



**BA/LEVERHULME SMALL
RESEARCH GRANT**

POLICY BRIEF

Driving and Restraining
Forces for Students'
Adoption of **Self-Directed
Learning** in Higher Education



دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة
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Ministry of Higher Education

SUBMITTED TO

MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION



POLICY BRIEF

Driving and Restraining Forces for Students' Adoption of Self- Directed Learning in Higher Education

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Dr. Sabiha Mumtaz is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wollongong in Dubai. She holds an MBA from Aligarh Muslim University, India, where she earned multiple academic recognitions. She teaches Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management electives. Prior to academia, she held a management role at Allahabad Bank, contributing to digital transformation initiatives. She also served as Registrar at IMT University Dubai and has taught at several leading universities in Dubai, specialising in Human Resource Management.



Prof. Christian Harrison is a Professor of Leadership and Enterprise at the University of Bolton, UK. He previously served as Reader in Leadership and Chair of the Staff Forum for Research at the University of the West of Scotland. With a background in pharmacy, Prof. Harrison transitioned into management, completing an MBA with distinction and a PhD in Leadership. His research focuses on various leadership paradigms including authentic, ethical, and entrepreneurial leadership.



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Ms. Udani Dilrangi is a Lecturer in Management and the Program Convenor – Commerce at Edith Cowan University, Sri Lanka. She is currently pursuing her Doctor of Business Administration at Lincoln University College, Malaysia. She holds an MBA in Entrepreneurship, for which she was awarded the Most Outstanding Performer, and a First Class Honours BSc (Hons) in International Business Management from the University of Plymouth, UK.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this policy report is to provide some practical implications for the Sri Lankan Higher Education sector by outlining the driving and restraining forces for students' self-directed learning adoption in higher education.

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 and deepen the knowledge on more context-specific factors that are yet to be explored in the emerging nations' perspective.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Lifelong learning is widely recognized as essential due to the rapid and constant evolution of knowledge (Lehtinen et al., 2014). This necessitates that learners take ownership of their learning and develop independent learning skills (Garrison, 1997). Self-directed learning (SDL) refers to a process where learners take the lead in managing their learning objectives and tasks to achieve personal goals (Morris, 2019).

Traditionally, educational systems, particularly in developing nations, have been largely teacher centric. In South Asia, especially in countries like Sri Lanka and India, there is a notable gap in how educational systems address real-world issues (Acharya et al., 2023). Although there is growing interest in transitioning to student-centric learning, countries like Sri Lanka and India are still rooted in traditional, instructor-led models (Kurian et al., 2021). Various challenges, including limited infrastructure, inadequate digital access, and economic constraints (Ndubuisi et al., 2021), prevent widespread adoption of SDL.

These challenges can be both systemic and infrastructural. For instance, curricula in many countries remain rigid and ill-suited for SDL (Ndubuisi et al., 2021), and e-learning systems are crucial for SDL but are hindered by poor internet access (Al-Adwan et al., 2022).

Moreover, the digital divide, which encompasses not only access to technology but also the ability to use it effectively (Woo et al., 2022), further exacerbates these issues. Despite these barriers, the need for SDL has become more evident, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which underscored the importance of student agency in learning (Punjani & Mahadevan, 2022). Globally, SDL equips learners with the autonomy and motivation needed to navigate the fast-changing educational landscape, but developing countries face unique challenges in implementing it. Cultural factors, such as collectivism and high power distance in countries like Sri Lanka and India, further complicate the adoption of SDL, as they emphasize communal learning and teacher authority (Grande et al., 2022).

Addressing these gaps requires a deep understanding of the forces that drive and hinder SDL adoption in developing countries. By examining these dynamics, this research aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the global discourse on SDL, offering valuable insights that can shape the future of education in emerging contexts like India and Sri Lanka. The **key research objectives** are as follows:

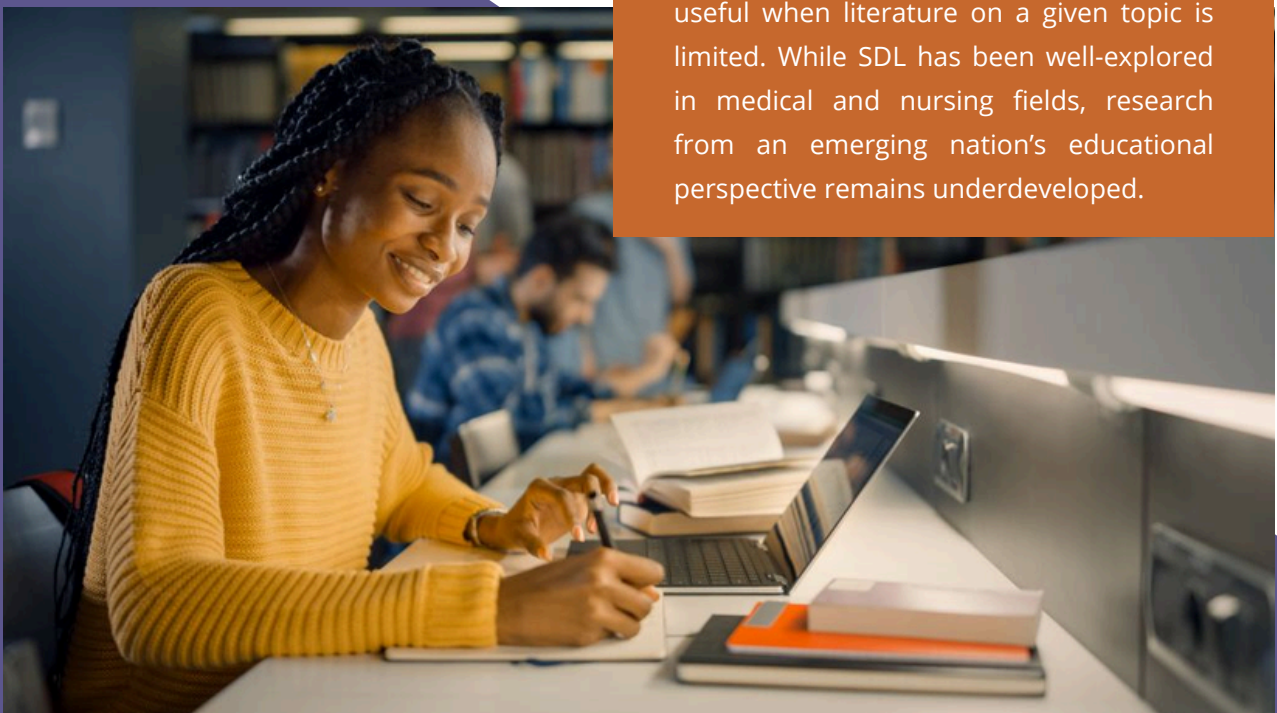
1. Examine the current adoption patterns of SDL in emerging context.
2. Identify the key drivers of SDL growth in these regions.
3. Explore the main challenges hindering SDL adoption.
4. Integrate findings to strengthen understanding and support for SDL in these contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs force field analysis as its theoretical foundation. Originally developed by Lewin (1943), force field analysis is a strategic tool used to examine the driving and restraining forces in a particular situation or change initiative. The core of Lewin's model focuses on identifying factors that either encourage or inhibit specific behaviors, a concept that has been supported in subsequent studies (e.g., Swanson and Creed, 2014). In the education sector, force field analysis has been applied in research examining major structural reforms within universities and other advanced educational frameworks (Mahmud et al., 2019; Shamsher et al., 2021). Recent SDL literature identifies key driving forces that facilitate SDL, such as well-trained educators, small learning cohorts, competency-based assessments and personalized feedback.

Conversely, challenges to SDL adoption, like insufficient support for self-learning (Maphalala et al., 2021), educator shortages (Yasmin et al., 2019), limited time for subjects (Bandara, 2022), and distractions (Kohan et al., 2017), have also been noted.

Given the nascent research into SDL in emerging contexts and the need for a thorough understanding of its evolution in a post-pandemic landscape, this study adopts an exploratory approach. Philosophically, this follows an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on subjective factors like cultural and contextual differences. This aligns with an inductive research method, aiming to build theory from the findings. Inductive research is often exploratory, and as Swedberg (2020) notes, it is particularly useful when literature on a given topic is limited. While SDL has been well-explored in medical and nursing fields, research from an emerging nation's educational perspective remains underdeveloped.



ADOPTED METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to explore the implementation of self-directed learning (SDL) in India and Sri Lanka, aiming to identify the key factors that support or hinder its adoption in these local contexts. Qualitative data is used for deeper and richer exploration. The research employs focus groups and semi-structured interviews for data collection. Purposeful sampling is utilized to select participants from two universities, one in each country. This approach is useful when researchers have access to key informants capable of providing rich, informative cases. The sample includes educators with at least a master's degree and final-year students, with students participating in focus groups and educators in semi-structured interviews.

To ensure validity, an interview protocol grounded in a comprehensive literature review will be developed. Each country will conduct three student focus groups with 6–8 participants, following Rabiee's (2004) guidelines, and 40 semi-structured interviews in total across both institutions, consistent with sample size. Before implementation, a pilot study will be conducted involving higher education stakeholders to ensure the appropriateness of the questions and themes for SDL in India and Sri Lanka.

Data from the focus groups will be compiled based on key themes from literature and refined through the pilot study. The interviews will be analysed using template analysis, a structured yet flexible form of thematic analysis (King, 2012). This process involves creating a coding template based on predefined codes and refining it throughout the analysis (Brooks et al., 2015). NVivo software will assist in managing the rich qualitative data. The iterative nature of template analysis will allow codes to evolve as more insights are gathered (King, 2012).

Two research associates, one from each country, will coordinate the primary data collection and assist with focus groups and interviews. They will maintain regular communication with the core research team to address any concerns and receive supervision. Methodological training and skill development will be provided as needed. The study timeline aligns with key milestones, including a conference paper at the BAM conference and a manuscript submission to the Journal of Management Reviews. This research seeks to contribute to the growing need for exploratory studies on SDL adoption in emerging contexts, especially in light of the transformative impact of the pandemic on higher education.



Highlights

Overview of the British Academy of Management small research grant



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2023 – 2024 BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants Scheme can be considered the British Academy's most popular scheme in terms of applications received and awards made and one of the Academy's most prominent programmes with awards made to academics working in around 100 institutions around the UK. The BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grants have established themselves as one of the Academy's highest-profile programmes. These awards are intended to cover the expenses associated with a defined research project up to £10,000 in value and tenable for 24 months.

Project Background

Teachers have historically dominated educational systems, especially in developing countries. There is a clear gap between university education systems in South Asia, particularly those centred around teachers and in addressing some real-world issues through education. There is a complex interplay between traditional norms and modern pressures regarding education in Sri Lanka and India. Although contemporary pedagogical practices are evident, they are not without challenges. Even though there is a growing interest in self-directed learning and a move toward student-centric learning, Sri Lankan and Indian students still have a traditional classroom learning process led by instructors.

As higher education evolves, self-directed learning (SDL) is at the forefront of this paradigm shift. The Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of SDL and the need for students to develop agentic competencies as part of their learning. Due to the challenges associated with the digital age,

globalisation, and the increasing emphasis on lifelong learning, the importance of SDL has been magnified simultaneously. This approach equips learners with the skills to navigate the ever-evolving knowledge landscape and fosters a sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation, vital qualities for the 21st-century learner.

Though the global conversation on SDL is comprehensive, it neglects the distinct challenges and opportunities in developing nations. In these countries, limited educational resources and opportunities hinder SDL's widespread adoption. For example, countries with collectivistic cultures, such as Sri Lanka (Collectivism=65), demonstrate cultural values emphasising communal learning in a classroom setting and may resist the individualistic nature of SDL. Similarly, in high power distance societies, e.g., India (Power distance=77), the traditional role of the teacher as the primary knowledge imparter might conflict with the SDL approach, where the learner takes charge of their own education.

Grande et al. (2022) highlight the distinctive characteristics of individual nations when addressing SDL and that there has been a lack of substantial research into SDL readiness from an Asian perspective. There is a significant gap in the current literature, which is highlighted by this oversight. As a result of the current recognition of SDL's transformative potential in reshaping educational outcomes, an appreciation of its dynamics in the context of developing nations becomes increasingly important. Rather than relying on organisational training initiatives alone, employees

in these regions need to cultivate SDL skills and foster a proactive learning attitude to compete with Western counterparts. Since the education system globally was affected by the pandemic, it is unclear whether the Covid-19 situation enabled or hindered the implementation of SDL. It is not just about individual growth but also about contributing to broader economic development. This study aims to fill this gap in current literature by providing a nuanced perspective from emerging contexts and enriching the SDL discourse theoretically as a result.

A brief overview of the research team profile

Dr. Isuru Koswatte: He is an assistant professor of business and management at the University of the West of Scotland, specialising in organisational resilience, entrepreneurship, and business sustainability, with active international collaborative research. Recently won the UWS Vice Chancellor's Studentship award in 2023 as well as the UWS Crucible Research competition for his outstanding commitment. He is also an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at NSBM Green University. He completed his PhD at 27 from the University of Manchester and is skilled in Mixed Method Research, Structure Equation Modelling, and qualitative research.

Dr. Sabiha Mumtaz: She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wollongong in Dubai. She is a highly qualified academic, having been bestowed several awards and recognitions throughout her time at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), including a Gold Medal for her MBA (scoring 99.47) in the National Percentile test of MBAs conducted by the All-

India Management Association, a ranking comprising candidates from various management colleges across India.

Professor Christian Harrison: He is a Professor of Leadership and Enterprise at the University of Bolton. Before joining the University of Bolton, he was a Reader in Leadership and the Chair of the Staff Forum for Research of the University of the West of Scotland, United Kingdom. He graduated with a First-class degree in Pharmacy and practised as a pharmacist, assuming managerial positions before moving into the Management field. Prof. Christian Harrison has an MBA and was the valedictorian of the University of Aberdeen Business School MBA class with Distinction. He is a recognised expert on leadership and provides regular expert media commentary on Scottish Television News (STV), Scotland Tonight.

Dr. Nirma Jayawardena: She is an assistant professor of marketing at Bradford University, UK. She completed PhD in Marketing and a Graduate Diploma in Business Research from Griffith University, Australia. She has published her work in prestigious journals and has received several national and international awards, grants, and scholarships.

Shehani Joseph: She is a lecturer in business and management at NSBM Green University. She has completed her MBA from Teesside University. In addition to her teaching role, she is an active researcher in entrepreneurship, self-esteem, leadership, and business psychology. She is presently the mistress-in-charge of the entrepreneurial circle and the dynamic society building future entrepreneurs.

Contributed by: Dr. Isuru Koswatte

CEYLON
TODAY

COLUMN

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Newspaper Article published on Ceylon Today

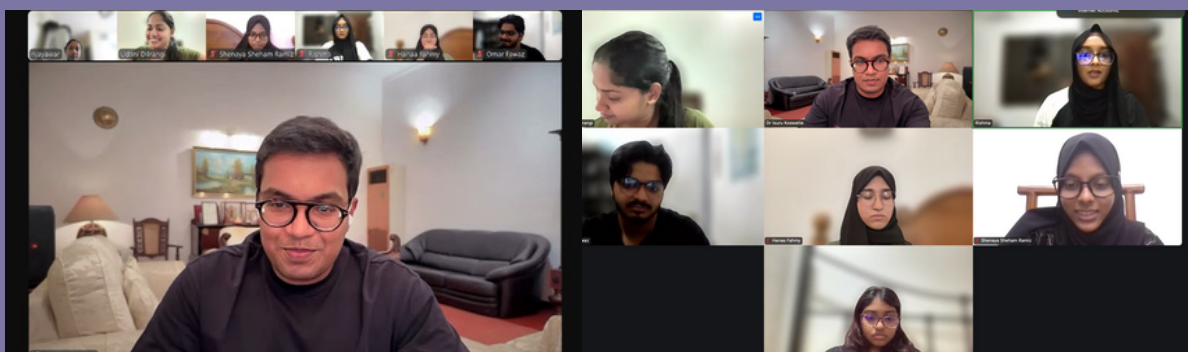
Highlights



Handing over the policy document to Mrs. Maheshwari, the Executive Director at South Asia Policy and Research Institute (SAPRI)



Continuous progress review and discussion meetings are being conducted to support and advance the research study.



A focus group discussion was conducted with undergraduate students as part of the pilot study



PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN SRI LANKA

The practical implications of advancing self-directed learning (SDL) in Sri Lanka's higher education sector could be transformative, particularly given the prevailing teacher-centred educational approaches. Key implications include:

1

To promote SDL, Sri Lankan universities would need to introduce more flexible curricula. Current structures are relatively rigid and fail to foster the learner autonomy crucial for SDL. Changes could include implementing project-based learning, competency-driven assessments, and personalized learning pathways, enabling students to take more responsibility for their educational progress.

2

A shift to SDL requires educators to move from being knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning. This would necessitate professional development programs that train educators in coaching and guiding students toward SDL practices, providing personalized support and feedback to foster independent learning.

3

E-learning systems are vital for SDL, giving students access to necessary resources for self-study. In Sri Lanka, however, digital infrastructure remains a challenge, necessitating increased investment in technology and internet access to ensure that students can benefit from SDL opportunities.

4

To effectively implement SDL, students need to develop skills such as time management, critical thinking, and self-regulation. Universities could offer workshops and training programs to help students acquire these competencies, empowering them to direct their learning more effectively.

5

The digital divide poses a significant barrier to SDL in Sri Lanka, where unequal access to technology could limit its reach. Government and institutional efforts to provide students with devices and improve internet connectivity, particularly in rural areas, are essential for the widespread adoption of SDL.

6

Encouraging SDL in higher education would help prepare students for lifelong learning, a critical skill in today's rapidly changing world. By fostering this mindset, Sri Lankan graduates can become more adaptable and competitive in both local and global job markets, contributing to national economic development.

7

While SDL emphasizes individual autonomy, Sri Lanka's collectivist culture values collaborative learning. Universities can create a hybrid model where SDL is complemented by group work and peer collaboration, thus aligning with cultural preferences while promoting learner independence.

8

With globalization increasing demand for adaptable, self-reliant learners, incorporating SDL into higher education can enhance the global competitiveness of Sri Lankan graduates. By cultivating independent problem-solving skills, these graduates would be better equipped to meet the needs of international industries and work environments.

In conclusion, implementing SDL in Sri Lanka's higher education system requires overcoming significant cultural, infrastructural, and systemic barriers. Nevertheless, the potential benefits—developing independent learners and enhancing the quality of education—are considerable, positioning Sri Lanka to compete more effectively in the global knowledge economy.

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