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Department of International Projects in Education
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Learning through International Exchanges in Teacher Education:

**Experiences with the Learning Culture in
Universities (LECU) Project in Albania, Kosovo
and Switzerland**

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DOK insight 1

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Part II: Institutional and Cross- Country Experiences in Teaching Education

4 Managing Autonomous Learning in Higher Education: Transnational Experiences in Comparison

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Abstract:

Autonomous learning⁴ is a bundle of cognitive, behavioural and individual emotional/motivational aspects (ability and willingness). Knowledge, ability and willingness are at the centre of autonomous learning. With the help of networked and dynamic knowledge, students can facilitate the course of their own learning process. With the ability competence, they apply suitable strategies and what they have learnt. The willingness component can strengthen their self-image and help them perceive their own learning process as significant and to feel responsible for their own learning. This practice-oriented article deals with autonomous learning at universities. Its aim to present how autonomous learning is managed at different universities. Firstly, autonomous learning at selected higher education institutions in Albania, Kosovo and Switzerland is presented and then compared using a theory-based model. The results of a study tour of Swiss students to Kosovo and Kosovar students to Switzerland then complete the article as examples of how autonomous learning was promoted and how it was experienced by the students.

Keywords:

- autonomous learning
- competence
- regulation of learning
- teacher education

⁴ The term autonomous learning is used in the context of this paper as a synonym for self-directed learning, self-regulated learning, independent learning, problem-based learning, etc. (Konrad, 2019, p.41).

1. Theoretical Background

Autonomous learning (also referred to as self-regulated, self-directed, independent or personalised learning) was recognised as part of the Bologna reform: namely to develop productive forms of initial and continuing education and training in guided and accompanied self-study, and to encourage autonomous learning in higher education teaching (KFH, 2004). The aim is to give students more scope to organise their own learning process autonomously and independently of location. They are expected to analyse carefully their own learning needs, formulate learning objectives, plan individual learning steps, use suitable learning strategies and materials, apply appropriate learning methods and evaluate their own learning progress. In summary, students are to set their own content priorities.

To this end, universities provide appropriate learning opportunities and a suitable infrastructure to enable students to make productive use of their learning. However, autonomous learning can be influenced by several factors:

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| a. | the profile of a particular higher education institution, |
| b. | its educational strategy and educational goals, |
| c. | the range of modules on offer and the didactic design of the subject and |
| d. | the teachers' professional competence, openness and willingness to provide support (Messmer, Niggli, & Reusser, 2009, 150). |

Individual learning habits, learning styles and metacognitive ability are important elements in an autonomous learning process. In habitual and metacognitive terms, the students themselves receive, plan, organise, monitor and assess their learning process and the associated learning content (Zimmerman, 1986, 308; Weinert, 1996, 6; Hellrung, 2011, 57). These and other factors and prerequisites can make a decisive contribution to whether a higher education institution successfully fulfils its core pedagogical tasks, including autonomous learning.

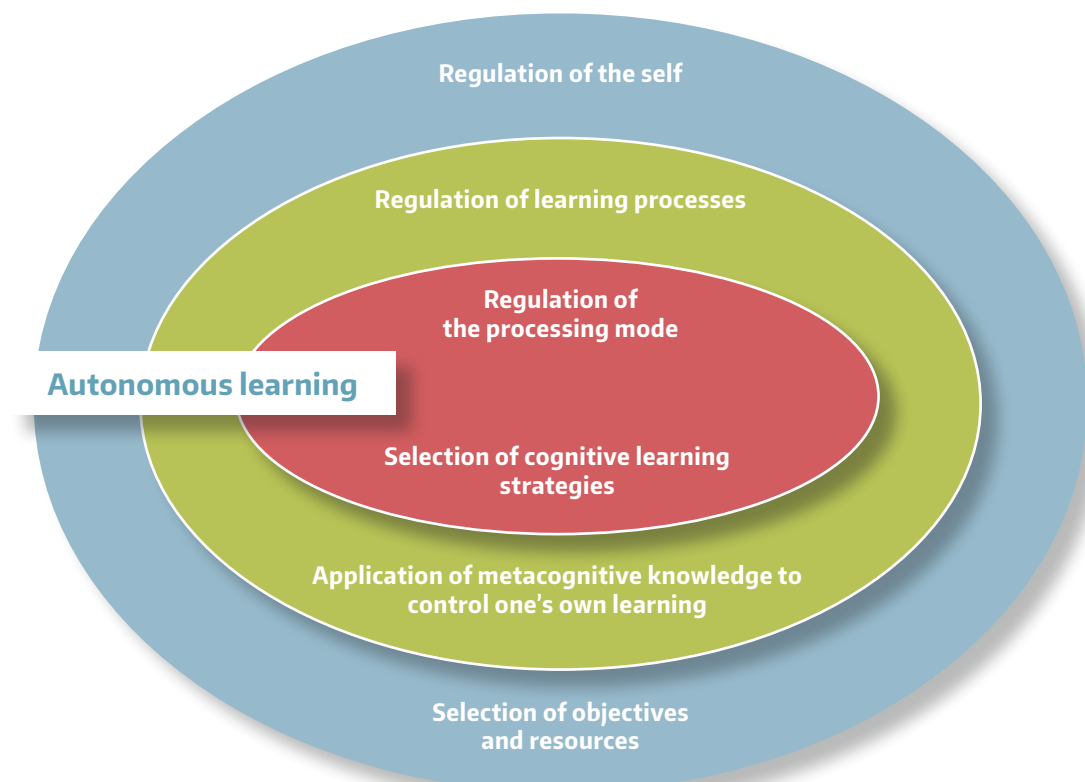


Figure 1: Three-level model of autonomous learning according to Boekaerts (1999, 449)

Autonomous learning should help students acquire sufficient mental independence and master their learning process and all the associated demands and challenges independently.

Educational experts (Schiefele & Pekrun, 1996, 271) have developed multilevel models to study autonomous learning more in depth. In this paper, we use Boekaerts' (1999) three-level model, but without neglecting the advantages provided by other models for autonomous learning. In the model shown below, three levels of regulation (cognitive, metacognitive and motivational-volitional level) are linked.

All three levels encompass various aspects in autonomous learning. For example, the inner circle as shown in Figure 1 covers the individual learning habitus of the student. This includes the student's own learning strategies, learning times, operationalisation of content, networking and bundling of learning content, performance orientation, etc. Thus, this level comprises everything that is related to coping with certain learning requirements or task solutions.

The second level (the middle circle) refers to a student's meta-ability to monitor their own autonomous learning and to modify it where necessary. This includes the cognitive ability to recognise whether one learns logically, where and why learning stagnates, which corrections must be made to overcome possible stumbling blocks in solving a task, and how a learning object is received and processed (or reconstructed or constructed, respectively).

The outer circle represents the level of embedding autonomous learning has in a student's own beliefs. In this context, the cognitive, social, cultural, personal, emotional/motivational and other closely interrelated formative aspects play a role that should not be underestimated. When dealing with a certain content, each individual asks themselves a series of questions: what and how the same content should be treated, what it means for their personal interests or needs, who expects the student to work on a certain task and why, what resources are necessary for processing a certain content, how much time one would like to invest in it, which external factors one would like to differentiate oneself from, etc.

The theories and models of autonomous learning outlined so far are followed in the following section by an overview of the programmes and practices in autonomous learning implemented at the universities of Tirana, Gjiilan, Zug and Schwyz.

2. Autonomous Learning at Universities in the three Countries: Albania, Kosovo and Switzerland

2.1 University of Tirana

Within the framework of its educational opportunities/resources, the University of Tirana promotes the personal and intellectual development of students and prepares them to make a constructive contribution to a global society.

Autonomy in teaching and learning – which includes not only freedom of thought but also individual learning and is one of the most important leitmotifs – is enshrined in law (QAAHE, 2015).

Different university committees⁵ (such as the Senate, Rectorate, Dean's Office and Ethics Council) have the responsibility of ensuring the implementation of high-quality teaching, research and continuing education. It should be noted that the assessment of staff is no longer carried out solely by the University and the Institute, but also by the administrative structures of the University of Tirana and by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (QAHEE). The latter answers to the Minister of Education and aims to ensure the promotion and development of quality in the teaching process. On the other hand, it is the task of the teaching staff to provide sufficient space for independent learning for all students and to ensure that they organise their own learning processes under their own responsibility. This should enable them to link new learning content with their existing experience and prior knowledge, to substantiate their concepts on the basis of theory and to reflect on their own actions in practice.

As part of their autonomous learning process, students are responsible, for example, for

- a. studying the text of the course and the course package,
- b. attending over 80% of lectures and seminars on school ethics,

⁵ The Board of Administration is a decision-making collegial unit that supervises and controls the activities of the University of Tirana involving administrative, financial and economic aspects. It is the highest-ranking authority in governing and executive matters. The Board of Administration comprises seven part-time members. Its composition depends on budgetary planning and the percentage of the self-financing of the institution. In the case of the University of Tirana, four members of the board are members of the academic staff and the remaining three are appointed by the Minister of Education.

- c. carrying out the necessary research and literature reviews according to the requirements of the following tasks, and
- d. bringing along two discussion topics to the seminar classes.

The educational process at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Tirana is dynamic and allows the application of different teaching and learning methods. These include:

- the presentation of theoretical material by the lecturers on each course;
- the presentation of the work and tasks for the students for each lesson depending on the objectives of the module;
- discussions on case studies and
- final examination.

In connection with the external assessment, the criteria are as follows:

- Audit of the annual services provided 60–70%;
- Work presentation 25–30% and
- Participation and involvement in lessons 5–10% (Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [QAHEE], 2015).

Conclusion: in general, we can conclude that academic scientific teaching at the University of Tirana can be considered independent to a certain extent. The academic staff work to ensure the quality of teaching and set study programmes that are in accordance with the demands of the job market and with global social demands.

Lessons are taught using interactive methods and the teaching style is focused on the students, giving them the opportunity to express themselves and be creative with the help of individual presentations and open discussions. This ensures they have the opportunity to develop their abilities in critical thinking and independent learning by following the study programmes that are offered and implemented.

2.2 University of Gjilan

Kosovo is a country in transition which is facing an important number of challenges in order to improve the quality of higher education. The main concern for the Public University “Kadri Zeka” in Gjilan is to increase the quality across all the aspects of academic activity. For this purpose, regulations regarding quality assurance procedures have been drafted and a Quality Assurance Office has been established which will monitor the quality of teaching and learning. The control and quality assurance process consists of several stages carried out during the semester: the first stage is the syllabus provided by the professor which shows the work expected per week during the semester in detail. The syllabus is distributed to the students (in electronic form or as a hard copy) to inform them of the content of the teaching each week. Lesson reports are then created each week which must be matched with the syllabus submitted at the beginning of the semester. At the end of the semester, the professor submits a self-evaluation report, which assesses the extent to which the syllabus was fulfilled or not fulfilled, with reasons why any test, lecture or exercise did not comply with the syllabus. A similar report is submitted by students using anonymous questionnaires, who grade to what extent the syllabus was complied with (but without the section on why certain tests, lectures or exercises did not comply with the syllabus). Based on the two types of report, the Quality Official then completes an Evaluation Report for each professor separately comparing whether the syllabus, lesson reports, professor’s self-evaluation report and report from the anonymous student questionnaires are matched. Based on these three reports, an evaluation report is then written by the Rector, the Vice-Rector or the Dean which becomes part of the personal file for each professor and assistant.

Another concern for our University is the preparation of our students for a successful future career. For this purpose, part of the learning process in all the faculties is practical learning. “Kadri Zeka” Public University has conducted agreements with relevant institutions for the development of practical learning (University Kadri Zeka, 2016).

Professors aim to develop autonomous learning by encouraging students to develop new learning strategies. They support students in organising their own learning by teaching them methods on planning their own learning progress, organising their tasks and time, how to motivate themselves, how to relax and how to assess themselves, etc. The following practices are being implemented at our University: resource-based approaches which deal with independent interaction with learning materials, technology-based approaches which deal with

independent interaction with educational technologies, classroom-based approaches which deal with changes in the relationship between students and teachers and curriculum-based approaches which deal with student participation in setting the curriculum. Moreover, the following student-centred approaches are also used by our professors: a choice of questions in exams or essays, group discussions, group work, reflective writing, poster design and presentation, practicals, problem-based learning, peer mentoring and role play, etc.

Autonomous learning also takes place in small scientific projects (mini projects) which are developed through the Institute for Research and Educational Training.⁶ Our students can engage in these projects. They do research and – based on the results – they are awarded credits for the course and at the same time are evaluated for the work done. During this time, students learn how to research independently and are educated for professional development throughout their lives. This makes them active and motivated for educational / scientific work.

2.3 Schwyz University of Teacher Education

The Schwyz University of Teacher Education has adapted its study programmes and training concept to the need for flexible study times and study programmes, the reduction of travel times and the desire of many students to organise and control their learning process themselves. Blended learning, for example, consists of a mixture of e-learning and face-to-face courses. Self-organised training formats, simultaneous events, group assignments and one-to-one exchanges can be carried out both online and in person using the appropriate infrastructure and digital tools. Frontal teaching can also be made available on the internet in the form of videos. Workshops, discussions or tasks involving a laboratory infrastructure (e.g. technical design) then tend to take place on university premises. Thus, studies can be divided into classroom teaching guided by lecturers and into variable, self-directed study formats.

At a macro level, the following teaching formats and didactic scenarios are suitable:

- blended learning offers (e-learning)
- lectures with optional student participation;

- oral and written exercises in the form of compulsory seminars, didactic workshops, block weeks, etc.;
- study forms like learning portfolios with fixed specifications;
- tailor-made project seminars and internships for autonomous learning;
- independently prepared interdisciplinary or cross-module services and
- individual projects instructed by lecturers, etc.

Various teaching formats are also practiced at a micro level (Pädagogische Hochschule Schwyz, 2019a; Pädagogische Hochschule Schwyz, 2019b):

- problem-based and case-based task settings;
- visiting events, e.g. lectures, visiting lectures with external speakers, organised by the university for a broader audience;
- small assignments during the session or weekly assignments on specific topics;
- in-depth and group work presentations (oral and/or written, poster presentation, PPT, theatre);
- learning tandems;
- tutorials;
- performance records and their design and
- verbal and written feedback.

Based on the above, it can be said that autonomous learning has established itself as part of university culture at the Schwyz University of Teacher Education. The courses deliberately combine autonomous and instructor-controlled forms of learning. Digital communication and learning technologies particularly are used – teaching is paperless, but without excluding analogue media. Autonomous learning with digital tools has been a strategic objective of the university since 2015 and represents a core element of education. It has been a concept with strategic guidelines for lecturers and students and the University has also created an Institute for Media and Schools (IMS) with corresponding professorial chairs. The aim is to enable lecturers and students to use digital media in all didactic scenarios and subjects in a variety of high-quality ways.

⁶ See more at this link: <https://www.uni-gjilan.net/en/research/institute-for-training-and-educational-research/>.

In addition to the premises and goals for the further development of autonomous learning, the Schwyz University of Teacher Education has expanded study formats that considerably reduce the time of classroom attendance for students. Many students who wish to study and work in parallel (so-called 'lateral entrants') choose this course of study. This gives the Schwyz University of Teacher Education a locational advantage because a teaching diploma can be obtained in three years attending class for just three days a week. For this purpose, lectures are video recorded and made accessible to all students.

As part of the further development of autonomous learning with digital media, the Schwyz University of Teacher Education has carried out various binding university didactic implementation measures. These include technical, personal, administrative, module design and cooperation-related measures. A working group is currently developing a manual on learning using digital technologies for both lecturers and students. This instrument should contribute to the strengthening of autonomous learning.

2.4 University of Teacher Education Zug

The University of Teacher Education Zug has a long history of promoting autonomous learning. The following subchapter provides an insight into this work by discussing

- | | |
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| a. | the objectives pursued, |
| b. | the didactic methods implemented and |
| c. | the higher education development projects which have already taken place plus those planned for the future. |

All in all, autonomous learning constitutes an important component of the degree programmes, responding to the students' varied learning requirements, interests and life situations.

On the one hand, the teaching aims to develop the students' professional competence to enable them to work as teachers, while on the other hand preparing them for academic studies (at Bachelor level). The importance of autonomous learning in the teaching at the University of Teacher Education Zug must therefore be considered in light of professional standards (Pädagogische Hochschule Zug, 2021) and the current reference points for academic teaching concerning the learning

outcomes according to the Dublin Descriptors⁷ (Swissuniversities, 2020).

Professional standards are based on a comprehensive job description which includes all areas of work in the professional field as well as specific features for the teaching profession. Also included in this is the independent design of the level of autonomy entrusted to students. This demands from teachers, for example, that they be aware of their own behaviour and its potential effect on others, as well as planning their professional development independently: *"The teacher continuously reflects upon the effect of their decisions and actions on others (students, parents and other teachers) and approaches their professional development actively and responsibly"* [translated by I.G.] (Pädagogische Hochschule Zug, 2021, 6–16).

This professional standard demonstrates that competences which correlate with the skills of autonomous learners are necessary to achieve the professional requirements (see section 1). This is also seen in other core documents from the University of Teacher Education Zug, which indicate that the courses of study at the University should enable students to:

- recognise the freedom given to them, carry out assigned work autonomously and in a way which can be justified and play a part in the design of their areas of activity (Pädagogische Hochschule Zentralschweiz, 2014, 11) and
- analyse their practice and design new action plans based on theoretical knowledge and reflection on their experience, as well as adapting new content (Pädagogische Hochschule Zug, 2021, 3).

The second approach to a rationale for 'autonomous learning' follows ideals of academic study and work, as formulated in the Dublin Descriptors (Swissuniversities, 2020). Of particular interest is the requirement for 'self-study skills', which states that people with an academic qualification at Bachelor level have developed learning strategies to pursue their studies with a high degree of independence (ibid.).

When describing the design of 'autonomous learning' at the University of Teacher Education Zug, a differentiation is made between the explanation of the elective

⁷ The Dublin Descriptors are included in the Qualification Framework for the Higher Education Sector, which serves as a reference for higher education institutions in Switzerland for the design at an appropriate level and further development of their study programmes (ibid.).

part of the study programme and the presentation of 'autonomous learning' in the modules. While the different forms of individual elective study programme described below primarily relate to individual specialisations within the course design, the design of modules takes deeper learning into consideration.

The University of Education Zug respects these components, offering various modules and programmes: e.g. elective subjects, modules, block weeks, sport camps and activities outside the module (Leutwyler, Aegerter, & Meierhans, 2014).

Methodological settings with an emphasis on autonomous learning are, for example:

- open tasks and elective mandatory tasks;
- individual choice between self-organised processing of the learning content or attending lectures;
- online tutorials for individual consolidation of lecture content;
- portfolio work (also ePortfolio);
- individual student support by mentors and in-service teacher trainers for the practical teaching placements (individual coaching, tandem coaching);
- interventions, case discussions, video analyses of (individual) practical experience;
- individual feedback from coaches, lecturers and peers;
- learning tandems, study groups;
- scientific dissertations with group or individual coaching, for example for the research project (2nd year) and Bachelor's dissertation (3rd year);
- online language assessments with individual support and
- individual design of mentoring in the 'Nightingale' integration and mentoring programme.

The promotion of 'autonomous learning' forms part of past and future higher education development projects at the University of Teacher Education Zug. Of the completed projects, the following two are highlighted:

'Learner Autonomy' Partnership Project (2005–2018) within the framework of the university partnership with the South East European University (SEEU) in Tetovo (Republic of North Macedonia): its aim was to contribute to the development of autonomous learning spaces at each university. The main project activities included:

- Developing a self-assessment tool based on the Dynamic Autonomy Model with Descriptors by Tassarini (2010), which recorded the autonomous, self-regulated learning of the students relating to 'planning – carrying out tasks – monitoring – evaluating'. The results and hypotheses that arose were discussed together in joint workshops.
- Publication of the conference transcript entitled "Promoting Learner Autonomy in Higher Education" (Xhaferri, Waldispühl, Eriksson-Hotz & Xhaferri, 2015).
- Holding the international "Promoting Learner Autonomy in Higher Education" conference (29th–30th November 2013).
- Workshops with lecturers, research associates and students from both universities analysing 'practice examples' of 'learner autonomy' from different perspectives and discussing selected research projects.

Internal further education courses on competence-oriented learning with particular emphasis on the roles of learner and teacher in the "shift from teaching to learning" (Bachmann, 2011) and 'alignments' in (individual) learning objectives, learning processes and examination methods. The analysis of competence-oriented learning, especially the 'professional teaching competence' model (Baumert & Kunter, 2011) highlights the importance of the self-regulation of learners – in its interdependency with the other aspects of competence – for the development of professional teaching competence.

The University of Teacher Education Zug's strategy for 2019 – 2026 is relevant to its future higher education didactic development projects. It strives to promote digital forms of teaching and learning, and to focus on digital and interdisciplinary competences (Pädagogische Hochschule Zug, 2019). This means development projects on the design and further development of 'autonomous learning' will also belong in future to the higher education didactic priorities to be promoted. At the same time, it is also evident that – as a result – digital forms of teaching and learning will be of particular importance.

3. Similarities and Differences between the Universities with regard to Autonomous Learning

The concepts presented by the universities of Tirana, Gjiilan, Zug and Schwyz show that they handle autonomous learning at the university level in different ways, both formally and from an organisational point of view. For example, students at the University of Tirana are required to attend over 80% of lectures and seminars in order to receive the necessary credits. It is the responsibility of the teaching staff to provide students with sufficient space to organise their learning process independently. In doing so, they should be able to justify their own learning concepts on the basis of theory, and reflect on them in practice. The offers and programs should enable students to learn independently and to think critically (Rowden 2013). On the homepage of the University of Tirana (<http://fshs-ut.edu.al/>), there are no indications as to whether and, if so, which online platforms are used.

Lecturers at the University of Gjiilan support their students in creating their own learning process in their studies by using different learning strategies and methods. In the case of autonomous learning, students can take part in various research projects and receive credits for their work. In doing so, they learn to think and act autonomously in a scientific and practical way. The teaching staff provides learning material, tests and assignments for the students on the university website (University of Gjiilan, 2016).

The University of Schwyz attaches great importance to autonomous learning and allows students to design their learning process flexibly by attending about half of the courses and working on the other half online. Students receive credits for modules that they complete, which consist of both classroom and online courses. A digital platform is available to them for the preparation of content and assignments (Pädagogische Hochschule Schwyz, 2017).

Similarly, the University of Zug has a long tradition of autonomous learning and considers this form to be an important part of its courses. Depending on the module, a distinction is made between the compulsory part of the course and the implementation of autonomous learning. The University of Zug realises projects (e.g. the study trip to Kosovo described in chapter 4 and discussed in chapter 5) on autonomous learning and has integrated this form into its Strategy 2019 – 2026. Thus, autonomous learning, especially with digital media, has a high priority in the future and will be treated as a focal point.

While the concepts of autonomous learning at the Universities of Zug and Schwyz are largely identical for historical reasons (in the past they belonged together), they differ from those of the Universities of Tirana and Gjiilan in terms of compulsory attendance (e.g. over 80% classroom in Tirana and Gjiilan; approx. 50% classroom in Schwyz).

4. Projects for Autonomous Learning

4.1 Using the Example of the Study Tour for Students at the University of Teacher Education Zug to Gjiilan

As part of the framework for autonomous learning, the University of Teacher Education Zug aims to enable its students to act in a self-reliant and self-responsible way. As an opportunity to support these aspects of competence development, the University of Zug offered a study week in Kosovo to its students. This was possible thanks to the partnership and collaboration with the Kadri Zeka University in Gjiilan that facilitated and organised the week in Kosovo. The overall learning objectives of the study week were defined by the University of Zug for its students as follows:

- they work on self-selected questions together and in an exchange with the students from Gjiilan University;
- they consciously reflect on their own attitudes, imprints and change their perspectives and
- they reflect the experiences they made and their findings with a view on their professional practices as a teacher.

Within the limits of these overall objectives, the students were free to set their own objectives and were asked to organise the exchange with their fellow students from Gjiilan by themselves.

During the week in Kosovo (which took place from October 5 to October 11 2019), eighteen students from the University of Zug worked jointly with their fellow students from Gjiilan University on pedagogical questions they had chosen and developed in small groups in the preparation phase prior to the study week. In Kosovo – and particularly in Gjiilan – they were given the opportunity to participate in visits, encounters and discussions related to their questions, but also beyond them. For four nights, the students from Switzerland were accommodated as guests in the homes of their local fellow stu-

dents. Back in Switzerland, the students from the University of Zug presented their findings for the joint work and reflected on the week from an intercultural perspective. They analysed their findings and their experiences from the point of view of their personal and professional development.

The responsible lecturer from the University of Zug led two preparation sessions before and one evaluation session after the study week. He did not accompany the group to Kosovo. In Kosovo, the group was accompanied and led through the programme by responsible parties from Gjilan University. The presentation of their findings, which was open to all the staff at the University of Zug, was organised and coordinated by the students themselves. The flights and the booking of accommodation for the three nights not covered by homestays were also organised by the students themselves, with one student coordinating the booking of the flights. Another student acted as contact person for the students' group vis-à-vis Gjilan University and the responsible lecturer at the University of Zug.

After the study week and the presentations and reflections that followed it, the students from Zug were asked to fill out an online questionnaire anonymously with the aim of finding out what they found conducive or inhibiting to their learning, and how they perceived the rather open set-up of the module. 14 out of the 18 students participated in the survey.

They were first asked to describe the learning objectives they had set for themselves for the study week in Kosovo. Some of the learning objectives they stated were rather specific, mostly linked to the educational questions they had defined for themselves. To name one example, they wanted to discover what it meant for a child to grow up in Kosovo or what challenges a teacher faces in Kosovo compared to Switzerland, or what the differences in teaching practice between the two universities are. Others formulated their learning objectives more generally. Some students wanted to reduce their prejudices, others wanted to gain insights into everyday life in Kosovo or to learn more about the culture of the people there. One student wrote that they went without many expectations to Kosovo. Many of the students stated they believed they were able to achieve their learning objectives.

The stays with the host families and the exchange with the students at Gjilan University were described by the students from Switzerland most often as being conducive elements for learning. Also, the school visits and the discussions with teachers and mayors were often mentioned as useful learning opportunities.

On the other hand, the programme during the week was considered by many of the students to be too rigid and overloaded, which they felt was obstructive to their learning. They would have liked to have had fewer school visits which would have allowed them to observe classes for a longer period and have more in-depth exchange with the teachers. Some would have liked to have a bit more preparation in Switzerland and think this would have enhanced their learning. One student stated that the rather large size of the group hampered their learning.

All the students who participated in the survey were motivated to shape the study week within the given framework. 9 students thought that they were able to engage well with the open setting of the study tour, leaving 5 students who were not particularly happy with the setting. They would have liked to have a more detailed preparation in Switzerland in terms of what to expect in the host families or during the school visits or meetings with the two mayors. One student thought that it might have helped to have the responsible lecturer from the University of Zug with the group in Kosovo. One student suggested that the students plan their trip independently right from the start as part of their preparation and that the planning could be divided within the group.

When asked about moments of contentment and happiness, all the students answered that they had experienced such moments during their stay in Kosovo. The experience that gave them the greatest number of such moments were the stays with the host family, which was mentioned by almost all the students. They highlighted the outstanding hospitality from the families and the conversations they had with them and the students. Some admitted that it was exhausting living and spending time together with the students and their families, but that it was completely worth it.

From the answers given by the students, one can conclude that all were motivated by the open setting and all were able – albeit to varying degrees – to cope with it. They were able to set their own objectives for the study week and they became aware of their learning.

The informal moments made possible thanks to the home stays and contact with the students from Kosovo in general were the most important elements of the study week for the students from Switzerland. The home stays made intensive exchange with the local students and their families possible. They allowed them to gain valuable insights into the everyday life of the students from Gjilan. Even though this required a high degree of flexibility and self-responsibility from students, it was still a most enjoyable week for them. It seems that

the home stays and the time they had for exchange with the families and students had the biggest impact on their learning. This is also underlined by the verbal feedback and comments from the students during the sessions that took place after the study week.

4.2 Using the Example of the Study Tour of Students from Kadri Zeka University Gjilan to Zug

Due to the cooperation agreement between the University of Gjilan and the University of Zug, 17 students from the University of Gjilan took part in the study visit to Switzerland and the University of Zug. The visit to Switzerland lasted from 15 December to 21 December 2019, where our students were welcomed by the management of the University of Zug and looked after by professors at the University of Zug and the hosting friends.

During the study visit, students from our university were accompanied by students from the University of Zug with whom they carried out joint activities and gained an accurate picture of the way teaching and learning is done at the University of Zug and at some of Zug's primary schools. After the training period on university premises, they also visited some interesting places in the city.

Two workshops were held as part of the study visit. The first workshop, which was organised by the University of Zug, dealt with robotics. During the workshop, the students were given the opportunity to discover a number of innovative new tools and devices. They were able to practise with them in concrete terms and were able to create a robotic device themselves that works based on human instructions. The second workshop dealt with the topic of migration. Representatives from both countries gave lectures on the subject. After the presentations, the students from Kosovo and Switzerland were divided into groups and presented each other their examples in connection with the topic of migration.

After their return, our students were given an online questionnaire to evaluate their study stay in Switzerland. Regarding the first question on the learning objectives they had set for the study visit, most of the students wanted to learn about the differences between their education system and the education system in Switzerland and to see the different methods and techniques used by Swiss professors in teaching their students. Some students wanted to learn more about the cultural similarities and differences between Kosovo and Switzerland. Among them there were students who wanted to learn more about Swiss cuisine, for example.

In the next two questions, the students had to list the elements that helped or hindered them in achieving their goals. The answers from the students show that they were able to achieve the set goals through their observations in class. They experienced various learning activities in which the students actively interacted and cooperated while dealing with content. The students interviewed also noted that they experienced some new interactive teaching aids, teaching ideas and educational games. They were also able to gain experience with regard to the forms and formats of learning: for example, working in groups in the presence of the lecturers or completing assignments independently. Another question was whether they were able to become actively involved during the study visit. This question was largely answered in the affirmative. The UKZ-students were able to express their interests in the Swiss educational system, educational opportunities and life in general. They were free to ask about anything, they expressed their opinions on everything without being interrupted, and everyone was polite and friendly. Some students mentioned that they were actively involved in various activities. During their visits to the schools, they participated actively in class activities, such as reading together with the pupils or playing different games. One student was not very satisfied with his success, although he tried his best.

The results of our survey show that the majority of students not only learnt about forms of guided and autonomous learning, but also experienced for the first time what it feels like to be so far away from home. In their answers, they stated that teamwork is the best form of working to solve problems regarding content. In doing so, communication is the key to solving problems and they saw that they have a lot in common with the students from the University of Zug. This included the desire to become an excellent teacher, the use of assessment methods such as midterm exams, tasks, presentations, final tests, etc. and some teaching methods such as group discussions, pair work, the strategy of getting students' attention through games, etc. They also experienced things that make them different, such as: Swiss students have more pedagogical practice hours and have a better learning environment, and the Swiss Bachelor degree lasts three years, whereas ours lasts four years.

With regard to autonomous learning, the results of the survey indicate that it is important to encourage our students to consciously transfer these forms into their own practice.

5. A Short Discussion of the Evaluation of the Study Weeks in Gjilan and Zug

The cooperation framework between the University of Gjilan and the University of Zug aims to enable an exchange of students to take place between both institutions. During the study week, students from both universities are supposed to gain experience in and reflect upon education. These experiences should enable students to discover new teaching concepts, and the encounter should enhance their intercultural competence. In this way, the students, once they become teachers, will be prepared to work constructively and competently with linguistically and culturally heterogeneous groups of pupils with regard to their own teaching practice.

The experiences of the 18 students from the University of Zug during the study week in October 2019 in Kosovo and the 17 students from the University of Gjilan during the study week in December 2019 in Switzerland described in chapter 4 indicate that an exchange of this kind is a win-win situation in several respects: the students gain pedagogical, linguistic and intercultural experiences that are valuable for both their personal and professional development.

Evaluations of the scheme by the students from both universities showed they were able to see with their own eyes how the educational programmes taught at the Universities of Zug and Gjilan are structured (e.g. four-year Bachelor's degree in Gjilan versus three years in Zug, or longer internships for students in Zug than in Gjilan, etc.), the variety of learning formats on offer, what teaching and learning methods are used in class, what the infrastructure is like, etc. Furthermore, the evaluations show that the students learnt valuable linguistic and cultural aspects thanks to their stays in host families. They were able, for example, to observe and recognise the differences in growing up as a child in Kosovo or Switzerland and how the school systems in the respective countries differed. They were also able to identify teaching differences between the two universities. The Kosovan students noted that the Swiss students expressed themselves freely during the lessons, actively participated in classroom activities, listened until they finished their thoughts, treated each other respectfully and implemented different strategies (Hasselhorn & Gold, 2006; Metzger, 2010; Konrad, 2019).

Based on the feedback from students at the University of Gjilan that their Swiss counterparts are able to participate in more internships than they are during their studies, the question arises as to how far teacher training at Gjilan University can combine theory and practice in order to ensure the transfer and quality of teaching. If you consider that the students at the University of Gjilan do

an 18-week internship during their studies, it is clear that this is a good opportunity for the students to combine theory and practice. Therefore, this feedback cannot be explained based on the length of the internship. Other methodological aspects would need to be clarified.

In this context, an intensification of the cooperation between university lecturers and practice teachers who would be willing to enable students to do an internship in their classroom and, as a result, gain the necessary practical experience (Villiger, 2015) is an opportunity which could be investigated. Tremp (2015) speaks here of a 'didactic double-decker' and points out the importance of combining theory with practice: "The central subject of teacher education is 'school' and 'mediation'" (ibid., 31).

The Swiss students considered their stays with host families and the exchange with the students from the University of Gjilan to be valuable and instructive. According to the results, the Kosovan students and their host families provided them with valuable insights into everyday student life at Gjilan University and into daily life in Kosovo. The in-depth exchange with teachers during the school visits was said to have been too short in practice. Fewer school visits would have allowed them more time for in-depth observations in class and a deeper exchange with Kosovan teachers.

Because the students from both universities were free to formulate their own educational goals for the study week, the evaluation does not explicitly refer to autonomous learning as stated in the title of this paper. However, feedback from students at the University of Gjilan implicitly indicates that the open cooperative learning they were able to experience at the University of Zug – which likely includes autonomous learning – is more of a new experience for them. In order to be able to judge this in a more differentiated way, an explicit investigation and study into these questions is, of course, required. On the other hand, the results suggest that student exchanges with host families provide a useful insight into the linguistic and cultural aspects of the respective countries and is valuable both for the development of students' intercultural skills and professional development.

Conclusion: study visits within the framework of university cooperation – in this specific case between the University of Gjilan and the University of Zug – are a good opportunity for students to gain experience in autonomous learning. The educational goal of such student exchanges is to impart knowledge to the students and for them to discover new teaching concepts which they can later implement in their own practice. Furthermore, stu-

dy visits play an important role in the practical training of our students. In addition to their pedagogical experience, they can better understand the language, culture and traditions of others; Swiss students learn more about Kosovo, Kosovan students more about Switzerland.

6. Summary and Recommendations for Practice

This paper aimed to compare autonomous learning at universities transnationally. The educational concepts of the universities of Tirana, Gjiilan, Zug and Schwyz show that autonomous learning is handled differently. Students at the University of Tirana attend more than 80% of lectures and seminars as part of their studies and are given enough room to organise the learning process independently. Students at the University of Gjiilan organise their autonomous learning by participating in face-to-face lectures and various research projects, as well as online lectures during the pandemic. At the University of Schwyz, students have access to a digital platform for autonomous learning, whereby the latter attend their modules both in presence and online. The University of Zug places great emphasis on autonomous learning and designs teacher training in face-to-face and online courses. Historically, the Universities of Zug and Schwyz have almost identical concepts of autonomous learning. The University of Tirana prefers compulsory attendance, while the University of Gjiilan uses a mixed form of attendance and project work.

In summary, it can be said that autonomous learning at university level is a contemporary form of education in any individually oriented and digitised society. At this point, it would be appropriate to reiterate the three phases that characterise autonomous learning: the planning phase (setting learning objectives, viewing tasks, planning the work process), the implementation phase (implementation of what was planned, constant monitoring) and the reflection phase (reflection on the learning process, further development) (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). Konrad sums it up: "Prompts, learning partnerships and other metacognitive impulses support the development of central aspects of self-regulation (e.g. reflection, articulation and evaluation) in the execution of tasks and often improve the quality of the results" (Konrad, 2019, 259). With regard to the implementation of autonomous learning in practice, Tassinari (2010) suggests the following possible steps:

Each student should:

- first analyse their individual learning needs;
- then plan their own learning;
- consciously use working methods and strategies;
- realistically assess their own strengths and weaknesses;
- know how and where to select appropriate materials according to their needs;
- decide whether to work alone, with a partner or with other students and
- evaluate and reflect on their learning progress and learning process.

Based on the findings in this paper and the literature review, it should finally be noted that the term 'autonomous learning' is extensive and is defined and interpreted differently depending on the context. In the context of this article and our teaching, autonomous learning (particularly using digital media) is an essential part of our everyday working life. Due to the current experience with the Covid-19 pandemic, it makes sense to investigate the effects of autonomous learning with digital media in a broad-based study and to create a basis for the effective use of autonomous learning.

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Teaching Philosophies:

- ▶ I believe that the educational system must accommodate the individual and the diverse needs of each student because each student is a unique individual who needs a secure, caring and stimulating atmosphere in which to grow and mature emotionally, intellectually, physically and socially. Moreover, I believe that students are the centre of our work and we, the teachers, are here to facilitate, educate and advise students to learn effectively and efficiently in a way that will afford them the opportunity to grow professionally and personally so they can and will reach their full potential.

Teuta Agaj

- ▶ I prefer a more informal and interactive setting with my students which, in my experience, is suitable for my teaching approach. Whenever this kind of setting is not completely possible (e.g. in lectures), I nevertheless try to involve the students individually as much as possible by asking questions that stimulate their reflections or by providing opportunities to share and discuss. What I want to transmit to my students is an attitude of open-mindedness and the ability for multiple changes of perspectives. My teaching is not about giving recipe-like solutions, but about presenting useful approaches to deal successfully and meaningfully with migration-related diversity at school.

Marcus Büzberger

- ▶ I believe that students can enrich lectures with their ideas because they bring a diverse set of worldviews to the classroom, and I believe it is the teacher's responsibility to take a neutral stance on controversial material, education issues and general social issues as well. I believe remaining neutral and supportive of student's ideas motivates students to participate in class. Taking a neutral stance also acts to challenge students' intellectual abilities.

Nada Kallciu

- ▶ I believe that a positive classroom climate feels safe, respectful, welcoming and supportive of students learning where they are free to speak their minds and grow. These are primary conditions to facilitate learning activities. Once these conditions are adjusted, they are free to express their views on different learning issues. I should also consider that each of them has a special talent that they can bring to their education, so they should be motivated to express themselves freely and be encouraged to give their best. In this context, all my students will develop professionally and will implement their knowledge in their professional and daily lives.

Shpresë Qamili

- ▶ We prepare teachers to take into account the language and learning requirements of all pupils in competence-oriented German lessons and to support them individually in acquiring the educational language. The teachers are aware that the competences form a framework for orientation and know that the acquisition of the educational language of their learners is not linear (from A to B), but dynamic.

Naxhi Selimi