

Developing Learner Autonomy via Choosing a Person's Educational Pathway

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Abstract: The article examines the correlation between choosing a personal educational pathway and developing learner autonomy. The authors share the opinion that educational pathways and self-directed studies have been getting vital in life-long learning. Thus, pedagogical universities should equip their students with skills of autonomous learners who are able to make well-informed choices about their own education and, in future, can facilitate a similar choice for their prospective schoolchildren.

The study describes the authors' positive experience in increasing students' awareness of responsibility for choosing their personal educational pathways. The survey participants included 421 students who enrolled in the Bachelor's program and the Master's program at H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Ukraine, in 2018 and in 2019. The obtained data indirectly proved the fact that learner autonomy of the 1st Year students was not sufficiently developed and it impeded designing their personal educational pathways. The students of the master's program evinced more mature position in making choices and setting goals. The analysis of the students' motivation demonstrates a certain dynamics towards a more conscious choice of elective components in the academic program and gradual transition from external motivation to instrumental and intrinsic ones. The results of the research show that an appropriate balance between teachers' guidance and students' personal responsibility enhances the process of designing a personal educational pathway.

Keywords: *learner autonomy; personal educational pathway; motivation; goal-setting, self-realization; critical reflection.*

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1. Introduction

The concept of learner's autonomy has been central to innovations introduced into global educational practice in the 20th - 21st centuries. In order to succeed in life-long learning people should become autonomous learners with raised awareness of their needs, ability to set aims and motivation to achieve them, developed skills of analysis and reflection necessary for planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning. Learner autonomy has been widely discussed throughout the world but different theories underpinned numerous definitions suggested by various scholars.

A classical definition was made by H. Holec who postulated that it is the "ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3). D. Little emphasized that "Autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (Little, 1991, p.4) W. Littlewood (1996) explained: "This capacity depends on two main components: ability and willingness" (Littlewood, 1996, p.428).

Jiménez Raya et al. (2007) highlighted the significance of developing learner autonomy in a democratic society: "the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environments, within a vision of education as (inter)personal empowerment and social transformation" (Jiménez et al., 2007, p. 1).

S. Moiseenko (2015) distinguishes the following components in the concept of learner autonomy: psychological (motivation, reflection, self-control and self-correction), methodological (mastering ways and techniques of self-studies), and communicative (ability to discuss problematic issues with teachers and peers).

Z. Solomko (2014) considers learner autonomy in two aspects: as a way of organizing educational process so that it facilitates learners' self-directed studies and as students' ability to take responsibility for their own learning at all of its stages.

I. Zadorozhna (2015) insists that it is necessary to research the way students' autonomous learning is organized, and distinguishes the following four levels of that organization depending on the degree of students' autonomy.

I. Kamynin & N. Tuchina (2017) prove that providing conditions nourishing for the development of learner autonomy is of paramount importance for pedagogical universities that educate future teachers who are going to implement the idea in their professional activities. The scholars supported the idea of D. Little who stressed that "...teachers are more likely

to succeed in promoting learner autonomy if their own education has encouraged them to be autonomous” (Little, 1995, p.180).

Horváthová (2016) emphasizes that “developing autonomy is a lengthy process and its successful implementation depends on the *persistence of the teacher*” (Horváthová, 2016, p.132).

O. Solovova (2008) views autonomy as the basis for creating such learning conditions that enable adult learners choose their own educational pathways proceeding from their real needs and the facilities available in their learning environment. A learner can select what, how and with which teacher to learn as well as how to account for the results of their studies. The university guarantees that those rights of a learner are not violated and controls learners’ compliance to the demands as to the deadlines and amount of work (Solovova, 2008, p. 36-37).

We agree with the cited researchers that learner autonomy, being a complex multifaceted phenomenon, can be characterized in different ways with the focus on one or several of its aspects and can be viewed as a gradual process including several stages at which learners develop different levels of autonomy. We also share the opinion about the importance of teacher’s motivating and facilitating role in developing learner autonomy, especially in the educational context of teacher training universities.

In this article, we argue that learner autonomy is, on the one hand, a prerequisite for choosing a personal educational pathway appropriately, and, on the other hand, is being further developed via following that pathway. Teachers are expected to motivate and facilitate learner’s making informed decisions about setting their goals, selecting means to achieve them, monitoring the educational route, reflecting and evaluating the learning outcomes.

2. A brief outline of views on the concept of a personal educational pathway

Historically, the term *learning pathways* appeared first in the context of approaching different tasks in the process of learning and it was used irrespective of where the process was taking place – within some school, college or another educational institution or as a part of self-studies, independent research project etc. The term was used in the plural to focus on the multiple characters of possible ways depending on learners’ cognitive styles, learning preferences and other attributes.

Alongside with the development of the idea of differentiation and individualization, there came to be applied the term *personalized pathways*,

mainly in reference to the electives and other various learning opportunities offered by schools and universities (Crossan et al., 2003; Aro et al., 2010; Giudici & Pallas, 2014).

It is appropriate to mention that personalized pathways originated in Middle Age universities and in the 19th – 20th centuries were quite popular at the best universities on the territory of the Russian Empire. For instance, at the Historical and Philological Department of Kharkiv University students were offered some compulsory subjects, recommended special majors and minors. The latter were considered useful for learners' further scientific research but were of elective character. The teaching staff practiced special courses and seminars during which students chose some of the topics suggested for more profound research and got engaged in self-studies under the guidance of their tutor (Imperial Kharkiv University, 1914, p. 32). To develop students' critical thinking, the university organized annual competitions for best scientific papers. In 1843, the Minister of Education allowed the university to publish the best students' research papers in a separate book entitled "Imperial Kharkiv University Students' Essays on Mother Tongue and Literature" (Bahaley, Sumtsov, & Buzeskul, 1906, p.14).

The implementation of learner-centered approach brought about essential changes and demanded developing subject-subject relations between teachers and learners. Scholars began to operate with the concept of a personal educational pathway (trajectory in some sources, for example, in M. Aro et al. (2010)). The main innovation included the fact that such a pathway was not just offered to students as one of available alternative learning pathways but was created by them according to their needs, career goals, and interests. Naturally, while designing their individual educational pathways, learners are still restricted in their choice by the type of their educational institution, by national educational and professional standards, by available facilities etc. However, essentially more flexibility is manifested in creating individual educational programs, which really become customized documents, unique in their composition. In this connection, T. Lomakina (2013) emphasises that a process of designing a personal educational pathway conforms to the necessity of personal professional self-actualization and requires a certain level of "designing competence".

Personal educational pathways have been subjected to close examination by a number of both foreign and native scholars. Canadian researchers B. Crossan, J. Field, J. Gallacher, & B. Merrill (2003) analyze different approaches to studying the concept of educational pathways and relate it to learning careers and the process of the construction of learning identities. Vuorinen (2012) underlines the crucial role of developing

individual learning pathways and flexible learning opportunities in boosting both a personal career and economy growth. N. Dabbaghe & A. Kitsantas (2012) research into opportunities of using mass media and social networks as means of following personal educational pathways.

F. Giudici & A. Pallas (2014) study post-high school institutional pathways and work out their typology. M. Klemenčič (2017) enumerates key elements and indicators that demonstrate presence of student-centered learning and instruction in an institution and emphasizes that one of them is the design of study programs with flexible learning pathways.

Educators in different countries (Roderick et al., 2006; Allensworth et al., 2008; Pavlova, Chi-Kin Lee, Maclean, 2017; Keinänen, Kairisto-Mertanen, 2019) demonstrate concerns as to the relevance of educational systems to economic and social needs as well as the necessity to improve transition from secondary to higher education and to enable students to achieve the career goal they desire.

Allensworth et al. (2008) emphasize that students should be actively engaged in tailoring their individual pathways by systematic exposure to problem-solving and analytical skill building.

Osofsky and Schraeder (2010) suggest a Personal Plan for Progress as a way to organize a student's individual pathway. This document highlights a student's individualized path through high school and maps out their further path through college by advising which elective courses and various learning opportunities to take in reference to student learning styles and life ambitions.

Keinänen and Kairisto-Mertanen (2019) recommend that higher educational institutions should search for the right methods to support students to be more active in their study path and encourage them to explore different learning opportunities.

L.Vishnevskaya (2008) specifies the directions in which individual educational pathways can be traced and singles out content, technological and procedural aspects of their realization. Tolbatova (2012) works out a competence model of university learners creating their individual educational pathways that comprises several structural components: values and motivation, knowledge of how to design and to follow personal educational pathways, students' practical actions, and critical reflection, self-monitoring and self-evaluation.

Plaksina & Matveyeva (2012) believe that alongside with their deeper immersing into the learning environment, learners are gradually getting aware of which electives to choose and how to create their personal educational pathways. I. Kan'kivskiy (2013) views personal educational

trajectories as a prerequisite for a person's professional growth. Shaulska & Yakimova (2013) consider proper guidance in the process of young people's choosing their personal educational pathways a sphere of the state social responsibility. Shaposhnikova (2015) analyses theoretical aspects of designing individual educational pathways and compares these issues in the context of British and Russian universities. Sukhenko (2017) analyzes educational pathways as an interdisciplinary phenomenon and dwells upon its interpretations in psychology, pedagogy, sociology and economics.

We share the scholars' concerns about grave consequences that will follow the inappropriately chosen educational pathway. They may tell negatively on the prospective professional career of the person, may cause frustration and low self-esteem and lead to financial losses in case of retraining. For the region and society as a whole, it may mean getting unbalanced quantities of different categories of specialists, unsatisfied economic and social needs, waste of human and material resources spent on educating redundant professionals.

A brief overview of the opinions of the above-mentioned scholars reveals that in spite of terminological differences and various approaches, the researchers are unanimous in their recognition of the importance of personal educational pathways in modern learning environment and in their agreement as to the most essential traits describing the complex process: learner's autonomy in designing and following the individual educational pathway; developing strategies necessary for personal and professional growth; learner's self-actualization facilitated by the teacher's support.

As to the terms applied, we agree with Kan'kivskiy (2013) and Sukhenko (2017) in using the concept *a personal educational pathway* as an umbrella term. We use the term *individual educational route* to denote the sequence of steps to master content components and the term *individual academic program* in reference to a document fixing the learner's choice of academic courses, the order of taking them, terms and forms of assessment and learning outcomes.

We firmly believe that the appropriate balance between learners' freedom of choice and teachers' guidance and support is a cornerstone in providing autonomous learning environment and ensuring practical realization of learner-centered approach. The analysis below addresses the following research questions:

1. Are the students aware of opportunities for creating their personal educational pathway and consequences of their decision?
2. What kind of chances are Ukrainian university students offered and when and how have the learners been using them?

3. What can teachers do to assist a student in choosing the appropriate educational pathway and move along it more smoothly?

3. Context

3.1 Reforms in Ukrainian educational system and their significance for personal educational pathways

At the present stage of its development, Ukraine has introduced a number of crucial changes in its educational system with the aim to meet contemporary needs of a person and society and to follow global trends. In this respect, we should mention legal changes, for instance, adopting a new framework law on education (2017), launching a key reform connected with the New Ukrainian School, approving the State Standard of Primary Education, creating a system of higher education standards that matches the national framework of qualifications etc.

The Law On Education proclaims that the primary goal of education is “holistically developing the human being as a personality and society's ultimate value, his/her talents, intellectual, creative, and physical abilities, shaping values and competences required for successful self-realization, raising responsible citizens who can make an informed social choice and act for the benefit of other people and society...” (The Law on Education, 2017, p.5). So, self-realization and informed social choice are both the required attributes of education.

One of the progressive innovations of the law is recognizing the right of students to have an individual educational trajectory. Article 1 explains the term alongside with such terms as autonomy, academic freedom, academic mobility, individual development program, individual educational plan and others viewed as the main ones in the sphere of education.

One of the primary tasks of the New Ukrainian School is to ensure the new content of school education aimed at forming 21st century competences. Among them, critical and systemic thinking, initiative, decision-making, problem resolution and risk-assessment are enumerated as important cross-cutting skills.

However, both the government and the Ukrainian society have to admit that a lot has to be achieved in the sphere of education. The official governmental portal states that, with educational approaches persisting from the previous century, “Students at Ukrainian schools and universities mostly gain a body of knowledge without being aware of how it can help them with self-realization” (Government portal: Official site).

3.2 The system of choosing personal educational pathways existing at H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University

Applicants to our university faced the first instances of making a choice in the sphere of education when they became enrolled in the pre-school institution, primary school and different hobby groups, musical, sports or arts schools etc. The choice was mostly made by their parents and other relatives, who took into consideration a number of factors: vicinity of the educational institution, its reputation, prestige, financial matters, child's abilities and inclinations, etc. Practically the same reasons predetermined the choice of a tertiary institution after the completion of secondary education program, though most young people had a chance to voice their opinions and insist on their preferences. To make that choice more informed and conscientious, the teaching staff and administration of our university use different opportunities to better inform schoolchildren about chances for professional and personal development they will be obtaining while studying at our institution: talks and conferences, quests and quizzes, competitions, information in mass media and social networks, special university days, when schoolchildren can visit different departments, attend some practical classes and lectures, laboratories, libraries, centers of foreign cultures at our faculty (Chinese, Japanese, Turkish, Persian, Israeli, Polish), etc. At several affiliated schools, special departments have been working for several years assisting schoolteachers and children in the educational process, facilitating research projects and making our university more popular.

On entering the university, 1st-year students face the choice of minor subjects – the second foreign language and the subjects related to that. It is done exclusively by students' own wish, though the choice is restricted by the faculty facilities, teaching staff qualifications, and the number of students sharing the same wish. But no decision is imposed on the young people.

Later, if students are successful during the first year of studies, they can take a third foreign language as a part of the system of extra-curricular services.

The situation of decision-making repeats itself when students choose topics for their research papers in Methodology of Teaching English and in Philology and their scientific advisers in the 3rd and 4th years.

By the end of the 4th year students graduate from the Bachelor's program, and, if they wish, they make take Master's program and choose electives the repertoire of which is much wider compared to the Bachelor's level. For their diploma research students can again choose a topic and a scientific adviser.

In addition, it should be mentioned that both at the Bachelor's and Master's levels students can express their preferences while choosing their individual tempo of studies, individual assignments, ways of solving educational tasks and reflecting on the results of their activities, ways of self-evaluation and self-correction. Students can take part in the work of different sections of the students' scientific society, creative laboratories, hobby groups, etc.

To support student transitions within lifelong learning, university teaching staffs help students to become better aware of their educational needs and learning characteristics, to reflect on their progress along the chosen pathway, and to verbalize their plans for the future. Our practice proves that students need and appreciate this guidance.

To sum it up, creating a personal educational path is not a one-moment action but is taking place gradually and a person's choice gets wider and more responsible with every learning step. The process can enhance the development of students' motivation and initiative, skills of goal-setting, self-organization and critical reflection which can later facilitate their professional teaching activities.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The participants included the students of the Department of Foreign Philology of H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University who enrolled in the Bachelor's program at the University in 2018 and in 2019 and chose English as their major (151 persons in 2018 and 135 persons in 2019). Some data were collected from the students who enrolled in the Master's program in the same years (71 and 64 persons correspondingly). All the participants gave their informed consent to use their personal data and to participate in the study.

4.2 Research instruments

Governed by the research questions and the educational context the following data collection tools were chosen for the enquiry process: questionnaires and interviews with focus groups. The tools were chosen for the purpose of triangulation. Interviews with 4 focus groups were used since the researchers shared the idea of J. Munday (2006) that it would be more time-consuming to interview individuals and that a diversity of opinion was important in addressing the problem. Focus group participation was voluntary. Each group embraced 10 persons. Confidentiality was ensured.

The collected data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

5. Results and discussion

5.1 The data collected about the 1st Year students in the Bachelor's program

The first questionnaire dealt with the level of students' awareness and their expectations as to choosing their personal educational pathway. The researchers were also interested in any experience, both positive and negative, the students might have accumulated in making decisions about their course of studies. The questionnaire was offered to the 1st Year students of the Bachelor's Program 2018 and in 2019. The questionnaire was to be answered in writing anonymously. Most questions were close-ended.

The results of the survey based on close-ended questions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The Data Collected through Questionnaire 1

	Students in the Bachelor's Program (answered affirmatively)		Students in the Bachelor's Program (answered negatively)		Students in the Bachelor's Program (were not sure)	
	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019
Have you had any experience in choosing schools, classes, hobby groups etc. by yourself before entering the university?	35.7 %	36.3 %	49.7 %	47.4 %	14.6%	16.3%
Was it more positive than negative? (only the students who answered the first question affirmatively)	15.5%	20.1%	10.2%	15.2%	–	–
Have you chosen our university yourself?	43.0 %	45.2 %	44.4 %	45.2 %	12.6%	9.6%

Have you chosen your major yourself?	58.9 %	64.4 %	36.5%	31.9%	4.6 %	3.7 %
Would you make the same choice now?	82.1 %	87.5 %	8.6 %	6.6 %	9.3 %	5.9 %
Have you chosen the second foreign language to study at the university yourself?	41.7 %	37.8 %	49.6 %	54.1 %	8.7 %	9.1 %
Would you make the same choice now?	88.1 %	87.4 %	6.7 %	5.9 %	5.2 %	6.7 %

The other questions included in the survey were of the multiple-choice format, but in the questions about the reasons for their choice, the students could select several options. They could add their comments or some other options as well. Because of that, the results of the answers to such questions do not make up 100 % total.

As to the answer to the question “Where have you learned the information about our university and our department?”, most students chose the option “From my friends/ my relatives/my neighbors” – 33.8 % in 2018 and 26.7 % in 2019. The option “From my teachers at school or private tutors” was chosen by 19.2 % and 18.5 % correspondingly. “From mass media and social networks” – 20.5 % and 23.7 %. “From the events organized by the university” – 23.2 % and 28.9 %. The option “From other sources” – 3.3 % in 2018 and 2.2 % in 2019.

In reply to the question “What were the reasons behind your choice?” the students chose the following options: “reputation of the university and the Department of Foreign Philology” (39.0 % and 44.4 %), “high qualifications of teachers” (35.8 % and 41.5 %), “locality close to my home”(42.4 % and 38.5 %), “availability of the state-financed places” (51.7 % and 58.5 %), “affordability of the contract price” (66.2 % and 77.8 %), “wish to become a teacher”(38.4 % and 40.7 %).

The replies to the question “Why have you chosen English as your major?” varied. Most students indicated their love to the English language and interest in the English-speaking world (47.7 % and 58.5 %), some had instrumental motivation and hoped to get better job perspectives with a high level of communicative competence in English (29.8 % and 34.8 %), prestigious status of a person who knows English well (59.6 % and 58.2 %). Some simply followed the advice of their parents (40.4 % and 33.3 %). Unfortunately, 23.8 % and 21.5 % of the students were not sure in the grounds for the choice. During the interviews they admitted that they did

not care much, though most of them understood the necessity of having some diploma of a tertiary institution.

Even more students were not sure why they have made a choice about their second foreign language (32.4 % and 34.8 %). They were not able to see if any of the offered options was of certain personal significance for them. Those who could answer the question mostly replied that they had instrumental motivation (44.3 % and 49.6 %), or extrinsic motivation (56.9 % and 52.6 %) as the choice was recommended to them by somebody else. During the interviews the researchers found out that some students explained they had heard that studying that language was comparatively easy. Motivation of 59.6 % and 66.7 % of the learners could be considered intrinsic as they explained that they liked the language and the culture.

The data testify to the general tendency that students have not accumulated much experience in choosing their personal educational pathway. Even those who had some experience before entering the university do not always evaluate it positively. A very disturbing fact is that about 9 % of students were dissatisfied with their choice of their major and about 6 % were not happy about their choice of the second language. Partially, it is supported by the average number of students who apply to change their minor during the first month of studies (2-3 of them).

The data obtained through the questionnaire are in full agreement with the results of the interviews with focus groups. Students admitted that they were not always aware of the opportunities offered for them to choose their personal educational pathways and often have not used them effectively.

The data indirectly proved the fact that learner autonomy of the 1st Year students was not sufficiently developed and it impeded their designing their personal pathways.

5.2 The data about the 1st Year students in the Master's program

The questionnaire offered to the students of the Master's program and interviews with focus groups were aimed at specifying if the students were more mature in making choices and designing their personal educational pathways. Some students wanted to improve various aspects of their major (40.8 % in 2018 and 35.9 % in 2019) and minor (35.1 % and 53.1 % correspondingly). Some students chose a third foreign language (8.5 % and 6.3 %). Since Ukrainian students have the right to choose from electives offered by other faculties and even institutions, some of our students realized that right and have been studying elective courses in the field of

Law, Psychology, Information Theory, Economics (5.6 % in 2018 and 4.7 % in 2019).

Though more elective subjects were offered for them to choose from, they felt that their choice was more informed and better grounded. Most of them clearer realized what exactly they wanted and why. The students mainly grounded their choice on instrumental (67.6 % in 2018 and 57.8 % in 2019) and intrinsic motivation (40.8 % and 54.6 %). The number of those who had relied on extrinsic motivation decreased essentially in comparison with analogous data from the 1st Year Bachelor's students (32.4 % and 26.6 % correspondingly). During the interviews it was found out that extrinsic motivation was in most cases connected with the students' feelings towards professors and assistant professors who delivered elective courses, or their personal and professional evaluation by the students themselves and information shared with them by those who studied before them.

Fewer students regretted their choice (4.2 % and 3.1 % correspondingly), which also indirectly testifies to the fact that it was more appropriate to their careers, abilities, interests and aspirations. However, the presence of such answers is still a disturbing fact as it may have negative consequences both for the persons themselves and for the whole society.

During the interviews with focus groups, the researchers found out that personal and professional growth of the students is reflected in their ability to prioritize subjects and assignments depending on their significance for learners' further studies and their professional careers. It also manifests itself in possessing a wider repertoire of study strategies and using them more flexibly and appropriately. Students believed that the process of choosing topics for their Master's research and scientific advisers for that did not cause so many difficulties in comparison with the similar processes for their research papers in Year 3 and Year 4, as most of the learners continued their research and were better informed about their focus, possible issues, perspectives etc. On the other hand, the learners admitted that they felt more responsibility and contemplated the consequences of their choice more thoroughly.

They also stressed the fact that the teaching staff and administration used various opportunities to facilitate choosing their personal educational path and moving more or less smoothly along it. Out of all the students who answered the questionnaire questions 39.4 % (2018) and 37.5 % (2019) considered the teachers' guidance as essential, 44.6 % in 2018 and 57.8 % in 2019 believed that it was enhancing and only 5.2 % (2018) and 4.7 % (2019) did not feel its impact. The replies to the questionnaire and students' answers during the interviews suggest that the students mostly welcome

teachers' support in designing and following their personal educational pathway and at the same time realize their own responsibility for that.

6. Conclusion

The illustrated research highlights the impact of designing a personal educational pathway and following it during the course of university studies. The analysis of the students' motivation demonstrates a certain dynamics towards more conscious choice of elective components of the academic program. With the students in the Master's program, the choice was mainly based on instrumental and intrinsic motivation while the choice at the time when the students entered their studies at the bachelor's level was often influenced by external factors and opinions of other people.

One of the most important findings that emerge from this study is the evidence of interrelation between the level of learner autonomy and the success in designing a personal educational pathway. The more responsible for their studies students become, the more flexible their study strategies get and the wider their range gets. Alongside with developing awareness of the impact of their decisions on the results of their learning and career perspectives, students start using reflection, self-evaluation and self-correction more often.

The results of the research show that a lot of students welcome continuous teachers' support and find it facilitating their choice of and movement along their personal educational pathways. However, there are aspects that can be improved. Sometimes students do not care much for the choices suggested by the teachers, feel that their freedom of choice is somehow restricted, and are not sufficiently motivated in achieving the goals set by somebody else. Thus, it becomes necessary to find an appropriate balance between teachers' guidance and students' personal choice to enhance the process.

It is obvious that further research in this area is needed to ensure the raise of effectiveness of students' choosing their personal educational pathways and teachers' support at the different stages of students' studies.

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