developing various learning motivations due to their individual differences." (Lecturer 1)

"From my understanding, self-directed learning is not only the learning process in which students set their goals, locate and choose the resources to learning, but also the approach that enhances the attributes of our students' personalities." (Lecturer 2)

"This approach significantly impacts our academic achievement because it provides us with higher degree of self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation as well as abilities to face new academic challenges." (Student 1)

"Self-direct learning helps us to improve our self-regulation in overcoming challenges experienced from our living surroundings and within the learning process." (Student 4)

"With self-directed learning, our abilities to encode knowledge and self-reflection are enhanced, which helps us to adjust our learning processes and goals to more advanced levels." (Student 5)

Likewise, adopting SDL to enhance the academic achievements of university students has been mentioned to improve intrinsic learning motivations (Kinsella et al., 2023; Tekkol & Demirel, 2018). This study also found that SDL enriches students with described plans of action to achieve their academic goals. In this regard, participants postulated that adopting SDL as a learning approach not only helps students to acquire new knowledge and skills, but also allows them to apply the learned knowledge to real-world contexts. This claim is supported by the following participants' statements:

"As a postgraduate student, I would like to say that academic achievement and self-directed learning are highly correlated, as SDL is mostly linked to every part of our daily lives." (Student 6)

"Self-directed learning approach enhances and promotes our academic achievements, as this approach allows us to collaborate with other students from different educational contexts globally." (Student 3)

"Self-directed learning and higher education contexts are inseparable and cannot be succeeded or observed independently because this approach is highly associated with life-long learning that helps many students to become self-directed and independent learners." (Student 2)

The effects of adopting SDL to enhance the academic achievements of university students have been discussed by many scholars globally. According to Al-Adwan et al. (2022) and Singaram et al. (2022), SDL is a good learning approach to predict university students' academic achievements. Research by Mthembu and Gachie (2024) and Olivier and Wentworth (2021) supported that SDL has made a significant improvement in university students' academic achievements. Doo et al. (2023) and Kinsella et al. (2023) also revealed that there is a significant relationship between SDL, learning readiness and students' academic achievements. Research by Syafiqurrakhman et al. (2024) and Tekkol and Demirel (2018) indicated that SDL is a necessary learning approach for both undergraduate and postgraduate students for them to become successful graduates. In addition, Mncube and Maphalala (2023) also affirmed that at university level, students seemed to be satisfied with SDL because the approach provides them with characteristics of self-discipline and self-management, and enhances their desire to learn.

Discussion

The study explored the use of the SDL approach to enhance the academic achievement of university students. The study's findings highlight the significant influence of SDL on students' academic achievements. The study also stipulates essential intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drive SDL to be the crucial approach for enhancing the academic achievements of university students in South Africa. As mentioned in Mahlaba (2020) and Mthembu and Gachie (2024), SDL is a proactive approach and has a positive influence on students. This implies that SDL empowers students to manage their learning process and perform better in their learning. In the same manner, this study revealed that SDL plays a crucial role in shaping students' careers and professional aspirations.

More importantly, comments from the participants indicated that SDL has gained significant attention in university contexts due to its potential to foster student autonomy and learning motivation. Conversely, SDL has emerged as an essential approach that empowers university students to take full control of their learning (Adigun et al., 2024; Al-Adwan et al., 2022). Drawing from the South African historical background, this study affirmed that SDL is crucial as it grants all students the ability to set their own goals, monitor their progress and reflect on their academic achievements regardless of their historical backgrounds. Participants noted that SDL improves their self-efficacy, which significantly affects their abilities and resilience in overcoming their academic challenges. Strong self-efficacy is vital for maintaining healthy study habits, work-life balance and fostering a sense of belonging within the learning environment (Singaram et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2023). The body of literature also revealed that SDL improves self-efficacy and significantly impacts students' engagement and their intrinsic motivations (Bonk & Lee, 2017; Kinsella et al., 2023).

In addition, the significant role of SDL was highlighted in Charokar and Dulloo (2022) and Khiat (2017) as a suitable adult learning approach that fosters skills for life-long learning. The study by Doo et al. (2023) also mentioned that SDL increases students' autonomy, reliance and accountability in their academic journey. This is consistent with Syafiqurrakhman et al. (2024), who mentioned that SDL increases interdependence between lecturers and students in university contexts, thus developing mutual trust and respect within the lecturer-student relationship. With that in mind, we argue that SDL necessitates university students to plan, organise and monitor their academic progress while keeping their specific goals in mind. This not only facilitates the development of their metacognitive skills, but also transforms the student's professional capabilities into more purposeful tasks.

Conclusion

This study underscores the usefulness of SDL as an approach to enhance the academic achievements of university students. The findings mentioned that SDL influences positive learning attitudes, confidence and

self-efficacy of students and plays a crucial role in shaping students' professional growth. This study also maintains that SDL is a learning approach in which students take the initiative to identify their learning needs, weaknesses and strengths, while evaluating their own progress. This approach fosters independence and critical thinking among university students as it allows them to personalise their learning experiences based on their goals and interests. This study concluded that by encouraging students to take ownership of their academic journeys, SDL not only enhances problem-solving and management skills to university students, but also promotes life-long learning, making it an essential approach for both academic achievements and professional growth.

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