

Socioeconomic Inequality and Autonomous Learning among University Students in Morocco: Access, Challenges, and Educational Opportunities

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Abstract

Socioeconomic inequality can strongly influence students' learning experiences and their ability to study independently. Students do not always have equal access to educational resources such as computers, internet connections, private tutoring, learning materials, and extracurricular activities. These differences can affect the amount of time and support students have for autonomous learning.

This study examines the relationship between socioeconomic conditions and autonomous learning among university students in Morocco. It focuses particularly on differences in access to educational resources, financial pressure, study time, and opportunities for independent learning. A mixed-method approach was used, combining quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative interviews. The study involved 120 students from the English Department at Moulay Ismail University. The findings show important differences between students from higher, middle, and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds reported greater access to computers, internet services, private tutoring, and extracurricular learning activities. In contrast, students experiencing greater financial pressure reported less time for study and autonomous learning.

The findings suggest that socioeconomic inequality can create unequal learning opportunities at university. Financial difficulties may require some students to work part-time, reducing the time available for academic activities. Limited access to technology and academic support can further restrict students' ability to learn independently. The study therefore argues that universities should provide stronger academic, technological, and financial support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Creating more equal learning conditions can help students develop greater independence and improve their academic opportunities.

Keywords: socioeconomic inequality, autonomous learning, university students, educational resources, financial pressure, Morocco, independent learning.

1. Introduction

Higher education is expected to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and independence needed for academic and professional life. One important part of this process is autonomous learning. Autonomous

learning refers to students' ability to take responsibility for their own learning, set goals, organize their study, monitor their progress, and look for additional learning opportunities.

However, students do not enter university with the same resources or learning conditions. Their socioeconomic background can influence the opportunities available to them. Some students have access to personal computers, stable internet connections, private tutoring, books, quiet study spaces, and other forms of academic support. Other students may have limited access to these resources because of financial difficulties.

The relationship between socioeconomic conditions and learning is particularly important in the context of higher education. University students are increasingly expected to work independently, use digital resources, conduct research, and develop their own academic skills. When students lack the necessary resources, their ability to meet these expectations may be reduced.

Previous research has identified socioeconomic status as an important factor in students' educational experiences. Students from families with greater financial resources often have more opportunities to access technology, academic support, and extracurricular activities. Students from lower-income backgrounds may face additional challenges, including financial pressure, limited access to learning materials, and the need to work while studying.

In Morocco, these issues deserve particular attention because access to educational resources can differ significantly between students. While universities provide formal educational opportunities, students' learning experiences outside the classroom may depend on their personal and family circumstances.

This study therefore focuses on socioeconomic inequality and autonomous learning among Moroccan university students. It examines how differences in financial resources and access to educational support can influence students' ability to study independently.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Autonomous Learning in Higher Education

Autonomous learning has become an important concept in higher education because university students are expected to take increasing responsibility for their studies. Autonomous learners are able to establish learning goals, organize their time, monitor their progress, and use different resources to improve their knowledge.

Boudraa (2021) describes autonomous learning as an important part of students' ability to manage their learning and develop independent study habits. This ability can support academic success as well as long-term learning.

However, autonomy does not develop in isolation. Students' learning environments and available resources can either support or limit their ability to become autonomous learners.

2.2 Socioeconomic Inequality and Educational Opportunities

Socioeconomic status can influence the resources available to students. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may have greater access to computers, reliable internet, private tutoring, books, and other academic resources.

Bouzidi (2019) highlights the relationship between socioeconomic differences and academic opportunities in Morocco. Access to educational resources can create advantages for some students while creating additional difficulties for others.

For example, a student with a personal computer and reliable internet can easily access online courses, academic articles, educational videos, and digital libraries. A student without these resources may depend mainly on university facilities or printed materials. This difference can influence how much independent learning each student can undertake.

2.3 Financial Pressure and Student Learning

Financial pressure is another important dimension of socioeconomic inequality. Students experiencing financial difficulties may need to work part-time to support themselves or their families. This can reduce the amount of time available for studying.

Lamrani and Rachidi (2023) emphasize the relationship between financial pressure and learning autonomy among university students. When students have limited time and financial resources, they may find it difficult to participate in activities that support independent learning.

Financial pressure may also affect students' access to technology, private tutoring, transportation, books, and other educational resources.

2.4 Technology and Autonomous Learning

Technology has become an important part of university learning. Students use computers and internet services to search for information, communicate with teachers, access academic materials, and complete assignments.

Sahraoui and Abdelkader (2022) point to the importance of technology access in supporting self-directed learning. Students who have regular access to digital resources can benefit from a wider range of learning opportunities.

However, unequal access to technology can create another form of educational inequality. Students who cannot afford personal computers or reliable internet may have fewer opportunities to develop digital learning habits.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a mixed-method approach to examine the relationship between socioeconomic conditions and students' autonomous learning. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire, while qualitative information was obtained through semi-structured interviews.

The combination of these methods made it possible to examine both general patterns and students' experiences of socioeconomic challenges.

3.2 Participants

The study involved 120 students from the English Department at Moulay Ismail University. The participants represented different socioeconomic backgrounds. The study considered factors such as family income, parental education, access to technology, and students' learning resources.

The original study used sampling procedures intended to represent different socioeconomic and cultural groups. Qualitative interviews were also used to provide additional information about students' experiences.

3.3 Data Collection

The questionnaire included questions related to students' demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, access to educational resources, financial pressure, and autonomous learning practices.

- access to a personal computer and internet;
- access to private tutoring;
- participation in extracurricular learning activities;
- financial pressure;
- part-time employment;
- study time; and
- time spent on self-directed learning.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore students' experiences in greater detail. The interviews focused on socioeconomic challenges, access to learning resources, and students' perceptions of their ability to study independently.

3.4 Research Questions

1. How does socioeconomic status influence autonomous learning among university students in Morocco?
2. How does access to educational resources differ between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds?
3. How does financial pressure affect students' study time and autonomous learning?
4. What challenges do students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds experience in developing autonomous learning practices?
5. What measures can universities adopt to reduce socioeconomic inequalities in learning?

4. Hypotheses

H1: Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have greater access to educational resources than students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

H2: Greater access to educational resources is associated with stronger opportunities for autonomous learning.

H3: Higher levels of financial pressure reduce the amount of time students can devote to academic and autonomous learning activities.

H4: Students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds face greater barriers to independent learning.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Differences in Access to Educational Resources

One of the clearest findings concerns differences in access to educational resources.

Educational Resource	High SES	Middle SES	Low SES
Personal computer/internet	85%	60%	30%
Private tutoring	70%	40%	15%
Extracurricular learning activities	60%	45%	20%

Table 1. Access to Educational Resources by Socioeconomic Status.

The figures show a clear difference between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Eighty-five percent of students in the high socioeconomic group reported access to a personal computer and internet, compared with 60% of middle socioeconomic students and 30% of low socioeconomic students. A similar pattern can be observed in access to private tutoring. While 70% of students from the high socioeconomic group had access to private tutoring, only 15% of students from the low socioeconomic group reported such access.

Participation in extracurricular learning activities also followed the same pattern. Sixty percent of students from the high socioeconomic group participated in such activities, compared with only 20% of students from the low socioeconomic group.

These differences suggest that socioeconomic background can influence students' learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Students with greater access to resources may have more opportunities to practice independent learning, search for additional information, and receive academic support.

5.2 Financial Pressure and Study Time

Financial Stress	Part-Time Job	Study Time/Week	Self-Directed Learning/Week
High	75%	10 hours	2 hours
Moderate	40%	20 hours	5 hours
Low	10%	30 hours	7 hours

Table 2. Financial Pressure and Students' Learning Time.

The findings indicate an important relationship between financial pressure and study time. Among students experiencing high financial stress, 75% were likely to hold a part-time job. These students reported approximately 10 hours of study per week and only 2 hours of self-directed learning.

In comparison, students experiencing low financial stress reported approximately 30 hours of study per week and 7 hours of self-directed learning.

These results suggest that financial pressure can reduce the amount of time students have available for independent learning. Students who need to work may have less time to read additional materials, conduct research, review lessons, or develop individual learning projects.

5.3 Socioeconomic Inequality and Autonomous Learning

The findings show that socioeconomic inequality can influence autonomous learning in several connected ways.

First, students with greater financial resources are more likely to have access to learning technologies. A personal computer and reliable internet connection can allow students to access academic materials whenever they need them.

Second, financially advantaged students may be able to receive additional academic support through private tutoring. This can provide them with opportunities to clarify difficult concepts and improve their academic performance.

Third, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may have more time available for extracurricular learning. Such activities can help students develop skills beyond the formal curriculum.

In contrast, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may experience several disadvantages at the same time. They may have limited access to technology, fewer opportunities for private tutoring, and greater financial pressure. These factors can reduce both the quantity and quality of their independent learning.

5.4 The Impact of Part-Time Employment

Part-time employment deserves particular attention because it can create a direct conflict between financial needs and academic responsibilities.

The study indicates that students experiencing high financial stress are more likely to work part-time. Although employment can help students meet their financial needs, it may reduce the time and energy they can dedicate to university work.

This does not mean that working students cannot become autonomous learners. Rather, the findings suggest that they may have fewer opportunities to engage in autonomous learning compared with students who have fewer financial responsibilities.

Universities should therefore consider the different circumstances of their students when promoting independent learning. Requiring students to complete large amounts of independent work without considering their access to resources may unintentionally increase educational inequality.

6. Educational Implications

6.1 Improving Access to Technology

Universities can reduce inequality by providing students with better access to computers, internet services, digital libraries, and other learning technologies. University libraries and learning centers can provide spaces where students without personal computers or internet connections can complete academic work.

6.2 Strengthening Academic Support

Academic support should be available to students who cannot afford private tutoring. Universities can provide free tutoring, peer-learning programs, academic workshops, and additional support sessions. Such services can help reduce the difference between students who can afford private academic assistance and those who cannot.

6.3 Supporting Students Experiencing Financial Difficulties

Financial support can also contribute to greater learning opportunities. Scholarships, grants, emergency financial assistance, and flexible student employment programs may reduce the pressure experienced by financially disadvantaged students. Reducing financial stress can allow students to devote more time to their academic work.

6.4 Creating More Inclusive Autonomous Learning Practices

Universities should promote autonomous learning while recognizing that students have different circumstances. Teachers can provide flexible learning materials, recorded explanations, accessible digital resources, and clear guidance for independent study. This can help students who have limited time or resources outside the classroom.

6.5 Developing Student-Centered Learning

Autonomous learning can also be supported through student-centered teaching. Group discussions, projects, problem-solving activities, research tasks, and guided independent work can encourage students to take greater responsibility for their learning. Such approaches can help students develop autonomy without requiring them to depend entirely on resources outside the university.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between socioeconomic inequality and autonomous learning among university students in Morocco. The findings indicate that students do not have equal access to the resources and conditions needed for independent learning.

Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds reported greater access to personal computers, internet services, private tutoring, and extracurricular learning opportunities. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experienced more limited access to these resources.

Financial pressure was also associated with reduced study time. Students experiencing high financial stress were more likely to work part-time and reported less time for self-directed learning. These findings suggest that socioeconomic inequality can influence not only the resources available to students but also the amount of time they can devote to learning.

The study therefore highlights the need to understand autonomous learning as more than an individual student skill. Students' ability to learn independently is also shaped by their social and economic environment.

Moroccan universities can help reduce these inequalities by improving access to technology, strengthening free academic support, providing financial assistance, and developing inclusive student-centered learning practices.

Creating equal learning opportunities does not mean providing exactly the same support to every student. Instead, it means recognizing different needs and ensuring that students who face greater barriers receive the support necessary to participate fully in university learning.

Reducing socioeconomic barriers can therefore contribute to stronger autonomous learning, greater academic participation, and more equal educational opportunities for Moroccan university students.

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