

# Learner Autonomy: A Theoretical Phantasm?

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*Abstract: Supporting the autonomous learner in the classroom is an innovative attempt to foster learner engagement and learning outcomes. Some proponents go so far as to stress the importance of the concept of learner autonomy for lifelong learning. The literature suggests several instruments (i.e. portfolios, diaries, learning contracts or individualised learning plans) in order to engender learner autonomy. Over the past 30 years, the literature has engaged extensively in elaborating the theoretical framework of learner autonomy and its practical application in the classroom. Aiming to equip students for lifelong learning, strong focus has been put on identifying the components of the autonomous classroom, and its academic and behavioural effects on students. According to various case studies, a number of schools have been identified to have tested or permanently adopted an approach fostering the autonomous learner. However, the majority of the findings focus on descriptive analyses of case studies. Contributing to these findings, this paper discusses findings of an empirical study nestled within the Australian schooling system. Its objectives were threefold. Firstly, it aimed to identify whether the concept of learner autonomy has been widely adopted by schools or whether it remains a theoretical concept rather than a feasible one. Secondly, it attempted to identify how schools define the concept of learner autonomy and thirdly, how this concept is generally implemented by schools. Drawing upon the existing literature, this paper argues that learner autonomy is more than a theoretical construct as it is implemented by the majority of Australian schools. However, its definition and application varies significantly amongst schools and school types. This indicates that learner autonomy must be considered as a flexible concept that takes various shapes that extend beyond commonly cited concepts in the literature.*

Keywords: Education, Learner Autonomy, Lifelong Learning, Learning Plans

**L**EARNER AUTONOMY IS a well established concept that has a more than 30 year tradition of research within the educational context. Different definitions and ways have evolved to facilitate the overall intention of learner autonomy; namely, putting the learner at the centre of learning and allowing him/her to be in charge of her/his learning (Holec & Council of Europe, 1981). As a consequence, today, the concept of learner autonomy is an umbrella term that holds various definitions (D. Little, 2009). It is further linked to other terms that have evolved in this research field, for example: self-directed learning, self-regulated learning or individualisation (L. Dickinson, 1977; McGarrell, 1996). There is no clear distinction between these terms and they are often used even interchangeably (Schwartz, 1977). The theoretical conceptions<sup>1</sup> of learner autonomy and its related concepts have been adopted by educational systems, including Australia. The Australian ministerial council on education, employment and youth affairs highlights the educational goal that young adults should become “*successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.*” (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training

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<sup>1</sup> Researchers such as Henri Holec, Phil Benson, Peter Voller, Leni Damn, Barbara Sinclair and David Nunan have established theoretical frameworks on the concept of learner autonomy.

and Youth Affairs, 2008). This implies that students should take responsibility for their learning in the sense that they are able to identify individual strengths, define learning goals (Wolff, 2002) and to monitor specific strategies in their learning process (Scharle, 2000). The focus on encouraging students to become autonomous learners is thus apparent. However, despite the establishment of a theoretical concept of learner autonomy and its desired application in the educational context, it remains unclear whether the majority of Australian schools engages in learner autonomy. Furthermore, little is known about the particular definitions of learner autonomy that are used within individual school curriculums. This research study embarks on these questions as it explores how secondary schools perceive the various definitions of learner autonomy and similar concepts and to what extent students are encouraged to become autonomous learners.

### **Locality of the Study**

The Australian education system shall be briefly outlined here as it forms the context in which this study was conducted. Australia consists of the states of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania as an island. Furthermore, there are two mainland territories: Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory. All states and territories have their own parliament including the rights to administer their own school system (Australian Government: Australian Education International, n.d.). The school sector is divided into public and private schools. Public schools are provided by the government (also known as government schools) and are free to attend for Australian citizens. Private schools are non-government schools that charge school fees. Private schools can further be distinguished into catholic and independent schools. In terms of research this means that a research approval has to be acquired for each state and territory for public and catholic schools. Independent schools need to be approached directly.

### **Sample**

For this research, approvals were obtained from the Catholic Education Office, Sydney and the Departments of Education and Training in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. The study does not necessarily represent the views of the Education Departments. The research covered an area of 62% of all secondary and combined schools with 1690 schools out of 2744 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). This excluded special schools which cater specifically for disabled or disadvantaged students. The total sample of 1690 schools was ranked randomly and the first 50% of the sample were asked to participate in this survey. The survey proposal addressed principals, deputy principals and director of studies<sup>2</sup>. It was a voluntary study and participants could drop out of the survey anytime during the process. Only one participant per school was envisaged to fill in the survey. After two calls for participation 212 schools had accessed the survey. 128 questionnaires were completed, 84 showed either missing answers or did not start the survey. All answers for each individual variable were considered in the evaluation.

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<sup>2</sup> Depending on the school type, the term principal also refers to headmasters, headmistresses or heads of school.

**Measures**

The data was collected on the basis of an online questionnaire. The survey consisted of three main questions and twelve sub-questions. Of those, two questions were open requiring free formulation by participants. The remaining questions triggered multiple answers from which in most instances one was to be chosen. Due to very limited time constraint of the participants in their professions as executive management staff, the survey was intended to be kept as short as possible. The average time to complete the survey was estimated at 10 minutes. The average time required by participants was 8 minutes and thus was within the range of expected time consumption.

**Framework of Analysis**

Participants were allocated in six categories: high school, selective (private and public) high school, independent (private) high school and K-12 school, comprehensive (K-12) grammar school and catholic high school<sup>3</sup>. Participants that could not be considered as either of these categories were categorised as ‘other’. The biggest group was represented by public high schools. Comprehensive K-12 schools represented the second biggest group. Independent (private) high schools and K-12 schools formed the third biggest group followed by selective private and public high schools in fourth position and catholic systemic schools in the sixth group. The smallest category was identified as ‘other’. (Table 1, Figure 1)

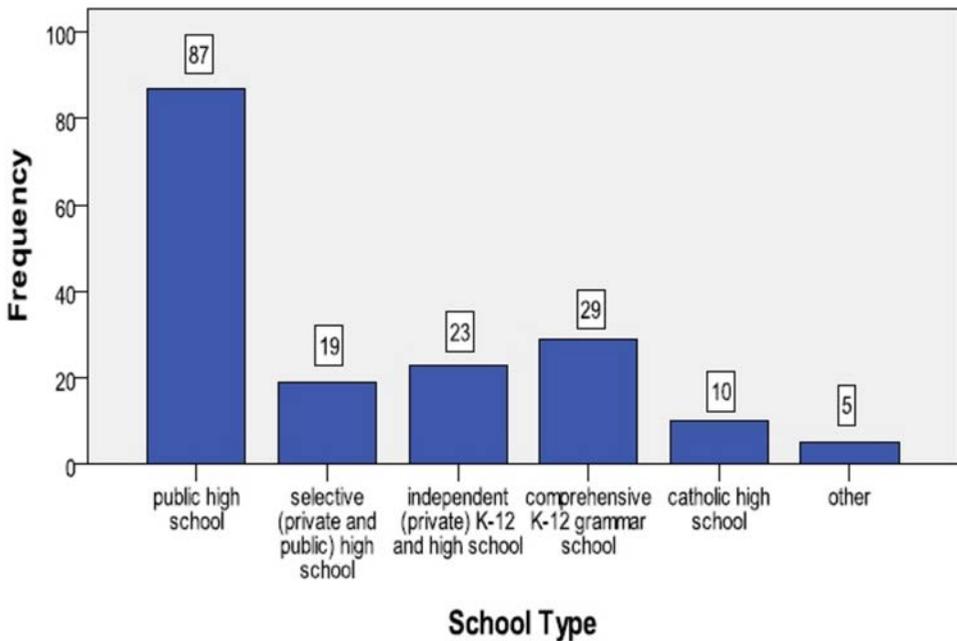


Figure 1: Distribution of Participants by School Type

<sup>3</sup> Catholic high schools refer to systemic schools that cater for students in years seven to twelve.

**Table 1: Distribution of Participants by School Type**

<b>School Type</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
public high school	87	50.3	50.3
selective (private and public) high school	19	11.0	11.0
independent (private) high school	23	13.3	13.3
comprehensive K-12 grammar school	29	16.8	16.8
catholic high school	10	5.8	5.8
other	5	2.9	2.9
Total	173	100.0	100.0

The answers provided by participants were analysed in two ways. In a first analysis, the questions were interpreted based on the whole sample. In a second analysis, a comparative analysis by school type was conducted.

## **Results<sup>4</sup>**

### ***Conceptions about Concepts of Learner Autonomy***

While the literature states and distinguishes a number of definitions on the concept of learner autonomy and related conceptions, it is widely unknown how these definitions are perceived and differentiated in praxis. Thus, members of executive staff management were asked to comment on eight definitions that are commonly cited in the literature (Table 2).

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<sup>4</sup> The terms 'public school' and 'private school' in this study comprise high and K-12 schools of the public and respectively they private schooling sector.

**Table 2: Definitions on Learner Autonomy and Related Concepts**

Nr.	Author	Definition
1	Holec & Council of Europe., 1981, p. 1	Learner autonomy is <i>“the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning”</i> . <i>“Taking charge of one’s learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning.”</i>
2	Dickinson, 1987, p. 11	Learner autonomy describes <i>“the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implantation of those decisions. In full autonomy there is no involvement of a ‘teacher’ or an institution. And the learner is also independent of specially prepared materials.”</i>
3	Holec & Council of Europe., 1981, p. 4; Little, 1991, p. 4	<i>“Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action, autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes.”</i>
4	Gibbs, 1992, pp. 41-42	Independent learning <i>“describes a wide range of practices. It has become a rallying cry for those who believe that students need, or can cope with, much less support from teachers than they often receive, and that such independent is beneficial to students. ... Independent learning nearly always involves extensive independent use of the library and other information sources rather than formal teaching. Lecturers’ time is concerned more with identifying clear learning goals, providing support and feedback during learning, and assisting the collation, presentation and assessment of learning outcomes than with conventional teaching.”</i>

5	Dam, 1995, p. 336	Autonomy is to be defined “ <i>in terms of the learner’s willingness and capacity to control or oversee her own learning. [...] [S]omeone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice.</i> ”
6	Pintrich, 1995, p. 5	“ <i>In short, self-regulated learning involves the active, goal-directed, self-control of behaviour, motivation, and cognition for academic tasks by an individual student.</i> ”
7	Scharle, 2000, p. 4	“ <i>We may define autonomy as the freedom and ability to manage one’s own affairs which entails the right to make decisions as well.</i> ”
8	Nunan, 2000, p. 7	“ <i>Principally, autonomous learners are able to self-determine the overall direction of their learning, become actively involved in the management of the learning process, exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities.</i> ”
9	Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 2	Learner autonomy represents “ <i>a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning.</i> ”
10	Sinclair, 2009, p. 185	Learner autonomy is the “[...] ‘ <i>metacognitive knowledge</i> ’, or the knowledge about learning”.

**Table 3: Ranking of Definitions**

		Statistics									
		def 1	def 2	def 3	def 4	def 5	def 6	def 7	def 8	def 9	def 10
N	Valid	136	136	136	136	136	128	128	128	128	128
	Missing	37	37	37	37	37	45	45	45	45	45
Median		2.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Percent-iles	25	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	50	2.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00

The researchers who developed the definitions remained anonymous in the survey. Participants ranked each definition on a scale between 1 (I strongly agree) and 4 (I strongly disagree). In general, principals ‘rather agreed’ (2) with all definitions except one. Only definition two which designates the learner the total responsibility for her/his actions (Leslie Dickinson, 1987) was ranked 3 on the scale meaning that participants rather disagreed with this definition. It thus shows that schools do not believe that students can be held fully responsible for their

learning but that a teacher should supervise and guide the learning process of the student. Participants were however not critical with regard to related but not identical autonomy concepts. The list of definitions included two which define independent learning (definition 4 by Gibbs, 1992) and self regulated learning (definition 6 by Pintrich, 1995). However, participants ‘rather agreed’ with these definitions. Thus, according to executive staff management it seems that a clear distinction between learner autonomy and related concepts such as independent learning and self-regulated learning is not made. Contents of the latter concepts are more likely to be treated as characteristics of the umbrella term learner autonomy.

### Engagement in Learner Autonomy

Participants were further asked as to whether they engage in ‘learner autonomy’. A total number of n=109 (66.5 %) indicated that their school engaged in the concept of learner autonomy and n=55 (33.5%) negated any engagement in learner autonomy. These figures suggest that learner autonomy has found currency in the educational system for the investigated states. Considering that the study was done based on a random selection of schools within a sample population covering more than 50% of Australian conducting secondary education, the results are a reasonable indicator for a positive perception of learner autonomy at secondary schools in Australia. Splitting the results of engagement in learner autonomy according to the different school types, a slightly differing picture evolves with regard to their engagement in learner autonomy. Although all school types show a clear tendency to support learner autonomy, selective public (n=16; 89%) and independent high schools (n=19; 86%) seem to be the strongest supporters of this educational concept of selective schools engaging in the concept of learner autonomy. (Figure 2, Table 4)

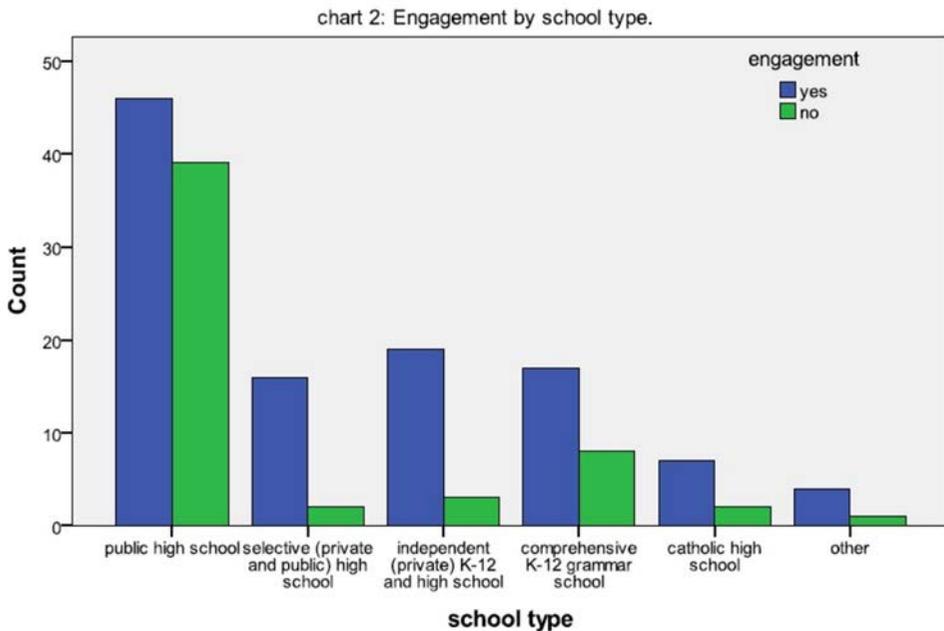


Figure 2: Engagement by School Type

**Table 4: Engagement by School Type**

			Engagement			
			1	2	Total	
<b>School Type</b>	public high school	Count	46	35	81	
		% within school type	56.8%	43.2%	100.0%	
	selective public and private high school	Count	16	2	18	
		% within school type	88.9%	11.1%	100.0%	
	independent (private) high school and K-12 school	Count	19	3	22	
		% within school type	86.4%	13.6%	100.0%	
	comprehensive K-12 school	Count	17	8	25	
		% within school type	68.0%	32.0%	100.0%	
	catholic systemic school	Count	7	2	9	
		% within school type	77.8%	22.2%	100.0%	
	other	Count	4	1	5	
		% within school type	80.0%	20.0%	100.0%	
			Count	109	51	160
			% within school type	68.1%	31.9%	100.0%

An explanation for this could be the fact that schools of this type provide education to high achieving students. Students who wish to attend selective high schools whether they are privately or state run are granted admission to these schools based on their academic merits. Selective schools seem to find that an autonomy friendly environment best serves their students to foster their high academic potential.

Similar to the selective schools also independent (private) high schools and K-12 schools enhance autonomous skills in their students. Fewer than 3 (14%) of the participants who identified their school as an independent or private school do not focus on learner autonomy. Further, more than two thirds of students at catholic schools seem to be studying in an environment that fosters their skills as autonomous learners.

In contrast to the private education sector, a higher proportion of public high schools and comprehensive K-12 schools appear to prefer other educational concepts than learner autonomy. A small majority (n=46; 57%) of public high schools agreed to be engaging in learner autonomy, whereas around 35 of the asked schools (43%) refrain from this concept. Students studying at a K-12 public school are more likely to develop autonomous learning skills with n=17 (68%) of this school type supporting learner autonomy. Thus, a significant difference was observed between public and private schools’ engagement in a concept that fosters students’ individual learning skills (Table 5).

**Table 5: Dependence of Variables**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.448 <sup>a</sup>	5	.029
Likelihood Ratio	13.539	5	.019
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.229	1	.040
N of Valid Cases	160		

a. 3 cells (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.59.

**Ways to Support Learner Autonomy**

This research further attempted to identify different pathways that schools take to foster learner autonomy. Participants who had indicated that their school actively supported learner autonomy were hence further asked as to whether their school used an instrument to enhance learner autonomy. 92 (87%) of the participants engaging in learner autonomy (n=106) have an instrument such as a learning plan, diary, portfolio or computer program implemented at their school (Figure 3, Table 6).

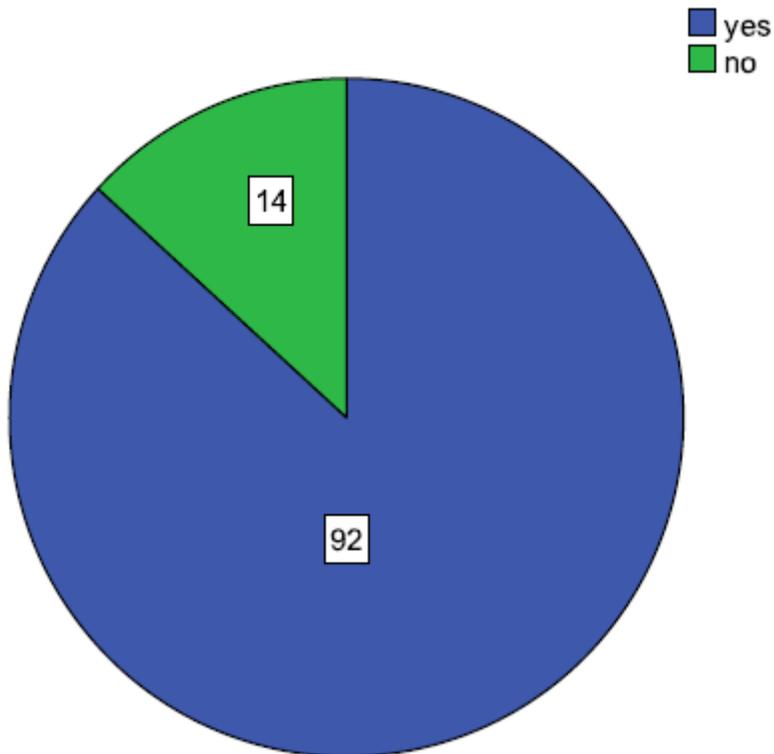


Figure 3: Instrument use

**Table 6: Instrument use**

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	yes	92	86.8
	no	14	13.2
	Total	106	100.0
Missing	System	64	
Total		170	

Looking at the results by school type (Figure 4), public high schools, selective (public and private) schools and comprehensive K-12 schools showed with over 90% to be nearly identically strong instrument-users. In addition, all participants from catholic schools (n=7) stated to be using an instrument. Private high schools and K-12 schools on the other hand differed in their preferences. Compared to public and selective schools, about one third of participants from private schools (n=5) denied the use of an instrument. Thus a significant relationship between school type and the use of an instrument was observed (Table 7).

**Table 7: Relation between School Type and Instrument use**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	21.395 <sup>a</sup>	5	.001	.001		
Likelihood Ratio	15.649	5	.008	.008		
Fisher's Exact Test	14.041			.005		
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.084 <sup>b</sup>	1	.043	.047	.031	.011
N of Valid Cases	106					
a. 6 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .49.						
b. The standardized statistic is 2.021						

Only 14 (13 %) of the participants engaging in autonomy indicated that they do not use an instrument (Figure 3, Table 6).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For further information, read Julia Atkins 1996, *From Values to Beliefs about Learning to Principles and Practice*, available at: <http://www.learningtolearn.sa.edu.au/Colleagues/pages/default/atkin/?reflag=1> [accessed on: 23 March 2011].

**Table 8: Instrument use Versus Methodology use**

Instrument: No			School Type					Total	
			1	2	3	4	6		
no	methodology	yes	Count	1	1	4	0	1	7
		% of Total	7.7%	7.7%	30.8%	.0%	7.7%	53.8%	
	no instrument	no	Count	2	0	1	1	2	6
		% of Total	15.4%	.0%	7.7%	7.7%	15.4%	46.2%	
Total			Count	3	1	5	1	3	13
			% of Total	23.1%	7.7%	38.5%	7.7%	23.1%	100.0%

Nearly half of those participants indicated that their engagement in autonomy was based on a particular methodology. Students are for example assessed according to the bloom grid or the Julia Atkin’s model. Students have greater choice “*in direction of lessons*”. Further, schools address “*higher order thinking skills and different learning styles*”. Curriculum design and activities are “*student-oriented*”. This includes that students are potentially advised to monitor their learning behaviour. Thus, they are made aware of their responsibilities. Private schools represented the biggest group of methodology and non-instrument users (n=4; 31%). On the other hand, in the category of non-instrument and non-methodology users public schools and ‘other’ schools formed the majority (n=2; 15%). It can be assumed that these participants may provide a learning environment that indirectly supports autonomous learning skills.

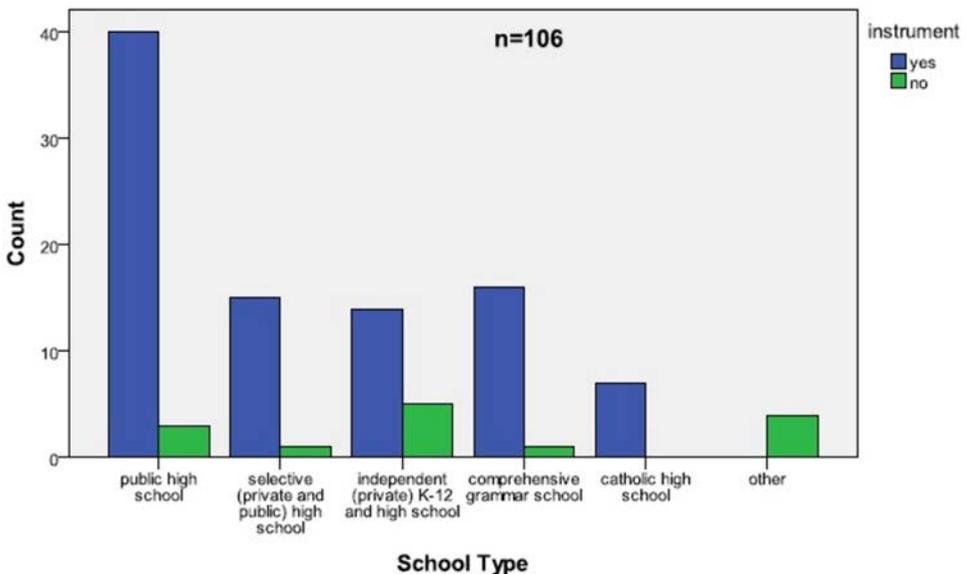


Figure 4: Instrument users by School Type

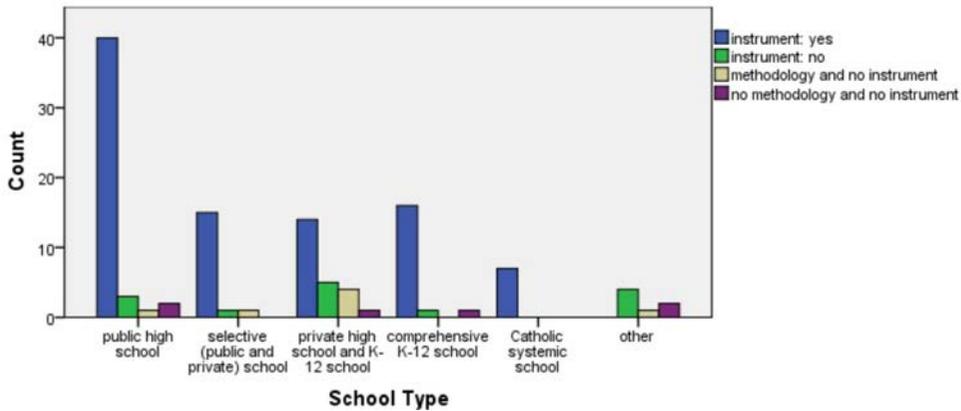


Figure 5: Instrument versus Methodology users by School Type

All in all, instruments represent the main support of learner autonomy in all school types. Nevertheless, compared to public schools in the sample there was a greater number of private schools that do not use an instrument but focus on a particular methodology (Figure 5, Table 8). Hence, the public and private schooling sectors seem to differ slightly regarding their approach to creating an autonomy friendly environment for their students.

### Preferred Instruments and their Implementation

Attempting to identify the preferred instruments used in the educational system, instrument-users were able to choose from four given instruments. The literature discusses various instruments that support students to become autonomous learners. The most cited instruments are learning plans/contracts<sup>6</sup> (Beyer, Brugger-Paggi, Caldwell, Gottmann, & Graf, 2008; Brown, 1992), portfolios (Wolff, 2002; David Little, 2002, 2009) and diaries (Thanasoulas, 2000). In addition, computer assisted learning (CALL) has more recently been allocated functions that support learner autonomy (Levy, 1997; Nadzrah, 2007). As this list included only some prominent instruments<sup>7</sup>, a category ‘other’ served to allow for more instruments to be named. Participants were able to select one or more of the named instruments.

The majority of instrument-users (n=75) stated that more than one instrument is implemented at their school (Figure 6). More than one third of instrument-users (n=33) use three instruments while about every fifth principal agreed to be using two or four instruments at their school.

<sup>6</sup> There are numerous terms used synonymously such as: personalised learning plan, individual learning plan, learning contracts.

<sup>7</sup> This work cannot provide a comprehensive list of all instruments and authors researching on the ways to foster learner autonomy.

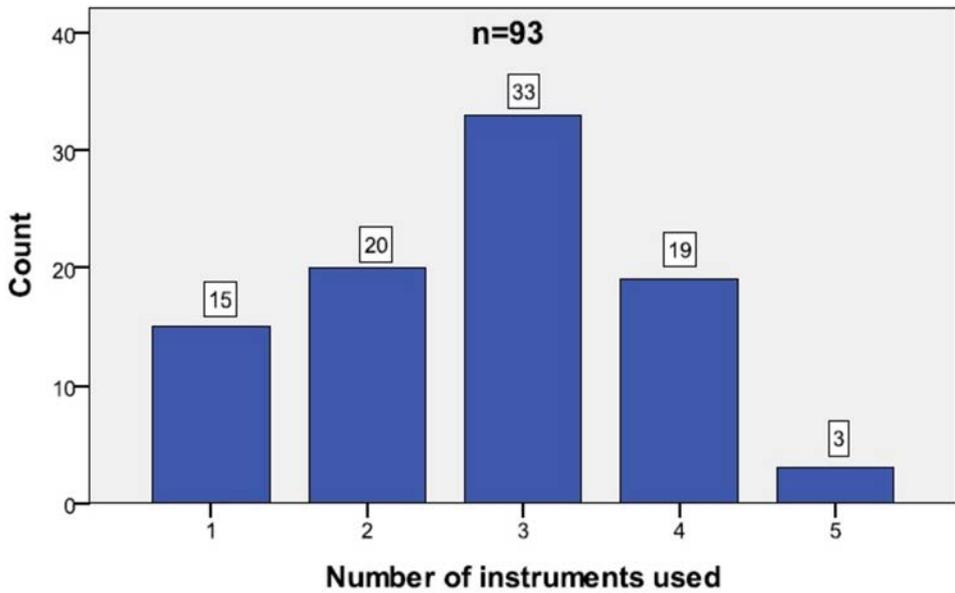


Figure 6: Number of Instruments used

With regard to the frequency according to which the instrument(s) is (are) implemented (Figure 7), about two thirds ( $n=55$ ; 73%) of the schools always use their instrument(s) as part of their pedagogical enforcement. An equal percentage of  $n=10$  (13%) use their instrument(s) regularly or sometimes.

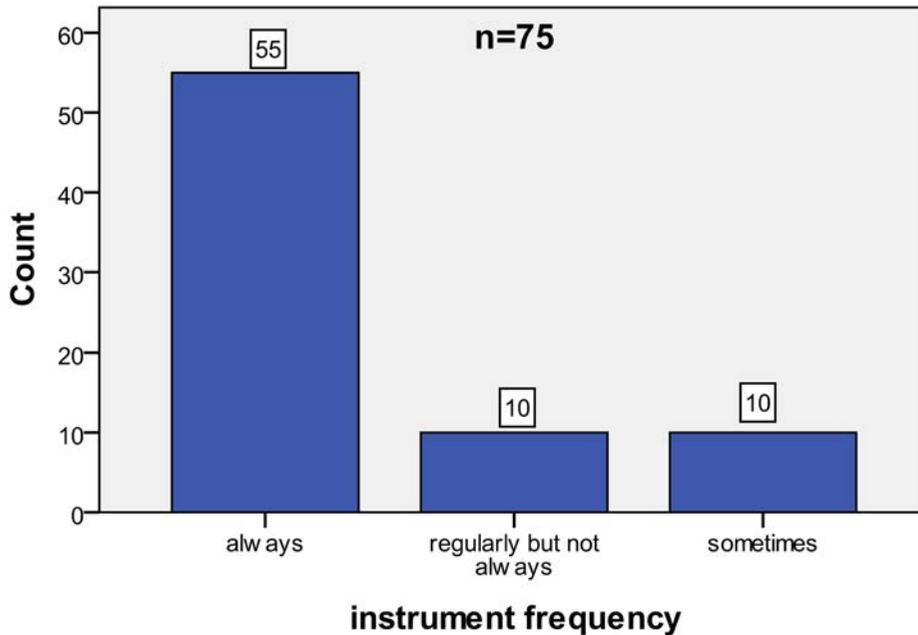


Figure 7: Instrument Frequency

Furthermore, instruments are mainly used across the curriculum, in all subjects (n=53, 60%). All other subjects were distributed between 11 (13%) and 16 (18%). Languages including English as a second language (ESL) with less than 10% of agreement clearly formed the subjects of the lowest focus (Figure 8). Other subjects where an instrument is enforced are design and technology, interdisciplinary studies. Instruments are also used outside the standard curriculum as part of independent learning programs for example. Therefore, it can be assumed that schools implement instruments in order to enhance skills of an autonomous learner in all subjects and across all subjects rather than for a particular subject only. However, aiming to define the framework under which instruments are implemented across the curriculum, the study revealed that a methodology does not always underlie the use of an instrument. Although 61 out of 85 participants (72%) agreed to follow a particular methodology on which their instrument/s is/are based, in the majority of the cases (n=36; 80%) this methodology is applied regularly but not always. Only 6 (13%) reported that they always use this methodology. 3 participants (7%) stated that they only sometimes engaged in a methodology. Hence, it seems that a particular instrument is not necessarily embedded in a methodology. No significant relationship between the school type and the frequency by which schools apply a methodology was detected.

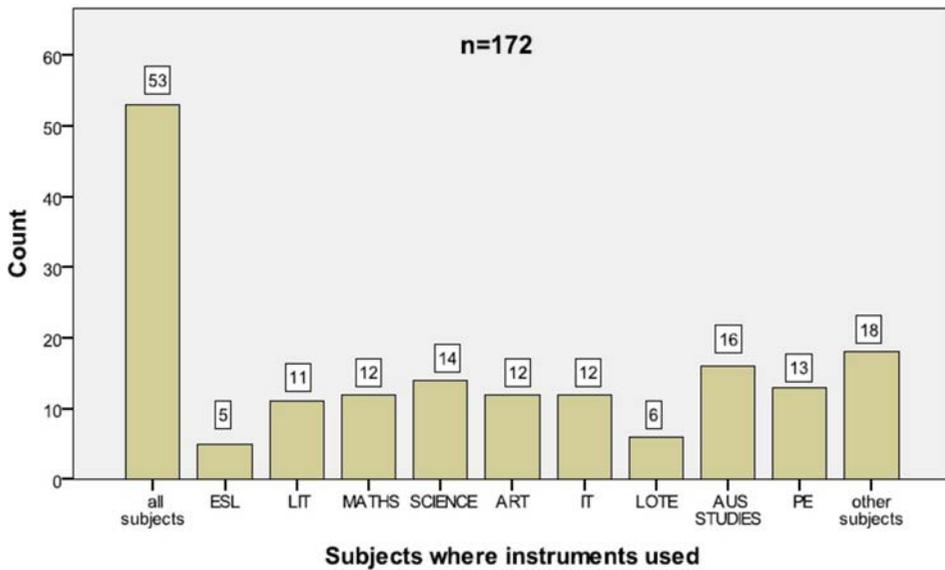


Figure 8: Subjects where Instruments used

Regarding the preference of an instrument, a ranking is apparent (Table 9, Figure 9). The learning plan/contract is used by 79 (88%) of all participants (n=245). About two thirds of all responses indicated that computers and diaries are part of a school curriculum. In only 4 cases (4%) another instrument is used. This shows that the autonomy supportive instruments suggested in the literature are equally applied in praxis.

Table 9: Distribution of Instruments used

		Responses		
		N	Percent	Percent of Cases
Instrument	portfolio	29	11.8%	32.2%
	lp	79	32.2%	87.8%
	diaries	66	26.9%	73.3%
	computer	67	27.3%	74.4%
	Other instrument	4	1.6%	4.4%
Total		245	100.0%	272.2%

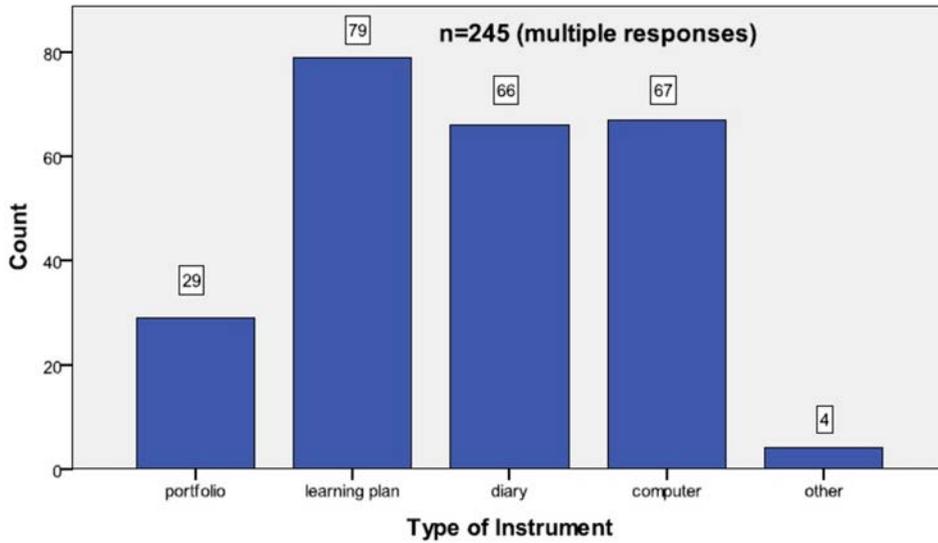


Figure 9: Distribution of Instruments Used

However, the use of a particular instrument varies amongst the different school types (Table 10, Figure 10). Learning plans are the favourable instrument in all school types apart from catholic systemic high schools. While the computer is the second favourite instrument used to support learner autonomy in public high schools, the diary is the second preferred instrument by all other school types. Computers rank in third position for selective schools and public K-12 schools, whereas private schools state portfolios in third position. This underpins the earlier conclusion that the different school types support learner autonomy in different ways.

**Table 10: Distribution of Instruments by School Type**

			Type of Instrument					Total
			portfolio	lp	diaries	computer	otherinst1	
School Type	public high school	Count	9	38	30	34	1	112
	selective (private and public) high school	Count	7	11	10	7	2	37
	independent (private) K-12 and high school	Count	8	11	11	10	1	41
	comprehensive grammar school	Count	4	16	11	10	0	41
	catholic high school	Count	1	3	4	6	0	14
Total		Count	29	79	66	67	4	245

Percentages and totals are based on responses.

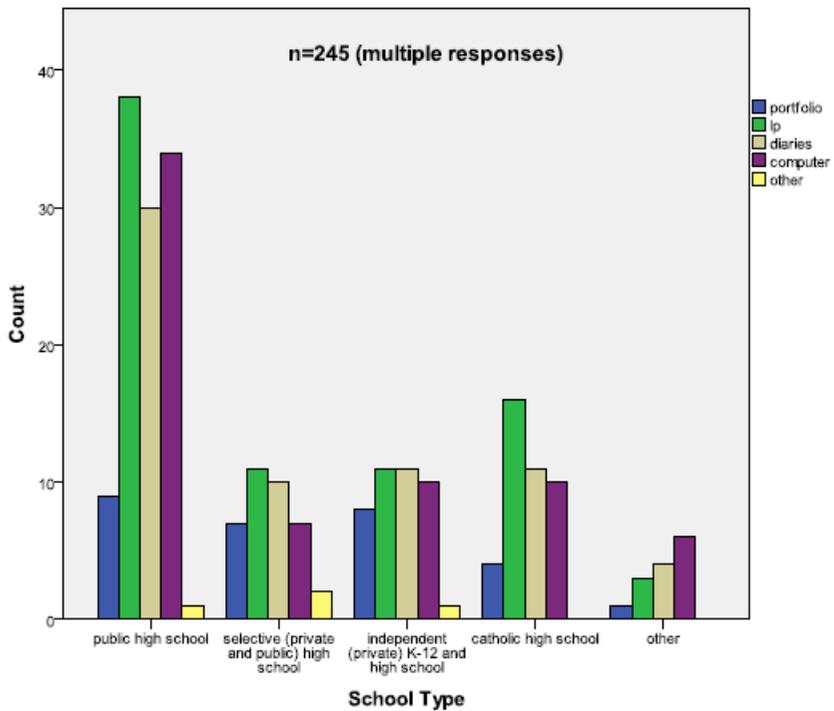


Figure 10: Distribution of Instruments by School Type

## Frameworks to Implement Learning Plans

In comparison to the other named instruments, learning plans require a specific implementation framework. Generally defined in this study as an agreement between the learner and the teacher on particular learning goals, learning plans can only function if specific resources are provided to the student and if the outcomes negotiated in the plan are subject to constant evaluation. Required resources range from greater time investment by the teacher - to assess, foster and monitor students' needs - to material requirements such as books and other sources including adequate locations (Wolff, 2002) where students can focus on their individual learning syllabus. Due to the high impact of learning plans on a management level and the controversy about the most suitable student age when to take over responsibility for ones learning (Weyers, 2009), it was expected that the majority of learning plans are used for particular classes only. The table underpins these expectations to a certain extent stating that 42 (56%, n=75) participants do not use a learning plan as part of the whole school curriculum. However, differences were not as great as expected. 33 (44%) of those schools indicated that they have made arrangements to integrate learning plans on a class level.

However, in respect of the assumption that age and management factors may play a role in the perception of the individual school types, there are two indicators. First, comparing the figures of public high schools with those from public K-12 schools, students from public high schools may be twice as likely to be working with a learning plan than students at K-12 schools. Introducing a learning plan in the senior classes at a high school may be more feasible than implementing them at a school that hosts students from kindergarten to adult age. This argument is supported by current political innovations in the education system. The government in South Australia for example has announced a policy which envisages the implementation of learning plans in all year 10 classes. The policy aims to “*develop well-rounded, capable young people who can make the most of their potential*” (Sace Board of South Australia, 2011, p. 11). In addition, strong emphasis is placed on the needs of students with disadvantaged background. The Australian government has launched a program that specifically addresses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who show a lack of literacy and numeracy skills this objective (Australian Government: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). The program is represented in the answers participants who make restricted use of learning plans formulated. The answers provided by the principals were clustered (Figure 11). Aboriginal students formed the second biggest group of students in which learning plans are used. The biggest group that uses a learning plan, however, represents students with learning needs which include behavioural issues, learning difficulties or disabilities.

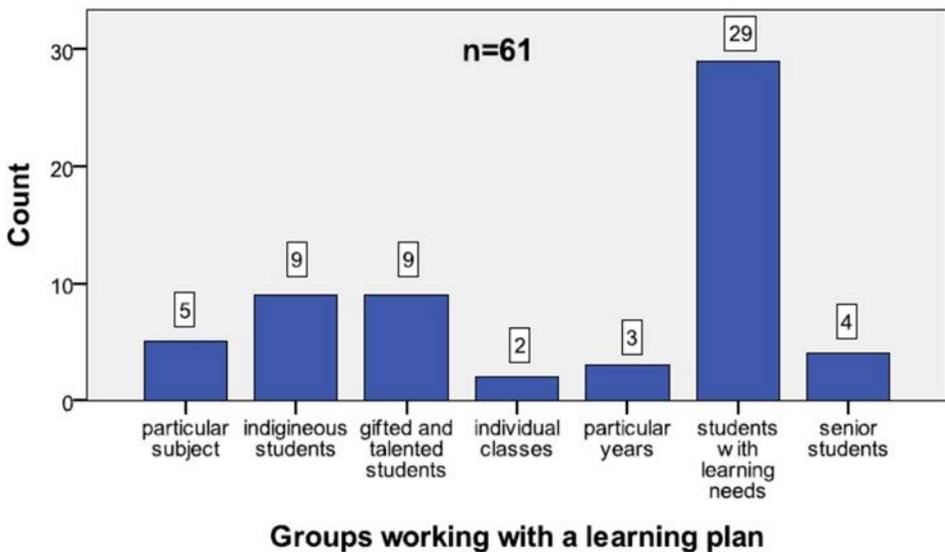


Figure 11: Particular Groups that Work with a Learning Plan

Gifted or talented students were specified as the third biggest group in which learner plans are applied restrictively. Some schools also use learning plans in particular subjects only. A reason for that might be that introducing learning plans may be more practical in some subjects rather than in others. Other collective answers included the use of learning plans in senior years or in other particular school years and in individual classes only.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the results of the study indicate that theoretical concepts on learner autonomy do not remain enclosed in the 'ivory towers' of universities and other research institutions. Concepts on learner autonomy find currency in the majority of secondary Australian schools. Furthermore, a relation between the school type and the engagement in learner autonomy has been detected with the private and selective school sector forming its strongest supporters. In comparison private and selective schools, public schools seem to have a more critical view on the concept of learner autonomy with only a small majority of schools supporting it. Investigations should be extended to determine the reasoning behind this scepticism.

In addition, it seems that schools consider a variety of aspects under the term of learner autonomy, but schools seem to prioritise their own beliefs of what learner autonomy should imply. Hence, common theoretical conceptions of learner autonomy documented in the literature do not necessarily underlie the actual concepts that are implemented in schools.

Further, secondary schools show differences in the ways their understanding of learner autonomy should be translated into their school curriculum. The majority of all school types use an instrument to foster learner autonomy across the curriculum. However, amongst the non-instrument using schools private and catholic systemic schools show a stronger tendency to use a methodology rather than an instrument. Amongst instrument-users, public schools dominate in the use of a range of instruments. However, students attending comprehensive

K-12 schools are more likely to work with an instrument than public high school students. Regardless of the school type however, learning plans form the most commonly used instrument. Their use is limited in the majority of cases to a regular but not constant use. This suggests that learning plans are considered a supplement of learner autonomy rather than the fundamental basis of it.

All in all, learner autonomy is far more than a theoretical phantasm although it has not been adopted by all schools. In terms of its understanding and implementation practises, the data indicates that schools vary significantly between and within school types. Therefore, public debates about the conception of learner autonomy have to include best practice models in addition to theoretical definitions and frameworks as defined in the literature. This is due to the varying interpretations of the concept of learner autonomy as a valuable skill for the learner. What is considered to define and to represent an autonomous learner in one school may not coincide with another school's vision. Further research would be required to provide more details on the particular frameworks that schools establish in order to support their students to become autonomous learners for which this study hopes to have laid a basis.

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## About the Author

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Having studied English, French and German as a foreign language at Master level, my interest in language acquisition, literature, cultural studies, teaching and psychology is evident. My university studies, my work experience as a teacher and research assistant at the University of Dortmund, Germany as well as my travel experiences have contributed to shaping my current Ph.D. topic, "Commitment in Learning Plans". After my move to Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, I have been able to further my teaching experience as an associate lecturer for German at the Department of International Studies as well as working on my thesis. Writing my Ph.D. and teaching enables me to combine findings and experiences from a theoretical and practical point of view. This has led to research interest in further domains such as organizational psychology and motivational research which continuously influence my work.

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