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Autonomy and Academic Success: MA Syrian Students' Perspective

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□ ABSTRACT □

This study is an attempt to investigate the academic characteristics required for international students to successfully function in a western academic context . It seeks to shed light , in particular, on the value of autonomy as an essential academic trait and goal for higher education in the west . A group of Syrian MA students studying in British universities were involved in the study.Questionnaires and interviews were the primary research methods used to conduct this research. The results indicate that MA Syrian students involved in the study show almost full possession of autonomous characteristics, though this autonomy does not always operate at an intellectual level. The study concludes that there is a need to develop and apply more advanced courses relating to particular intellectual skills for MA Syrian students, in order to help them to adjust to a Western style intellectual culture.

Key words: autonomy, academic competence, study skills, MA Syrian students.

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استقلالية المتعلم والنجاح الأكاديمي
من منظور مجموعة من طلبة الماجستير السوريين

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□ ملخّص □

تحاول هذه الدراسة تحديد السمات الأكاديمية المطلوبة للنجاح في بيئة أكاديمية غربية حيث تسعى لإلقاء الضوء على مفهوم استقلالية المتعلم والصفات المرتبطة به كأحد أهم السمات و الأهداف الأكاديمية في برامج الدراسات العليا. يركز البحث على مجموعة من طلبة الماجستير السوريين في جامعات بريطانية. استخدمت الاستبيانات والمقابلات كطرائق للبحث. تشير النتائج إلى أن الطلاب السوريين المشمولين في الدراسة يظهرون سمات المتعلم المستقل عامة وإن كان مشوبا باختلال على المستوى النقدي فكريا . تخلص الدراسة للدعوة إلى تطوير برامج دراسية ما بعد تقليدية تتناول المهارات الفكرية النقدية لمساعدة طلبة الدراسات العليا التأقلم مع الثقافة الفكرية الغربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استقلالية المتعلم،المقدرة الأكاديمية، المهارات الدراسية، طلبة الماجستير السوريين.

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Introduction:

Hill, Storch and Lynch (1999) assert that there is nobody who would argue that English language proficiency for overseas students has no role to play in academic achievement in British universities. However, language proficiency is not, of course, the only factor that contributes to academic success or failure (Graham, 1987). It is widely accepted by academics and researchers that the reasons for poor academic performance are varied and complex (Morrison et al., 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2006). Some can be the result of personal background factors, academic factors, cultural factors, teaching and supporting factors.

Ballard (1996) argues that a significant number of non-native speaking students experience serious difficulties in their early studies that are not language problems per se, but the difficulty is that of coming to terms with a new way of studying. This, according to Sowden (2003), is largely due to the fact that many international students come from cultures which are totally different in their educational systems and goals from their British counterparts. Thus, trying to answer the question of what are the characteristics required to be a successful academic student in a UK university, particularly student's autonomy, becomes important to help reforming pedagogical goals in our programs preparing Syrian students for western academia.

1-Significance of the Study

All too often, studies have attempted to highlight the study skills required for students in higher education to help them pursue a relatively smooth, successful experience (Weir, 1988; Bloor and Bloor, 1991) . These studies point out a number of problems faced by international students during their studies in Western universities, mostly in the areas of note-taking, reading research articles, writing critically, listening to lectures, and giving academic presentations (Kinnel, 1990; Blue, 1991; Jordan, 1997). The results of the studies are derived from the students' tutors perspectives, whose own judgements and expectations are the criteria for the students' success. In contrast, this study aims to find out students' own perceptions of their study skills in terms of autonomy within their academic departments. This comes into accordance with the more recent trend in research that shifts towards establishing a more detailed profile for academic success in terms of personal and cultural characteristics for international students.

2- Objectives of the Study

This research will focus on students' own perception of their autonomy as an essential characteristic for success at higher education within the UK. It will particularly consider this issue from the students' point of view. The study, therefore, seeks answers for the following questions:

- Do MA Syrian students perceive themselves to be autonomous learners in a western academic context?
- Are there any reasons for these particular perceptions?

Literature Review

1- Academic Competence

A major source of difficulty for overseas students seems to be seen in their learning approach, as inherited from previous experiences in their homeland educational-system. Both Ballard (1996) and Sowden (2003) argue that the excuse of poor English language skills as being the main source for academic problems suffered by overseas students is inadequate. They claim that these language problems are to some extent masks for much deeper problems connected with adjusting to a new intellectual culture, a new way of thinking and processing knowledge inherited in the "Anglo- education system".

Touching on the dichotomy that Ballard and Clanchy (1991) and Ballard (1996) draw upon, the influence of different cultural attitudes to knowledge on teaching and learning strategies will be helpful to understand some sources for the problems suffered by the overseas students in the Western academic culture. They suggest three recognized approaches to learning across cultures: the reproductive, the analytical and the speculative. Whereas the aim of the reproductive approach is the straightforward, unreconstructed transfer of information and skills, the analytical approach goal is more concerned with the development of independent and critical styles of thinking as well as a capacity for theory and abstraction. The speculative approach, on the other hand, seeks a more detailed development of the speculative, hypothetical and critical capacities, as well as a widening of the knowledge base (theory, data, and techniques in the study field). In Western academic contexts, the analytical approach generally characterizes undergraduate education, while the speculative approach is associated with postgraduate courses. The overseas students, in this light, often come from a culture which does not encourage independence of the mind, and does not train its students to assemble arguments based on critical evaluation of the evidence (Sowden, 2003). In short, they come from an educational system that appreciates memorizing, imitating and the correct application of formulae and information; it is a reproductive one, which does not fit readily into the West at this phase of education. Foreign students moving into the Western academic system usually lack the awareness and the skills to adjust to the requirements of the new setting. In most cases, they cling to learning strategies that worked well for them in the past, but the problem is that these means are no longer suitable to their present needs.

From the previous discussion, it seems clear that researchers in the area of study skills and academic success for overseas students agree that what these students frequently lack is not only knowledge of the study skills in the known traditional sense. For Elsey (1990) and Walters (1992), these students are more fundamentally in need of initiation in terms of "underlying competences", for successful study, independence of the mind, self-awareness, confidence, and the capacity for critical and creative thinking. A similar conclusion was reached by Tonkyn et al (1993) when seeking to determine the non-linguistic factors that seem essential for students' academic success: the ability to think critically in English and to take control of one's own learning were mentioned by the tutors as being the most important characteristics for a successful student. These needs demonstrated by Walters (ibid) are derived from the attempt to define a profile of the successful student in an academic sense. The emerged picture was not that of a proficient user of study techniques, but rather, was that of "a mature, balanced individual, possessing an open, questioning mind, and willing to adopt an active, independent approach to study" (Walters, 1992: 265).

2. Autonomy

As revealed through the investigation of the research concerning the aims, factors, and skills required for success in Western academic contexts touched on in the previous section, student's autonomy seems to be one of the essential characteristics and goals that should be empowered to overseas students.

2. 1 Definition

In the literature, a definition of the term 'autonomy' is still an elusive one that needs to be crystallized. However, a rapid review of the literature shows that autonomy is described as both an attitude towards learning and a capacity for independent learning. Holec (1981:4), in his attempt to conceptualize autonomy, defines it as the "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". This ability for being autonomous is demonstrated in the form of certain range of "explicit behaviours", which embraces the content and process of learning (Little, 1999). These behaviours of the autonomous learner range from deciding on the goals of one's learning, content, pace of progression and methods to evaluating the whole process of learning (Little, 1991; Dam, 1995). Autonomy is thus characterized by two central features: taking responsibility for one's own learning and holding the ownership of many processes traditionally belonged to the teacher such as deciding on learning objectives, methods, and content.

Furthermore, it is accepted by researchers that autonomy is a multidimensional capacity that will take on different forms for different individuals; even these vary for the same individual at different contexts and at different times. Drawing on this, Benson (2001) suggests that autonomy should be dealt with on three levels: learning management, cognitive processes and learning content. Oxford (2003), in searching for a more comprehensive framework for autonomy, proposes a model that contains four different perspectives that determine the different aspects of autonomy: technical- the focus is on the skills to function independently in self access centres for example, psychological – the focus is on autonomy as a combination of individual characteristics, a) sociocultural-autonomy as gained through mediated learning, or b) political-critical - autonomy in relation to ideologies and power structures. Through these perspectives, four themes can be identified: context, agency, motivation, and learning strategies. Associated with these, different characteristics for autonomous learners can be drawn.

2.2 The Autonomous Learner

Unlike the definition of autonomy, which is still to be perfected, the characteristics of what is agreed on as autonomous learners are well-established and widely accepted in the field. A list of these characteristics can be drawn from the works of Little (1991, 1999), Dickinson (1993), Dam (1995), Sinclair (2000), Oxford (2003), Burton and Wang (2005), Benson (2006), Holec (2008), and Murphy (2008). As such, autonomous learners are those who can perform the following consciously:

- Explicitly accept responsibility for their learning;
- Understand the purpose of their study program;
- Actively participate in setting and reformulating the goals and objectives of their learning;
- Take initiatives in planning and executing lesson activities;
- Critically reflect on their learning and evaluate its effectiveness;

- Successfully monitor their learning strategies and abandon those not working for them.

At the same time, these learners have another profile concerning their personal characteristics, based on (Dam, 1995; Oxford, 2003; Dornyei, 2003 ; Holec, 2008), as follows:

- High motivation. They have a combination of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation;
- Confidence of their own abilities;
- Willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others;
- Positive attitudes;
- Desire to seek meaning;
- Need for achievement.

Methodology

The present study was conducted using a mixed methodology of research including both qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and analysis. This is in line with the growing tendency in the field which challenges the traditional dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative research methods. It seems that the boundaries between qualitative and quantitative are increasingly blurred and that researchers often end up incorporating methods from two camps in order to answer their research questions. Pring (2000) emphasises that there is no such kind of distinction between these two research paradigms and that no distinction should exist. Moreover, the research nature is frequently described in terms of "fixed design strategy" and "flexible design strategy" (Robson, 2002). While the first of these adopts one single method when conducted, the other can include collecting both types of quantitative and qualitative data. Thus, this research design is flexible. I made use of a combination of research methods involving both interviews and questionnaires. The importance of this choice springs from the fact that no instrument on its own can provide the necessary validity and reliability desired in a piece of research as asserted by Weir (2005). In accordance with this, the data initially obtained was harnessed by means of a questionnaire (see appendix one) distributed for as many students from the population as were willing to cooperate. On the basis of the questionnaire responses, four interviewees were chosen. This allowed for more-in-depth investigation of the issues raised.

1 Participants

The study was conducted with the participation of 30 MA Syrian students in different British universities. All of them were from Syria and speak Arabic as their first language. They were 19 male and 11 female candidates ranging from 22 to 35 in age. They were also from different educational backgrounds.

2 Quantitative Part

Based on literature in this field, a questionnaire was prepared .Three broad types of data, as identified by Dornyei (2003), can be harnessed through the use of questionnaires: these are factual, behavioural, and attitudinal. Most of the questions included in the questionnaire were of the "closed ended" and "fixed response" types, and based on the Likert scale. Furthermore, the respondents' views were solicited through "open ended "questions. The main reason for this is that because though "responses to closed questions

are easier to collect and analyze, one often obtains more useful information from open questions" (Nunan: 1992, 143).This questionnaire was split into two parts to elicit the following data:

A. Background information about the students and in particular, their language proficiency tests and scores;

B. The students' actual experience during the study programme, in terms of the level of autonomy and the extent to which they were prepared for their courses through the language programs they did before joining their MA.

Before the questionnaire's actual administration, it was studied and revised repeatedly, and then for the purpose of content and linguistic validity, it was piloted with 3 university teachers having the given criteria. Moreover, on the basis of the feedback obtained, some modifications were done and at this stage the questionnaire was finalized. The quantitative data from the questionnaire were analysed by totalling the number of responses in a particular category. This enabled common ideas about the study skills required in the academic setting to be identified.

3 Qualitative Part

Interviewing, as stated earlier, was chosen as a supplementary data collection instrument. The argument for this choice is that the interactional nature of the interview situation gives it "adaptability" that enables the researcher to gain "information that a written response would conceal" (Bell, 1999:98). In order to test the validity of the responses provided by the questionnaires and to explore in more depth issues arising, I selected four respondents to take part in the interviews (see appendix two for the interview questions). The interviewees were selected according to the following initial criteria:

- Their willingness to cooperate further;
- The potential for their responses to be enlightening for my research;
- The need to maintain a balance in terms of the representative subject samples chosen.

The aim of the interviews was to gain a more detailed picture of the students' own thoughts and attitudes regarding their skills, and the degree to which these skills had been predicted by the proficiency tests they took. Of the three types of interview available, namely structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Robson; 2002:270), a semi-structured format was chosen, which "[is] intended to encourage people to speak." and in definition these "are guided conversations and the list of questions on the interview guide is just that: a flexible guide and not a rigid framework." (Arksey and Knight, 1999: 98). The interviews concentrated on the following areas:

a. The students' perception of autonomy as a required characteristic for the course;
b. The students' actual experience concerning autonomy on their course;
c. The students' views of what could be done to enhance their autonomy.

The qualitative data from both the interviews and the questionnaires was coded, with broad categories being identified. This allowed the frequency of a particular category to be identified and at the same time, it enabled the researcher to narrow down the data to themes. The benefit of this is that it made the process of data analysis a much smoother one.

4 Procedure

More than 40 questionnaires were administered through face-to-face contact or email by the researcher. 30 of them were returned. Thus, the response rates to them were about

75 %. In each one, namely the paper version and the electronic one, the purpose of the study and a request for participants were stated. The data were collected over a 2-year period.

Findings and Discussions

The responses of the MA students for this part of the questionnaire are set in table one and two overleaf. The 30 students in the sample answered all the statements in this section.

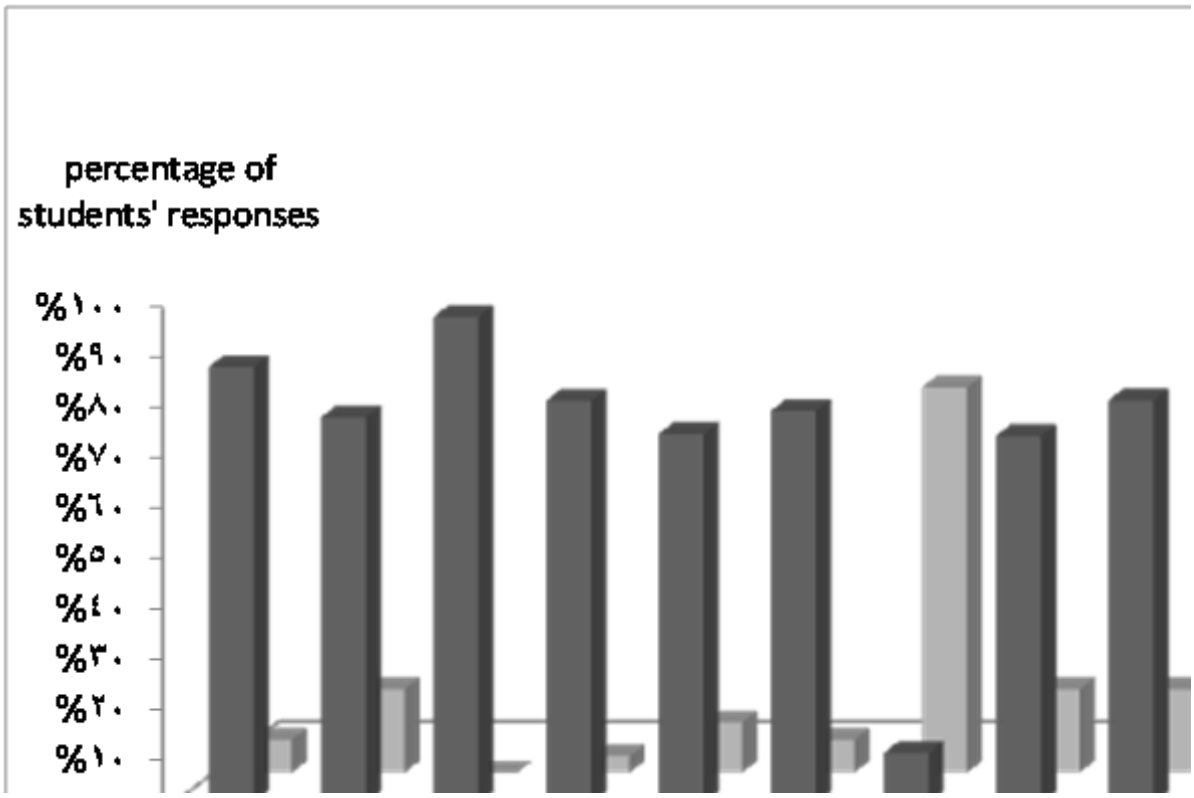

Figure 1: percentage of students' responses for each of the questionnaire items in terms of only agreement and disagreement .

Table 1: detailed number of students' responses to the questionnaire items.

Autonomous characteristics	Totally agree	Slightly agree	Neither agree or disagree	Slightly disagree	Totally disagree
1. In retrospect, I am satisfied with my choice of modules.	14	12	2	2	-
2. I feel happy with my achievements on the course so far.	11	12	2	3	2
3. Throughout my course, I have been able to take responsibility for my own learning.	19	10	1	-	-
4. I have actively shared in formulating my own learning objectives.	11	13	5	1	-

5. I have had no difficulty in recognizing the aims and the purposes of my classes.	9	13	5	3	-
6. I have had my own plan to achieve my learning goals.	13	11	4	2	-
7. Throughout my course, I have had to rely heavily on advice from my tutor.	1	2	4	15	8
8. I have made good use of the feedback on my work to reformulate my goals and learning strategies.	8	14	3	5	-
9. I regularly reflect and self-evaluate my learning strategies and experience.	12	12	1	5	-
10. I have generally felt confident about my own abilities.	13	9	2	6	-
11. On my course, I have found the academic work to be intellectually more demanding than I expected.	8	11	3	7	1
12. I have been able to cope adequately with the demands of the course.	10	15	2	3	-

Table2: the overall percentage of students' responses to the questionnaire items.

Autonomous characteristics	Totally agree	Slightly agree	Neither agree or disagree	Slightly disagree	Totally disagree
1. In retrospect, I am satisfied with my choice of modules.	46.6%	40%	6.6%	6.6%	-
2. I feel happy with my achievements on the course so far.	36.6%	40%	6.6%	10%	6.6%
3. Throughout my course, I have been able to take responsibility for my own learning.	63.6%	33.3%	3.3%	-	-
4. I have actively shared in formulating my own learning objectives.	36.6%	43.3%	16.6%	3.3%	-
5. I have had no difficulty in recognizing the aims and the purposes of my classes.	30%	43.3%	16.6%	10%	-
6. I have had my own plan to achieve my learning goals.	43.3%	36.6%	13.3%	6.6 %	-
7. Throughout my course, I have had to rely heavily on advice from my tutor.	3.3%	6.6%	13.3%	50%	26.6%
8. I have made good use of the feedback on my work to reformulate my goals and learning strategies.	26.6%	46.6%	10%	16.6%	-
9. I regularly reflect and self-evaluate my learning strategies and experience.	40%	40%	3.3%	16.6%	-
10. I have generally felt confident about my own abilities.	43.3%	30%	6.6%	20%	-
11. On my course, I have found the academic work to be intellectually more demanding than I expected.	26.6%	36.6%	10%	23.3%	3.3%
12. I have been able to cope adequately with the demands of the course.	33.3%	50%	6.6%	10%	-

An overall view of the MA students' responses concerning their attitudes of the characteristics and behaviours of their being autonomous demonstrates that these students seem to be highly autonomous learners almost in all aspects defining the concept of autonomy. Higher percentages are identified across all the questionnaire statements providing the clues for fully autonomous learners in their attitudes, abilities for taking the responsibility of their study, formulating and reformulating their study goals, self-evaluating, and feeling satisfied with their choices and achievements. One point to be highlighted in these responses is the low percentages in the neutral position, which ranges from 3.3% to 16.6%. This indicates the full awareness of these students for their autonomy which might be explained in terms of their previous academic experience on one hand and their being mature, adult students on the other. This result is also in keeping with the expectations about adult students suggested by Rogers (1996:35) including: "characteristics such as far-sightedness, self-control, established and acceptable values, security, experience and autonomy".

The interviews sought to investigate these results in greater depth. Though these students were autonomous, they were able to recognize the centrality of autonomy in their academic course. Ali, one of the interviewees, stated the importance of this concept in the interview: "the postgraduate course here required me to take charge of my learning and to learn independently". Not far from this view, Ola, another interviewee, said: "what I have learnt most in this course is that I should not only learn following the teacher's plan or the course as in the past, but I also need to learn to arrange my own study plan because here no one forces you to learn … it all depends on you". However, this autonomy is not in the same degree on all levels for all students, as indicated by Little (1991). A third interviewee, Amani, though considering herself as developing her skills as a more autonomous learner, mentioned confidence in her own critical abilities as being the main problem when she first arrived in the UK : "I knew I had to work on my own but I was afraid of relying on my judgments and abilities at the beginning … I used to be affected by my colleagues in the course at the beginning in everything I read and write and even think… and then upon the assignments time I became heavily relying on my tutor for advice". It seems from this quotation that autonomy for Amani continues to be problematic in functioning on the intellectual level, which according to Benson (2001: 43) equates with "critical intelligence, independence of thought and judgment". Hence, this conclusion may go some way towards shedding light on the reasons behind the problems these students reported in relation to critical reading and writing.

The four interviewees highlighted this last issue of autonomy functioning at an intellectual level and particularly its critical aspect. The interviewees agreed that the main reason behind this lack of autonomy at an intellectual level is to a large extent of a cultural, educational nature and to a less extent of individual one. A fourth interviewee Ammar, commenting on this issue, states the following: "I remember my main difficulty at the beginning was the adjustment to the learning culture at my university rather than my academic skills … I thought I would have no such a problem since I knew a lot about that …but it seems that the long history of rote learning back home still has a deep impact on the way I approach and think of issues". The notion of inherited rote learning, based on memorizing, is mentioned by both Ammar and Ola. This idea seems to have a major influence on autonomy on all its levels from pushing students to total reliance on the teacher not ending by losing control over the whole learning process. This suggestion is in full contrast with Kember (2004: 37) who, though accepting the fact that overseas students are passive learners who depend on rote learning as a strategy which is inherited from the

ways they have been taught at school and "the underlying socio-cultural patterns of behaviours", argues that what is seen as hindering the fulfilment of autonomy is as a matter of fact a merit in achieving deep understanding of the materials learned.

Drawing on the above discussion, it could be concluded that MA Syrian students demonstrate almost a full range of characteristics and behaviors for being autonomous learners. However, they seem to struggle with the critical dimension of autonomy on the intellectual level. Furthermore, the study reveals that these students attribute this critical shortcoming basically to inherited cultural and educational reasons.

Conclusion

1 Implications and Recommendations

This study indicates that the courses preparing Syrian students for studying in British universities remain valid to some extent concerning the linguistic aspect, but that their value is somewhat lessened in terms of the MA students' academic needs. These needs, emerging from these students, throughout this study tend to be of more intellectual nature-related. It seems, especially with postgraduate studies, that attention should be shifted or stretched beyond the usual focus on learning the techniques of note-taking and essay-writing to concentrate primarily on developing the student's critical thinking skills as a main characteristic of intellectual autonomy. The recommendation would , thus, be to develop a course of a rather different nature in English for intellectual purposes (EIP); a notion suggested by Ballard (1996) and Sowden (2003). Ballard (1996: 164) argues that such a course should "introduce them to the intellectual skills they will require and the study adjustments they must make if they are to be successful in an unfamiliar foreign language and foreign culture institution". An attempt to develop such a syllabus was held by Walters (1992) but the problem, as she reports, was broadly speaking the difficulty of teaching such insufficient concrete skills. In the light of this research, such a course might introduce students to the two following areas:

- The intellectual demands of university work and on a later stage the department demands;
- The language skills required to perform such skills.

However, much more effort needs to be devoted to researching this poorly investigated area, and it seems essential to find out more about the nature of these skills and to develop substantial methods for teaching them.

Moreover, a suggestion may be made to introduce an academic test that is capable of evaluating students at the level of more advanced academic thinking skills. Such a test may help the Syrian universities and ministry of higher of education to determine the student's potential and consequently, may further guarantee quality standards, whilst ensuring that Syrian students have minimal difficulties. This will also help the students themselves by predicting their own level of success in Western universities. This kind of test suggested cannot be designed without further research, which aims to establish a theoretical framework that can rationalize the criteria for the students.

2 Limitations

The study in question is necessarily small in scale in terms of the number of participants. In this sense, I cannot claim that my data was sufficient to establish statistically well-founded generalizations concerning these students, even though it acts as a useful starting point in focusing on these areas. Subsequently, further research is required on a larger scale.

Furthermore, the focus of the study has been on the MA Syrian students' perceptions of their autonomy and their potential problems in the academic context. This limited focus of the study to the students' perceptions raises the issue of how reliable are their attitudes? Especially in relation to making judgements about their abilities where it is very common to students to either overestimate or underestimate their skills and problems. Consequently, a wider study that includes in addition to the students' perceptions their tutors' views towards the issues in question will help to overcome the previous problem.

A further point emerges in relation to the nature of the findings obtained in the research. These findings are much more quantitative in nature; though a qualitative method was used but because of the wide range of elements and factors involved in most issues explored did not give the space for a detailed investigation. Thus, many issues arising in the research could be areas for much more detailed investigation in future pieces of research. Among such issues is the area of critical thinking which might be an area of fruitful research to provide answers for many questions such as: how can these become the base for more advanced courses in study skills areas?

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