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Adoption of Self-Directed Learning in Post- and Pre-Pandemic Contexts: A Leadership Perspective

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Abstract

Learning is acknowledged by many as a lifelong process and self-directed learning (SDL) plays a key role in this step as they take the responsibility in controlling what they learn to reach their goals and objectives. At the same time, the leadership role of instructors and institutional heads fostering a supportive environment becomes crucial. Despite the transformation of global education from a teacher-centric to a student-centric approach, especially with the pandemic situation, emerging contexts have seen a reduced impact. The study aims to explore this phenomenon in the emerging context of India and Sri Lanka to first identify the present context of SDL and identify the key drivers and challenges associated with the learning transformation. The study aims to capture both the learners' and educators' perspectives in this regard to build a stronger foundation, understand the dynamic role of empowered leadership in higher education and deepen the knowledge on more context-specific factors that are yet to be explored in the emerging nations' perspective.

Keywords: self-directed learning; SDL adoption; emerging economics; post and pre-pandemic; restraining forces

1. Introduction

There have been a number of studies that have examined the educational qualities of ubiquitous and mobile learning to date: formal education settings both inside and outside the classroom (e.g. Frohberg et al., 2009), workplace settings (e.g., Pimmer & Pachler, 2014), and lifelong learning environments (e.g. Sharples, 2000). There is no doubt that learning is a lifelong process as rapid change and development of new knowledge are inevitable (Collins, 2009; Lehtinen et al, 2014). Learners need to be in control of their learning and develop the ability to learn on their own (Knowles & Sternberg, 1975). Morris (2019) proposes self-directed learning (SDL) as a process in which learners take full responsibility for controlling their learning objectives and tasks to meet personal goals. Historically, education systems, particularly in developing countries, have been largely **teacher centric**. In South Asia, university education often fails to address real-world issues effectively (Acharya et al., 2023). Despite growing interest in **self-directed** and **student-centric** learning, countries like Sri Lanka and India continue to rely heavily on traditional, instructor-led classroom methods (Kurian, Ramanathan, & De Alwis, 2021). Transitioning to modern pedagogical practices remains challenging due to the complex interplay of traditional norms and modern pressures.

Developing nations often face significant challenges related to limited educational infrastructure, inadequate access to digital resources, and economic constraints (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020; Ndubuisi et al., 2021), all of which hinder the widespread adoption of **self-directed learning (SDL)**. These challenges can be **systemic**; for example, a flexible curriculum is crucial for SDL (Nasri et al., 2020), yet existing curricula in countries like Sri Lanka are not designed to support SDL. Traditional teaching methods in these regions require considerable enhancement to facilitate SDL (Munasinghe et al., 2019). Grande et al. (2022) argue that the approach to SDL must recognize the distinct characteristics of different nations. At the same time, creating supportive learning environments promoting SDL means the leadership role playing a pivotal role in the change process especially in a teacher centric emerging economy context (Suhartini & Sary, 2025)

Research on SDL readiness in **Asian contexts** remains limited, highlighting a significant gap in the literature. Understanding the dynamics of SDL in these developing regions is crucial, as such insights could serve as a blueprint for other countries with similar socio-cultural landscapes, helping them modernize their education systems. Moreover, promoting SDL in emerging Asian contexts can enhance employee competencies, encouraging a proactive

learning mindset rather than dependence on organizational training (Vithayaporn et al., 2021). Given the global impact of the pandemic, further research is needed to determine whether COVID-19 acted as a barrier or enabler for the broader adoption of SDL (Singaram et al, 2022). A proactive approach to fostering SDL is not only essential for individual development but also for contributing to the economic growth of emerging economies. This research seeks to address the current literature gap by offering a nuanced perspective from emerging contexts, enriching the theoretical discourse on SDL and contributing practical insights that could shape the future of education in these regions and beyond. Specifically, the study aims to critically examine the driving and restraining forces influencing the adoption of SDL among higher education students in India and Sri Lanka. This leads to the formation of the research question of; *“Identifying and exploring the key factors driving the growth of SDL in the emerging context?”*

2. Theoretical Framework

This study uses force field analysis as its guiding theoretical framework. Force field analysis, pioneered by (Lewin, 1943), is a strategic tool designed to understand the dynamics of driving and restraining forces in a specific situation or during a change initiative. Central to Lewin's model is the identification of factors that either promote or inhibit specific behaviours, a focus that has been echoed in subsequent research (see Swanson & Creed, 2014). In the education sector, the force field analysis concept has been utilized in studies that focus on significant structural reforms within universities and other advanced educational frameworks (Mahmud, Mohd Nasri & Syed-Abdullah, 2019). Recent literature on SDL highlights some important factors supporting SDL, such as well-trained educators who can better guide students towards SDL (Beckers et al., 2016), smaller sized learning cohorts (Wong et al., 2021), non- traditional competency-based assessments (Beckers et al., 2016) and personalized affective feedback. Conversely, challenges to SDL adoption are also evident such as lack of support for self-learning (Maphalala et al, 2021) due to educator shortages (Yasmin et al., 2019) or constrained time allocated for subjects (Yasmin et al., 2019) and distractions while studying (Kohan et al., 2017).

The study also focuses on the concept of empowering leadership which is a leadership approach leading to greater individual autonomy, self-efficacy and a sense of ownership over the tasks in hand (Kim & Beehr, 2017, Praszkie, 2015). In the context of higher education, empowering

leadership could be manifested through the educational instructors as well as academic leaders who are vital in creating learning spaces encouraging student independence and confidence leading to students adopting SDL mechanisms (Farooq & Iqbal, 2025). Especially in a post pandemic era, the empowering leadership role is essential in shaping the long-term sustainability of SDL practices. By embedding such practices directly into the policy frameworks of respective institutional leaders could possibly champion supportive learning spaces at the same time be the mentorship required to drive the structural and psychological gaps in the emerging context. (Hishamuddin et al., 2024; Davis, 2024)

3. Methodology

Given the infancy of the research into SDL in the emerging context as well as the need for an in-depth understanding of its evolution in a post-pandemic landscape, the study takes on an exploratory study technique. From a philosophical stance, this is identified as the interpretivist approach which aims to take on an in-depth overview and pays close attention to subjective factors such as differences in culture and context (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). This in away is the inductive approach towards research where the research aims to infer the findings of the research towards a theory building exercise. Inductive research is exploratory in nature and according to Swedberg, (2021) exploratory research adds value in situations where there is relatively less literature on a given topic. Despite the development of SDL in medical, and nursing literature and a predominant Western outfit, there is substantially less work and application in the educational field from an emerging nation lens (Shafait et al., 2021; Vithayaporn et al., 2021).

Through exploration, the study aims to conceptualize the application of SDL practices in both India and Sri Lanka, and this would allow us to delineate the key supporting and restraining factors in the local context. Exploration is complimented using qualitative data given its ability for an in-depth and richer exploration of a given phenomenon. The study will use the techniques of focus groups together with interviews as its methods of qualitative data collection. Purposeful sampling is used to investigate the SDL practices with two established universities respectively from India and Sri Lanka. Purposeful sampling as a tool is primarily used in situations where researchers have access to the key informants in a field in building information-rich cases of a given study. The sample from the two institutions is accessed

through the existing networks and a research associate from each institute is part of the overall study team. The sample would consist of both educators and students from each institute. The inclusion criteria for academics were to at least have a master's level qualification in the institution and for students to be in their final year of study in their respective degree programs. The students will be subjected to a focus group session and the academics will take part in a semi-structured interview process. To ensure validity and consistency across both data collection and analysis, all interviews will be guided by an interview protocol. This developed interview protocol will be based on evidence of a comprehensive literature review and findings of previous studies. In terms of the focus group, given the optimal number suggested to be between six to eight.

As a sample size for the semi-structured interviews, A range of five to twenty-five respondents is recommended (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The present study aims to conduct forty semi-structured interviews in total for both the institutions in India and Sri Lanka. Before the interviews and the focus group are to be deployed a pilot study will be conducted. The pilot study will include higher education stakeholders and experts from both countries and ensure the used questions and overall themes on SDL are appropriate and feasible in the contexts of India and Sri Lanka for optimal responses. The interviews will be conducted in two rounds of ten per each round allowing sufficient time for the research team in Sri Lanka and India to transcribe both textual and other non-verbal information as part of the qualitative data gathering. The focus group data collected will be compiled and listed based on some of the key themes derived from literature and modified using the pilot study work (O'Nyumba et al., 2018).

The semi-structured interviews conducted will be mainly analysed using the inductive-based analytical process of template analysis. Template analysis as a technique is characterized by its high level of structure in analysing contextual data and the flexibility to adjust to the specific needs of a given study (King, et al., 2017). Template analysis is a variety of thematic analysis and central to this technique is the development of a coding template which will be a subset of the data in the study that is applied to the rest of the data to be revised and refined (Brooks et al., 2015). The key step in the process is the identification of certain 'piori codes' which are also themes relevant to the data analysis that will evolve with the actual analysis. The predefined codes will develop the initial template as a starting point and throughout the data analysis process this would further refine and change which will ultimately lead to a final

template of the study (King et al., 2017). The initial template developed will also run through several iterations as some codes might change or be modified during the process. The initial coding process also uses the qualitative software tool NVivo to assist in identifying initial codes and themes to break down the rich qualitative information gathered in the study process.

Expected contribution

This study makes both **theoretical and practical contributions** to the field of self-directed learning (SDL). From a theoretical perspective, it extends existing SDL research beyond predominantly Western contexts by exploring its application in emerging economies, specifically India and Sri Lanka. By adopting a post-pandemic lens, the study captures the unique challenges, cultural nuances, and contextual factors that influence the adoption and effectiveness of SDL in these regions. This contributes to a more globally inclusive understanding of SDL, highlighting how local conditions shape learning practices and outcomes. From a practical standpoint, the study identifies the key **supporting and restraining forces** that affect SDL implementation, such as educator readiness, cohort sizes, assessment practices, available resources, and institutional support structures. By mapping these factors, the research provides actionable insights for **educators, academic leaders, and policymakers**, enabling them to design targeted, context-sensitive SDL strategies. Ultimately, the study bridges the gap between global SDL theory and local practice, offering guidance on how to foster effective, sustainable, and culturally responsive self-directed learning environments in emerging educational contexts.

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