CASE STUDIES OF VIETNAMESE TERTIARY STUDENTS’ LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA

Submitted by
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A thesis submitted in total fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

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STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

This thesis integrates the publications authored by me during my candidature. Most of them, as included at the end of this page, are modified where appropriate to fit into the structure of the thesis.

Other than that, except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no materials published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of this thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee, La Trobe University.

Nguyen Cao Thanh
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Publications integrated in the thesis


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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Statement of Authorship ................................................................. i
Publications integrated in the thesis .................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................. iii
Table of Contents .............................................................................. iv
List of Figures and Tables ................................................................. viii
List of Appendices ........................................................................... ix
Summary of thesis ............................................................................ x

Chapter One INTRODUCTION ............................................................. 1

1. Who am I to do this study? ....................................................... 2

2. National context .......................................................................... 7
   2.1 Current status of higher education in Vietnam .................. 7
   2.2 Quality of the university graduates ................................. 9
   2.3 New policies for reforming higher education ................. 10

3. Global setting ............................................................................. 11

Chapter Two LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................. 15

1. Introduction ................................................................................. 15

2. Autonomy and learning ........................................................... 15
   2.1 Autonomy as an integral part of peoples’ lives .................. 17
   2.2 Autonomy as a student ....................................................... 18
   2.3 The importance of autonomous learning ....................... 19
   2.4 Autonomous learning in higher education ...................... 20

3. Learning in Western and Asian cultures .................................. 22
   3.1 Asian learning context and style ...................................... 24
   3.2 Characteristics of dependent learners and independent learners .... 26

4. Criteria indicating an autonomous learner in tertiary education .......... 27
   4.1 Learner initiative ............................................................... 28
   4.2 Learning independently within institutional requirements .... 30
3. Research population..........................................................................................................63

3.1 Sampling selection.....................................................................................................63

3.2 Accessing the participants......................................................................................65

3.3 Participant Profile .................................................................................................66

4. The role of the researcher ..........................................................................................70

5. Ethical considerations ...............................................................................................71

6. Maintaining rigour .....................................................................................................73

7. Data collection ............................................................................................................75

7.1. Using Vietnamese language in the interview process............................................75

7.2. Interview process .................................................................................................76

8. Data analysis .............................................................................................................78

9. Limitations ................................................................................................................81

10. Review ..................................................................................................................82

Chapter Four RESULTS....................................................................................................83

1. Hang.........................................................................................................................83

2. Cuong.......................................................................................................................87

3. Nguyen.....................................................................................................................91

4. Cao ............................................................................................................................95

5. Chi .............................................................................................................................100

6. Hung .........................................................................................................................104

7. Tan .............................................................................................................................108

8. Long ..........................................................................................................................112

Chapter Five DISCUSSION..........................................................................................137

1. Round 1: dependent learner .....................................................................................137

2. Round 2: engaged learner .........................................................................................139
3. Round 3: potential of becoming autonomous learners ..............................................142
4. Erratic development in the process of becoming autonomous learners..................143
5. Review ......................................................................................................................145

Chapter Six CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS ........................................147
1. Autonomous learning of Vietnamese students overseas.........................................147
2. Constraints on Vietnamese students in becoming autonomous learners in domestic institutions. ........................................................................................................149

3. Recommendations....................................................................................................151
   3.1 For Vietnamese students......................................................................................151
   3.2 For Vietnamese university teachers ....................................................................153

4. Limitations ...............................................................................................................155
5. Conclusion ...............................................................................................................155

REFERENCES.............................................................................................................157
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Economic production and education spending, Asia-Pacific nations, 2007 .......12
Table 2: Summarising cultural expectations..............................................................24
Table 3: Warring’s (2009) model of stages of self-directed learning.....................49
Table 4: Participant’s profiles..............................................................................67
Table 5: Reframing Warring's model.................................................................81

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Descriptive statistics on students’ learning progress.............................116
Figure 2: Model of autonomous learning of Vietnamese students studying overseas148
Figure 3: Constraints on Vietnamese students in becoming autonomous learners ....150
LIST OF APPENDICES

APENDIX 1: Information Sheet, Consent Form and questionnaires of interviews. ..........168

APENDIX 2: Ethics Committee approval ........................................................................175
SUMMARY OF THESIS

The study investigates Vietnamese students’ learning when they are required to shift from a dependent learning context in Vietnam to a more independent learning environment in Australia. To examine the learning behaviour of a group of Vietnamese students in an Australian university I designed interview questions based on Warring’s (2009) model of the stages of development of self-directed learning. Eight Vietnamese students were involved as participants and I interviewed them on three separate rounds at intervals of one university semester. Additionally, my own personal educational experiences were used as a source of data.

The results of the study show that although the students come from a dependent learning context in Vietnam, these students developed the capacity for autonomous learning in Australia. However, the results from this cohort of Vietnamese students do not entirely match Warring’s learning model, which suggests that learning progresses through an identifiable number of stages. Although all the participants progressed towards becoming independent learners from semester to semester, this progress was erratic and did not occur in the linear way identified by Warring. However, the results demonstrated that given the appropriate support, as they were in this university, Vietnamese students are able to learn independently. The study concluded that to learn independently students need to be facilitated and supported by a variety of factors such as teachers, learning resources, and curriculum and that Asian students are not necessarily restricted to being dependent learners.
Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Insist on independent and free thought.
Go deeper and understand a text thoroughly
without having blind faith in every word or phrase;
boldly discuss questions that you have not perfectly
understood until you have fully grasped them.

Ask ‘why?’ every time you encounter a problem
and study closely to determine whether it concerns
real life and reason; in short, absolutely refrain from
a blind obedience to books. One must think
maturely.

- Ho Chi Minh -
(cited in Margison’s work, 2010 p.4)

In Vietnam, it is widely accepted that Ho Chi Minh was an eminent leader and a brilliant
intellectual. He devoted his life to struggling for the communist ideal and his ideas on
politics, economics and education are still viewed as relevant in Vietnam today. Ho Chi
Minh encouraged people to grasp critical and creative thinking in dealing with new
problems, and to be independent in their thoughts. Today these same capacities are
recognized as essential for students who need to be autonomous learners. Ho Chi Minh’s
advice regarding how people should think and learn gave me the idea of choosing and
conducting a study examining the learning processes of Vietnamese students studying
overseas.

While the thoughts and actions of Ho Chi Minh are the foundations of my passion for
conducting this study, there are a number of additional reasons that motivate me to
undertake this thesis including my own educational experiences in Vietnam and Australia. For me the transition from the Vietnamese educational culture to the one in Australia was not easy and I wondered how others from my country would fare. I decided to investigate the experiences of a selected group of Vietnamese students, newly arrived to study in Australia, and to determine if they had experiences that were similar to my own. One of the striking experiences that I had was the need to be an independent learner in the Australian context. Because this had been so critical for me I decided to frame the thesis around the following question: *What happens to Vietnamese students when they are required to shift from a dependent learning context in Vietnam to a more independent learning context in Australia?*

1. **Who am I to do this study?**

I was born in a small city in the North of Vietnam. My parents, who were secondary teachers, looked after and took care of me. They usually lulled me to sleep with Vietnamese proverbs or sayings which are permanently embedded in my heart.

\[Vua, thay, cha ay ba ngoi\]
\[Kinh tho nhu mot tre oi ghi long.\]

The King, the teacher and the father are at different positions; but children remember that they should venerate them equally as one unified person.

and

\[Cha me sinh con thay cho cuoc song\]

My parents gave me birth but my teacher made a man of me.

and

\[Khong thay do may lam nen\]
\[Muon sang phai bac cau kieu\]

You would do nothing without a teacher.

To get over a river, you must need a bridge

To become a good student, you have to admire the teacher.
At school, there were several slogans attached to the class wall to praise the teacher’s credit in graduating, for instance:

*Nhat tu vi su, ban tu vi su*

Whoever teaches me a letter, He should be my teacher.

Thus, whenever I was in school or at home, the image of the teacher was embedded forever in my mind as forming part of the highly esteemed trio: the King, the Father and the Teacher. When I was a student in Vietnam, I was not aware that the education system I was following was very traditional and conventional, as I did not have any opportunities to experience anything else. Everything that I had learnt was already recognized and acknowledged nationwide. I believed that all of the knowledge from textbooks and all the talk from teachers were the most trusted sources of knowledge. I thought that I had to follow, copy and imitate the teachers whatever the reasons were. In my mind, there was no room for argument or discussion. The absolute obedience to teachers was the target I was trying to reach. I was not aware that the way I thought and learnt, and the way teachers performed, was a teacher-centered approach which encouraged passive learning. Nor did I appreciate the idea that new ideas and understandings were continuously being developed.

From elementary school to high school, I had to learn every academic area of study, whilst creative subjects such as music, art and dance were excluded from the curriculum. The classroom was usually divided into two, with a few rows on each side, and an aisle between the two sides. Students had to sit in the same place until the end of the school year and teachers were on a podium all the time to perform their teaching. When going to class, we had to bring the textbooks, which were published by the government, and open them when the class started. During classes, we tried to listen, write down and take notes as much as possible as almost all the content presented in class would be used for tests and exams.

In each grade, we had to do oral, written and fitness tests. There was an oral test (*kiem tra mieng*) every day usually at the beginning of the class. In this kind of test we were required to repeat exactly what we had written in our notebooks, and the more fluent and exact our recitation, the higher the scores we attained. For example, in Vietnamese literature, teachers often asked me to repeat a short paragraph of a lecture note or a poem, and to get a
high mark I needed to recite every single word. In the written tests, in subjects which required creativity and imagination such as literature, we still had to follow the ideas from teachers when we analyzed and evaluated a poem or short story. If we presented something different from the teacher, we would not get high scores. It could be said that the teachers’ understanding was also our understanding, and everything they said was absolutely accepted. In addition, we were not allowed to criticize the teachers’ work even at the university level. I have a vivid memory from 1997 when I was in my third year at university. We had a writing test in class, and the requirement of the test was “danh gia vai tro dac thu cua mot giao vien day van sau khi ra truong” (to evaluate the specific roles of the literature teacher). One of my classmates wrote in his paper that:

“nguoi giao vien day van co nhung dac thu rieng voi giao vien cac bo mon khac nhu toan, ly hoac ngoai ngu. Nguoi giao vien day van ngoai kien thuc co ban phai co tri tuong tuong phong phu va co su cam nhan tinh te tu nhung tac pham van hoc. Theo toi, chi co nam giao vien o khoa ngu van cua truong ta la co du tieu chuan ay”

After that, his paper was handed out to all the lecturers in the faculty, and almost all the literature lecturers vented their anger and unhappiness at that student. At the time, I also disagreed with him and thought that his evaluation was inappropriate and improper, until I went to study in Australia. Then, I understood that he was able to think critically, and he was much more critical than I was in terms of assessing the teacher’s work. He was the first person in the 40 year history of the university to take such a stand in opposition to the teachers.

Inside the classroom, there were no discussions and arguments between teachers and students, and the activities in class were mostly monitored by teachers. Sometimes, I disagreed with the teachers about some issues, but I did not dare to express my own opinion. During lectures, I usually sat quietly, and observed the teaching in silence, without interruption or interference. In class, the students were only allowed to speak or ask questions with the permission of their teacher. Otherwise, questioning the teacher was
considered to be rude and unacceptable. The students’ responsibilities were obeying teachers and behaving respectfully towards their teachers. In all our assignments, exams or learning activities in the classroom, concepts like critical thinking, problem solving or decision-making were out of place. At that time I felt satisfied with the information given by teachers, and I thought that I was provided with the most reliable sources, so I rarely sought information from other sources such as the internet, books or articles. In assignments, I tried to recite as much as possible from lecture notes and textbooks. I repeated this without any critical comment and without considering whether or not the information was appropriate.

At university, the main purpose of my study was to pass every exam with good marks and to finally get a bachelor’s degree. Whenever I got a high mark, I was happy, because in that context getting a good mark meant I was a good student. I assumed that the higher the marks I got in exams or assignments, the more competent I was. I never looked back at the assignments that had good marks as I assumed they were perfect. I was not aware that I went to university to learn seriously in order to fit my knowledge into the workplace.

Occasionally, I and other classmates were aware that we needed to learn responsibly and creatively, but following the Confucian ideology that had been embedded in our thoughts for many years, we were not encouraged in creativity or in being responsible for our own ideas. Phuoc (1975) claims “the Confucian model is teacher-centered, closed, suspicious of creativity, and predicated on an unquestioning obedience from the students” (cited in Ellis, 1995, p.17). This certainly describes my experience where the teachers were powerful holders of all knowledge that it was our duty to accept. The overwhelming need to respect teachers made us afraid of challenging their statements. We were very reluctant to give our opinions or to convey our thoughts or to suggest solutions to problems that occurred in the learning process. At that time, in my mind, there was no room for contradiction of the teacher’s work, and I was an obedient product of this system.

As mentioned earlier, from childhood I was taught by my parents poems, songs and sayings through repetition and memorization. Perhaps the ideas and meanings of Confucian ideals through those poems, songs and sayings had dissipated my own voice when I was in front of teachers. According to Torrance (1973), one of the most important reasons leading to the
elimination of creativity in children is “premature attempts to learn in early age” (p.4). Torrance argues that children should be free to naturally explore anything they like and their parents and teachers should not ask them to do what they do not like. Unfortunately, because of our social and educational views at that time, we were not encouraged or facilitated to follow our own interests. Even at university level, we still thought that as long as we studied and memorized what we learnt we could learn well, and so we tried hard to learn all the things teachers said. We truly believed that learning meant remembering.

My learning attitude was positively changed when I came to Australia to study. I enrolled in the Master of Education course and then went on to do an EdD. During this time I have become a more independent, more creative and more responsible learner than I was in Vietnam. In essence my earlier mode of passive learning has been seriously challenged.

My educational experiences in Vietnam and Australia have helped me to realize myself in terms of the differences in characteristics of learners in these two educational environments. When I finished my Master of Education course, I was aware that the learning style of Vietnamese students, myself included, was strongly and negatively affected by traditional Vietnamese teaching and the rigidity of the curriculum. As noted above, my learning experience in Vietnam encouraged passivity and a belief that I was a high achiever because of my results. Now I consider that it actually inhibited my learning motivation and my capacity for critical thought and reflection. In addition I took no responsibility for my own learning considering that that was the teacher’s job. There are probably a number of ways to describe my learning style in Vietnam, but there is no doubt that, as a learner, I was passive, obedient, dependent and uncritical.

In my studies in Australia, I initially experienced obstacles in adapting to the learning and teaching approaches in the new environment, but gradually I have coped with those difficulties and learnt from them. It may not be the right time to say whether I have learnt very well in a Western education institution, but at least I have positively changed my attitude to learning. When I first came to Australia, I was wondering why the students, Australian and international, were so talkative in class and asked so many questions. They did not seem to be afraid of being critical of the ideas and readings that were being studied. The Vietnamese students in my classes were like me and stayed silent, even when we were
expected to take part in class discussions. It took some time but gradually I took part in the class activities and developed my sense of independence as a learner and began to think differently.

At one stage I came across an article that claimed that Vietnamese and Asian students were passive and dependent learners. This shocked me, especially when I realized it was true of myself. As I read more, I found that for Western learners, the goal of being an autonomous learner was highly valued (Lamb, 2008). Lamb pointed out that autonomous learning is effective and necessary for students especially at university level. Even coming from a traditional and non-developed background of education once I had realized this I was able to take part in the kinds of learning activities that demanded more of me in terms of finding out information, developing an argument and defending my point of view than simply repeating what others had said. However, my personal experience alone is not convincing enough to make a statement about Vietnamese students’ learning. Thus, based on my experiences and also on other factors such as national and global contexts, I set out to conduct a study on a cohort of Vietnamese students to identify whether or not they could be seen as autonomous learners.

2. National context

Today, more than ever before in human history, the wealth – or poverty – of nations depends on the quality of higher education. Those with a larger repertoire of skills and a greater capacity for learning can look forward to lifetimes of unprecedented economic fulfillment. But in the coming decades the poorly educated face little better than the dreary prospects of lives of quiet desperation.

Malcolm Gillis, President of Rice University, 1999

2.1 Current status of higher education in Vietnam

Although some progress has been made in restructuring higher education in Vietnam, many concerns still exist. Researchers who have studied this report that there are still cumbersome areas in Vietnamese education in general and in higher education in particular even though efforts to renovate the education system have been made (IIE, 2004; Stephen, Doughty et al, 2006; Hai et al, 2007; Lee & Emerita, 2008; Thomson, 2009; Jonathan, 2011).
In an educational conference held in Hanoi, Vietnam (29/10/2009), the Minister for Education and Training (MoET) Nguyen Thien Nhan concluded that, generally, the quality of higher education is low and poorly managed. He reported that, “In fact, in the last 30 years, the quality of higher education has not been adequately managed” and went on to indicate that every year there have been no reports regarding the training quality of universities. Lieu and Charles (2007) support this finding and claim that MoET has not yet built the strategies and policies necessary to create a competitive environment for higher education. With regards to teaching and learning, it is widely documented that most of the learning and teaching occurring in Vietnamese universities continues to be through rote memorization and ‘teacher-centered’ lectures in which students are not motivated to adopt critical and analytical skills or creative thinking (Stephen, Doughty, Gray, Hopcroft & Silvera, 2006; Thomson, 2009; Minh, 2009). Minh (2009) states that at universities, the common work method in the classroom is still ‘teacher talk and student write’ (p.6). Minh goes on to claim that students are not given opportunities to update current socioeconomic information. Observations in 2005 by teams of the National Academies of the United States identified problems of teaching and learning at selected Vietnamese universities and concluded that:

- Ineffective teaching methods, which have too high a dependence on lectures and little use of active learning techniques were used;
- There was a lack of emphasis on conceptual learning or higher order learning;
- Students learning is passive;
- Students spend too much time in classes each day … [and there was] no deep learning and comprehension;

(Stephen, Doughty, et al, 2006 p.16)

Another observation of an American professor in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) University of Education recorded that “Vietnamese students are reluctant to think critically for themselves because they fear being differentiated from the group” (Adam, 2004: p.2).

Higher education in Vietnam does not yet meet the needs of the nation (Jonathan, 2011). Although there were recently a number of proposals and agendas regarding renewal of the higher education system, including teaching and learning approaches, the whole higher education system has remained unchanged for a long time. Teaching and learning in the
universities is still immersed in the transmission model with many hours of lectures and texts that are well out of date.

2.2 Quality of the university graduates

University graduates are the key to the labor force in any society, and it is not surprising that the quality of the tertiary graduates in Vietnam has been found wanting. Before 2007 MoET has not required universities to meet standards for graduates in terms of their practical skills, professional understanding, or ability to work in different working environments (MoET, 2009) and the reflections of employers and organizations report that many do not fulfill the requirements of the workplace. Hai et al, (2007) found that many graduates lacked basic skills and knowledge, and that their communication skills were limited. A report from the World Economic Forum (WEF) comments that there are three major concerns in Vietnam: inflation, poor quality infrastructure and a lack of highly skilled workers (Vietnam net, 2009). Ly (2008) identifies a number of weaknesses observable in graduates of higher education, especially in areas such as teamwork, independent work and communication skills, and argues that these are essential for successful employment in the workplace. She also claims that many graduates find it difficult to make decisions and this is an important requirement in many jobs.

One of the salient weaknesses of the training at universities in Vietnam is the disconnection between classroom and the needs of the market. Vietnamese universities are not producing an educated workforce that Vietnam’s economy and society demand (Thomas & Wilkinson, 2008). Struggles for companies looking for qualified workers are illustrative. In 2006, Intel – the world’s largest semiconductor manufacturer - was looking to hire hundreds of new engineers. However, from interviews of over 2,000 Vietnamese potential candidates only forty individuals were found to be suitable for recruitment (Thomson, 2009). Further to this point, the deficiency of the Vietnamese labor force not only negatively affects domestic development but also handicaps the global integration that Vietnam is pursuing.
2.3 New policies for reforming higher education

Since the outset of the Doi Moi (reforms) in 1980s and later Vietnam’s entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in January 2007, the Vietnamese government has recognized the need to reform the outdated system of higher education. MoET and the government have produced an impressive set of goals, policy proposals, and education laws to articulate the dramatic changes. These include:

- As early as 1991, the government, through the channel of the 7th Party Congress, officially acknowledged the importance of reforming the tertiary education system to meet the needs of socioeconomic changes.

- In the agenda of the reforms of higher education from 2001 to 2010, there were prescriptions regarding reforming teaching and learning. Particularly, the focus was “learning is parallel with doing, and matching theories with practice” (p.75). Moreover, the agenda stresses the importance of independent learning, presentation skills, teamwork skills and raising issues. (Hai, et al, 2007)

- In 2007, MoET intended to enhance the quality of training in higher education with the slogan ‘training in accordance with the needs of the society’. To implement this action, MoET required universities to build and to proclaim standards of each qualification of students, and to analyze the suitability of that qualification to the needs of employment and society. (MoET, 2009)

- In March 2010, MoET produced an agenda specifically aimed at the standards of tertiary education graduates. This policy listed attributes of new graduates including:
  - Hard skills: professional skills, practical ability, skills in dealing with working situations, and problem solving skills.
  - Soft skills: communication skills, teamwork, ability in using information technology and being a competent speaker of English.
  - Behaviour: professional behavior and attitude, responsibility and being ambitious in learning updated knowledge. (MoET, 2010)

- In the perspective of Vietnamese education until 2020, the resolution shows that education is a prime national priority, and that investment in education is an investment in development. Particularly, the proposal lists the criteria in which people are expected to be capable:
  - choosing and grasping new knowledge
  - solving problems
  - organizing and cooperating
  - being self-disciplined (MoET, 2010)
As documented above, key aspects such as the quality of higher education, the quality of the university graduate, new agendas and proposals of MoET and the Vietnamese government on renewing the education system in general, and on students’ learning approaches in particular, were briefly reflected. These aspects were the key rationales for me to conduct this study.

3. Global setting

*How to combine national identity with a globally engaged Vietnam?* No doubt Ho Chi Minh would have found a way to do this (Adapted from Marginson’s work, 2010). The issues facing Vietnam today are different to those at the time of Ho Chi Minh – but equally challenging.

Today, higher demands and the competitive environment of the international market bring to Vietnam both opportunities and challenges, especially since Vietnam joined the WTO in 2007. According to Hai, Lam and Duc (2007), international integration would benefit Vietnamese education in terms of international cooperation to enhance the quality of education; motivating students to strengthen their ability to be able to work in a competitive environment; and the opportunity to receive, approach and exchange from other progressive education systems in the world. Further to this, globalization puts a lot of pressure on education’s shoulders in terms of its quality (Ly, 2008). According to Ly (2008) in order to fulfill international commitments and to meet the requirements of modernization and industrialization since Vietnam joined the WTO, a capable labor force is more vital than ever. It is evident that the socioeconomic and international changes demand the labor force, specifically new university graduates who have the ability to think critically and creatively, to solve problems and to interact with others in meaningful ways (Lee & Emerita, 2008). Researchers in this area conclude that the Vietnamese labor force including university graduates, is still incapable of meeting the needs of the global market. This has a critical effect on the Vietnamese economy, which often lags well behind even its Southeast Asian neighbors.

International banks and organizations released statistics that show comparisons between Vietnam and other Asian countries in terms of education spending and economic production.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population (millions) WB</th>
<th>Gross National Income ($s billions) WB</th>
<th>Gross National income per head ($s) PPP WB</th>
<th>Public education spending (% GDP) WB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>127.8</td>
<td>4813.3</td>
<td>34,600</td>
<td>3.7 ADB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China PRC</td>
<td>1320.0</td>
<td>3120.9</td>
<td>5370</td>
<td>3.5 ADB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>955.8</td>
<td>24,750</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>217.3</td>
<td>7880</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>142.6</td>
<td>3730</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>225.6</td>
<td>373.1</td>
<td>3580</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>67.2</td>
<td>2550</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>1690</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Documented from World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), Public Private Partnerships (PPP), and New Times, 2008)

Table1: Economic production and education spending, Asia-Pacific nations, 2007

Within the Asian countries Vietnam is just above Cambodia in terms of the national income per head although it has the highest percentage of GDP allocated to education, suggesting the importance this sector is now given.

For Vietnam to productively function and compete in the global workforce, Thompson (2009) argues that universities in Vietnam must properly equip graduates with the necessary skills. Marginson (2008) has identified attributes that nations, including Vietnam, need to maintain if their higher education system is to be productive in the global context. Important elements of his recommendation include the need for a modern research...
and innovation system, an education system that prepares tertiary students for a future of continuous adaptation and innovation, a sufficient spread of people who can communicate globally and work effectively with people from other countries in business and governmental activities. He suggests that a sign of global effectiveness is when a nation has a strong flow of students moving in and out of the country.

Based on the accounts from the above scholars, it is worth noting that the overwhelming concentration on globalization has a significant effect on socioeconomic development and particularly has close bearing on the outcome of tertiary education in Vietnam. In an important sense, to maximize advantages from global trends, Vietnamese tertiary graduates need to be capable and competent enough to meet international requirements. This aspect is one of the leading reasons motivating me to conduct this study on Vietnamese tertiary students learning autonomously.

There are both subjective and objective reasons that motivate and inspire me to choose and conduct a study on the topic of autonomous learning towards Vietnamese students studying overseas. The subjective reason is my own educational experiences in both Vietnam and Australia. One of the objective rationales is the national context which includes the current status of higher education in Vietnam; quality of the university graduates; and new policies of reforming higher education. Another objective reason motivating me to undertake this study is the global context.

**Thesis organization**

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter One is the introduction of the thesis. This chapter provides three key reasons that motivate the researcher to choose and conduct a study on how Vietnamese students learn in one Western university. My own educational experience in Vietnam and Australia is a leading reason. Following this is the national context which includes an overview of higher education in Vietnam, and introduces new policies of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) that focus on renovation of higher education system. The global context that effects socioeconomic development and particularly, has close bearing on the outcome of tertiary education in Vietnam, is the final reason.
Chapter Two consists of a literature review on autonomous learning in education. It starts with key understandings of autonomous learning and the importance of autonomous learning in education especially at university level. Next, it documents learning characteristics in Western and Asian cultures. After this, it presents criteria indicating an autonomous learner at tertiary level and the role of teachers in fostering autonomous learning. The chapter then presents potential obstacles in the process of becoming an autonomous learner. Finally, the chapter outlines a theoretical framework for the thesis.

Chapter Three describes the methodology of the investigation. It argues for the employment of qualitative methodology to be aligned with the interpretive paradigm. The process of selecting participants and the role of researcher are described. The chapter continues and sums up with ethical considerations, maintaining of rigour and the limitations of using a case study approach. The next section is the descriptions of the data collection process. The chapter finishes with presenting how the data is analysed.

Chapter Four reports on the results of the three rounds of interviews. The learning development of eight participants is reported in each round, and in this section some responses of participants are quoted. The chapter also consists of a section of the researcher’s educational experiences and learning journeys from Vietnam to Australia.

Chapter Five is the discussion based on data gathered from three rounds of interviews in relation to the theoretical framework in the literature. Each round is named to reflect the participants’ process of becoming autonomous learners. The discussions show the erratic development of participants, and there are mismatches between data and the theoretical framework.

Chapter Six is the conclusion of this thesis. It indicates the difficulties of becoming autonomous learners for Vietnamese students who are studying in domestic institutions. The chapter continues with presenting recommendations for Vietnamese students and university teachers. It finishes with limitations of the study and possible explanations for these.
Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Introduction

In the first chapter, I identified the purpose of this thesis and described the events that aroused my interest in autonomous learning. I introduced the purpose of this study and the methods I would use to find an answer to my question. In this chapter I identify issues related to autonomous learning in higher education and create a picture of autonomous learning in education as understood by Western scholars. These ideas will bring me the essence of autonomous learning and process of becoming autonomous learners. There is a large amount of literature on developing learning autonomy available in Western education, whereas the literature on this topic in Vietnam is quite scant. My interest lies in finding ways to assist Vietnamese learners to develop their own autonomy so that they are able to continue learning long after they have left educational institutions. As I noted in chapter one, the Vietnamese economy needs people with initiative and creative capacities, and these I consider to be outcomes of autonomous learning.

This review of the literature related to shaping and constructing autonomous learning at university level was necessary to help me, as a researcher, elaborate a theoretical framework for this study. Moreover, the literature review will provide alternative lenses for viewing autonomous learning, which allows me to consider, choose and elaborate a theoretical model to my study.

2. Autonomy and learning

The original definition of autonomous learning was conceived during a series of workshops conducted by the scholar Holec in 1981. In French, his definition reads as:
L’autonomie de l’apprentissage est la capacité de l’apprenant à prendre en charge son apprentissage, c’est à dire la capacité à:

- définir des objectifs
- déterminer des contenus
- choisir des supports et des techniques
- gérer le déroulement de l’apprentissage
- évaluer l’apprentissage (contenus et forme) (Workshops 17/96, 3/97, 8/97, 17/97)

(Holec, 1981: p.3)

The English translation of Holec’s 1981 French statement is:

Learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one’s own learning. In other words: to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning:

- determining the objectives
- defining the contents and progressions
- selecting methods and techniques to be used
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition
- evaluating what has been acquired

(Holec, 1981: p.3)

According to Holec’s points, learning autonomy incorporates the fundamental skills which learners need to attain. The central feature of his argument is that learner autonomy is achieved when the individual has developed the ability to undertake learning tasks independently and responsibly. A result of Holec’s perception has been a shift of focus from teaching to learning, from what the teacher does to what the students do and how they do it. Since 1981 the idea of autonomous learning has been variously interpreted, and, according to Sparrow and Swan (2000), is used synonymously with other terms such as independent learning, self-directed learning, collaborative learning, experiential learning and learner-focused learning. However Sparrow and Swan argue that these terms can obscure or neglect the critical focus on independence and responsibility. While these two capacities are accepted as the hallmarks of an autonomous learner, it is to be expected that fully functioning autonomous learners would exhibit all of the above-mentioned capacities: independence, self-direction, collaboration, experience and the capacity to reflect on their own learning (Sparrow and Swan, 2000). Also according to Sparrow and Swan these capacities are not always exposed in the same manner and at the same time in each person.
Chapter Two

2.1 Autonomy as an integral part of peoples’ lives

Many experts argue that the capacity for autonomous action is an important one for human beings and is a leading factor in their success. Breen and Mann (1997: p.7) assume that “autonomy as a quality of the person, [is] a way of being in the world”. Ryan (1991: p.74) puts it differently and argues that whether or not “a person is highly appraised in society depends on his/her ability to do things autonomously”. It seems that the achievement of the sense of autonomy is one of fundamental demands and goals of human beings in today’s Western society.

Consistent with these beliefs about human autonomy, Chanock writes that:

... as we grow and mature, we develop an increasingly deep psychological need to be independent, first, of parental control, and then, later, of control by teachers and other adults. An essential aspect of maturing is developing the ability to take increasing responsibility for our own lives – to become increasingly self-directing.

(Chanock, 2003: p.2)

Chanock raises a critical point when she claims that we are not born as independent learners, it is something that we need to develop. The ability to take responsibility is an integral aspect of growing up, especially when people begin to integrate into society as adults. A person’s ability to act autonomously is not only essential for their daily life, it is also essential if students are to be successful as learners and in their later life in the workforce (Chanock, 2003; Lamb, 2008). This is also true in Vietnam, even though traditional and cultural influences still remain strong in family’s lives, parents expect their children to be independent and responsible when they grow up.

Lamb (2008) argues that it is hard to see how people can be autonomous in their daily lives without being autonomous with regard to their learning. Lamb is confident that there is a direct link between learning and real life: if students are not autonomous in their learning, they will neither be successful in their study or their own lives. He goes on to claim that learners, as people, usually desire to lead their own lives autonomously, and they generally have an idea that their learning performance can positively contribute to their daily life.
2.2 Autonomy as a student

Since Holec’s original statement, others have further developed the idea of autonomy. Moore (1973) claimed that independent learning was an essential capacity for students. He stated “That each scholar can and should pursue knowledge in his own idiosyncratic fashion is a fundamental assumption of the university and one of its most ancient traditions” (p.661).

To develop competency in learning skills, Boud (1988) suggests students should try their best first, and seek help from the teacher only when their best attempts have been unsuccessful. Boud stresses the importance of the teacher’s role as an essential and valuable resource in promoting and directing the growth of learners and assisting them to gain confidence in decision making and problem solving; two of the most important capacities if students are to become autonomous learners.

Autonomous learning does not mean that students work in isolation or apart from teachers and fellow-learners (Kesten, 1987; Littlewood, 1999; Marshall & Rowland, 2006; Mugan & Kuipers, 2010). Learners need guidance and interaction with their peers and collaboration with their teachers. According to Littlewood (1999), learner autonomy is the outcome of interdependence, not independence and for this to occur, students need proper instruction from teachers rather than merely reviewing what they already know or aimlessly discussing what they find without direction from the teacher. Consistent with this idea is the advice that tertiary students:

In addition to assignments, you are expected to gather information for lectures, discussion groups, practical sessions, field trips and exams. Most of this work you undertake on your own, but it is also worth seeking opportunities to work collaboratively.

(Marshall & Rowland, 2006: p.87)

As well as the ability to work independently, the autonomous learner is required to cooperate with others in their learning as it is unlikely that independent learning can be achieved in isolation. In interactive processes, students may have more opportunities for seeking possible answers for their educational development (Kesten, 1987). Collaboration
is identified by Littlewood (1999) as one of the most important aspects of becoming an autonomous learner, as it is essential for maintaining the ability to learn independently and responsibly.

2.3 The importance of autonomous learning

Autonomous learning is part of an ongoing, lifelong process of education that fosters the continuing growth of students’ capabilities (Kesten, 1987; Voller, 1997; Champagne et al, 2001; Cotteral, 2003; Teaching Expertise, 2004; Koulouris & Heffernan OAM, 2011; Nguyen, 2011). Learning autonomy promotes and stimulates in students the abilities to produce new knowledge based on their own experiences, interests and needs (Kesten, 1987: p.1). Kesten maintains that “autonomous learning makes full use of the resources of the school and the community and fosters the development of independent learners in every grade and in every subject” (p.3). Consistent with Kesten, Lamb (2003: p.5) concludes that autonomy is “an educational goal”. The author raises important aspects of autonomy in learning in which learners are active in seeking and grasping new knowledge. Taking account from the above scholars’ ideas, it is probable that the outcome of learning is less likely to be productive and effective if students do not learn autonomously.

According to the above researchers, the adoption of autonomous learning skills is essential. This is especially so in the modern context where there are many issues to be understood and problems to be solved. Learners can no longer rely on their teachers to know everything and must be courageous themselves in finding new information and answers. In one magazine edition of the website Teaching Expertise (2004), the importance of independent learning skills is specifically indicated as:

Independent learning skills are an essential preparation for life and for transition to, and success in, vocational, college or HE courses. Independent learning skills promote pupils’ ability in reviewing, recording and reflecting on their learning. They also encourage independence in problem-solving, decision-making and organisation.

(Teaching Expertise, 2004: p.3)

The author points out several comprehensive skills that equip students with the ability to
conduct their learning in effective ways. Ideally, such skill building will start early and be sustained throughout an individual’s learning life. Hence, being autonomous and attaining independent learning skills such as “problem-solving, decision-making and organisation” will assist learners at every level to be more successful and competent. In an important sense, the learner, working autonomously at a basic level, would have the potential to develop and enrich their competence at a tertiary level, which is a critical stage before integrating into and facing real life and society (Koulouris & Heffernan, 2011; Nguyen, 2011).

2.4 Autonomous learning in higher education

Tertiary education equips students with essential skills and practical knowledge that enables them to handle challenges in the work place (Kesten, 1987; Boud, 1988; Champagne et al., 2001; Marshal & Rowland, 2006; Akella, 2010; Nguyen, 2011). Marshal & Rowland (2006: p.45) claim that “in tertiary education, you make many decisions about what, why, how, when and where to learn”. At the tertiary education level, students are expected to make decisions by themselves rather than depend on their teachers. Starting university can be both bewildering and stimulating; students face the challenge of integrating into a new culture and transitioning into independent learning (Marshal & Rowland, 2006). In Vietnam students may face an even greater challenge than students in Western cultures. Not only is their educational experience very teacher directed but also students coming to university are from different cities, urban and rural areas. They bring with them learning habits and learning attitudes that may be a long way from enabling them to be autonomous learners (Nguyen, 2011).

Autonomous learning approaches at university play an important role in equipping students with essential skills. It is unlikely that a student who is dependent on their teacher is going to be productive in learning, or in any subsequent employment (Boud, 1988). Mynard & Sorflaten (2003) classify some typical aspects that show how being an autonomous learner can benefit the students. According to the authors, these benefits would be helping students to be more confident and more responsible in learning. Additionally, when students are autonomous learners, they know how to learn in order to make their learning more
effective and enjoyable (Akella, 2010). This capacity contributes to their ongoing success.

All the above mentioned skills, such as confidence, decision-making ability, time management skills and being able to take responsibility, are salient characteristics of autonomous learners. These key abilities will advantage students and graduates, not only in their learning at university, but also in handling and coping with actual circumstances in real life.

In addition, autonomous learning approaches at the higher education level are critically needed, especially to meet the demands of our changing society. In theory, there would be no need to develop an autonomous learning approach if our societies remained unchanged. However, in reality, society is changing frequently, and the learner needs to be able to adapt (Boud, 1988). Boud states that “the main impetus towards education [sic] developments is the rapidly changing nature of the world which graduates have to face” (p.26). Developing the skills of an autonomous learner at university, therefore, will enable students to cope with the problems that arise from an ever shifting society. Kesten (1987) argues that:

To take responsibility for their lives in times of rapid social change, students need to learn on a life-long basis. As most aspects of our daily lives are likely to undergo profound changes, independent learning will enable individuals to respond to the changing demands of work, family and society. For example, changes in work life will require retraining, job change and life-long learning, and technology change will demand the value, attitudes and skills associated with independent learning.

(Kesten, 1987: p.4)

Taking Kesten’s account into consideration, it is unlikely that students, who have not developed the competencies of responsibility, creativity and independence in their learning, will be able to efficiently respond and adapt to circumstances in their future lives.

The above issues are relevant to graduates from universities in Vietnam. In my own experience as a graduate from a Vietnamese university, I faced problems when applying for a job. I graduated with excellent results in the Bachelor of Education from one of the biggest universities in Vietnam. I was confident in my abilities when applying for
administrative work with foreign companies. Nevertheless, my first application was rejected after a probationary period for new recruits as I could not demonstrate the ability to work independently. Specifically, I was puzzled when I was asked to write a report demonstrating the current administrative constraints in the company. At that time, I had no idea how to do this and lacked the confidence to ask for help.

My own experience is not a generalisation of the experiences of all Vietnamese graduates. However, it illustrates the importance of learning to be autonomous for Vietnamese students, especially at university. Thus, as explained in the introduction, it is also one of the major reasons why I chose to conduct my thesis on the topic of autonomous learning at the tertiary education level in Vietnam - one of the Asian countries where the traditional, social and cultural characteristics remain as strong influences on most aspects of life, including education.

3. Learning in Western and Asian cultures

The differences between Western and Asian pedagogical contexts are also evident in learning styles and approaches to learning. In Asian contexts, learning is teacher-centred, and students tend to rely on teachers to transmit (tell or provide) information, whereas Western students engage in critical thinking, and learning is student-centred. This means that students do more than reproduce knowledge; they question and challenge the ideas of others and forward their own opinions and ideas. Additionally, in Western educational environments, the role of the student is to understand, think deeply about and make sense of information, and being a successful student means being able to think critically about others’ ideas and be creative and original in constructing new ways of thinking. In contrast, Asian learners tend to reproduce the information and knowledge that has been passed on to them by their teachers, and the role of students is to accumulate knowledge. Likewise, Asian students prefer teachers telling them the ‘correct answer’ while Western teachers will not tell students the ‘correct answer’. Many different ‘answers’ might be provided by the teacher and students are expected to reach their own conclusions.

The University of Tasmania (UTAS) published a booklet which included the research of
scholars such as Biggs (2007), Littlewood (1999), Ballard & Clanchy (1997), Bochner (1986), and Hofstede (1986). Parts of their research relate to Western education and parts relate to Asian learning preferences. Many of these studies examine the characteristics and the differences between education in Western and Asian cultures. In Western cultures, teachers and students relate to each other informally, and teachers are not automatically respected. In Asian cultures, the relations between students and teachers are formal and the students show great respect for their teachers (Ballard & Clancy, 1997). In Western contexts students can question and challenge teachers and their classmates and students can initiate conversations. However in Asian educational environments, students do not question or challenge their teachers or their classmates, nor do they refer to their teachers by their first name. Additionally, in Western cultures, teachers expect students to be independent at the least and autonomous learners at best. This means that students are expected to take control of their own learning. Students are not dependent upon their teachers for their success, while in Asian cultures, teachers are dominant in the teaching and learning process. These characteristics have a bearing on my learning experiences when I was at the university in Vietnam. As already stated in the introduction, at that time I always followed teachers’ ideas and considered them as the most trusted source of knowledge. Others, myself included, were of the opinion that asking teachers in front of the class was disrespectful.

Attitudes to knowledge and learning are other features that vary between Western and Asian students. In Western students’ thinking, ideas can be owned, and this is called intellectual property. In addition, the ideas of others need to be acknowledged. This means giving information about who ‘owns’ the idea, and if the source of ideas is not acknowledged, it is considered a form of academic dishonesty or plagiarism. Unlike Western students, Asian learners think that no-one can ‘own’ knowledge, and knowledge is owned collectively. Students are free to reproduce, in their assignments, the ideas of their teachers and the ideas found in sacred writings without acknowledgement or specifying where the ideas came from.

The dissimilarities between Western and Asian cultures are briefly categorized based on key features as below:
Table 2: Summarising cultural expectations

However, the learning attitudes of Asian students have been changing over the past few decades. Because of strong traditions embedded in various Asian cultures, the educational systems and learning styles in Asia cannot be expected to change overnight. As summarised above, the Asian educational systems, Vietnam included, support: non-autonomous learning styles and approaches to learning, passive attitudes towards knowledge, and formal and distant teacher/student relationships in the learning environment.

The above generalisations are helpful in realizing the characteristics of students coming from Vietnam.

### 3.1 Asian learning context and style

All Asian countries are in a process of change in terms of integrating socially and economically with the world (UNESCO, 2012). However, in the last few decades they still maintained tradition in education, and it is unlikely to be abandoned overnight. Littlewood (1999) assumes that people in East Asian nations show a much stronger collectivist
orientation than people in Western countries. He states that mutual support and harmony within groups, with strong attachment of members, are typical features of East Asian people. The Asian emphasis on harmony has considerable influence on education in general and their preference style of learning.

Sullivan (1994) notes that Asian cultures pay more attention to ‘face’ in the form of ‘saving face or losing face’. In class, neither the teachers nor the students should be made to lose face. Students keep quiet in class without discussing or contributing to the teacher’s lecture to show their respect toward their teacher and to avoid making mistakes and losing face in public. As Hwang (1986) points out, “he or she must pay attention to preserving others’ face in social encounters, especially the face of the superiors” (p.248). In addition, the teachers rarely give students a chance to question, and teachers try to avoid answering the learners’ questions by saying “I do not know” (Teachers are at all times supposed to know everything). As evaluated, the term ‘keeping face’ is one of the salient characteristics of Asian learning, and it happens both inside and outside classroom. In reflecting on my own experiences (as presented in Chapter Four) when undertaking study in the Master Course of Education, I was afraid of ‘losing face’ in the classroom. While local and other international students were discussing and contributing to the lecture, I stayed in silence and contributed little. In group discussions, I was the last person in the group to express opinions, and I tried to avoid giving my own ideas at the beginning of discussions. This does not mean that I did not understand the topics or lectures, but I was afraid that if I said something inappropriate other people would laugh at me. Additionally, at that time, I thought that it was a safe way to listen to someone first and then, based on their ideas, to present my understandings.

Many writers claim that Asian students are very traditional in their learning styles (Biggs, 1990; Nelson, 1995; Littlewood, 1999; Biggs, 2003; Nguyen, 2010). Biggs (2003: p.122) maintains that “Asian students tend to look on lecturers as close to gods. Often, they are very reluctant to question statements or textbooks”. Biggs observes that students coming from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Vietnam appear to prefer using rote learning rather than other approaches. Consistent with Biggs, Littlewood (1999) illustrates that, in Vietnamese classes, students are often inclined to act as ‘one family’ of 20 or 30 students,
and they ‘respond together’ rather than working in smaller groups. These characteristics mostly reflect the learning styles of Vietnamese students, myself included, when we were at the Language Centre in Australia. In the English classes, when teachers allocated students in group discussions, we - a cohort of Vietnamese students - preferred to be in a Vietnamese group. We even discussed topics in Vietnamese, and then one person presented for a whole group. These learning styles are more likely to be influenced from traditional learning and teaching approaches in the home country where Confucian ideology had greatly dominated in both thought and actions of teachers and students.

Confucianism has a strong influence on Asian people’s social communication and also on educational direction. Within the Confucian tradition, students learn by working for the common good (Nelson, 1995; Nguyen, 2010). In fact, Biggs (1990: p.4) states that “Asian students are perceived to be relentless rote learners, syllabus dependent, passive and lacking initiative; brought up in, and committed to, what we would regard as a surface approach to learning”. As mentioned by Nelson and Biggs, Confucian ideology, which highly regards the harmony in group learning and avoiding arguments, has hindered the fostering of autonomous learning in the Asian context. This view of Confucius’ teachings is challenged by Alexander (2001) who claims that Confucius actually promoted a dialogic engagement between teachers and students rather than the authoritarian form that was my experience.

However, summed up from many authors, it is more likely that Asian students’ learning styles incline to the ‘surface approach’ and are influenced by the cultural syndrome of ‘collectivism’. Clearly, these characteristics of Asian students with respect to learning styles are likely to constrain and restrain the process of promoting autonomous learning in Asian countries. In particular they challenge educators and teachers in assisting and facilitating students to move from dependent learners to independent learners.

3.2. Characteristics of dependent learners and independent learners

In conjunction with the dissimilarity of learning styles and approaches between cultures, in this section I intend to elaborate on the characteristics of dependent learners and
independent learners (autonomous learners) at the tertiary level.

The issue of dependent and independent learning has drawn attention from a number of researchers (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991; Oxford, 1991; Barnett, 1993; Broady & Kenning, 1996; Nguyen, 2011). These scholars have clarified the different characteristics of dependent and independent learners. Dependent learners are described as relying heavily on the teacher, while independent learners are self-reliant. Moreover, independent learners can make informed decisions about their learning whilst dependent learners cannot. In addition, the teacher’s whole responsibility for learning is engraved in dependent learners while independent learners think that they are responsible for their own learning (Barnett, 1993; Broady & Kenning, 1996). More importantly, independent learners are intrinsically motivated by making progress in learning, whereas dependent learners do not set learning goals and they pay more attention to extrinsic motivators such as grades or rewards.

The above characteristics are only generalisations, and they may manifest dissimilarly in different contexts and different cultures. This generalisation is useful for seeing the different role of teachers or students in each model. In the dependent learner model, the teacher is the person who has the main responsibility in the learning activities of students, and the students are passive receivers. In contrast, in the active learning model, students play an active role in their learning in terms of seeking and grasping knowledge instead of relying on teachers as a source of knowledge.

4. Criteria indicating an autonomous learner in tertiary education

Being an autonomous learner at a tertiary level usually requires a huge effort and a high degree of competency from learners in which the consciousness and self-awareness of learners about their learning is extremely important. Boud (1988) indicates the skills and abilities that tertiary students need to attain in order to be autonomous learners. One of the key points is that students need to identify learning needs and set learning goals as well as planning learning activities. Moreover, autonomous learners are expected to work collaboratively with others, using teachers only as guides and counselors rather than
instructors. In addition, the learner is able to make significant decisions about their learning tasks as well as creating ‘problems’ to tackle.

It seems that almost all of the factors serve the purpose of the development of autonomy in learning. The noteworthy points include: working independently, collaborative learning, problem solving, using resources, decision making, setting and determining learning goals. They are all relevant to supporting autonomous learning in education. Lamb (2003) supplements and emphasises the importance of the skills that need to be obtained in the process of being an autonomous learner:

> Autonomous learning skills are transferable key skills eg: planning, monitoring, evaluating, reflecting, decision-making, accessing and organising information – way of coming with explosion of knowledge.

(Lamb, 2003: p.6)

The above aspects will be found in autonomous learners who need to fulfill the rest of these criteria, depending on different pedagogical environments. However, during the process of becoming autonomous learners, it is unlikely that students are able to meet all of the above criteria. They may choose and decide the factors that fit into their particular context. The following sections will classify and elaborate some key criteria which learners are expected to meet during the process of becoming autonomous learners at the university level.

### 4.1 Learner initiative

This section will adopt the work of Ponton (1999), particularly using the author’s conceptions regarding learner initiative. He develops a construct for learner initiative that addresses intention to initiate learning activities. Ponton assumes that, to be autonomous in learning requires the learner to establish a learning goal, and this goal is expected to match the standards of subsequent work after university. In this stage, learners are recommended to compare current levels of achievement to desired levels. The author defines this component as ‘goal – directedness’. Moreover, learner initiative also includes the ‘action orientation’. It refers to the learner’s capacity to quickly engage in the learning activity with learning goals which have been established. This capacity is maximally motivated
when the learner is able to perceive the presence of opportunity, time, importance, and urgency. Additionally, according to Ponton, to be active in learning, it requires students to have the ability to take the responsibility and readiness in overcoming learning obstacles. A learner who exhibits an active approach does not expect others to solve his or her problems. An active approach will be valuable if the learner is able to allocate time, money and resources to learning activities. The last but not least is ‘self-starting’. It refers to the behaviour of a learner to motivate his or herself to begin a learning activity. A self-starting learner does not wait for others to create learning plans or goals that possibly lead to the individual’s valued achievement. Instead, self-starting learners are expected to actively create and plan their own learning activities. Ponton’s points are related to my own learning experience when undertaking the Doctor of Education course. In the third year of the course, I actively found alternative approaches in conducting my research instead of merely waiting and expecting advice from the supervisor as I had in the first year. I regularly attended research workshops of staff and research proposal presentations of other research students. Through these activities I gained invaluable experiences that made me become more confident in undertaking my thesis.

Developing Ponton’s work to its logical conclusion shows that the learner is required to and expected to be active, ready and creative in performing his or her learning activities. Concerning the learner initiative, the learner is characterized as a person actively seeking and creating the learning plans, and also confidently participating in and attending to learning activities. At this stage, there is a lesser presence of others being involved in the learner’s learning activity. It is important to note that learner initiative is one of the crucial aspects in fostering autonomous learning.

However, it is less likely that the theory of Ponton (1999) works productively in Asian contexts in general and the Vietnamese context in particular. As indicated earlier by Biggs, (1990); Nelson, (1995); Littlewood, (1999); and Biggs, (2003), there is still a deep and strong influence of culture and tradition on students’ learning in Asia. Furthermore, only endeavor of learners seems not to be enough. They need to be supported and facilitated by other factors such as teacher pedagogy or technology. Thus, concepts such as self-starting, active approach, action orientation and goal-directedness appear strange to Asian learners.
My educational experience in Vietnam can be seen a typical instance of these above statements. In the classroom at the university in Vietnam, I sometimes did not entirely agree with teachers in a certain degree, but I did not dare to openly argue with her/him as my culture taught to absolutely obey teachers.

4.2 Learning independently within institutional requirements

As already indicated independence is one of the most essential and fundamental aspects of learning at every level of schooling in the West, and it is even more important in higher education (Boud, 1988 Higgs, 1988; Camiller, 1997; Littlewood, 1999; Warring, 2009; Vasuvat & Intratat, 2010). Boud (1988) asserts that one of the priorities that the university should develop is its students’ habit of independent intellectual inquiry. Thus, the expectation of universities towards students is that learners are able to work on their own rather than depend on others. Boud expands the aspect of independence by saying that the autonomous person must be free, not only from the guidance of others external to him or her, but also from his or her “inner compulsions and rigidities”. He argues that learners need to be brave to get rid of their traditional rigidity. Littlewood (1999) adds that the capacity for independent learning at university level is crucial, as there will be no teachers to accompany students throughout their life when they leave university. Hence, the ability to be responsible for one’s own learning is a critical goal for all learners.

Autonomous learners are willing to acquire knowledge by their own efforts, and they know their strengths and weaknesses (Warring, 2009). To achieve this, autonomous learners are expected to decrease use of the traditional approaches they adopted before becoming autonomous learners. Supporting Warring’s idea, Camiller (1997) emphasizes that independent learners have to refuse ‘spoon-feeding’. He adds that autonomous learners are capable of undertaking personal research. Consistent with these scholars’ ideas, the writers of the booklet from the University of Tasmania (UTAS) describe several aspects of autonomous learners as follows: “being an independent learner means taking responsibility for your own studies and learning” (p.18). This idea is further expanded: independent learners do not rely on the teacher to make them successful, instead of that, they are expected to work by themselves to achieve their learning success (Vasuvat & Intratat,
However, independence in learning is not free of choice, it must be compatible with the institutional environment where learners are involved. These ideas are more likely to be applicable to students in Vietnam where the impact of factors such as culture, society and economy and especially an overlap of administration procedures have hindered students’ desire to learn. These challenges are not easy to overcome instantly in Vietnam.

It is further verified that autonomy in learning involves not only the ability to work independently, but also to be conscious of one’s role in the environment in which the learning occurs (Higgs, 1988, Lamb, 2008). Clearly, students often perform their learning in relation to a specific context, so they need to consciously adjust their learning behaviour. Thus, one of the practical requirements of becoming an autonomous learner is to respect the content and organisation of the course (Boud, 1988).

Along the lines of the above points, Higgs (1988) believes that learners should work independently, but they still need to:

…be aware of institutional requirements and expectations associated with the disciplines in which they are studying…This last role is an especially important one, since students bring to the learning task their own standards for their work, but they need to learn what others expect of them.

(Higgs, 1988: p.41)

Higgs raises a fundamental point, which is the connection of the institutional context to the learners. This refers to the idea that students need to be aware that they are learning not only for themselves, but they are also fulfilling and serving responsibilities to their institutes, fellows, and also their families.

There is a consistency among scholars that one of the most important aspects of being an autonomous learner is the ability to work independently. Autonomous learners are expected to actively and confidently perform their study instead of entirely depending on others. Independent learners cannot work without understanding the institutional requirements.
4.3 Problem solving and decision making

In today’s changing world, many hurdles and obstacles arise which require people in general and graduates in particular to have the ability to make decisions as well as the ability to overcome problems. According to Ponton (1999), obstacles to learning may include: a lack of confidence in their learning ability, a lack of learning resources, time constraints, non-learning commitments or monetary restraints. The ability to handle and overcome these challenges is also essential for students to become autonomous learners. At university, if students shun the opportunity to be involved in decision-making in their learning, they are less likely to successfully handle challenges in real life (Boud, 1988).

At a tertiary level, students are often required and expected to possess the capacity to cope with challenges that students usually face at university (Boud, 1988; Ponton, 1999; Confessore, 2004; QIA, 2008; Lamb, 2008; Nguyen, 2010). Boud asserts that:

No learner can be effective in more than a very limited area if he or she cannot make decisions for themselves about what they should be learning and how they should be learning it: teachers cannot, and do not wish to guide every aspect of process of learning.

(Boud, 1988: p.25)

Obviously, teachers cannot perform the learning activities on behalf of students. Hence, the ability to make decisions is critical for students at the tertiary level. Students must be able to make decisions by themselves in order to determine whether the learning approaches they are adopting are effective or whether they should seek another approach (QIA, 2008). For example, regarding assignments, teachers will suggest important readings to students, but students have to make their own decisions about which materials to choose and use in their assignments.

Consistent with Boud (1988) and the QIA (2008), Confessore (2004) claims that overcoming obstacles is essential for the development of students’ autonomous behaviour at university. The author emphasises that, even in the presence of impediments during the learning process, learners have to continually be engaged in their learning activity. Moreover, a problem–solution framework is also helpful to both teacher and student. It
enables them to share problem-solving by finding possible solutions to handle the
difficulties (Lamb, 2008).

4.4 Using learning resources

At tertiary level students are not expected to work without support, and they should be able
to use learning resources such as peers, tutors, teachers, electronic media and technology
(Knight, 1996; Race, 1996; Lynch, 2000; Maria and Pueyo, 2006; Lamb & Reinders,
2008). The availability of learning resources will productively engage students with
carefully chosen tasks, which will assist students’ learning to be successful (Race, 1996).
Thus, competence in using learning resources is one of the most fundamental aspects of
being an autonomous learner in the tertiary education context. Learning resources are
classified into human resources and physical resources.

4.4.1 Human resources

Human resources include teachers, tutors, mentors, and fellow-students. Lamb & Reinders
(2008) suggest that the teacher needs to remain "present" for the learner, so that the learner
can feel supported by the teacher. In addition, the learner needs to develop the capacity to
reach out to the teacher as a resource, in order to maintain an inter-relational climate,
conducive to the learner’s desired independence in the learning experience. Moreover,
Lamb & Reinders (2008) state that a requirement of being an autonomous learner at
university is that “the learner must develop a capacity for persistence in using resources
and the teacher as a resource” (p.66).

It is likely that students will find their study difficult and challenging without assistance
from teachers. As stated by Lamb & Reinders (2008), students need to see guidance from
teachers as a valuable resource and they need to take full advantage of the teachers’
support. Lamb & Reinder’s ideas are true on reflection of my educational experience when
I began to conduct my EdD course. At that time I became stuck in finding a research topic
as the more I read the more confused I got. Then my supervisor suggested that I examine
my own educational experiences, in Vietnam as well as in Australia, to see what questions
arose. At that point I recognized the different expectations with which I was confronted in
Australia. Gradually this consolidated into the present topic. Admittedly, without my
supervisors’ continuous support and advice I would have found it a great struggle to change
this into a research topic.

The concept of human resources commonly refers to the teacher only, although one’s peers
also have an important contribution to make. There is a saying in Vietnamese that “Hoc
thay khong tay hoc ban” (learning from teachers is not as good as learning from fellow-
learners). This saying does not deny the role of teachers in the learning process, rather, it
emphasizes the important aspect of learning from peers. Race (1996) validates the crucial
role of fellow-learners in helping each other to keep a sense of perspective. The author goes
on to claim that interaction between learners helps them to find out which resource
materials work best and to explain difficult ideas and concepts to each other. Importantly,
Race indicates, through this activity, students not only gain good points from each other
but also learn from each other’s mistakes.

As analysed above, human resources are valuable resources for students, especially if they
are autonomous learners. In addition to exploring human resources, students also need to
demonstrate the ability to grasp physical resources.

4.4.2 Physical resources

Generally, physical resources that support students’ learning consist of books, databases,
online-databanks, learning packages, lecture notes, handouts and manuals. Moreover, the
utilization of technology also plays a fundamental role in fostering autonomy in learning.
Technology which supports learning includes computers, the internet, interactive software,
audio and video programs. They can be effectively used to assist students to learn
independently (Lynch, 2000). In addition, Race (1996) also suggests the applications of
communication media in students’ learning such as telephone tutoring, teleconferencing
and video-conferencing.

Particularly, the internet is one of the most useful means to support learning autonomy.
Maria and Pueyo (2006) refer to the advantages of the internet in supporting learning: “It provides a great amount of authentic material and retrieval of timely and abundant information” (p.178). Maria and Pueyo go on to state that e-mail and computer conferencing enable students to take part in collaborative learning. For instance, students can use e-mail to work in international teams and find a solution to real world-problems. Thus, the ability to use the internet is one of the essential skills which students need to grasp to be autonomous learners.

Drawing together ideas from the abovementioned scholars, I conclude that the ability to use learning resources, including human resources and physical resources, are two of the most crucial factors for students to be autonomous learners at university. Two crucial aspects of the writers’ works can be summarised as follows: first, the use of physical resources is likely to indicate independence and self-directedness in student’s learning; and second, the ability of students to explore human resources seems to indicate the extent to which they can participate in collaborative work between students and teachers as well as among students. Both of the concepts: learning independence and collaborative learning are very important skills in the formation of autonomous learners.

4.5 Collaborative learning

Little (1999) indicated that autonomous learning is a product of interdependence rather than entire independence. Autonomous learning does not mean that students work in isolation or separately from teachers (Boud, 1988; Newby, 1999 Thornbury, 2000; Marshall & Rowland, 2006; QIA, 2008; Song, Cao, Yang, Song & Wu, 2011). The collaboration between teachers and students and between students is likely to be one of the key factors forming the process of being an autonomous learner. Students can only work independently and effectively when they receive proper instruction from teachers.

Higher education always requires from students a capability to attain knowledge that is more sophisticated than that required at lower levels of education. Collaborative learning is a necessary factor in attaining higher level knowledge. The aim of autonomous learning at university is not simply for learners to be individualistic or to work on their own (Boud,
1988), rather, the author assumes that the autonomous approach helps students to become interdependent learners instead of treating learners in isolation. Thus, learners are expected to collaborate with teachers and fellow-learners. Independent learning is not an absence of teachers’ help, and it is not ‘isolated or ‘unaided’. It operates by the sharing of ideas and working together to overcome problems (QIA, 2008). Research also reveals that, “the characteristics of independent learning can just as easily be demonstrated by a group working together or by an individual” (p.3). Therefore, collaboration in learning will bring benefits, not only for individuals, but also mutual benefits for people involved in the learning context.

Responsible learners are often willing to cooperate with teachers and others in the learning group for everyone’s benefits (Thornbury, 2000). The mutual benefits would be the positive outcomes of collaborative learning that are indicated by the QIA (2008) and Thornbury (2003). Moreover, autonomous learners are also expected to actively participate in the social process of learning. Newby (1999) claims that:

> Successful autonomous learning involves plenty of peer co-operation. It is a social and democratic process through which learners have plenty of opportunity to learn from each other and to learn together – to create the learning text and context together. Learner autonomy is a social process.

(Newby, 1999: p.20)

Hence, collaboration is regarded as one of the predominant criteria of being autonomous learners at university. In one important sense, learning is seen as “a social process”. In this regard, learners in schools are the same as people in society, often needing mutual cooperation to guide their learning and lead their lives successfully.

### 4.6 Persistence in learning

Being an autonomous learner at university requires students to have persistence in learning. Kesten (1987) regards perseverance in the face of obstacles as vital. According to Kesten, during the learning process, if obstacles or difficulties occur, students must be self-controlled and conscious to effectively overcome the unexpected circumstances and
Derrick (2001) suggests that persistence in learning indicates intention to continue learning activities. She conducts analyses around three components that construct persistence in learning: volition, self-regulation, and goal-maintenance. Regarding volition, Derrick (2001) emphasises learning efforts towards goals with an intentional focus despite distractions, hurdles or restraints. In addition, “volition is commitment to a goal through regulation of the self by protecting the intention to learn and maintaining the attempts to learn” (p.47). Moreover, with respect to self-regulation, Derrick focuses on attainment of a goal through the control of thoughts, feelings, and actions. From this perspective, learners have to regulate actions, cognitions, beliefs, and intentions that affect learning goals. The third component is goals-maintenance. In this regard, the author suggests that successful learners need to establish and value goals. In conclusion, the above three components of persistence in learning include the intentional focus, the attainment of the goal, and the establishing and valuing the goal, which have been described and examined. These points imply that persistence in learning is one of the most crucial aspects in the autonomous learning process.

The above criteria: **Learner initiative; Problem solving and decision making; Using learning resources; Collaborative learning; Persistence in learning** indicate an autonomous learner, but they may not be applicable in every context. For example, in Vietnam, a country where the educational system and the cultural tradition are usually interrelated, such criteria appear to be unfamiliar to Vietnamese learners, even university students. However, it does not mean that the criteria of being autonomous learners are impossible to apply into Vietnamese students. There are a numbers of Vietnamese students studying in Western institutions, and they are adapting well in new cultural and educational environments (this statement comes from my own educational experiences in
Vietnam and Australia). This is one of the crucial reasons for me as a researcher to decide to undertake a study on a cohort of Vietnamese students in order to examine whether they can learn independently in a Western university.

According to various researchers, to be an autonomous learner, students need to be able to grasp skills such as independent learning, taking initiative, collaborative learning, decision-making, using resources and persistence in learning. These skills do not need to always be present at the same time, but they are expected to be used appropriately depending on each particular learning circumstance. In the process of becoming an autonomous learner, the endeavour of the student can be insufficient: support or guidance may still be necessary. The crucial role of teachers in fostering autonomous learning cannot be ignored.

5. The role of teachers in fostering autonomous learning

As examined earlier, the role of the teacher in helping students to learn autonomously is essential, and it would be detrimental to students if teachers neglect this. Heywood, McCann, Neville et al (2005) offer some self-criticism on behalf of teachers: “We teachers are too concerned with being busy professionals and with dispensing knowledge” (p.39). These authors assume that “education is not filling a bucket but lighting a fire”. Obviously, ‘dispensing knowledge’ is not the right way to promote autonomous learning as it provides no opportunity for individuals to construct their own understanding. The image of the teacher lighting the fire clearly puts the onus on the teacher’s task of engaging the learner and the learner’s task of keeping the fire alight. From another perspective, Neville (2012) posits that students’ cognitive development is affected by not only their age, but by the quality of the emotional, spiritual and relational experiences. He argues that teachers need to recognise this, no matter what the age of the students, and that such recognition will contribute towards developing lifelong, autonomous learners.

Other writers, including Higgs (1987), make recommendations for university teachers that will assist their students to become autonomous learners. This includes developing positive attitudes towards learning, setting personal learning goals and being involved in joint decision-making regarding the design and operation of their learning experiences and
measuring their learning progress through self-evaluation. Ramsden (1992) believes that one of the key tasks of teachers is to provide a broad context of knowledge, in which students can understand their more specific studies. He argues that the role of teachers in the tertiary level should involve the creation of a learning environment in which students are encouraged to think critically, and in which they are capable of facing risks and difficulties in their learning. More demanding of all perhaps, teachers are expected to be involved in assisting students to maintain passion in learning, to achieve their aims, to be aware of their responsibility and be willing to learn. These points appear to be true on reflection of my own learning journey in Australia. In the classroom, the lecturer who is my supervisor now, created a special environment in which learners including myself found it exciting and interesting to participate. During lectures instead of using traditional approaches, she taught students through activities such as dancing, singing and meditation. While I initially thought this was a strange way to teach and resisted what was being taught because it was so different from anything I had experienced in Vietnam, on reflection I realised that this process did awaken my imagination and interest in the topic. In fact, they are one reason I am still here and still learning.

Ramsden (op cit) writes about the tasks of teachers at university as including the creation of a supportive and exciting learning environment, the provision of a broad context of knowledge and enabling students to achieve their own aims are very important in terms of developing autonomous learners. If teachers can satisfy all the aspects identified by Ramsden such as *Creating a supportive learning environment; Understanding student’s learning styles; Flexibility in fostering learning autonomy*, they will be more effective and more efficient in fostering learning autonomy in higher education.

5.1 Creating a supportive learning environment

The learning environment is one of the most decisive factors contributing to the success of autonomous learning in higher education (Kesten, 1987; Ryan, 1991; Lynch, 2000; Lamb, 2006). Kesten asserts that teachers play an important role in creating, facilitating and providing a supportive environment, and that these factors will encourage students’ motivation, self-confidence, curiosity and desire to learn. Ryan (1991) points out several
factors that facilitate a supportive learning environment, including the provision of help and resources, and personal concern and involvement for the students. Another significant factor is creating opportunities for students to make choices and to experience a sense of freedom from external agents. Lynch (2000), among others, sees it as important that teachers and students share power in learning, rather than complying with the traditional “teacher as the expert” model.

However, a productive learning environment does not mean a totally free environment in which students can do whatever they want. Lamb (2006) supposes that the purpose of fostering autonomous learning at university is not to create an environment without regulations. Structure is essential for providing students with information and possible options to support their own learning process. Lamb (2006) argues that an environment supportive of autonomy offers the possibility of personal choice while providing structures that support an individual’s effectiveness. In brief, establishing a productive learning environment, which is mentioned often by the scholars, is one of the critical things teachers need to do to promote autonomous learning in higher education.

5.2 Understanding students’ learning styles

Teachers who understand that students entering university have a variety of learning styles, and cultural and social backgrounds can more successfully promote autonomous learners (Kesten, 1987). Although most commonly written about in the context of school education, the concept of learning styles has become an important way of understanding students. According to Pritchard (2009) the way of identifying a style may be based on cognition, psychological theory, forms of intelligence or the hemispheres of the brain. Recognising learning styles demands that teachers provide a range of learning activities, regardless of how they choose to understand the distinctions. Similarly, Kesten (op cit) posits that cultural and social backgrounds need to be appreciated and accommodated in the tertiary classroom. It is unlikely that teachers can be successful in fostering autonomous learning if they do not understand their students well. In the example of singing that I mentioned above, all students’ were engaged in a range of learning activities that activated our
cognition and emotion in ways of which we were unaware at the time. However, they certainly made the memory of that class more engaging and long lasting than many others that I have had.

The following strategies can perhaps assist in the understanding of students’ learning styles.

5.2.1 Acting as students

As previously mentioned, learners are often different in abilities and interests, and come from dissimilar communities and cultures. Theorists argue that teachers need to expand their understanding of the students’ strengths and weaknesses which are “socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically – their exceptionalities, their health, their cultural backgrounds” (Kesten, 1987: p.8). To adequately understand these factors, it is recommended that teachers act as learners themselves. From my own perspective when I was in classrooms in my Master of Education course, I experienced lecturers who had created an effective classroom environment for students who came from different cultural, social and academic backgrounds, including Vietnamese students. It was clear to me these lecturers understood the characteristics of international students who, like all students, bring along their own cultural and educational characteristics and I learned much from these sessions.

Breen (1997) argues that teachers need to participate in student’s learning so that they can have the same experience that will help them understand students’ learning characteristics. In addition they will become more aware of their own preference for learning and he claims that an explicit awareness of one’s own self as a learner is a key to fostering autonomous learning. Little (2000) states that if teachers themselves are non-autonomous, they will find it challenging to help their students learn autonomously, but those who are autonomous will more deeply understand their learners’ styles, strengths and weaknesses. From another perspective Lamb (2006) supports the idea that teachers should help students learn how to learn and recognise that effective learning will involve understanding variables such as metacognition, motivation, learning styles, and affective factors. To
engage in this complicated process teachers themselves need to be active learners both inside and outside the classroom. This point appears to be true in reflection on my learning experience in the Master of Education course. In these classes, teachers often participated in our group discussions and their ideas were equally assessed and analyzed by the rest of the group. Outside the classroom these teachers were also available for ongoing discussions as well as completing their own research and writing.

5.2.2 Understanding students’ biography

Dam (2001) is another who believes that teachers must understand their students if they are to develop their capacity for autonomous learning and he argues that autobiographies serve as a sort of needs analysis to determine what the teacher will do. Dam suggests that valuable time may be wasted if a teacher is not aware of the factors underpinning students’ attitudes and beliefs early in the course, and that this time is better spent developing the capacity of learning autonomously. Breen (1997) also believes that the role teachers perform in acting as learners and understanding their students’ biographies is critical for understanding the students’ learning styles. He is another who believes that teachers need to be aware of their own biography as a learner and as a teacher and of the factors that have “shaped his/her current assumptions, perceptions, and practices in the classroom” (Breen, 1997: p.104).

5.2.3 Maintaining teacher-student relationship

Autonomous learning does not take place in isolation, and it needs the presence of teachers. Learner autonomy is an attained interrelational achievement between teachers and students (Kesten, 1987; Heywood, McCann, Neville, & Willis, 2005; Lamb, 2008; Konidaris & Barto, 2006). How valuable that achievement is mostly depends on the capacities of teachers in building a relationship with their students (Lamb, 2008). Specifically, Kesten (1987) affirms that “the relationship between teacher and learner should foster increasing learner responsibility” (p.15). Hence, the ability of teachers in tightening and enhancing the teacher-student relationship is one of the most essential aspects in promoting autonomy in learning.
To productively build and maintain teacher-student cooperation, teachers need to see each student “as a person of value and worth” (Heywood, McCann, Neville, & Willis (2005). As a result, students will feel motivated because this will help them to discover their own experiences, and learning is seen as being related to their own needs. Moreover, teachers are able to assist students in the decision-making process as instructors, guides and facilitators (Kesten, 1987). This truly reflects my learning experience when I undertook the Master course. In the classroom lecturers really appreciated our own educational experiences in Vietnam, and they encouraged us to present these in front of class. Furthermore, at that time, lecturers acted as listeners, and they were curiously listening to something that they have not experienced. Through this approach I not only improved in presentation and discussion skills, but also I fully realised that my culture of learning was highly appreciated and valued by other people who are from different cultures.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, teachers should also know their students well. Teachers have to judge their students’ readiness in terms of their decision-making ability, which is one of the key criteria of an autonomous learner. Teachers are advised to base their judgments on the learner’s age, maturity, ability and knowledge (Keston, 1987). A comprehensive understanding of students is crucial to enhance collaboration between teacher and student. Thus, to maximise the teacher-student relationship in terms of fostering autonomous learning, such relationships need to be open and dynamic in holistic settings, instead of following bureaucratic and conservative rules (Miller, 1998).

5.3 Flexibility in fostering learning autonomy

Autonomous learning is a highly developed approach in promoting students’ learning, but it is less likely to be successful in every learning context and for every student, if rigidity and inflexibility exists in the teachers’ approach when promoting learning autonomy. Lynch (2000) claims that, “we cannot teach passive learners to become independent learners” (p.9). Hence, one of the fundamental aspects leading to the success of autonomy in learning is the flexibility of teachers in their teaching approaches, especially at the university level. There is a saying that “we can bring the horse to water, but you cannot make him drink”. In teaching, learning can only happen if learners want to learn, despite all
the learning material and input provided by teachers (Thornbury, 2000). The horse might remain thirsty standing by the river and might wait patiently for his thirst to go away. In accordance with Thornbury (2000), the success of autonomous learning is not based on imposition and forcing students to learn. Instead, the techniques of motivation and encouragement need to be used.

Consequently, depending on varying contexts and different social-economic backgrounds, teachers may choose the most suitable approaches in fostering autonomous learning. This issue is more appropriate to university students, because they often come from different places with dissimilar ethnicity and customs. As suggested, if students have little experience in how to structure their learning and make decisions or critical evaluations, the teaching approaches might be counter-productive. As a result, “the course may simply give the appearance of promoting autonomy while actually inhibiting it” (Boud, 1988: p.4). According to Boud (1988), the expected outcome of autonomous learning and teaching ultimately is effective and responsible students, who are be able to respond to the variety of environments they will face during their lives.

As consistently argued by researchers, teachers are expected to effectively encourage autonomous learning. This includes creating an effective learning environment, understanding student’s learning styles, maintaining teacher-student relationship, and being flexible in different learning contexts. All of the mentioned approaches appear to be feasible and practical in assisting students’ learning. It is also more useful and valuable to university students who will participate in the workplace when they graduate.

6. Potential obstacles in the process of becoming an autonomous learner

Obstacles hindering the process of becoming an autonomous learner are unavoidable. Villareal & Kirac (2005) list a number of factors which may interfere with the growth of the learning autonomy process in higher education these include the learners’ characteristics; the teachers; technology; hierarchical relations between teachers and students; educational legislation; and other social, cultural, economical and political aspects.
6.1 The learner factor

This hurdle is based on the assumption that students lack basic knowledge and skills to learn autonomously. Normally, when embarking on their university education, it is unlikely that students are able to make decisions on how and what they will learn, and they may tend to rely on their teachers (Boud, 1988). Moreover, students might prefer to be taught rather than learn. Boud argues that students may feel more comfortable and less threatened when being taught rather than learning independently.

Furthermore, as indicated in section five, learning styles in collectivistic societies, such as the Asian context, are also seen as a constraint to the growth of autonomous learning. Ballard & Clanchy (1991) detail the typical characteristics of Asian students:

They attend all classes, taking detailed notes, but seldom contributing to discussions or volunteering to answer questions. They only ask questions to clarify something they may not have understood, and usually they wait until after class to ask such questions of the lecturer individually.

(Ballard & Clanchy, 1991: p.16)

Clearly, the learning styles of Asian students, as described by Ballard & Clanchy, appear to be a challenge to the endeavour of fostering autonomous learning. All of the features listed above, such as a low involvement in discussion, avoiding answering questions, or a reluctance to contribute ideas in class, seem to go against the development of autonomous learning.

Biggs (2003) found that many university teachers report difficulties in teaching international students. In particular, they complain about Asian students. According to these teachers, Asian students lack critical thinking skills and are passive learners. Teachers complain that Asian students do not easily adjust to local conditions and ‘stick together… won’t mix with locals’. These teachers believe that progressive western teaching methods won’t work with Asian students. In my experience these above comments are not entirely appropriate. In the class of the Master course, although Vietnamese students, including me,
were not very confident when presenting or discussing, we were willing to learn and to hear ideas from others, especially from local students.

The above characteristics of Asian learning styles cannot be generalised to all Asian countries. Currently, the situation is much improved, and Asian learners work quite competently whilst studying in overseas universities. However, the number of Asian students travelling overseas to study is not huge, while almost all students in Asian countries are still learning in their host nations. Supporting Biggs’s points, Hess (2006: p.4) states that “Asian students are not generally known for a disposition towards independent learning (largely because the various national systems of education provide little incentive for it)”. Thus, due to the strong history and tradition in Asian contexts, it is unlikely that Asian students will change their traditional attitudes quickly. Also, it may be too soon to determine whether the autonomous learning approach has worked well in Asian contexts. These statements truly reflect my learning experience in Australia. Even though I attempted to adapt to new cultural and educational environment, I still lagged behind others, especially local students. Admittedly my learning styles were still egregiously influenced by my culture and tradition.

In my own experience, when I was at university in Vietnam, I often felt less motivated in terms of my learning attitude. Sometimes, teachers asked me to do a learning task independently, which was not compulsory. As a result, I did not do it, because I thought this would not bring me immediate advantages. At that stage, my peers and I often chose safe ways to perform the learning. Specifically, in assignments, we usually used and recited ideas from lecture notes instead of expressing our own ideas and opinions. We thought that the more recitation we gave of the teacher’s ideas, the higher mark we would be awarded. Obviously, as these reflections on my past experiences show, it is not easy to change traditional learning styles quickly, and the process of autonomous learning is likely to be hindered by traditional learning contexts such as in Vietnam.

6.2 The teacher factor

As discussed previously, teachers play an important role in fostering autonomous learning
in terms of their willingness to do so. Conversely, if teachers are not willing to promote autonomous learning or are not capable of doing so, it is an obstacle to this process. Boud (1988) demonstrates that independent learning requires the teacher to adopt a new and unfamiliar role. Because of this “new and unfamiliar role”, some teachers may be lacking in confidence and unenthusiastic towards assisting their students to learn autonomously.

In addition, Boud (1988) supposes that teachers in the higher education sector do not necessarily possess the skills or experience to be guides, consultants, or to offer direct assistance. However, these skills are critical in assisting students to be autonomous in learning. It is probable that unfamiliarity with skills in terms of autonomous learning hinders teachers in promoting autonomous learning.

6.3 Social and cultural constraints

As previously discussed, the learning context affects the process of becoming an autonomous learner. Social and cultural factors affect the development of autonomous learning both positively and negatively, depending on where the process of autonomous learning takes place. For instance, according to Boud (1988), Ballard & Clanchy (1991), and Biggs (2003), the strong cultural foundation of the Asian context is a barrier in cultivating and facilitating autonomy in learning. Thus, in the micro range, this section mainly focuses on the constraint of cultural influences on promoting autonomous learning in the Asian context.

The emphasis on control and constraint that go with socialisation and education in East Asian nations may appear to be a potential force for undermining a young person’s sense of autonomous learning (Littlewood, 1999). The main point is that, in most Asian countries, Confucian ideology deeply influences education in general and students’ learning styles in particular. There is a common complaint that students coming from Confucian-heritage cultures are overly dependent on their teachers (Biggs, 1990; Samuelowicz, 1987). Consistent with these scholars, Ellis (1994) presumes that “the Confucian model is teacher-centered, closed, suspicious of creativity, and predicated on an unquestioning obedience from the students” (p.42). There is a Vietnamese saying that “Khong thay do may lam nen”
(Without the teacher, you sure can’t be successful). The behaviours and attitudes reflected in Confucian ideology seem to be contrary to the theory of autonomous learning, which has a high regard for independence, responsibility and decision making.

The model of autonomous learning cannot be expected to work productively and effectively in every learning context. Dam (2001) affirms that attempts to enhance learner autonomy in Asia do not necessarily involve an imposition of Western individualist values. This point is quite evident in that the success of autonomous learning in Western society is improbable to succeed in the Asian context. Boud argues that autonomy does not need to be totally based on the belief of excluding values such as collaboration and interdependence, which are quite prominent in Asian cultures. In relation to this issue, the role of teachers is extremely important in choosing and implementing teaching approaches, especially in contexts where traditions are strong, such as in Vietnam. For instance, as examined by Phan (2001), the ‘polite’ form in front of teachers is one of the common things of Vietnamese students. This presence of that form may lead to a lack of interaction, discussion and communication between teachers and students.

7. Developing a theoretical framework

Becoming familiar with the above discussions has given me a deeper and broader understanding of autonomous learning. Additionally, researchers’ views gave me more information in terms of the advantages of autonomous learning and the criteria one needs to achieve in order to become an autonomous learner. Moreover, the researchers also specified factors that both facilitated and hindered autonomous learning.

After careful consideration of the existing work, I decided to develop the theoretical model for this study based on the work of Grow (1991) and the follow-up model developed by Warring (2009). I used this as the theoretical model to examine the learning process of Vietnamese students in this study. Warring’s Model, based on the Stages Self-Directed Learning Model (Grow, 1991) is shown below.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self Directed S4</td>
<td>Able/Willing and/or Confident</td>
<td>Believe student responsible for learning</td>
<td>Decisions made by students</td>
<td>Low guidance &amp; supportive behaviour</td>
<td>Work experience. Students write their own marking guides</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involved learner S3</td>
<td>Able/Unwilling and/or insecure. Not willing to use the ability and/or insecure or apprehensive about doing it alone</td>
<td>Believe teacher &amp; student share responsibility for learning</td>
<td>Decisions teacher &amp; student made, or student made with encouragement from teacher.</td>
<td>Low guidance/high support</td>
<td>Higher risk choices, e.g. whether to complete assignment individually or in a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested learner S2</td>
<td>Unable/Willing and/or Confident. Motivated and Making an effort, or confident as long as teacher provides guidance</td>
<td>Believe teacher responsible for learning</td>
<td>Decisions teacher made with an explanation of the rationale for decisions</td>
<td>High guidance/Support</td>
<td>Low risk choices, e.g. select assignment topic from a list. Provide basic academic skills. Explain why students need to gain skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent learner S1</td>
<td>Unable/Unwilling and/or Insecure. Lacks commitment/motivation and/or lacks confidence</td>
<td>Believe teacher responsible for learning</td>
<td>Decisions teacher made</td>
<td>High guidance/low support</td>
<td>Information lectures. Practice with immediate feedback. Specific and concrete assignment topics</td>
</tr>
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Table 3: Warring’s model of stages of self-directed learning

There were a number of reasons leading to my decision to apply Warring’s work. Firstly, I wanted to examine the essence of autonomous learning in relation to Vietnamese students as a process rather than just taking a superficial glance. Secondly, Warring’s learning model gave me the general picture of the stages of learning development from dependent to independent. This helped me to follow and examine the learning process of Vietnamese
students in different periods of time. Additionally, I agreed with Warring’s ideas that, to become autonomous in learning, students need to experience a learning development which is quite complex and not the same for every individual.

According to Warring, the transformation from being a dependent learner to an independent learner often undergoes different stages with a gradual change in terms of the quality of learners. It seems that students cannot be expected to change their learning styles overnight. As shown in the Table 3, the two levels at the bottom, dependent learner and interested learner, follow the traditional learning style or ‘rote learning’, or ‘surface learning’. In these two stages, students are not confident enough to make any decisions by themselves and always expect guidance and support from their teachers. Likewise, these students usually choose safe ways to approach their learning instead of seeking and being willing to face risky circumstances.

In contrast, the involved learner, especially the self-directed learner, is willing and confident to make choices and decisions by themselves. These students are able to cooperate and share their work with others. Moreover, they are not only active in seeking and creating an environment which is conducive to their learning, they are also active in making high risk choices and learning how to efficiently cope and overcome that difficulties in learning.

The ideas of Warring (2009) partly reflect my own experiences in the process of moving from a dependent learner to a self-directed learner. As argued earlier, Vietnamese education in general and students’ learning styles in particular are still traditional, where the learners are seen as passive receivers of knowledge, even at university level. At the tertiary level, I found that there were few changes in teaching and learning approaches from those at high school level. At university, I still thought that the transmitted knowledge from teachers was the best, so I had little motivation in seeking other sources of information. During my time at university, concepts such as responsibility, decision making, or problem solving in learning had not occurred to me. Thus, I was a dependent learner at school and at university in Vietnam.
My learning attitude changed when I went to Australia to study, particularly when I enrolled at the English Language Centre at La Trobe University. This was the first time I had studied overseas, so everything was unfamiliar to me. I was faced with new learning approaches, and I needed to familiarise myself with Western learning styles. At the Language Centre, I gained confidence in participating and engaging in learning activities. However, strong traditional habits in learning were still carved in my mind, and they could not be adjusted overnight. In class, I still expected teachers to have the correct answers even if I understood the learning tasks. I ranked myself in this stage as an interested learner.

The next stage in my learning process was undertaking the Master of Education at La Trobe University. In this stage, I was quite confident in participating in the learning activities. I became familiar with choosing topics and doing assignments. For example, in the assignments, I chose topics which raised issues that were complex. This was different to my previous study habits where I usually chose safe and easy approaches to learning tasks. Nevertheless, during the master course, I continued to seek the support and guidance from the teacher, and I was not confident enough to do the task independently. I assess my learning progress in this stage as an involved learner.

My learning attitudes changed again when I commenced my EdD studies. In this stage, I made decisions regarding my learning tasks by myself, based on counseling and suggestions from supervisors, and I was willing to be responsible for the learning outcomes. At the beginning of the EdD candidature, I had to choose a thesis topic and locate resources to support the topic. I still had support and guidance from my supervisors which was necessary and useful to my study. Whenever I met with my supervisors, I explained my understanding first, then my supervisors gave me their guidance and advice. Perhaps, this is equivalent to the level of reactive autonomy in learning, and I am on the way to becoming a self-directed learner.
Chapter Two

8. Review

In this chapter, I have given an overview of autonomous learning in higher education and elaborated the key aspects of autonomous learning. The chapter is not simply a collection of understandings about autonomous learning. It has been organised in an interrelated way.

In light of the existing research, the theoretical model for my study was adapted from Warring’s developmental model as this will orient me in designing questionnaires to collect data. In the next chapter I will present the rationale and methodology of this study.
Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I identified the characteristics that have been attributed to
autonomous learners. The key understandings of autonomous learning have been identified.
Moreover, the importance of autonomous learning in general and its role in tertiary
education in particular was examined. Additionally, collecting accounts from scholars, I
have categorized criteria indicating an autonomous learner at the university. More
importantly, the lenses from others, I have adopted a theoretical model for this study. The
theories of learning, process stages and learning characteristics from the model of Warring
(2009) have been adopted.

I have recognised the parameters of my question, which is, ‘What happens to Vietnamese
students when they are required to shift from a dependent learning context in Vietnam to a
more independent learning context in Australia?’. Considering this question I need to find
a methodology that allows me to discover the understandings and perceptions of
Vietnamese students. Considering that at present there are 8 students in my study, the
methodology must help me delve into the learning experience of the cohort of Vietnamese
students.

In this chapter I outline my understandings about methodology and the reasons for
adopting a particular research approach. After carefully review a variety of methodological
approaches, I have decided to use case study design under an interpretive paradigm using
qualitative interviews as a method to collect data. This chapter will describe how and why I
came to this decision.
2. The methodology

2.1 Interpretive paradigm and qualitative methodology

The term paradigm has been understood differently by various scholars. MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford (2001) explain that a research paradigm comprises three elements: a belief about the nature of knowledge, a methodology and criteria for validity. Whereas, Neuman (2000) & Cresswell (2003) refer to the paradigm as: epistemology or ontology, or even research methodology. In different understandings, Mackenzie & Knipe (2006) classify variable theoretical paradigms as positivist (post-positivist), constructivist, interpretivist, transformative, emancipatory, critical, pragmatism and deconstructivist.

In my study, I considered which paradigm to adopt: postpositivist or interpretivist. In the postpositivist paradigm, the philosophy is determined by cause and effect (Creswell, 2003). In contrast, interpretivist researchers understand “the world of human experience” (Cohen & Manion, 1994: p36). Consistent with Cohen & Manion’s view, Creswell (2003) and Yanow & Schwartz-Shea (2011) claim that interpretivist researchers discover reality through participant’s views, their own background and experiences. Because, as mentioned earlier, my study sought to explore the experiences of Vietnamese students studying at one Australian university with the purpose of uncovering the reality of learning development in Vietnamese students when they are required to shift from a traditional educational environment to a new one. This is the reason that consolidates my belief in employing the interpretive paradigm for this study as it allows me to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants. In seeking the answers for research, the investigator who follows interpretive paradigm uses those experiences to construct and interpret his understanding from gathered data. Specifically, interpretivism supported me in terms of exploring their world by collecting and interpreting the understanding of individuals. To support the use of an interpretive paradigm in this study, more characteristics of interpretivism are further clarified.

Although the interpretive paradigm is not a dominant model of research, it is gaining considerable influence, because it can accommodate multiple perspectives and versions of truths.
Interpretivists believe an understanding of the context in which any form of research is conducted is critical to the interpretation of data gathered.

(Willis, 2007: p.4)

According to Willis (2007), interpretivism usually seeks to understand a particular context, and the core belief of the interpretive paradigm is that reality is socially constructed. Since most research is constructed within a Western paradigm and my study is of students moving from an Asian community to a Western culture, the context of their transition between cultures is important and so Willis’ statement supports the choice of interpretation. Postpositivism often looks for the discovery of universal and critical theory or rules. Interpretivism on the other hand includes “accepting and seeking multiple perspectives, being open to change, practicing iterative and emergent data collection techniques, promoting participatory and holistic research, and going beyond the inductive and deductive approach” (p.583) Sabharwal commenting on Willis (2007). In order to explore understandings of participants, an interpretive methodology provides a context that allows me to examine what the participants in my study have to say about their experience.

Interpretive research is more subjective than objective. Willis (2007) argues that the goal of interpretivism is to value subjectivity, and “interpretivists eschew the idea that objective research on human behaviour is possible” (p.110). Following from Willis’s points, Smith (1993) believes that interpretivists are ‘anti-foundationalists’, because “there is no particular right or correct path to knowledge, no special method that automatically leads to intellectual progress” (p.120). Proponents of interpretivism do not accept the existence of universal standards for research, instead the standards guiding research are “products of a particular group or culture” (Smith, 1993 p.5). Interpretive researchers do not seek the answers for their studies in rigid ways. Instead, they approach the reality from subjects, typically from people who own their experiences and are of a particular group or culture. Not unlike the above points, my study was designed to seek information from subjects who are a cohort of Vietnamese students whose own experiences capture the essence of my research question.

Differing from positivists who often accept only one correct answer, interpretivism is
much more inclusive, because it accepts multiple viewpoints of different individuals from different groups. Willis (2007) asserts that the leading viewpoints of each nation, region or ethnic group are often found in different experiences and perspectives of individuals. Hence, it could be interpreted that the national characters are usually determined by characteristics of those individuals who direct their groups’ view. As indicated above, the interpretive paradigm often seeks answers for research by forming and underpinning multiple understandings of the individual’s worldview. According to Willis (2007) the idea of multiple perspectives arises from the belief that external reality is variable. Willis goes on to indicate that “different people and different groups have different perceptions of the world” (p.194). The acceptance of multiple perspectives in interpretivism often leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the situation (Klein & Meyers, 1998; Morehouse, 2011). Along the lines of these perspectives, I am gathering data for my study from eight Vietnamese students who come from different educational, social and economic backgrounds to obtain more diverse and multi-faceted information.

Researchers believe that the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm predominantly uses qualitative methods (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Silverman, 2000; McQueen, 2002; Thomas, 2003; Willis, 2007; Nind & Todd, 2011). Willis (2007) asserts that “interpretivists tend to favor qualitative methods such as case studies and ethnography” (p.90). As explained by Willis, qualitative approaches often give rich reports that are necessary for interpretivists to fully understand contexts. Consistent with Willis’s ideas, Thomas (2003) maintains that qualitative methods are usually supported by interpretivists, because the interpretive paradigm “portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing…” (p.6). The characteristic of interpretivism, in terms of adopting qualitative methods to approach reality, contrasts with the positivist paradigm. According to Glesne & Peshkin (1992), with the tendency of viewing the world through observable and measurable facts, the positivist paradigm often supports quantitative methods. Expounding the use of the qualitative in the interpretive paradigm, McQueen (2002) states that:

Interpretivist researchers seek methods that enable them to understand in depth the relationship of human beings to their environment and the part those people play in creating the social fabric of which they are a part.

( McQueen (2002: p.17) )
Hence, interpretivists do not prefer using the methods that offer objective or precise information. Instead, according to McQueen (2002), interpretivists view the world through a “series of individual eyes” and choose participants who “have their own interpretations of reality” to “encompass the worldview” (p.16), and quantitative methods are not the preferred mode of interpretivism. Instead, according to defenders of interpretivism, qualitative methods are approachable means for examining reality.

Following the above points, Creswell (2009) states that “qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.4). Hence, in my study, which seeks understandings and experiences of a group of Vietnamese students, qualitative methods are likely to be the best-suited methods. In the interpretive paradigm, the crucial purposes of researchers are to get ‘insight’ and ‘in-depth’ information. In my case, using quantitative research, which describes the world in numbers and measures instead of words, is not likely to be productive. It is unlikely that I will gather ‘depth’ and ‘insight’ via the statistics that are frequently used in quantitative methods. In addition, one of the reasons why qualitative data is rich and in-depth is that researchers often capture data through the process of ‘deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding’ (Punch, 2009).

The above evaluations of the scholars have expanded my understanding of the connection between interpretivism and qualitative methods. Following the nature of the interpretive paradigm, my study is going to elaborate and explore the adaptation of Vietnamese students when they are required to shift from a traditional educational background to a new teaching and learning environment. This transition will be examined based on the understandings, and experiences of one cohort of through a series of interviews.

Marguerite, Dean, and Katherine (2006) present the following characteristics of qualitative research.

- Studies are carried out in a naturalistic setting.
- Researchers ask broad research questions designed to explore, interpret, or understand the social context.
- Participants are selected through non-random methods based on whether the individuals have information vital to the questions being asked.
- Data collection techniques involve observation and interviewing that bring the researcher in close contact with the participants.
- The researcher is likely to take an interactive role where she or he gets to know the participants and the social context in which they live.
- Hypotheses are formed after the researcher begins data collection and are modified throughout the study as new data are collected and analysed.
- The study reports data in narrative form.

(Marguerite, Dean, and Katherine (2006: p.21)

In my study I did not include all these characteristics because of limits of time. The most important omission was gathering data in more than one form as I have relied only on interviews. However, the interviews were carried out over a period of 10 months and so provided the opportunity for me and the participants to develop social relationships. In fact these relationships became important as we talked about our shared experiences as students in a foreign country.

I decided that I would be working within the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach in this study. As a researcher I wanted to understand the world of my participants (Cohen and Manion, 1994) through gaining insight into their backgrounds, beliefs and experiences (Cresswell, 2003; Yanow and Schwartz-She, 2011). My aim was also to test whether the theories developed by other researchers described the developmental stages of my participants, while maintaining the possibility of developing an alternative theory.

2.2 Case study

My study follows the interpretive paradigm and uses qualitative methods to collect data. In a more particular clarification, the study was constructed by using the case study design under an interpretive approach. Current researchers have classified qualitative research by four approaches: ethnography, phenomenology, case study and grounded theory (Marguerite, Dean & Katherine, 2006; Merriam, 2009; Keith, 2009; Cohen, Manion & Mossison, 2011). According to these scholars, the emphasis in ethnography is on studying an entire culture while a phenomenological approach mainly identifies phenomena. My study was shaped through interpreting experiences and perceptions from a cohort of Vietnamese students studying overseas, and the deep and insightful understandings of these
students are the data from which I draw my conclusions. Thus, it is less likely to be appropriate if I choose qualitative approaches such as phenomenology which examines a particular phenomenon or ethnography. Based on the purpose of my study, case study is the best-suited approach. I employed qualitative case study as a research strategy for data collection.

According to scholars, case study has a long history in educational research and has also been used in other areas. In the early 1980s, case study was acknowledged as a methodology (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1988; Yin, 1984). Case study research, as with other methodological approaches, can use either qualitative or quantitative methods of data collection. Hancock (2002: p.6) states that, “case study research is used to describe an entity that forms a single unit such as a person, an organisation or an institution”. Hancock goes on to claim that the usual complexity of case study is the process of the pursuit of the same subjects over a period of time to trace and to explore understandings and changes in behaviour which serve researchable purposes. Yin (1984) states a brief understanding of case study as follows:

The case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individual life cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighbourhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries.

Yin (1984: p.14)

Yin’s ideas of case study suit my study which aims to uncover the learning process of a cohort of Vietnamese students. As a researcher, using case study would enable me to more comprehensively and adequately, perhaps, reflect the reality on this cohort of students.

Additionally, case study is broadly understood as a bounded system that operates through in-depth description and analysis (Smith, 1978; Burns, 1994; Stake, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Walliman, 2010; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Holding a similar view, I suppose that the characteristic of a ‘bounded’ system of case study facilitates the researcher in terms of gaining and accessing focused and important information from a selected population. Stake (1995: p.5) claims that, “The case study must always have boundaries”. Supporting Stake’s point, Smith (1978) affirms
the term “bounded system” as a single study, a unit that is surrounded by boundaries, illustrating that “I can fence in what I am going to study” (p.40). According to Smith, case study is seen as a research approach in which investigators often localize subjects to get in-depth information. Merriam (2009: p.43) specifically indicates the characteristics of case study and agrees that the “case could be a single person who is a case example of some phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific policy”. It is likely that case study is not often conducted across a broad range of diverse areas, and researchers using case study are inclined to gather data in specific and confined cases. Thus, Merriam (2009: p.41) concludes that, “If the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case”. In my study each case is bounded as it focuses on one individual and the individuals together make up another ‘case’- Vietnamese students studying in Australia.

Methodological researchers consistently indicate that qualitative case study offers a wealth of information that is not usually offered by other methods (Hancock, 2002; Yin, 2003; Merriam, 2009). To capture variable information as much as possible, case study can identify how to set up complex circumstances into a particular manifestation (Hancock, 2002). The researcher of qualitative case study is described as “…the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2009: p.39). Like other approaches, case study is a methodological implementation in gathering data. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005) and Torrance (2010) assert that case study is strong in reality, and it recognises the complexity of social truths. Case study can be seen as products which contain rich descriptive material to admit subsequent reinterpretation. Nisbet and Watt (1984) point out that one of the strengths of case study is that the results catch unique features that may be lost in a larger research approach such as a survey. These unique features would be the keys to understanding the situation. In my study, which aims to uncover learning experiences of Vietnamese students studying overseas, the ‘rich’, ‘deep’ and ‘unique’ information is crucial in analysing data. Case study has advantages that other methods, such as experiments and surveys, may miss. Bromley (1986) asserts that case study can get close to the subject of interest in natural settings, and to subjective aspects such as thoughts, feelings, and desires. Merriam (2009)
Chapter Three

61

gives a conclusion of the salient strength of case study as a tool to investigate complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon.

The typical features of case study are specifically characterised and classified as being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2009). Particularistic refers to a case study that mainly focuses on a particular situation, or program. Stake (2005: p.448) states that, “case study method has been too little honored as the intrinsic study of a valued particular”. Regarding ‘descriptive’, Merriam (2009) describes that the final product of case study is a thick and rich description of the studied phenomenon. With regard to the methods, case study does not claim any particular methods in data collection and data analysis (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2007). The scholars indicate that any methods of collecting data such as testing or interviewing can be adopted in a case study in which certain methods are used more often than others. Summarising ideas from the above authors, in qualitative case study, the main techniques used are observation (including participant and non-participant), interviewing (unstructured and structured), and document analysis.

My study, as argued previously, through using case study design under an interpretive paradigm, attempts to uncover the process of Vietnamese students’ development as learners. As mentioned earlier in the literature review chapter, there has been no particular theory of autonomous learning in the education domain in Vietnam yet. Furthermore, it is not likely to be practical and appropriate if I make a statement of the learning process of Vietnamese students drawn only from Western theories. Additionally the learning theory by staged-development of Warring (2009) guides my approach in collecting data and I used this to design interview questions which were my chosen means of collecting data in this study.

2.3 Interview method

In my study, I used the interview method that would allow me to gather ‘in-depth’ information by face to face communication which other methods are unlikely to offer.
Theoretically, according to researchers, case study tends to employ multiple methods such as interview, observation, document analysis or questionnaire (Burns, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Punch, 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). However, based on my research purpose, I adopted a semi-structured interview method only. This can be explained with several reasons: Firstly, in Vietnam, the documents or educational materials mentioning autonomous learning are not available. Secondly, as I clarified previously, autonomous learning is a long process for the development of a learner, so it is hard to observe and expect students to exhibit their autonomous characteristics inside or outside a classroom in a limited period of time. The last but not least is that using the interview method would enable me to gather rich and deep information, which I believe is less likely to obtain when using other methods.

Theoretically interviewing is the most widely used tool in qualitative research (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2002 and Punch, 2009). Punch (2009) indicates the prominence of qualitative interview by arguing that it is an excellent way to access people’s understanding, definitions of situations and construction of reality. Freebody (2003) also believes that interview is one of the most popular methods for collecting data in social science. Moreover, interviewing helps researchers uncover researchable purposes that other methods may not effectively fulfill. Patton (2002) indicates that interviewing can help investigators find out things they cannot observe. Actually, it may not be a productive way if we observe the meaning that individuals attach to their experiences.

There are different kinds of interviewing for data collection. Researchers classify different kinds of interviewing into the following: structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviewing (Fotana, 1994; Patton, 2002; Willis, 2007). Considering the thesis topic, subject and purpose of the research, my study employed semi-structured interview as a means to gather data.

As elaborated earlier, the paradigm applied to my study was interpretivism, and according to Willis (2007), interpretivists tend to prefer semi-structured interview in their research. Klandermans and Staggenbord (2002) summarise the strengths of semi-structured interview as below:
They provide greater breadth and depth of information, the opportunity to discover the
respondent’s experiences and interpretation of reality and access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and
memories in their words rather than in the words of the researcher.

(Klandermans and Staggenbord, 2002: p.92)

One possible consequence of Klandermans and Staggenbord’s ideas is that, through semi-
structured interview, researchers have the chance to gain rich and diverse information
which is exposed through the hopes, expectations, imaginations, or critiques of individuals.
Importantly, semi-structured interview embodies the subject’s voice instead of the voice of
researchers. Hence, the in-depth data, which is recorded from the subject’s own
descriptions and understandings of reality, is useful to access whereas the theory being
tested might not fit the data well (Ragin, 1994). Consistent with Ragin’s idea, Burawoy et
al. (1991) state that one of the salient characteristics of semi-structured interview is to
allow researchers to revise and extend existing theory through exploring the participants’
views.

In addition, semi-structured interview can be effectively used in areas in which it is not
easy to gather data through structured questionnaires, field observation, or documentary
analysis (Klandermans and Staggenbord, 2002). Unlike the structured interview or surveys,
which often ask participants to select answers from lists of options, the open-ended nature
of semi-structured interview creates the possibility for respondents to generate, elaborate or
challenge the reality. According to Thomson (1988), qualitative interviewing is one means
of counteracting the biased availability of documentary sources. In this case, interviewing
allows researchers to access people whose activities and understandings may be lost or
filtered through the voice of others. This is particularly relevant to my study when working
with Vietnamese students when they were on a path to new ways of learning.

3. Research population

3.1 Sampling selection

Researchers state that sampling is important in both qualitative and quantitative research
(Ary, Jacobs &Razavieh, 2002; Marguerite, Dean, & Katherine, 2006). They assume that
the participant sampling procedure mostly used in the qualitative approach is purposeful sampling. These authors go on to specifically indicate that “purposeful sampling is a procedure where the researcher identifies key informants: persons who have some specific knowledge about the topic being investigated” (Marguerite, Dean, & Katherine, 2006: p.140). Guba and Lincon (1981) claim that with purposive sampling, researchers often use their experiences and knowledge to select participants who can provide relevant information about the research topic. For this study I used purposeful sampling. The participants were eight Vietnamese students who were studying in Australia. The reason for selecting 8 participants was that I saw these students as potential participants who might provide me with information I needed to attain. This decision of selecting the participants was in accordance with the theory of purposeful sampling. All of these participants had studied at universities in Vietnam and in Australia and all of them were studying by course work. All of the participants in my study have rich experiences at university level in Vietnam and are currently approaching a new teaching and learning style in an Australian university. Hence, their experiences in universities in both Vietnam and Australia were valuable sources, and I considered that the gathered data would serve my research purpose well. Hence, I believe that the choice of purposeful sampling was appropriate for my study.

Based on the particular context of Vietnam, purposeful sampling would be a further appropriate choice when I decided to collect data from Vietnamese students who are studying overseas. Students would feel free to express and reveal their perceptions, and have their say. With such information, it would be less likely to access if I collected data in Vietnam through the interview. As indicated previously, the cultural and traditional characteristics apparently dominate the educational framework in general and student’s learning in particular. Therefore almost all students who are studying at universities in Vietnam would be reluctant to reveal the information I need, even when they are unhappy or unsatisfied about something. Importantly, the information from respondents can be seen as one of the most valuable and up to date sources for examining the reality of teaching and learning at tertiary education in Vietnam.

There are different types of purposeful sampling such as convenience sampling, snowball sampling, or critical case sampling. In the process of participant selection, my study
specifically employed convenience sampling. Thomas & Lunsford (1995) believe that, with convenience sampling, researchers purposefully select population for their projects based on convenient accessibility to the researcher. Thomas & Lunsford also show that convenience sampling takes the sample from people who fit the criteria which the researcher is looking for. According to Thomas & Lunsford (1995), convenience sampling is the opposite of random sampling. With convenience sampling, the researcher does not worry about seeking random samples of the population. Instead, the researcher can use friends, family or colleagues. Convenience sampling is well suited to my study, given that the eight Vietnamese participants would fulfill the criteria of my research. Another reason for using convenience sampling in my study lies in the fact that I would not be able to access a wider population due to time and cost constraints.

3.2 Accessing the participants

Based on convenience sampling I selected eight Vietnamese students who were studying at one of the biggest universities in Australia. All of the participants in my study come from different areas and cities in Vietnam with different educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

As elaborated earlier in the literature chapter, autonomous learning is a process in which students are encouraged to learn autonomously, and this process is less likely to be carried out in a short time. We cannot train and expect students to be responsible for their learning overnight. According to my research the process of becoming autonomous learners is a process of development from dependent learners to independent learners. Hence, the shifting of Vietnamese students from universities in Vietnam to one Western university can be seen as a learning process, in which the progress or regress of each student would be obviously exposed. As a result, those students were expected to be good informants with their own experiences and perceptions.

Another strong point of the participants in my research is that before coming to Australia, all of them had experienced tertiary education in Vietnam. Thus, they have experienced both Vietnamese and Australian higher education in terms of learning and teaching.
approaches. These students would find it easier to give me their comparison of their experience as they have been having different models of teaching and learning, which were unfamiliar to most of them. The above aspects are crucial reasons for choosing those students to be participants in my study.

3.3 Participant Profile

All the names of the participants in this study are pseudonyms. This is consistent with the requirements of anonymity in research as suggested by Crow, Graham and Wiles, Rose (2008) (see next page).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year of university graduating in Vietnam</th>
<th>Position in Vietnam</th>
<th>At La Trobe University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hang</td>
<td>South–Urban</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuong</td>
<td>North–Urban</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nguyen</td>
<td>South–Rural</td>
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<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
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<td>Cao</td>
<td>Centre–Urban</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Tan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Long</td>
<td>North–Urban</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Participants’ profiles

Hang

Hang has finished university in Vietnam and her major is Business Administration. She lives in the north in one of the biggest cities in Vietnam. Hang graduated at the University in 2008. Even though she graduated from university, Hang still decided to go overseas to continue her study with financial support from her family. La Trobe University, Australia
is the institution she chose for studying. Hang will be at La Trobe University for 3 years studying for the Bachelor of Business Administration. Hang was selected to participate in my study as she fulfils the criteria as a research respondent. She has gained experiences as a student at university in Vietnam, and she is starting to approach a new teaching and learning style at La Trobe University.

Cuong

Cuong is from the north of Vietnam, and he graduated in 2008 from one of the biggest universities in Vietnam with a Bachelor of Finance. To pursue his major to a higher level his family sent him to Australia for further study, to La Trobe University. Cuong decided to enrol in the Bachelor of Telecommunication. His course at La Trobe will take 2.5 years including the English language course. Cuong was included in this research because he is expected to be a potential informant in terms of experiences and understandings of learning approaches at university in Vietnam and Australia.

Nguyen

Nguyen is from a rural area in the south of Vietnam. She graduated from university in 2007 with a Bachelor of Business Administration. Nguyen spent 4 years at the university in Vietnam as a student. She enrolled at La Trobe University and will be studying for 2.5 years for her main course at the university. Nguyen’s reason for going overseas is that she is seeking and expecting a better supportive learning environment. Nguyen was selected to take part in my study as her experiences will be valuable sources for my research.

Cao

Cao comes from a big city located in the centre of Vietnam. He has rich experiences as a student at the university in Vietnam for 5 years. Cao graduated from the university in 2008, and holds a Bachelor of Technology of Transportation. However, Cao was unsatisfied with his current academic qualification, and he decided to try his ability in another area and applied for the Bachelor of Accounting course at La Trobe University. Cao is undertaking a
course of Bachelor of Accounting. He has appropriate experiences and is likely to have insights and understandings of learning at the university in Vietnam as well as at La Trobe University, so Cao was chosen to be a respondent in my study.

Chi

Chi comes from a small city in the north of Vietnam. Her educational background at the university in Vietnam is Foreign Trade Economics, and she achieved a Bachelor Degree in 2007. Chi applied for the Bachelor of Nursing course at La Trobe University for 2.5 years including the English course. Chi was selected to be a participant in my study as she has gained 4.5 years at university in Vietnam as a student, and also as a student at La Trobe University. Her experience in shifting from being a university student in Vietnam to being a student at an overseas institution is expected to be a valuable contribution to my research.

Hung

Hung is from a rural area in the South of Vietnam. He finished university in 2008. Currently, Hung is undertaking his Bachelor of Nursing. The reason I chose Hung as a participant in my study is that he has rich experiences and understandings as a student at the university in Vietnam and as a student at La Trobe University.

Tan

Tan comes from a small city in the North of Vietnam. Tan graduated from the university in 2007. Then, he was selected to become a lecturer at the university where he undertook his Bachelor degree. Currently, Tan is doing Bachelor of Education at La Trobe University. Tan is taking part in my research as he fulfils the criteria for being a potential informant. His experiences in studying and teaching at the university in Vietnam are the aspects I am looking for.
Long comes from one of the biggest cities in the North of Vietnam. She attained a Bachelor degree in Mathematics in 2008 in Vietnam. Then she became a lecturer at an educational college in her hometown for one year. Currently, Long is doing her Bachelor of Business at La Trobe University. Long was invited to participate in my study as she has gained rich and deep experiences as both teacher and student at the university in Vietnam. Moreover, Long has been experiencing the teaching and learning styles at the universities in both Vietnam and Australia. She was expected to be a useful informant in my research.

4. The role of the researcher

In conducting a qualitative approach, according to scholars one of the most important steps is to determine the role of the researcher. The position of the researcher as insider or outsider of the context, which is being investigated, is likely to affect the quality of projects. Marguerite, Dean, & Katherine (2006) argue that the researcher has to determine to what degree she or he will be involved with the participants. Looking at their argument of the role of the researcher, because of the characteristics of qualitative research, the researcher usually keeps contact with participants. The researcher often immerses in the culture that is being examined to get a true reality. Those writers maintain that “to portray the participants’ perspectives, the researcher needs to develop an “insider” point of view” (p.265), and I was certainly able to do this.

Not unlike Marguerite, Dean, & Katherine (2006), to establish a relationship with the participants I let them know that I had similar experiences to them which was one reason I was conducting the research. I was a student at university in Vietnam for four years, so I have had experience in terms of learning styles, teaching approaches, and using learning resources. My experiences were further developed after university as an educational officer related to implementing educational policy. The turning point of my educational process was at the University in Australia. These personal experiences have given me a very real sense of the lived experience of learners who are required to work in new and maybe problematic ways. I appreciated the different stages of the changing learning attitudes or
learning responsibility of the participants, because I have undergone what they have been doing.

Using my ‘insider’ experience, I selected participants who were known to me, and whose learning experiences from university in Vietnam to one Australian institution were quite similar to mine. The participants and I come from the same culture and same educational system and had come to this university for further study. Thus, the respondents and I were experiencing and adapting to changes between two educational systems.

As the study progressed I became aware that my own experiences were of significant advantage to me in conducting this research. In the interviews, the language I used was Vietnamese (the reason for this will be furthered clarified in the section 7 of this chapter). Both researcher and participants are Vietnamese, and our first language is also Vietnamese, so it was easy and comfortable for us to understand each other. There were few barriers between us. The gathered information from the respondents would provide valuable and reliable resources for me in terms of exploring and examining the learning development of Vietnamese students when they were required to shift from their country of origin to Australia. Contributing to the study, indeed, was why I developed my initial interest in the learners’ progress. At this point I decided to recognize my own experience as part of the data.

5. Ethical considerations

Ethical issues are an essential aspect of undertaking research. This is crucial in qualitative research because of the close interaction and relationship between the researcher and the participants, as well as the unstructured and unpredictable nature of qualitative research methods. Ethics aim to protect the research respondents from harm which may come from interaction with the researcher or occur during the research process (Mishna et al, 2004; Stake, 2005; Liamputtong, 2007a; Morse 2007a; Christian, 2008; Padgett, 2008; and Liamputtong, 2009). In regard to the above points, the writers emphasise the importance of ethical issues, especially the human factor is seriously considered. Wiersma and Jurs (2009) summarise the criteria which need to be obtained in ethics approval, including:
Projects should identify anticipated risks to subjects and be designed to minimise such risks. Risks are reasonable relative to expected benefits.

- Participation of subjects is voluntary and equitable.
- Informed consent will be obtained from each prospective subject and properly documented.
- Additional safeguards must be taken for the inclusion of potentially vulnerable subjects such as children.
- Adequate provisions are made as appropriate for ensuring the safety of subjects, monitoring data collection, and maintaining privacy and confidentiality of subjects and data.

(Wiersma and Jurs, 2009: p.436)

In planning the interviews, I found that ethics approval was one of the compulsory and important steps before collecting data. To ensure I conformed to all the ethical requirements. I applied for ethics approval at the beginning of October 2009 to carry out this research. To support the application I presented a list of questions to be used when interviewing participants in three rounds (see Appendix 1). I also prepared Plain English Information Sheets for individual interviews and a Consent Form (see Appendix 1) which confirms that no participant will be exposed. Preparing this application was useful in clarifying my research aims and considering any potential risks to the participants. These preparations also showed respect for the participants with the promise of confidentiality and the emphasis on informed consent, and unconditional withdrawal, if participants were not interested in participating in my research anymore. It demonstrated to participants that I was respectful of them personally and committed to maintaining any information they supplied in confidence. In addition, providing Plain English Information Sheets to participants prior to interviews was a good way to let participants know the research area that is going to be investigated.

When my ethics application was approved by the University Human Ethics Committee (UHEC) (see Appendix 2) I sent the participants Plain English Information Sheets for individual interviews, a Consent Form and the questions which I would use for the interview. The first round of interviews was carried out immediately. As explained earlier, the participants involved in my research were only from one university without any engagement with any other institution. Thus, I did not need to send written requests to
other organisations to get permissions for interviewing. This matter can be seen as an advantage in the process of data gathering in my study.

6. Maintaining rigour

Rigour is one of the most essential factors in conducting research. The researcher has to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the research. Liamputtong (2009) explains that “rigour refers to the qualitative enquiry and is used as a way of evaluating qualitative research” (p.20). Liamputtong goes on to argue that rigour in qualitative research is similar to the terms of reliability and validity in positivist science. Consistent with Liamputtong’s ideas, Wiersma and Jurs (2009) give several reasons as to why qualitative research needs to be rigorous. These authors argue that the nature of qualitative research is its occurrence in natural settings, so it is very difficult to replicate studies. Therefore, it is essential to give the readers adequate understandings of the research, so that readers can judge the replicability within the limits of the natural context.

In my study I collected the data in a natural setting at the university. I met each of the participants at a place of their choosing, most often this was at their place of residence and sometimes at a café on campus. Although the number of participants was small, I expected rich data to be gathered through three rounds of interviews. The time period between each round was five months designed to fit in with the time available for my studentship as well as providing sufficient time for changes in their learning behavior to emerge. Moreover, the gaps between interviews were useful to see what was developing and changing in each participant’s learning attitude and progress. Thus, I hoped that the gathered data in each round of interviews would reflect what was happening to the Vietnamese students in terms of their learning behavior and motivation.

Throughout the process of conducting the research, I remained objective in the interviews in order to get a fair view of each participants. However, I was aware that the way I had designed the interview questions and the process of conducting the interviews and the data analysis were more or less affected by my educational background as well as my personal experiences. In an attempt to reduce this influence I listened carefully to the respondents
and, as far as possible, put aside my own experiences. In an important sense, I also considered my experience to be important and drew on it when writing my own story. As already indicated, I was a student at university in Vietnam, and I was also an educational officer. During my time in Australia, I have been experiencing the life of a student who is attempting to adapt to the autonomous learning environment. Thus, I knew and understood some characteristics of Vietnamese students regarding the shift from the traditional educational background to a new learning environment overseas. Moreover, the Vietnamese language, nationality and culture are the factors that will be my strengths as a researcher and at the same time the weaknesses in terms of the rigour of the research.

As a further effort to ensure the research is rigorous, I adopted some techniques such as member checking and peer review which are frequently used in qualitative research. Carpenter and Suto (2008) explain that the term member checking “…is a process where the researchers seek clarification from their research participants” (p.28). Taking the account from Carpenter and Suto, I invited the participants to review the transcripts, and they were encouraged to give me further comments. The participants in my study were able to remove any information that they might not want included. However, in the event the participants gave very little response to the transcripts.

In addition to verify my interview results I asked two Vietnamese co-students to be peer reviewers. Creswell (2007) presumes that “peer review allows an external confidence in the research process that is similar to reliability in positivist research” (p.29). Along the lines of Creswell (2007), I asked my colleagues who were working towards the PhD in education to review the interview process and results. They also used qualitative methods in their research, so were knowledgeable about qualitative research inquiry. They assisted me with reviewing transcripts, and importantly validating the links between data, codes, categories, and materializing themes which I wanted to obtain.
7. Data collection

7.1. Using Vietnamese language in the interview process

As already elaborated, an interview is not an informal conversation, but requires participants to have a basic knowledge and understanding of the areas mentioned in the interview. To deeply and profoundly describe experiences and understandings of the process of becoming an autonomous learner, it would have been challenging to the participants if I interviewed them in English. Thus, to productively obtain data for my study, using Vietnamese when interviewing the respondents was more likely to provide useful information for my research.

Some of my peers warned me that interviewing in Vietnamese language and translating this into English would be quite complicated and time consuming. After considering both the strengths and weaknesses of their argument, I decided to use Vietnamese in the interview process. Based on the purposes of my research, I believed that using Vietnamese when interviewing would be more effective than using English.

The participants in my study were Vietnamese students. Despite studying in an English speaking country like Australia, they were not as fluent in English as they are in Vietnamese. Thus, to fully and comprehensively respond to my research questions, I encouraged the participants to speak in their native language. Additionally, using Vietnamese language when interviewing would make both the participants and me feel more comfortable and confident when communicating with each other. From my own experiences, when I use English to communicate with English native speakers, I often get puzzled and do not have the confidence to express what I want to say. This is because I am usually too busy focusing on the words, grammar, and especially pronunciation, rather than what I want to convey. As a result, my listeners usually receive a general reply from me that may appear shallow. By using Vietnamese in the interviews, the participants need only focus on the content of the questions rather than on the language. During the interviews the participants might provide some good phrases, sayings or proverbs in Vietnamese which are not likely to happen if I use English in interviewing.
7.2. Interview process

In speaking to each person, I tried to capitalise on the benefits of interviews, but I also anticipated a number of problems involved in my project. I was aware that the selected participants in my study were students, and that they were quite busy with their own studies and part-time work. Thus, organising the time to interview eight people would not be an easy task. Moreover, as a full-time student, I am required to finish my course within four years and am unable to extend my course due to the requirements of my sponsor. Hence, conducting the interviews in adequate time was one of the most important factors that influenced the timeline of the interviews. Another challenge, as noted earlier, was that semi-structured interviews usually offer rich data but are inconsistent with a directed approach. This matter might also make the stage of data analysis considerably more difficult.

To deal with this concern, I carefully prepared for the interviews by developing an outline of the leading questions (See Appendix 1) that I was going to ask, and I sent the outline to the participants before the interview. The interview questions were the same for three rounds of interviews except the first round, when there were a few questions asked for initial feelings on first arriving in Australia. The foci of the interviews included: accumulating background information on the participants themselves and their feelings about living and studying in Australia. The next focus was on the participant’s experiences that related to their experiences in terms of being a student at university in Vietnam, and their learning development since coming to Australia to study after each university semester.

I conducted individual interviews with the eight participants on three separate occasions. The first round of interviews took place in December 2009. The second round occurred at the end of April 2010, and the last round was carried out 6 months after that in September 2010. All of the interviews involved face-to-face contact with the individuals and were carried out at a time and location that suited them. This was necessary due to the participants being enrolled in different courses, and living in different locations. It required that the interviews be carried out either during breaks between classes, in my office or in
the participant's home. The places and time slots were organised depending on the availability of the participants. All of the interviews were recorded on micro cassette recorders using two recorders in case one of them broke down. The length of time for each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, but it sometimes took longer depending on the quality of the interview.

The first round of interviews was carried out after the participants had been living in Australia for about five months. After the first interview with the first participant I delayed further interviews to carry out a preliminary analysis of the information gathered. This was undertaken on the advice of some of my PhD colleagues who commented that it helped to ascertain whether the study was heading in the right direction. The first few questions in the first round of interviews mainly focused on the experiences of the participants as students at university in Vietnam. The main questions required participants to express their initial understandings and impressions in terms of teaching and learning approaches, and student-teacher relationships at the university in Australia during their first five months.

After the first round of interviews, I transcribed and gave each participant a copy of their interview transcript, and then carried out an analysis on the information gathered so far. The second round of interviews took place in April 2010. The questions in this round were revised a little after initially analysing the data from the first round. The main focus of the questions related to what was happening to change the participant’s learning attitude and awareness. The questions directed participants through a simple to more complex process. The first thing that I asked of participants was to list differences and similarities between universities in Vietnam and the university in Australia regarding teaching and learning approaches. In particular, respondents were asked to express their understandings of the responsibility of the learners during their learning, and the role of teachers in class. I then asked them to describe what had been changing in their minds, their thoughts and awareness of being a student at universities in Vietnam and in Australia. The questions of the final round of interviews were the same as the second round. All of the data collected from three rounds of interviews were translated from Vietnamese into English, coded, analyzed and discussed.
8. Data analysis

Different writers show different types of data analysis. This variety suggests that the research purposes are important in directing the analysis of the data. However, whatever the types of analysis, qualitative data analysis refers to the terms such as ‘transforming’, ‘interpreting’ and ‘making sense of’ qualitative data (Punch, 2009). Miles and Huberman (1994) describe analysis that is directed at tracing lawful and stable relationships among social phenomena, and these phenomena are linked based on regularities and sequences. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) there are three components of data analysis “data reduction; data display; and drawing and verifying conclusions” (p.4). Presented in another similar way, Kelle (1995) assumes that “qualitative data analysis is a series of alternating inductive and deductive steps” (p.27). Following Kelle’s ideas, deductive hypothesis examination is formed from data-driven inductive hypothesis generations.

After careful consideration, my study uses Punch’s ideas to analyse data. According to Punch (2009), in order to find out a core category grounded in the data with high levels of abstraction, grounded theory analysis does this in three steps which are correlative with three types of codes: The first is to uncover conceptual categories from the data (open coding). The second is to find the interconnection between categories (axial coding). The third is to account for and conceptualize these relationships at a higher level of abstraction (selective coding).

Open coding

At this level, the empirical data from interviews were classified and conceptualised into categories. Throughout three rounds of interviews of eight participants, all of the data were abstracted by concepts. In other words, at the level of open coding, the data were structured into parts. Specifically, the gathered information from the participants in terms of the process of being an autonomous learner was labeled from different pieces of the data. Then, the preliminary concepts exposed the theoretical possibilities. At this stage, based on information from three rounds of interviews, I categorized data into five themes: initiative in learning, problem solving, using learning recourses, decision making and responsibility in learning.

Chapter Three
Axial coding

If open coding divides and breaks the data into parts, axial coding connects parts to each other. The categories from open coding were put into an axis which was more abstract than open coding. At this level of coding, the perceptions of eight participants were compared and their meaning interrelated to each other. The information was grouped together in a logical manner. At this stage, based on the five themes which were divided in the step of open coding, I attached these themes in each participant through interviews.

Selective coding

This is the highest level of grounded theory analysis. At this stage, the purpose is to select the core category. The point will be a central focus which is expected to develop a theory from data. Selective coding is a high level of abstraction of understandings from participants. The uncovering of the core category is likely to be a decisive aspect of approaching the research intention. Based on results of open coding and axial coding I constructed a bar chart (see page 90) which illustrated the learning process of eight participants through three rounds of interviews. There are five themes that were categorized from data: Learner initiative; Problem solving; Using learning resources; Collaborative learning; Responsibility in learning. These themes were adopted and adapted from the literature review and Warring’s framework.

At the beginning of this study I followed Warring’s (2009) model that demonstrates the learners’ growth in terms of stage development. However, on completion of data collection, I considered that ‘stages’ was not really appropriate to my study, and decided to use the term ‘phases’ to describe the learning process of the learner. In my understanding the term ‘stages’ implies the development as following sequential steps, and it occurs in a predictable way.

Not totally different from the term ‘stages’, the concept ‘phases’ also means the development of thing, but it happens erratically and irregularly. This is what occurred with the participants in my study during the three rounds of interviews. Thus I decided to use the
term ‘phases’ to describe the learning development of participants. Additionally, as I continued to think about what I would be looking for in my participants’ responses, I considered that the four stages developed by Warring were not quite suitable. In the process of data collection I conducted three rounds of interviews. I hoped that subsuming stages two and three, would create a three-phase model that would be appropriate to my participant cohort. In Warring’s model, the ways in which stages 2 and 3 are distinguished, that is the interested learner and the involved learner, are not as clear as it is for the other stages. In this study I wanted to establish discrete phases, as far as possible, against which I could assess my participants. I decided that three phases of classification would make my data more focused and more precise and in addition would, I hoped, make it easier to interpret the data. I named my third phase ‘engaged learner’ and merged the learning characteristics into one phase. I also renamed phase three (self-directed learner) into a new name: autonomous learner. In this study, I examined the learning development of the participants through three phases:

1. dependent learner;
2. engaged learner
3. autonomous learner.

Reflection of the process of data analyzing, the reframing of four stages into three phases was presented by the below table that shows how Warring’s framework was adapted and reframed (see next page).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Warring’s framework</th>
<th>Modified framework</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 4 – self-directed learner</td>
<td>Phase 3 – autonomous learner</td>
<td>Able/Willing and/or Confident; Decisions made by students; Low guidance supportive behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3 – involved learner</td>
<td>Phase 2 – engaged learner</td>
<td>confident as long as teacher provides guidance; Decisions teacher &amp; student made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2 – interested learner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1 – dependent learner</td>
<td>Phase 1 – dependent learner</td>
<td>Lack of motivation; unwilling to learn; cannot make decision;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Reframing Warring’s model

9. Limitations

All research approaches have strengths and weaknesses. It is probable that the strengths of one research method are the limitations of another one, while the weaknesses of one research design are the strengths of others. In my study, qualitative case study is used as the research design. As mentioned earlier, case study is defined as a ‘bounded system’ (Merriam, 2009 and Punch, 2009). Both strengths and limitations come from the term ‘bounded system’. The common criticism of case study is the lack of generalizability. Thus, a lack of representativeness may lead to a problem of bias. This limitation needs to be acknowledged. Relating to the term ‘bounded’, my study did not involve all Vietnamese students studying at universities in Australia, and also not all students studying in Australia.
and other countries. Only eight students studying at one Australia institution were invited to participate in my study.

The limitations of case study are not apparently distinguished as they interconnect with strengths. Because the scale of research is ‘bounded’, the researcher is able to gather ‘in-depth, insightful’ data, and hopefully, in this thesis, the strengths will outweigh the limitations. Prospectively, scholars will uncover some ways to turn limitations of case study like boundedness into its strengths.

As explained earlier in this chapter, all interviews in this study were conducted in Vietnamese, and this issue could be another limitation. When the data was sorted out and written up, translation was needed to put this data into English. In translating the data from Vietnamese into English, objectivity might not be completely maintained. This was because the translation could alter the original meaning of the data. Because of different local dialects or the connotations of some terms used, the translation was less likely to appropriately and comprehensively define the original meaning of the participants in English. To minimise the limitation, I asked two of my Vietnamese colleagues doing their PhD in education to randomly double-check my translations. In addition, their academic backgrounds are in linguistics, so they were knowledgeable to verify my translation. Additionally, after each round of interviews, I gave the transcripts of interview to the participants and asked them to double check the content of translation from Vietnamese into English (these procedures have been more specifically examined in the section of rigour of the research).

10. Review

This chapter has specified the research question. In seeking answers to the research question in terms of theoretical aspect, the rationale of methodology has been determined. The paradigm of this study was interpretivism, and qualitative case study was an approach to conduct the study. Regarding data collection, semi-structured interview was used. The chapter also reports the data collection process and the methods of data analysis. All of the results generated from three rounds of interviews are presented in chapter Four.
Chapter Four

RESULTS

In this chapter I will present the results from three rounds of interviews with the eight participants. My learning journey will be presented as a final part of this chapter.

1. Hang

Hang is a twenty-one year old female student who has come to Australia to study the Bachelor of Business. Hang finished university in Vietnam with a major in Business Administration. She was very confident when answering the questions through the three rounds of interviews. Her responses through three rounds of interviews are presented below:

Learner initiative

In the first round Hang was a passive learner. She merely waited for guidance from teachers instead of actively finding ways to learn.

If I studied for exams from the beginning of semester, I would forget most of the important information. More importantly, a week before exams took place, we would often ask the teachers to limit the content which was used in exams or tests. As a result, with such narrowed information, it was much easier and quicker for us to learn and to remember.

In the second round although Hang still expected teachers’ help she was more aware of what she planned to do.

I thought that, with teacher’s help, I could adjust my learning approaches based on the requirements of different subjects.
In the final round, Hang was much more active than in previous phases. One of the ways she found to learn effectively was to seek advice from teachers through appointments.

I made appointments to see teachers sometimes. In the first few meetings, I expected that teachers would tell me how to do something and what I should learn. Now, before each appointment, I became aware that I needed to prepare questions to be discussed in these meetings.

**Problem solving**

In the first round, Hang showed her endeavor in overcoming difficulties when she first arrived to Australia to study.

At the beginning I struggled with learning approaches here. Sometimes, I did not understand the lecture. Then, after class, I tried to find out more information from the internet by doing a Google search. In this way I understood the content in lectures more deeply.

In the second round, she found another way to handle her problems in learning by attending tutorial classes. She sought help from tutors and peers instead of from teachers only.

When I did not understand the lecture, I often sought solutions through tutorial classes with suggestions from tutors and peers.

In the third round, Hang productively developed her abilities in problem solving by effectively combining and connecting lectures and tutorials.

I tried to take notes in lectures, and after lectures I often asked teachers about some issues which I did not understand. If those problems were still unsolved, I brought them to discussions in tutorial class.

**Using learning resources**

Through the first round, Hang mostly depended on sources provided by teachers rather than actively seeking more information.
I preferred to use information from handouts given from teachers rather than from other sources.

Unlike the previous phase, in the second round she showed her ability in finding and using different learning resources instead of receiving information from teachers only.

_In a management subject, I was required to write an 1800 word essay, and the topic related to a specific company in Australia. During the three weeks, I found and read more than 20 academic articles from different journals. After that, I felt that I had considerably gained not only information from those articles, but also became much better with skills like skimming, scanning and taking notes._

In the final round Hang showed her remarkable development in using learning resources. She had effectively used information technology to search for information needed for her study.

_If I cannot go to library, I often accessed the internet at home to find articles and books online. Moreover, whenever I remembered any issues regarding my study, I accessed the internet by my I-phone immediately to find out information._

**Collaborative learning**

In the first round Hang was not confident in class especially when she was required to participate in group activities.

_I did not want to show my understandings to other people, because I was afraid that my ideas were wrong._

In the second round Hang had showed her interest in group work as she realized usefulness through these activities.

_I liked the way of learning in a team, because it gave me a chance to learn and to share experiences with others._

In the final round Hang was more confident in working with and learning from others especially from other students.
I learnt theories from teachers and learnt how to practice from friends, especially those people who had work experience. Specifically, they showed me how to do exercises quickly with different approaches which had not been given in lectures.

**Responsibility in learning**

At the beginning as shown in the first round, Hang was initially aware of her responsibility in learning.

*I reckoned that I would take responsibility for my learning achievement, but teachers also needed to show me how to learn efficiently.*

In the second round Hang seemed to be distracted by her parents’ influence in Vietnam in terms of their guidance and advice to Hang’s future career.

*I am studying in Australia, but I still received updated information of the market in Vietnam by my parents, and they asked me to change to the course which was currently in high demand in Vietnam.*

By the final round Hang had positively changed her attitude to her learning and seemed to be fully aware of her responsibility for her learning.

*I am studying in Australia, so definitely I am responsible for my study here, and no one can do that on my behalf.*

Generally, in the first round of interview, Hang was struggling with her learning approach. She was passive. Typically, she learnt only with the purpose of passing every exam and assignment rather than seeking understanding. Hang was also not able to use learning resources, and she was not motivated to seek information beyond the handouts.

Additionally, Hang was less collaborative in learning. Beside such poor characteristics, Hang showed her endeavor in handling problems in learning, and was aware of her responsibility in learning. Overall, in this phase, I assessed Hang in phase 1.

Hang had made a remarkable development by the second interview. She was much more motivated and competent in finding and selecting reliable sources for her learning. She also found her interest in teamwork. Additionally, when facing difficulties in learning, she
actively asked teachers for assistance. With teacher’s help, she could construct her learning plan. However, Hang was still inconsistent in her thoughts and beliefs about learning. At this phase I considered her to be in phase 2.

By the final round, Hang showed evidence of being an autonomous learner. She was highly aware of her responsibility in learning consciously and actively involved in teamwork and in finding different ways to solve problems in learning. In terms of finding resources for learning, Hang not only sought information outside textbooks but was competent in using information technology to seek information.

Overall, I determined that by the end of my study Hang was functioning as a phase three learner, that is as an autonomous learner.

2. Cuong

Cuong is a twenty four year old male student, and he came to Australia to study the Bachelor of Telecommunication. He was selected to be a participant in my study. I met Cuong for interviews in different places: the cafeteria, library and in his rented place for the final round. During interviews, Cuong felt very comfortable when answering me even with a tape recorder recording.

Learner initiative

In the first round, Cuong mostly expected the teacher’s help and was motivated by the idea of passing exams rather than actively preparing for and attending class.

*We only paid attention to final lectures before each exam. We were often absent from other lectures but always turned up in the last lectures of each semester. In these classes, we tried to ask teachers to limit the number of questions to as few as possible. We thought the fewer the questions the easier and quicker it was to learn.*

Cuong had significantly developed his learning capacity through the second round. He found useful connection between lectures and tutorials.
At the beginning, in lectures, I felt disappointed with the way of teaching, because it was difficult to follow and understand the lecture. However, gradually, I found that in lectures teachers focused mainly on theory, and in tutorial classes, I had more chances to practice the theories discussed in lectures. The more I practiced in tutorials, the more I became capable of learning.

In the final round, Cuong showed his interest in attending tutorials, and he was actively involved in this activity.

Before going to tutorial class, I often prepared in advance some questions, and then I brought these questions to the class to ask the tutors.

Problem solving

Through the first round, Cuong had found the way to overcome difficulties in writing. He had showed his willingness to learn in Australia.

When I had problems with referencing in my assignments, I asked the tutor a few times to correct them for me. After that, I understood that referencing is one of the strictest requirements in writing at universities in Australia.

In the second round, Cuong seemed not to be confident when he faced obstacles in learning, and he found it difficult in finding out possible solutions. I was struggling with the writing style here, because it’s very different from Vietnam. When I wrote essays here, I did not know how to avoid plagiarism.

In the final round, Cuong was more confident and active in finding his own way to meet the requirements of assignments.

In the subject Global Communication, the teacher asked me to interview three journalists in Australia. Then I decided to interview one more American journalist, and then the teacher seemed not too happy with that. I still conducted the interview, and finally I got a high score on the assignment, which used most data from the interview with the American.
Using learning resources

Initially, through the first round Cuong had started to find other information outside textbooks. He had tried to learn new things instead of merely using traditional ways.

Now I am starting to look for online journal articles which I have not done before. However, I still used mostly information from textbooks and lecture notes for essays or exams.

In the second round, Cuong had productively consolidated his ability in using learning resources. He not only used printed resources in the library but also used the available information technology.

Even though the textbooks are very important in terms of using information for exams or assignment, I preferred to access electronic library to get more information which gave me alternative sources.

In the final round, Cuong had considerably developed his capacity in seeking and using learning resources. Besides using physical resources he sought help from human resources.

Before handing in assignments I usually brought them to the ESL (English as second language). The staff there helped me to correct grammar or the structure of the essays.

Collaborative learning

At the beginning, through the first round Cuong was still passive and lacked confidence in group activities and presentations.

Normally, like many others I was not confident to question teachers. I was afraid that if I did say something wrong in front of the class, other people would laugh at me. Thus, I rarely asked questions of the teachers in front of class. I only dared to ask teachers outside of class if I was unsure about something.

In the second round, Cuong started to be familiar with new teaching and learning environment in the classroom.
I liked the learning environment through group discussions in tutorial classes, but I was afraid to say aloud my own opinions in front of group.

In the final round, although Cuong was still puzzled in some situations he was more confident and capable in classes and tutorials.

I found that group discussions were very useful. Through this activity, we learnt a lot from other peers. However I did not want tutors to present in the discussion as their presence drove me not very confident.

Responsibility in learning

In the first round, when first arrived Australia Cuong did not believe in himself or what was he learning.

Until now I am still not sure whether or not the course which I am studying in Australia, is applicable in Vietnam.

Even in the second round, Cuong shifted his learning responsibility to parents in Vietnam, and he had not become fully aware of his learning purposes in Australia.

I am doing the course in telecommunication to satisfy my parents, even though that is not my preferred major.

In the final round, Cuong showed his endeavor in taking responsibility for his learning.

Although I am not really interested in what I am studying I will try my best to pursue it.

In his first interview Cuong showed some passivity and dependence although he was beginning to put more effort into learning. He was quite confident when seeking help from tutors, but he was still unable to find out solutions by himself. While he was capable of finding information from other sources he mainly depended on lecture notes and textbooks. Besides the above good points, Cuong was still passive in learning. He learnt purposefully in terms of passing exams and assignments rather than appreciating learning as increasing his own understanding. Furthermore, he was not collaborative or confident in expressing
personal opinions in front of a crowd. Reflecting on what Cuong had said I considered him to be a dependent learner at this phase.

In the second round, Cuong was more active and confident in learning. He initially knew how to connect theory in lectures and practice in tutorial classes and he actively cooperated with teachers in learning although he was still not ready in group work. Cuong also expressed significant progress in terms of seeking information for learning from different sources instead of from textbooks only. However, his ability to handle the challenges of learning seemed to have gone down. He was still influenced by the writing style from the university in Vietnam. Besides, his belief in his own responsibility for learning was almost at a standstill although he did show some indication of that he was an engaged learner.

On reflection through the final interview, Cuong had made significant progress toward understanding his role as an autonomous learner. He was more self-dependent and was better with preparation before going to class. Additionally, Cuong showed ability in making decisions by himself rather than totally basing them on what the teacher seemed to be saying. He was much better in terms of using both physical and human resources and also saw group work as interesting and useful. However, Cuong’s sense of responsibility for his own learning was still not very strong and at this phase did not show the capacities of a fully autonomous learner.

**Overall I determined that by the end of my study, Cuong was on the half way between phase 2 (engaged learner) and phase 3 (autonomous learner).**

3. Nguyen

Nguyen is a twenty five year old female student who wanted to get a degree in Business Administration in Australia. I conducted interviews with her in the library for three rounds. Before each interview, I asked her permission to use the recorder, and she was happy with that. During the interviews, Nguyen felt nervous sometimes, and I asked her to stop for a little while. Then, the interview continued smoothly.
Learner initiative

In the first round, Nguyen presented as a passive and dependent learner as she relied completely on the teacher’s help and instructions.

*I never learnt for exams at the beginning of semesters. I often waited for teachers to show me which areas I needed to focus on.*

In the second round, Nguyen was even getting worse. She had no confidence in her own ideas and understanding and did not engage in critical or creative thinking.

*I wanted to get quick and correct answers from teachers. In my thoughts teachers were the best people to verify my understandings. I often expected teachers to tell me and give me some feedback such as your understanding is correct, or you need to add some more information like this, like that’.*

By the final round Nguyen showed considerable changes in her approaches and was more aware of her learning duties, evidenced by her commitment to planning her own study timetable, something she had not thought of in the first interview.

*I have been active in constructing my learning plan for weeks, months and also for a whole semester.*

Problem solving

In the first round, Nguyen said she got stuck when facing problems in learning, and was unable to find a solution to handle these problems. She was, however, questioning the role of the lecturer and the students’ need to be able to talk and ask questions.

*I felt not happy with the lecturer, because I found that his lecture was very hard to understand. Moreover, he was talkative for a whole lecture, and students ourselves had no chance to speak.*

In the second round, Nguyen was still reliant on the teachers’ instructions, but she had started to find effective ways to solve problems.
When I met problems in learning I often asked questions to tutors. Sometimes, I asked questions with a purpose to get a quick and correct answer.

Nguyen showed considerable development in handling difficulties in learning by the final round. She was demonstrating a considerable degree of self-confidence in problem solving.

One of the subjects in my course is equity, the lecturer asked us to use FCFF (the technique to analyze the stock market). This was extremely difficult for me to understand in lectures. Through discussions with tutors and other peers who had experiences in the accounting area, I became more knowledgeable about FCFF.

Using learning resources

In the first round Nguyen was completely dependent on teachers in terms of using learning resources. She considered teachers were the most trusted sources of knowledge.

I felt safer to use information provided by teachers instead of seeking information from other sources which were not verified by my teachers. For me, the lecture notes were very important, even more than textbooks, because most of questions for exams or assignment came from lectures.

Through the second round, Nguyen had started to find alternative information for her study instead of merely expecting it to come from teachers as in the previous stage.

Now, I used information for my essays not only from textbooks but also from other sources such as the internet or journal articles.

Nguyen maintained and expanded her capacity for finding and using resources in the final round and seemed far more confident about the whole process.

Before I used mostly information from books, but gradually I preferred to find information from journals. I thought that information from online journals was more up to date than from books.
Collaborative learning

In the first round, Nguyen was not very confident about working with teachers, but she enjoyed working collaboratively with friends.

*I preferred to work with my friends rather than working with teachers, because I felt more confident when talking with peers.*

In the second round, Nguyen was more confident than in the previous stage in terms of participating in group work.

*Group discussions brought me confidence when presenting in front of crowd. However, I did not want teachers to participate in our discussions because I felt puzzled by his or her attendance.*

In the final round, Nguyen was fully aware of effectiveness of group activities in class, and she believed that these were different ways of learning.

*Through discussions with peers I had chances to learn and to expand my understandings from different people who might give me some useful advice.*

Responsibility in learning

In the first round, Nguyen believed that her parents were responsible for her learning, and she seemed to have no passion to learn in Australia.

*I went to university just to satisfy my parents. I did not like learning education, but my parents forced me to learn that major. So, I did not have motivation and passion to learn.*

In the second round, Nguyen was still unable to take her responsibility in learning, and she learnt to satisfy her parents rather than she desired to learn.

*I was doing a Bachelor of Business Administration but my father, who was an auditor, told me that after finishing my course I needed to get another certificate in auditing. To satisfy his expectation, I would do that when I finished my main course.*

In the final round, Nguyen had been more aware of her learning in Australia. She started to think in a more positive way of her learning purposes.
I determined that coming to Australia is to get both a degree and knowledge for the work place in the future.

In general, through the first round of interviews, Nguyen expressed ideas that match a student in the first phase of learning. She was not active and showed little initiative beyond that of doing what the teacher asked. This dependence on the teacher made finding solutions and making progress difficult, especially as she did not trust information that had not been verified by the teacher. Although she consulted with her peers it did not lead to new ideas or questions that she could ask the teachers. She showed all the characteristics of a dependent learner at phase 1.

By the second round Nguyen had shown a little improvement. While she had been able to solve a few problems she still depended on the teacher’s solutions. She had started looking for resources outside lectures but still avoided communication with teachers. From her responses she showed a little movement towards becoming an engaged learner and I considered that she was between phase 1 and phase 2.

In the final round, Nguyen seemed more confident in coping with problems and finding some resources. However, she showed little evidence of having developed the capacities of an autonomous learner.

Overall, I considered Nguyen at best could now be seen to be half way between an engaged learner at phase 2 and an autonomous learner at phase 3.

4. Cao
Cao came to Australia with the purpose of studying accounting at undergraduate level. He had finished that degree in Vietnam and had worked for one year. Cao was invited to be involved in my study as an interviewee. He was very confident in all the interviews, because he had already had this experience in Vietnam as he said. Hence, he actively asked to sign the consent form as well as to see the information sheet.
Learner initiative

Through the first round, Cao described his passive learning characteristics and dependence on the teacher.

*I only relied on teacher’s instructions in learning, because I thought that his or her ideas were the best.*

By the second round, Cao was more capable and actively planned and consciously adjusted his learning approaches.

*I have two different notebooks, one for taking notes in class, and with this one, I tried to write down as much as possible. I had another notebook for summarizing notes in class. I read again all things written down in my notes and tried to understand them. Then I summarized those notes based on my own understanding and brought them to the tutorial class.*

In the final round, Cao demonstrated a high level of activeness in learning.

*I actively constructed my learning plans which are based on different requirements from lectures and tutorial classes. Moreover, I created a learning schedule which shows me when and what I need to learn for exams or essays.*

Problem solving

Cao showed his confidence through the first round in terms of his capacity in handling difficulties in learning.

*I was quite capable in dealing with difficulties in learning. When I met challenges, I often tried to find out the reasons leading to those challenges before seeking help from others.*

In the second round, Cao was unable to maintain his learning capacity as he had in the first round and was less confident when facing problems in learning.

*The more I learnt here the more I found it challenging, and sometimes, I felt pessimistic because I could not find out possible solutions to overcome those challenges.*
Then, in the final round Cao had become aware of his learning situation, and instead of being pessimistic when facing difficulties he tried to find out solutions and overcome if he could.

I was aware that obstacles, which occurred during studying, were unavoidable. Hence, whenever I faced difficulties in learning, I tried to find out solutions to handle them.

Using learning resources

Through the first round, Cao had been highly aware of seeking and using learning resources.

I often went to the library to borrow some journals which related to my topic. If I was unsure about choosing books and journals, I asked staff there, and they were happy to help me.

Step by step, through the second round, Cao was getting more capable in searching for and selecting information for his assignments.

When I wrote assignments in the first semester, I used all the information which I found from Google as long as it related to my topics. I did not care whether those sources were academic or reliable. After that, taking advice from teachers and peers, I only selected and chose articles with PDF versions from journals which were clearly reliable academic publications.

In the final round, Cao maintained and expanded his ability in using learning resources.

I still based my work on information from handouts given by teachers, but I did not get high scores through the first few assignments. Now, I understand that to get higher scores, I should expand my knowledge by finding and gathering more alternative information from the internet and journals.
Collaborative learning

In the first round, Cao was not ready to participate in group work because he did not see that it was useful and was looking for the ‘right’ idea rather than increased understanding.

*I got confused through group discussions, because different people presented different ideas. So, it was hard to know whose ideas were right.*

Through the second round, Cao started to be interested in group work. He realized that, through group activities he would develop his thinking skills and his competence at presenting his ideas to others.

*I found interesting and useful some kinds of activities such as group discussions or tutorial sections. They assisted me with critical thinking and skills of presentation.*

In the final round, Cao had been fully aware of effectiveness though group work such as discussions and tutorials.

*It was the best time to learn with each other in tutorial sections. We did exercises together to find out the best solutions. Through that activity my understandings were expanded and more importantly, I realised my strengths and also weaknesses.*

Responsibility in learning

In the first round, Cao believed that teachers and students should share responsibility in learning.

*I thought that I was not supposed to expect everything from teachers. I should be highly aware of my learning.*

In the second round, Cao’s attitude towards his learning was positively changed. He assumed that he would be fundamentally responsible for his learning.

*I reckoned that teachers needed to equip students with learning approaches and guide students how to learn best.*
By the final round Cao had clearly identified his role as a learner in partnership with the teacher’s role as a primary source and seemed to appreciate the partnership of learning and teaching.

_I believed that teachers were responsible for me in terms of transferring knowledge, and I was responsible for my learning achievement._

Generally, through the first round even though some progress had been made, Cao still demonstrated a low level of autonomy. He still waited and expected instructions from teachers and did not realize the usefulness of learning collaboratively. In his thoughts teachers were mainly responsible for his learning. Nevertheless, Cao showed his ability in identifying problems in learning and was also quite competent in using the library service. In this interview he had the characteristics of a dependent learner and showed some indication of reaching higher levels.

In the second round, Cao had made considerable progress towards developing autonomy. He tried his best in planning and approaching his learning in different ways. He said he had improved his skills of finding and choosing learning sources and was finding group work interesting and useful. However, he said he was still puzzled about some of the challenges that occurred during his course and it seemed to me that he was functioning within phase two of the model.

In general, through the final round, Cao revealed a significant improvement in his learning. He effectively connected his learning from lectures to tutorial classes and was highly aware of problems in learning and trying to find out possible solutions to overcome those problems. His techniques and skills in searching for information were also significantly developed and he highly appreciated the effectiveness of peer group work. At this phase I considered that he was now functioning at phase 3.

_Overall, I determined that by the end of my study Cao showed indication of phase 3, that is as an autonomous learner._
5. Chi
Chi is a twenty three year old female student who has come to Australia to study the Bachelor of Nursing. She was a busy person, because she had a part-time job and I interviewed her in her break time between lectures, and luckily, she was willing to go through three rounds of the interviews.

Learner initiative
In the first interview, Chi showed that she recognized this was a different learning environment and worked to adapt to the new demands.

I made an effort to adapt with learning and teaching approaches which I have not experienced at the university in Vietnam.

However by the second round she still tried to adopt the teachers’ ideas rather than taking the initiative to develop her own and seemed to rely on the teachers to tell her how to do this.

Far more often, I asked teachers to recommend to me how can I learn best as I thought his or her ideas were much better than mine.

By the final round she put less emphasis on the teacher’s role although she seemed to consider this a weakness and had not fully accepted the idea that the teacher was there to enable her to develop her own ideas and understanding.

I supposed that learning in Australia was totally different from Vietnam. Thus, in Australia I probably should not expect much from teacher’s assistance.

Problem solving
In the first round, Chi expressed great reliance on the teachers when faced with a problem or difficulty.

When I could not find solutions for the exercises, I asked teachers or tutors to show me what to do. With their assistance, I felt secure when facing with difficulties.

By the second round, she said she was capable of seeking different ways to handle problems in learning and was not as reliant on the teachers alone.
Some learning tasks were very difficult to understand, especially theories in lectures. To overcome these challenges, I sought more information on the internet through a Google scholar search. If it still did not work, I asked my friends who were more competent than me in the areas I was struggling with.

Through the final round, Chi was confident when she had to cope with challenges that happened during her learning process and had found strategies that helped her move forward.

Sometimes, I got stuck on finding solutions to the exercise. At that time, I did not try to find out at all costs but I left that exercise and went on doing another thing, then I came back to solve that problem.

**Using learning resources**

At the beginning, through the first round, Chi preferred to use the traditional way of using learning resources, which was to read and memorise them. She still mostly relied on learning materials that were provided by teachers.

The learning resources which I used were mostly based on lecture notes and textbooks, because most of the information from there was used in exams or tests. I rarely needed to find other sources such as internet, books or journal articles.

In the second round, Chi started to seek alternative information, and she showed her interest in applying a new way of searching resources.

In terms of seeking information for essays, I based on lecture notes first, then I accessed the internet to find out more. I liked to get information from journals as it is up-to-date.

Chi revealed a significant development through the final round regarding analyzing information.

There were five people in my class including me who often organised group discussions regarding learning issues. We listened again from a tape recorder to all the information from the lecture. After that, if someone still did not understand, we helped each other to explain it.
Collaborative learning

In contrast to many of the participants in the first interview Chi was very confident when she was required to attend group work. She highly valued the usefulness and importance of group activities.

In the classroom here, during the lectures, teachers usually organized the class by different small groups. Through these groups, I was encouraged to present my own opinions, and I felt free to say aloud what I was thinking even though it was not really appropriate sometimes. Through group discussions I have learnt not only from other students but also from the teacher, because the teacher sometimes participated in group discussions, and his or her idea was equally assessed by others.

By the second round, she had developed her own understanding of the value of collaborative learning and was appreciative of this way of learning in Australia.

I realised that Vietnamese students had a tendency to work individually. Here I recognised that working in teams was more effective than working individually.

In the final round, Chi was more capable than in previous phases when she was assigned to attend group discussions and working groups, and through watching others became aware of the degree of skills that her peers had developed.

In workshops, there were some students who were nurses in their countries of origin before coming to Australia, so they had practical experience in nursing. They showed me a lot of skills such as organizing beds for patients or checking blood pressure which looked very simple, but it was much more difficult to do than I had expected. However, if I was required to work individually I was not very confident to do that.

Responsibility in learning

From the beginning, Chi believed that she was responsible for her learning in Australia.

I reckoned that the learning environment at university in Australia made me become more aware of what and how I am studying.
In the second interview Chi was affected by concerns outside the course. Her motivation and responsibility had not remained stable in this round. She was less motivated in learning.

*I did not have much motivation in my learning, because I am unsure that, after university, I am staying in Australia or going back Vietnam.*

In the final round, Chi’s belief of her responsibility in learning in Australia seemed to partly go down.

*I am trying my best to study in Australia to get a degree. Then, my parents in Vietnam will help me to seek for a job when I finish study here.*

Generally, on reflection of what Chi said, she showed her initial capacity at the beginning. Chi had made an effort in adapting to a new learning and teaching environment. This was exhibited in the ways she overcame challenges in learning, and how she was interested in team work. Additionally Chi had been initially aware of her responsibility in learning. However, she was not motivated in seeking learning materials outside lecture notes. Reflecting on this interview, I assessed that Chi had almost reached phase 2.

In the second round, Chi still made some progress but was regressing in some areas. Chi had gained confidence in overcoming and solving problems in learning by different solutions. Besides, she was more active in collaborative learning. Her motivation in using learning sources was also significantly increased. Nevertheless, in the comparison with the 1st round, Chi’s initiative and responsibility in learning had gone down. In general, I determined Chi to be in phase 2.

In the final interview, overall, Chi had put considerable effort into her learning. She continuously became competent in problem solving and was motivated to learn collaboratively and pragmatically from peers. Chi was also more self-dependent in learning. However, her responsibility and belief in learning was almost at a standstill. It may be due to the influence of her parents on her learning purposes. At this phase, I considered that Chi showed the characteristics of an autonomous learner.
Overall, reflecting on what Chi showed through three rounds of interviews I determined that she was in the middle of phase 2 (engaged learner) and phase 3 (autonomous learner).

6. Hung

Hung is a twenty two year old male student who has come to Australia to pursue his study in nursing. Hung was invited to take part in my study. He demonstrated good speaking skills during interviews. He answered my questions smoothly even in public places such as the cafeteria at the university.

Learner initiative

In the first round, Hung was a dependent and passive learner. He still relied heavily on teachers to make decisions.

*I often asked my teachers to choose subjects for me. And with their recommendations I made decisions to select subjects in each semester.*

Reflecting on the second interview, Hung was familiar with the new learning environment in Australia, but there was still reliance on the teachers.

*I often asked questions in class because I would like teachers to give me the answers immediately instead of finding answers by myself. To be honest, the answers to those questions were quite easy, and I would have been able to work them out myself.*

In the final round, Hung was more active and confident than in previous phases. He started to self-manage his study.

*I am trying to construct my learning plans for every semester which show how many subjects I am studying and which subjects are most useful to my future career.*

Problem solving

Through the first round, Hung started to be aware of handling difficulties in learning.
I had problems with the writing style in Australia. I asked for help from other students who came here before me.

Hung was more active in the second round in terms of seeking solutions when facing difficulties in his learning.

When something happened to disappoint my expectations in learning, I tried to find out the reasons and possible ways to overcome it.

In the final interview, Hung showed a more competent level of solving problems. He actively sought help and consulted with friends when he met challenges in learning.

When getting stuck in my learning I did not try to find out solutions as soon as possible. At that time, I asked my friends that when they faced problems like mine, what did they do? As a result, some of them gave me some useful suggestions.

Using learning resources

In the first round, Hung still preferred using traditional learning resources. He was not confident to use information outside textbooks and lectures.

After each lecture, I tried to remember everything. I thought that information provided from lectures was good enough for exams or essays.

In the second round, Hung began to find and use alternative information from different sources to support his assignments.

Before going to lectures and tutorials I often read a lot and took notes.
Moreover, with the teacher’s instructions, I usually accessed electronic sources in the library to find out further information for the incoming lectures.

Hung had significantly developed his skills in finding and selecting learning materials though the final round.

I often accessed the internet to search for information which could be used in my essays. I knew some useful techniques such as how to find information by key words or how to search for academic articles.
Collaborative learning

In the first interview, Hung began to cooperate with his friends, especially when he faced problems.

*After lectures of tutorial sections, if I still did not understand, I asked some of my friends to stay late and explain to me some issues which I found confusing.*

Hung gained confidence in the second round when he participated in group work.

*I found it useful when attending group discussions and improved my confidence when presenting in front of people, even though sometimes, my ideas were not really appropriate.*

In the final round, Hung had effectively worked with and learnt from others. In particular he was highly aware of the importance of learning practical experiences in parallel with learning academic knowledge. However, he still did not consciously contribute much to group work.

*When working in groups, I have learnt a lot from friends coming from China. Most of them had work experience before coming to Australia. Hence, they shared with me their valuable experiences that I was unlikely to get from any sources. However, when they asked me to say aloud my opinions, I avoided doing that.*

Responsibility in learning

At the beginning though the first round, Hung was aware of his learning purposes in Australia, but he still believed that teachers and students should share the responsibility of student’s learning.

*I came to Australia for both purposes: getting a good degree and getting knowledge for the workplace. I thought that in Australia teachers were important factors which crucially contributed to my learning achievement.*

In the second round, Hung shifted learning responsibility to his parents.

*Sometimes, I did not have motivation in my learning in Australia. I wanted to go back Vietnam. However, I did not want to disappoint my parents who expected from me a lot.*
In the final interview, Hung began to take responsibility for his learning. It marked a positive change in his attitude to learning in Australia.

*I thought that I am mainly responsible for my learning, but whether my learning achievement is good or not, it partly came from teacher’s responsibility.*

In general, through the first round, even though independent attempts had been made, Hung showed characteristics as a dependent learner. He mostly relied on teacher’s guidance to make a choice in learning approaches. Hung was also not confident when facing difficulties in learning. Furthermore, he showed little motivation in using and searching for learning materials, and he leant mostly by memorization. Beside, Hung showed his interest in collaborating in learning. In his belief, teachers and students should share responsibility in student’s learning. Overall I considered Hung to be in phase one.

Reflection on the second round of interviews, Hung had made some efforts and progress even with some existing weaknesses. He was trying his best to find out solutions when experiencing difficulties. Moreover, with teachers’ recommendations he had become motivated in seeking learning resources. Hung was also adapting to group work even though he still lacked confidence. Besides, as compared with the 1st round, Hung’s initiative in learning was still unchanged and even got worse in terms of his responsibility in learning. Overall I accessed Hung was between phase one and phase two.

Generally, through the final round, Hung considerably developed his learning skills. He was much more competent in the ways of solving problems in learning. Also, he found the way to learn pragmatically from peers. Hung had been more active in learning, and it was revealed by his self-effort in making learning approaches. In other areas, such as his responsibility in learning and motivation in using learning materials, he remained unchanged. I considered that at this phase, Hung did not show the capacities of a fully autonomous learner.

**Based on what Hung demonstrated through three rounds of interviews I assessed him to be in the middle of phase 2 (engaged learner) and phase three (autonomous learner).**
7. Tan
Tan is a twenty four year old male student, and he came to Australia to undertake his study in education. Tan is a quiet person, and he was not very confident when participating in interviews in public places. Thus, in each round I went to his house to conduct the interview.

**Learner initiative**

In the first round, Tan had been aware of setting his learning plans when he was required to learn in a new educational context.

*I thought that each student has different strengths and also weaknesses, so each person needs to base a learning plan on that understanding so that it suits his or her ability, instead of merely expecting instructions from teachers.*

However, in the second round, Tan was not confident in what he was studying.

*I went to university just to satisfy my parents. I did not like education, but my parents forced me to learn that major. So, I did not have motivation and passion to learn.*

In the final interview, Tan showed a positive change on his belief of learning in Australia. He was more active and confident when attending learning activities.

*Both lecturers and tutors said to me that I needed to present my own opinions even if I was still unsure. This way, in tutorial classes, I tried to say aloud what I was thinking. Sometimes, I presented different solutions to the exercises. Then, the tutor explained the reasons why my solutions were not accurate. Based on the tutor’s explanation I realized that my argument was not strong enough.*

**Problem solving**

Through the first round, Tan showed his willingness in finding out solutions to handle learning difficulties, but he was still not confident enough to consistently and persistently follow this.

*When I saw teachers outside class, I did not totally agree with their points, and their explanations did not satisfy me sometimes. Then I brought those concerns to*
tutorial classes and shared with other classmates and also with the tutor. Then, I knew that my knowledge and understanding were not strong enough to understand the ideas from teachers. However, I still thought that ideas coming from teachers were the best.

In the second round, Tan was more capable in seeking various solutions when he faced problems in learning.

I could not do some exercises in an accounting subject. I tried to read a lot but still struggled even with the teacher’s explanations during class. Finally I made an appointment to see the teacher after class, and with his further explanations, I found strategies to do the exercises.

In the final interview, Tan was more confident than in previous phases in terms of asking and working with teachers to seek help.

If I had got stuck during studying, I sent teachers an email to ask for an appointment. Before going to see her/him, I prepared in advance what I was going to ask them.

Using learning resources

On reflection after the first interview, Tan seemed to lack confidence to use learning materials unless they were from textbooks and lectures.

In exams and tests I often quoted and used information from lecture notes, because I thought that information provided by lecturers was most important.

Tan had positively changed his way of using and seeking learning resources in the second round. It partly shows his adaptation with a new learning environment.

I always selected the academic journals for the references of my essay. At university in Vietnam, I used all information I got, and I did not care it was reliable or not.

In the final round of interviews, Tan was capable of selecting and using learning materials which were necessary to his assignments.

I thought that information from books was quite basic and academic, and information from journals is new and updated. So, I often combined information...
and data from both books and journal articles in my assignments. As a result, I usually got higher marks.

Collaborative learning

In the first round, when he first arrived to Australia, Tan found it difficult to get rid of his traditional learning habits.

At the beginning, I rarely attended group work. I thought that I can learn by my own ways as long as I passed every exam.

Tan’s awareness and attitude to collaborative learning were positively changed in the second interview. He began to recognize the usefulness of group work.

Day by day, I recognized that, in most learning situations, working in a team was much more productive than working in isolation. Through teamwork activities we learnt from each other and also helped each other. Each person had different strengths, so his/her understandings consolidated and enriched my own knowledge.

Developing from second round, Tan continued to show his interest in attending group activities, but he had not sufficiently gained his confidence.

Through group discussions, although I did not much contribute to group work I had chances to learn and to expand my understandings from other people instead of receiving information from teachers only.

Responsibility in learning

In the first round, although Tan still believed that teacher should take responsibility in student’s learning he started to be aware of his learning duties in Australia.

When I first came to Australia I was aware of my learning responsibility here. I supposed that, with teacher and peer support, I will learn more productively.

By the second interview, Tan was highly aware of his responsibility in learning.

The more I learnt here the more I believed that I was taking responsible for my learning.
In the final interview, Tan’s belief in learning sometimes fluctuated, but he was basically doing well.

*Studying in a different country brought me some important benefits, but sometimes, I felt bored because of the different culture.*

Overall, on reflection after the first round of interviews, beside some weaknesses Tan showed some significant strength in his learning. He was getting more active in making his learning plans. Although still relying on his teachers to a certain degree, Tan had become more confident in overcoming difficulties in learning and initially taking responsibility himself. Otherwise, Tan still revealed some limitations. He was still mostly dependent on learning resources provided by teachers. Moreover, Tan was not interested in working in a team. Based on what Tan demonstrated through this round I considered Tan in the middle of phase 1 and phase 2.

In the second interview, generally, Tan had made considerable progress. He was more capable in seeking and selecting learning materials. His awareness and attitude towards group work was also positively changed. He had become aware that he was main person to take responsibility in learning. Beside the above progress, in some areas, Tan’s achievements still remained unchanged and even regressed, such as his learning initiative or his ability in problem solving. Through this round, I assumed that Tan showed his characteristics of an engaged learner.

In general in the final round of interviews, Tan was significantly improved in his learning process. He was more active and confident in seeking solutions when facing problems in learning. Additionally, Tan had paid attention to looking for a variety of resources to find supporting information for his learning. He was more interested in being involved in group work. However, Tan’s progress was inconsistent. His learning initiative was still in a standstill as in the 1st round. Furthermore, his sense of responsibility for learning had not remained as high as in the 2nd round. Based on his learning characteristics, I considered that Tan had not fully shown his capacity to be an autonomous learner.
Overall, I determined that Tan was on the half way of phase 2 and phase 3, and he was potentially becoming an autonomous learner.

8. Long
Long is a twenty three year old female student, and she came to Australia to study business. Long was not confident in speaking when I turned on the tape recorder and put it in front of her. Thus, whenever I interviewed her, I had to put the recorder out of her attention. As a result, she felt more comfortable in answering my questions.

Learner initiative
Reflecting on the first round, Long quickly adapted to a new teaching and learning environment.

At university in Australia, I thought that, teachers here were better than teachers in Vietnam. Thus, I have expected them to show me how to learn productively.

Although Long showed her initiative previously, in the second round Long still relied on teachers to set up her learning approaches.

Even with my endeavor in learning, teachers should guide me in terms of learning approaches.

By the final interview, Long was more active and capable when she involved in learning.

After each semester, if my learning achievement was not very good, I often adjusted my learning approach in order to make my learning more productive.

Problem solving
At the beginning, through the first interview, Long showed her confidence and capacity in solving problems that occurred.

I have been getting familiar with how to deal with difficulties in learning. When facing problems in learning, I asked my friends, who have more experiences than me, how to solve problems.
Long kept doing well in the second round. She was flexible and capable when seeking solutions to handle challenges in learning.

I had struggled with expressing critical thinking in writing assignments. I found a few documents that guided me to solve that problem. Then, I decided to make appointments to see staff in department of ESL (English as second language). Through these meetings and with their instructions and advice, my writing was improved significantly.

In the final round, Long continuously showed her ability in problem solving. Now, when I met difficulties in learning, I maximised all kind of services at the university such as the library, tutorials or ESL to find out solutions.

Using learning resources

In the first interview, Long showed her interest in finding and using learning materials outside textbooks and lectures.

Besides receiving information from lectures, I often searched for more alternative information from journals and online books.

By the second round, Long revealed a deeper level of using learning resources.

Before writing assignments in each semester, I often went to see teachers and asked them to suggest some important books for me. Based on that, I tried to find and read them, taking notes and writing down some important quotes.

In the final interview, Long had effectively combined her knowledge with her friends’ experiences in selecting and using learning materials.

I often asked friends, who were in the same major with me and in the final year how to effectively search for materials on the internet. This was very effective, because it saved my time in seeking information.
Collaborative learning

Through the first interview, Long was not confident when she was required to work in groups.

*I liked to ask teachers questions individually instead of asking in front of class, because they gave me more specific information.*

In the second round, Long began to show her interest in working in teams, but she was still not ready to confidently work with others.

*Initially I found that group activities were useful, but I reckoned that Vietnamese students, myself included, were still puzzled and reluctant in cooperating with other students who were also international students.*

By the final interview, Long consciously and fully realized the importance and usefulness of collaborative work, especially with teachers.

*I described the role of the teacher towards my learning achievement as ‘when I want to go from A to B, and I do not know well the way to get there. I still decided to go from A to B by way. However, my teacher told me that other routes are quicker to go from A to B, and they gave me a numbers of reasons such as avoiding traffic jams and travelling by a shorter distance’.*

Responsibility in learning

Long was not really motivated to learn in the first round.

*I went to university wanting to pass every exam and finally get a Bachelor degree. I was unaware of how I would apply the knowledge from university to the workplace after university.*

In the second interview, Long assumed that her parents mostly took responsibility for her learning.

*Until now, I did not believe that going to Australia was the right choice. However, I still made the decision to come here to make my parents happy.*

During the final round Long fully appreciated her responsibility for her learning in Australia.
I went to Australia to study to get a good degree first, then getting knowledge to work.

Generally, through the first round, although some progress had been made Long’s, learning development was still at a low level. She had not taken initiative in learning. Moreover, she liked to work individually rather that collaboratively. She learnt purposefully to get a degree rather than to equip herself with knowledge. In other positive aspects, Long realised that her peers could help her to overcome some problems in learning. She also started to look for more learning sources instead of only using materials provided by teachers. Reflecting on Long’s learning characteristics, I assessed her in the level of dependent learner at phase one.

In the second interview, Long exhibited a significant change. She actively asked for assistances from staff and teachers in terms of dealing with learning difficulties and seeking learning materials. Additionally, she had showed her endeavor in setting up learning approaches and developing interest in group learning. Nevertheless, Long still thought that her parents should take responsibility for her learning. Based on Long’s learning characteristics at this stage, I considered Long at phase two.

In general, through the final round of interviews, Long has made considerable development with her learning. She was able to consciously adjust her learning approaches. Her skills and abilities in handling difficulties were also improved. Moreover, she was capable in using both physical and human resources. Additionally she found ways to help herself and also assist others through group discussions. There was still a minor problem existing in Long learning progress was that she was still not strongly believe in her learning.

Overall, I determined that by the end of my study Long was functioning at phase three, that is as an autonomous learner.

All of the data findings were illustrated by the bar chart. This was developed from the data collected from the eight participants during the three rounds of interviews which, for the purposes of this study are seen to be equivalent to three phases of becoming an autonomous learner.
It is worth noting that, because this study was conducted qualitatively, the descriptive statistics in the bar chart are relative only, and they are not as specific as quantitative statistics. The main purpose of constructing this bar chart was to help me to easily, logically and quickly understand the data findings and interpretations.

In conclusion, from the data I determined that Hang, Cao and Long had demonstrated that they were at phase 3 as autonomous learners. The other five participants: Cuong, Nguyen, Chi, Hung and Tan showed evidence of being half way between phase 2 (engaged learner) and phase 3 (autonomous learner). The presented data above will be more adequately and comprehensively consolidated, perhaps by including my own learning experiences.
My learning journey – an extra piece of data

“No one is born fully-formed: it is through self-experience in the world that we become what we are.” - Paulo Freire

The reason for including a section on my own educational journey in this thesis is because I consider myself to be also a participant in this project along with those students who had volunteered to participate in my study. My own educational experiences since arriving in Australia will contribute towards the data collected on a cohort of Vietnamese students studying abroad, and will be analyzed along with the participants’ contributions.

“I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand” (Confucius). This saying has a bearing on my own learning situation as it partly reflects my journey since coming to Australia to study in 2005 up to the present time. What I reveal below are my adaptations, shifts and developments since coming from Vietnam to a new cultural and educational environment in Australia. My journey comprises six significant moments which marked new steps forward in my studies in Australia. They are:

- 2005: La Trobe Language Centre
- 2006: First semester of Master of Education course
- 2007: Last semester of Master of Education course
- 2009: Beginning of Doctor of Education course
- 2010: Research proposal presentation
- 2011: On the way to finishing thesis

I am categorizing the above stages into three sections which I regard to be the three most significant phases of my learning journey at one university in Australia.

“If one learns but does not think, one will be bewildered. If one thinks but does not learn from others, one will be imperiled”. (Confucius)
This saying seems to truly reflect my learning status in Australia especially when beginning at the Language Centre (LC). The period at La Trobe Language Centre was one of the most extraordinary and noteworthy moments in my learning experiences. I remember experiencing a variety of emotions including feeling pessimistic, nervous, shy, not confident, puzzled and passive all at the same time. At that time, negative thoughts would run through my mind like “I cannot do anything” and “I can’t stay and study in Australia”.

The first hurdle that made me lack confidence was the low level of my English. At that time I was frustrated with myself that I hadn’t learned English when I was younger. I did learn English in Vietnam but only one year before coming to Australia. Before that, I learnt Russian in high school and Chinese at university. I tried to explain this weakness to the English teachers, and they seemed to sympathize with me. Whenever they spoke to me, they tried to speak slowly and clearly to help me understand what they were talking about.

Step by step my English improved, but my learning attitude and behavior remained unchanged. In the classroom I often expected and waited for the teachers to tell me how to learn rather than actively seeking advice. Usually the teachers divided the class into small groups in which students were allocated by different nationalities. Most of the time in group discussions I remained silent and contributed only a little to the group. I thought that if I said something wrong, people would look and laugh at me. On the occasions that I discussed a topic, I always ensured that what I was talking about was completely accurate. After hearing my responses the teachers appeared unhappy. This was not only because of my English but partly because of my negative contribution that did not meet their expectations. I was unaware that such negative behaviors were viewed as inappropriate in Australian classrooms. Moreover, if there were any difficulties in my learning, I often asked Vietnamese friends for solutions rather than seeking help from teachers or other students.

It is evident that my learning approaches still followed traditional Vietnamese ways. I
adapted to the new teaching and learning styles very slowly. I did not know how to write an academic essay and how to express critical thinking in my writing. One of the reasons for my problems with writing was that I still applied Vietnamese writing styles to my essay writing in Australia. It is worth noting that in Vietnamese writing, critical thinking or academic word choice are not seriously considered. When I first submitted an assignment for the Masters course, the teacher didn’t understand the points I was trying to convey because I used lots of non-academic words in my writing. I remember one particular occasion when I was required to write an essay on the topic of ‘crime’. When the essay was returned to me, there was a long comment at the end, stating that there were too many emotive words that were not suitable for academic writing. The teacher listed some examples such as ‘crime – sin’, ‘slide – involve’. After receiving and reviewing such comments, I tried my best to consciously adjust my learning habits with the intention of learning more effectively, but my results only marginally improved.

When I didn’t achieve my learning expectation, I shifted the responsibility onto the teacher. When I repeated level 4B EFS (upper-intermediate level of English), I felt unhappy with the teacher and wrote a long email to the academic coordinator complaining about the teacher. I did not realize that my English was not good enough to be at university. When I repeated the level a second time I found that I could not even do some of the exercises which I had previously been shown how to do. After that time I realized that I was wrong to claim that the teacher was at fault and acknowledged my English was not good enough to undertake the Masters course.

When I studied level 5 EFS (Advanced level of English for Further Study) my learning attitude and behavior had positively changed. On reflection, I think this was partly due to the good teaching and learning environment that had positively impacted on my way of thinking. This was also partly due to having tried my best to overcome challenges in learning and to begin to adapt to the new learning environment. I was more passionate and motivated when involved in group activities. In addition, I was also more confident when presenting in front of people, even though my English was still poor. Based on the comments of teachers throughout each essay, my critical thinking in writing developed further, but when facing difficulties in learning, I still relied on teachers and peers for
assistance. I initially understood that learning from others was very important, especially in learning English. More importantly, I was aware that the English preparation course was an important step towards undertaking my Master course at university, particularly in relation to my research skills. After finishing the English course I felt more confident in communicating with others. Not only did I improve myself, I also realized that there were inherent learning weaknesses with Vietnamese students, including myself, in learning English, in particular pronunciation and listening. I realized that in learning English, speaking and listening are tightly linked together. If we do not pronounce words properly, we cannot listen well. Likewise, I also realised the strengths of Vietnamese students in learning English was their strong command of grammar and vocabulary.

I graduated from the Language Centre with the English certificate 5B EFS and enrolled in the Master of Education course. At that time I felt very confident and optimistic that I was competent enough to undertake further studies in Australia. Noticeably, there was a big shift from the Language Centre to university. At the Language Centre, all the students were international students, and English was their second language, so I felt quite confident when speaking English, even when pronounced incorrectly. On the contrary, in the Faculty of Education, there were only a few international students, of which some were Vietnamese. Most of the students were Australian, and they spoke very quickly and used a lot of slang. It really made us puzzled and lacking in confidence. Sometimes, during lectures, the lecturer and local students laughed and smiled when they found something interesting or funny. However, the other Vietnamese students and I did not understand what was going on. Why did they laugh and smile? What things were so interesting or funny? So we just laughed and smiled along with them, even though we did not understand their humour. Fortunately, after a few lectures, the international students in general, and the Vietnamese students in particular, usually received much encouragement and assistance, as well as sympathy from the lecturers and local students. For instance, in group discussions, if Vietnamese students presented something, the lecturer and other students often highly appreciated our ideas, even though our English was poor.

Ironically, in the classroom I often regarded myself as a receiver rather than a contributor. During lectures, whenever teachers looked at me, I always assumed that they were going to
ask me something, so I did not dare make eye contact. When attending lectures, I usually sat at the back of the classroom and listened quietly with the hope that teachers would not notice me. I was less motivated in seeking and searching for learning materials for assignments due by the end of each semester. When using supporting evidence in an essay, I preferred to cite information from handouts provided in lectures. I thought that information from handouts was the most trusted source, because it was carefully and cautiously selected by teachers. Sometimes I searched the internet to find more information for essays by doing a Google search. I cited and quoted any words, sentences and paragraphs as long as they were related to the essay topic. I did not care whether such information was academic or reliable. Additionally, I frequently got into trouble with how to paraphrase. As a result, my essay grades were low. I felt quite disappointed with the results, and assumed that the teachers did not appreciate my work.

It is said that, “the more you travel, the more information and experiences you have”. This English saying appears to accurately reflect my cultural learning and language learning in Australia. In the first semester, I enrolled in the subject Intercultural Communication & Education which I was passionately curious about due to its extraordinary name. I was assigned to work in groups with three other Australian students who were incredibly helpful, lovely and enthusiastic. While they eagerly discussed and disputed together in loud voices and engaged in heated argument and debate, I just stayed silent and listened to them attentively and cautiously. On being constantly asked why I had not participated in the argument with them, I only smiled and answered in a soft voice that I preferred listening to them rather than sharing my opinions. Frankly, my culture had taught me to avoid conflicts, as harmony in class is indispensable. In addition, saving face is of great significance to me, and was embedded in my mind since I was a young boy. I only answered a question when the teacher called my name, instead of actively participating. Importantly, I was obliged to avoid showing off my knowledge in front of my classmates as well as the teacher, and it was also important to avoid disputes with them, which is seen as a taboo. In my culture, the students are expected to modestly learn from the teacher who is considered “to stand head and shoulders above the learners”.

Reflecting on Warring’s theoretical framework, at this stage, my learning progress follows
mostly characteristics that have been shaped as he describes. However, in some instances, it did not follow exactly along with the ideas from Warring’s theory. The theoretical framework describes characteristics of a dependent learner as being: passive and dependent in learning; isolated in learning; not responsible in learning and pessimistic in dealing with challenges in learning. Initially these characteristics generally fitted my learning experiences as described above. For example I presented negative behavior in the classroom, specifically, I always thought that everything I was observing, listening and writing in the classroom was enough. I was very reluctant to work in groups and contributed nothing to the group’s ideas. Additionally, at the Language Centre, when facing difficulties, instead of finding possible solutions, I often complained. Nevertheless, my learning progress was not totally negative as described above, as it also exposed some positive features during the learning period. At times I was interested and passionate in working in groups. I also gained confidence when presenting my personal ideas in front of people. I was able to identify for myself the areas I was good at, and also the areas I still found challenging. This could be seen as an improvement in terms of my learning awareness.

Taking into account the theoretical framework mentioned in the literature review, and also through the above characteristics, I rank myself as a dependent learner at that stage. Even though some improvement had been made, the traditional styles were still embedded in my learning approaches. In an important sense, I realized the negative characteristics of my learning, and those characteristics crucially motivated me to learn better and quickly adapt to a new, demanding learning environment. This is further explained by the fact that, in Vietnam, I did not realize that I was a dependent learner, and I always thought that what I was learning and the way I was taught was perfect.

“You don’t understand anything until you learn it more than one way”. (Marvin Minsky)

Gradually, I have discovered that the Western learning culture expects students to engage in debate so that the issue can be thoroughly discussed and understood. It is also important to speak in a loud voice so as to be heard by all members of the class. Another thing that
surprised me is that Australian students address the teacher as a friend or as a “more experienced colleague” and call them by their first names when they need help. This is something that never takes place in my culture, but in Australia, this may be their manner of having a close, informal rapport with their teachers. Like many other international Vietnamese students, I felt uncomfortable in calling Australian teachers by their first name instead of “thua thay/co” (dear teacher/dear Ms) or adding a professional or academic title before their names (Dr A/Professor B). This form of address between the teacher and Australian students gave me the impression that the students seem not to show sufficient reverence to the teacher. What is more, in my culture, students must not eat and drink in class when the teacher is explaining the lesson. If they have some concerns, they are expected to raise their hands in order to put forward a question, and only speak on any matter with the teacher’s permission instead of interrupting the teacher to make a query as Australian students do.

I am occasionally suspicious of the sincerity behind complimentary comments that Australian teachers usually employ in class. I wonder whether their praise is a bit hackneyed, and whether my work is actually excellent or not so as to further endeavor in the future. I do believe that the transition from the learning culture of an expected “large power distance” society like Vietnam to the Australian learning culture with the motto “when in Rome, do as the Romans do” requires international Vietnamese learners to achieve an entirely unbelievable adaptation which may be “easier said than done”. For example, writing 4,000-5,000 word argument essays seems to be a tremendously challenging issue to me in terms of critically written communication. Hence, Australian teachers may sympathize and realize that, the uncritical writing of Vietnamese students who are from a hierarchical society with the “large power distance” seems to be inevitable.

The ways that teachers manage and organize a lecture is to make the classroom environment informal and comfortable. During the lectures, students do not have to sit on the chairs; they can sit on the floor or stand against the wall if they wish. Students may interrupt the teacher if they desire to express an opinion. My reactions to these types of behaviors in class have ranged from surprise to shock, and from curiosity to interest. In the unit “Intercultural Communication & Education” which was supervised by Dr Keith
Simkin, he talked while making coffee and tea, and he talked while walking. When the lecturer talked, one student suddenly lay down on the floor and did breathing exercises. At that time, I was sure that her actions would attract the attention of others, but nobody cared what she did. In another subject the lecturers danced and sang together with the students in class. In the unit “Holistic Education” conducted by Dr Peta Heywood, she often guided students’ learning by practice. For instance, when she mentioned meditation in Holistic curriculum, she showed students how to do meditation in class, and students could do meditation sitting on their chairs or on the floor. In this case, I was really interested in the way of the lecture transaction which is applicable in practice. I found that during the lectures, there were fewer boundaries between Dr Heywood and the students. Sometimes, in presentations, she danced and sang together with the students as a friend. This would be acknowledged that Dr Heywood has done as she said in ‘Looking at Learners’ (2002) “We’re not teachers – we’re facilitators of learning, developing lifelong learners” (p.29).

Another unit which I undertook with other Vietnamese students is “Interpersonal Skills and Communication” supervised by Dr Tricia McCann and Mr Barry Carozzi. When Dr McCann spoke about the skills of interactions between person and person, she asked one student to participate in a short conversation with her, and the other students observed the performance between these two people. I learned a lot that way, as I realized a connection between theory and practice through these conversations.

With the experience of studying for a few semesters, by the time I reached the last semester of my course, I had the ambition of doing a PhD. In the early semesters of the Masters Course I never thought that I was capable enough to do a PhD. At that time I just tried my best to finish my Masters with the intention of going back to Vietnam as soon as possible. However, at the beginning of the last semester, I began to wonder whether to attempt a PhD. Another factor motivated me to pursue higher study, and that was the encouragement of my wife. She always encouraged and supported me in terms of studying, and her never-ending support has motivated my passion to go through with further study.

However, there was a hurdle that hindered my passion to continue at the PhD level. Education Faculty policy requires students who have finished their coursework and want to
continue to a PhD must first complete a minor thesis at the end of the Masters Course. This was a problem for me because the compulsory procedures of choosing a topic, preparing a research proposal and seeking a supervisor were required to be done before completing the Masters Course. I was very disappointed with that, and I thought that there would be no possibility for me to apply for PhD. Still, I emailed the Dean of the faculty explaining my situation, and fortunately, he said I could do EdD instead of PhD by writing a ten thousand word essay. There is a saying “there is a light at the end of the tunnel”, and this was true of my situation. I could apply for EdD if I had a ten thousand word essay with a high score. Nevertheless, writing such a big essay was not easy for me as I had not done this before. I was only familiar with 4000 to 5000 word essays which I did in the Masters Course. Furthermore, I was afraid that my understanding and knowledge was not strong and deep enough to complete such a big assignment. Under these circumstances, I approached my lecturer, Dr Peta Heywood (who is now my supervisor) to ask for her help. Fortunately she agreed to assist me and suggested I write an essay regarding holistic education. She guided me, explaining the difference between writing a 10,000 word essay as opposed to a 5,000 word essay. To initially approach this task, she advised me to read extensively to collect evidence for the essay.

In order to gather adequate information for the essay, I spent most my time looking up books in the library, and searching articles on the internet. More than twenty documents were read, cited, with notes taken, which I thought was more than enough. I confidently took my ideas to show the teacher. After perusing my list the teacher said that the quantity of references was insufficient and my references were not very academic or reliable. She asked me to seek out and read more sources. After that I felt disappointed and disagreed with her, because I believed that those materials were good enough to write a 10,000 word essay. Despite this, I still tried to get more than ten references from a variety of sources, and selected academic articles only.

Through the writing process, I gradually realized that all of the reminders and comments from my teacher were very necessary and useful. The more I wrote, the more complicated and difficult it became. Sometimes my progress faltered because I believed there was no more information to write down. Facing this challenge, I went to see my teacher, and she
gave me invaluable suggestions on how to expand and continue the essay. After two months of hard work, I finished the 10,000 word essay. It was one of the most challenging and difficult learning tasks of my life. I got a high score for the essay, and felt proud of myself as I had successfully completed a large undertaking. Deep down I appreciated my teacher’s assistance as without her considerable contribution I would have found it difficult to successfully finish the assignment.

With the completion of the 10,000 word essay I was eligible to apply for the EdD course. I was extremely excited and happy when I received the Letter of Acceptance and Confirmation of Enrolment (CoE) from the university. This moment was a turning point in my learning progress, because it marked a considerable development in my learning journey in Australia. I was also aware that I was standing in front of both opportunity and challenge, because I thought that the requirements for the EdD course would be much more demanding than the Masters course. No doubt there would be difficulties and constraints for me in achieving my EdD.

Reflecting on my learning journey from the Language Centre to the Masters course I felt that I had consciously grown in terms of my learning attitude and learning behavior. I changed from being a passive learner to becoming a more active learner in learning approaches; from lacking confidence to being more confident in group activities; from being discouraged to being more passionate and motivated in learning, and from being unlikely to seek help from others to being much more willing to learn from others.

Equipped with the knowledge from the language course and the Masters course, I stepped into a new role in which I would be required to be more competent and capable in doing research. When I attained the Masters degree in Education, I thought that I was at a profound level of learning. Nevertheless, when starting to undertake the EdD course, I suddenly realised that learning by coursework and learning by research are two very different areas.

My experience in doing research was almost zero, so I faced a lot of challenges at the beginning of the EdD course. I was struggling with finding a topic for my research; despite
presenting a number of topics to my supervisor, none were approved. Whatever topics I wanted to present to my supervisor, she always asked me to carefully clarify in terms of: my own experiences in the area; possible contribution of the study; participants in the project; and availability of the materials which related to my study. I could not clarify those points to my supervisor. After each appointment with the supervisor with no positive results in terms of choosing a research topic, I felt discouraged and wondered why my supervisor did not just choose the topic for me. Initially my supervisor suggested I spend two months reading and gathering information from different areas of interest, in both English and Vietnamese. This time was very boring and awful for me. In the first month, the more I read, the more I got confused as each article or book gave me different points of view, and I found it difficult to select a topic.

Based on the criteria of an involved learner, which is outlined in the theoretical framework in the literature review chapter, my learning progress partly followed those characteristics, but it happened erratically rather than in a linear way. In the theoretical framework, the characteristics of an involved learner are as follows:

- Motivation in self-constructing learning plans
- Ability to deal with difficulties in learning, with teacher assistance
- Cooperation with teachers and the peers when required
- Belief that teacher and students should share responsibility for learning

My learning progress did not exactly follow the above characteristics. At the end of my Masters course I still lacked confidence and was not actively engaged when participating in activities in the classroom. Moreover, a lack of confidence was also exhibited when communicating with the teachers. For instance I still felt very uncomfortable when calling the teachers by their first name. However, on a positive note, I was highly aware of my responsibility in learning, and always felt in control of my learning in Australia. Furthermore, I was much more capable and active in terms of dealing with difficulties in learning. For example, to be eligible to enrol in EdD course, I had to overcome a lot of hurdles such as writing a 10,000 word essay and seeking supervisors. It seems that at that time, if I did not try my best there would be little chance for me to continue further study.
Reflecting on the theoretical framework discussed in the literature review chapter, and also the characteristics described above, I rank myself at this stage as an interested or involved learner. Although there was still an acute presence of puzzlement and passivity in learning, my learning behavior and attitude had been positively changed, and my learning approaches were also capably and competently improved. Those developments more likely resulted from a period of having to deal with difficulties, problems and seeking solutions as described.

“When we learn with pleasure we never forget”. (Alfred Mercier)

This quote truly signifies the inspiration I felt at overcoming the challenges after starting my EdD course. One day I read some articles regarding autonomous learning at tertiary level, and the more I read, the more I felt interested in this area. It could be said that I was enlightened when reviewing the area of autonomous learning. I spoke to my supervisor about what I had found and my feeling about the topic, and fortunately she encouraged me to keep looking at that area. Another reason for my interest and passion in this particular topic was that my own experiences also played a part in conjunction with the area of learning in higher education in Vietnam. Vietnamese students, myself included, were not very active in learning. Moreover, it had regularly been proposed by the Ministry of Education in Vietnam to renew the learning approaches from passive learning to becoming more independent in learning, especially at the university level. Based on this, and after several discussions with my supervisor, I made a decision to conduct my EdD project regarding the shift of Vietnamese students from a passive learning context in Vietnam to a more independent learning context in Australia. Although I had some understanding of how to conduct research, I still struggled with the concept. I realize that one of the main reasons for my struggles was that I had not conducted a research project before. Some of my peers who had done a minor thesis found it more straightforward when they conducted projects at the PhD level. Furthermore, they had fewer difficulties identifying and finding a research topic because they had developed their minor theses prior to undertaking a PhD. I finally overcame the first stage of research, even though it was an extremely difficult period.
As officially required by the Faculty of Education when undertaking a EdD course, I had to finish and pass two 15,000 word essays in the first two years. Because I wanted to finish my course within three years instead of four, I asked my supervisor for permission to finish two essays in the first year, to which she agreed. As suggested by the supervisor, I wrote the first essay as a literature review, and the second one as a methodology chapter. However, she pointed out that those two essays would not be exact replicas of the two chapters included in the thesis. This time I found writing the essay a little easier as I had already completed a 10,000 word essay.

Completing the first essay was quite straightforward, but I was struggling with the second one that related to methodology. I was not knowledgeable about methodology in research. I tried to find documents related to methodology and research methodology in education, and then I decided that I would like to use a mixed method in my research and brought that idea to my supervisor. She asked me why I wanted to use a mixed method, however my answer did not satisfy her. I thought using both methods would provide my thesis with stronger data. However, after several discussions with my supervisor, we both agreed that the aim of my study was to look at the transition of Vietnamese students from a passive learning context to a more independent learning context. Hence, experiences, perceptions and understandings of participants about the issue were crucial. Based on the above, my supervisor and I both agreed that qualitative data collection would be most suited to my project. Finally I completed both of the essays and successfully passed.

As with my previous studies, I found that the higher the level of my study, the more difficult and complex it became. After finishing each assignment, I thought that I had become much more capable in learning and research, and it would be easier. However, after completing each level and each stage, I found that new difficulties and challenges often arose. After experiencing those difficulties at each stage, I learned a lot of useful lessons, and my knowledge of research was also basically underpinned and consolidated. I finally recognized my strengths and weaknesses in different areas. Based on these experiences, I found that I could adjust my learning approaches as well as my learning behavior.
My learning journey then moved to another stage, and that was the research proposal preparation. The research proposal presentation was one of the key stages in undertaking a thesis at the EdD level. I was aware that if I did not pass the presentation, I would not be eligible to continue my course. Also I understood that the research proposal presentation would provide the opportunity to gain useful comments from the academic panel, staff and my peers.

There were quite a lot of steps to prepare before presenting the research proposal. Following guidance from my supervisor, I applied for ethics approval. This was a new experience for me because I was unaware it was a necessity. I went to the website of the University and read the information related to ethical issues. It outlined that in Australian Educational Institutions, before conducting any experiments on humans or animals, researchers have to apply for Ethics approval in which researchers need to clarify compulsory procedures such as consent forms, information sheets, and processes of gathering data or data stores. After three weeks my application was approved by the Ethics Committee with minor revisions. When receiving final approval, I started to prepare power point slides for my proposal presentation.

I had mixed feelings during the presentation: nervous, worried, and confident. I felt very nervous at the beginning, and forgot most of the points that I intended to present. At that time, I remembered my supervisor advising me to just speak slowly, look at the audience and follow the key notes from the power point. I did exactly as advised, and fortunately the more I talked, the more confident I became. At the end, I still did not adequately and properly answer some questions from the audience, but I successfully passed the research proposal presentation. This result entitled me to continue my project.

It may not be an appropriate time to say that I had considerably improved in my research progress, but undoubtedly the research proposal presentation provided me with invaluable experience. I understood more about procedures and steps in conducting a research project at the EdD level; something that did not happen in my country of origin. Additionally, the compulsory requirement of Ethics approval gave me a greater awareness of the responsibility when gathering data from the population. Through the presentation, I felt
more confident and capable when presenting a study in front of an audience. Before this time, I had not thought that I was competent and confident enough to defend my study in front of an academic panel. From the presentation I received lots of useful feedback from both the academic panel and my peers. Looking at the responses of the feedback, I realized good points and also weak areas of my study, which I had not yet recognized. More importantly, with the recognition of successful completion of the research proposal, it marked a new level of success which I had achieved in my learning journey. Further to this point, it was more likely that I was capable of conducting a study at a higher level, which I had always doubted of myself.

To maintain the above passion and motivation in my research, I regularly attended research meetings that were organized monthly. To be frank, in the first few meetings, I felt bored and lacked interest in the discussions. Most of the people in the meetings were experienced researchers, and the way they discussed research was complicated and sophisticated. I found it very hard to follow their points, and most of the time in these meetings I kept quiet and contributed little. I took this concern to my supervisor, who encouraged me to keep attending, as I would soon find it useful. Gradually my attitude towards the research meetings became more positive, and I indeed found the activity useful. When people asked me to talk about the difficulties I experienced in doing research, I gladly contributed. Through discussions my colleagues shared some very good suggestions and offered additional advice. As many of the people in the meetings were lecturers, they understood the difficulties and challenges I was facing.

Another experience I gained in doing research was the process of data collection. It was the first time I had officially collected data for research purposes by the interview method. Hence, the first interview was not conducted properly because I did not ask enough in-depth questions of the participants. As a result my supervisor advised that the gathered data was not strong enough. Based on her advice, in order to get deeper and richer information, I paid more attention in expanding the questions based on the answers of the participants.

Although I had made a lot of improvement there were still some difficulties in the way I conducted my study. The challenges came from different issues such as data coding, data
analyzing and data interpretation. My supervisor told me that making meaning from the
data was one of the most difficult parts of the PhD thesis. My peers who were also doing
PhDs, shared those difficulties with me, and we all believed that:

For our research we are insiders, so we understand deeply and intimately our studies, and
we are very confident in discussing about that area. However, the point is, we have to
convince readers who are outsiders, especially the examiners, to understand our studies by
reading a few thousand words through data analysis. Through our research, we need to
clarify to the readers the logicality, possibility, significance and contribution of our theses.

While undertaking research study there was an unforgettable moment happening in my
family life: our baby was born, and his presence considerably impacted on my study. In the
first few months our baby kept me very busy. I had to do all of the housework and had no
time for research. At that time, I negatively thought that it was not the right time to have a
baby as I was busy doing my study, and I could not focus on my research. However,
overcoming those early stages, I was more excited whenever I heard the baby’s cry. It no
longer disturbed me, in fact it gave me more motivation, passion and responsibility in the
area of family and study. Some days I stayed in the office and recalled the moment of
witnessing our baby’s birth. That was an incredible time in my life. My feelings went from
worry and nervousness to happiness, when cuddling my little baby. Day by day I became
deeply and profoundly aware that from now on my studying achievements were not only
for my wife and me, but also for our baby a new member of the family. After that my
feelings shifted from worrying to being happy, I was more motivated and passionate in
undertaking my research. The reason for that shift was largely influenced by the theory
behind holistic education which I had learned from my supervisor, Dr Peta Heywood. The
theory briefly maintains that: Education is not simply about academic teaching and
learning. Education should also be tightly connected to the environment, community, and
especially in taking care of the human soul.

Drawing on the theories discussed in the literature review, my learning progress mostly
reflected characteristics from those theories, but it did not happen in a linear way as the
theories suggest. Instead, it developed erratically. Following the theoretical framework, an
autonomous learner was supposed to actively seek and create learning plans. They are able to effectively handle challenges in learning and be able to make decisions. The autonomous learners, according to the theorist are supposed to be willing to cooperate with teachers and peers. They are also expected to learn responsibly and productively use learning resources.

The above points were all revealed in my learning development but to differing degrees. Far too often, I still expected guidance and advice from my supervisor, instead of making an effort myself. Overall, through this stage, I had considerably improved in learning and in particular I was beginning to know how to conduct research. Noticeably I had successfully completed two major tasks: two big essays and a research proposal presentation.

At this stage, it would be the right time to say that my learning achievement had reached a higher level. As mentioned in the literature review, and based on the theory of Grow (1991) in which she constructs a process of becoming an independent learner, I rank myself at this stage as an autonomous learner. In considering the above developments my salient points were effectively seeking possible solutions to cope with difficulties in learning; I was able to learn and improve myself through facing challenges in learning; I had been active and confident to learn well, even under pressure and productively cooperating with the supervisors and peers.

My experiences of education in both the Vietnamese and Australian environment show me that I have learnt the following from Australian education:

- Close teacher-student relationship.

This enhances effectiveness and productivity of both teaching and learning. Taking this into account, there are more interactions and communication between teachers and students. Specifically students feel more confident when communicating with teachers. As a result the comfortable relationship between teachers and students provides more perspectives that may productively strengthen the effectiveness of teaching and learning.
• The casual and informal environment in class.

This characteristic also strengthens the above advantage. Greater flexibility in the classroom reduces stress when receiving heavy academic knowledge from lecturers. In other words, when both students and teachers feel more comfortable and motivated in lectures, the productivity of teaching and learning is enhanced.

• The helpful assistance from lecturers.

Support and assistance from teachers is one of the most significant advantages to students, particularly in relation to international students. When facing difficulties in learning, the timely help from teachers is very necessary. Their suggestions and advice are invaluable in providing possible solutions to handle challenges that can occur in learning.

• Collaboration among students.

This is extremely important to students’ learning. Through learning and helping each other, students have a chance to realize their weaknesses and also strengths that may be neglected if students work in isolation. Additionally, through group work, students have an opportunity to gain practical and pragmatic experiences which may not be received from lectures.

• The teaching approach: student-centered

As previously elaborated, this is one of the most salient characteristics of higher education in Australia, and highlights the weakness of tertiary education in Vietnam. Instead of paying more attention to teaching, the student-centered approach focuses more on students’ learning. Students gain considerable advantages from this type of approach, because they have opportunities to maximize their aptitude while also consolidating, sharing and learning from others.
• Independent and creative learning.

Learning in a supportive environment students are gaining independence and creativity in their learning. These characteristics are crucial for students in general, and university students in particular. Being independent and creative in learning not only positively impacts on students’ learning achievements, but also benefits graduates in the workplace.

• The effectiveness and efficiency in applying theories to practice

This feature shows that education in Australia often reflects and follows the development of society. The close connection between classroom and society equips students with up to date knowledge and skills in order to help prepare them for the workplace. Graduates are not lagging behind economic transformation.

In conjunction with the above developments and stages, I acknowledge that I have had a variety of learning experiences since coming to Australia in 2005 to study. It has been a rewarding, interesting, challenging, exciting, frustrating, enlightening and engaging journey, and to have had this period working with teachers, supervisors and peers has been very meaningful.

In undertaking this thesis, I have realized my development in terms of independent, creative and responsible learning. I had partly achieved these points previously when I enrolled in the Masters Course, but at that time I was not able to identify it. The crucial point I have gained is my responsibility in learning. I am aware of how and what I am learning, and more importantly I have the freedom to learn. In regards to my research study in analyzing data I now realize that the gathered data was not detailed enough to describe or to make infallible statements. If I had a chance to re-do my study, and to design questions and conduct interviews again, the data for my thesis would be stronger, deeper and more inclusive. My own educational journey is not merely a description, but it will be considered as one part of the thesis data, as it also strengthened my intention in choosing and conducting my project.

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Chapter Four
The above results, my own experiences included will be further analysed in relation to the theoretical framework in the following chapter.
This chapter analyses the results integrated from three rounds of interviews in relation to the theoretical framework adapted from Warring (2009).

1. Round 1: dependent learner

In the first round, the data mostly followed the theoretical framework, but sometimes, unlike Warring’s theoretical model, it happened erratically, systematically and iteratively. In Warring’s (2009) model the dependent learners were described as being unwilling, unable, and lacking confidence in doing and learning alone. They could not solve problems or make decisions by themselves. They were described as irresponsible learners in their learning, and they believed that teachers were mainly responsible for their learning. Theoretically, in this stage, the characteristics of the learners were briefly illustrated as: passive, negative, dependent and irresponsible in learning.

In the first round of data collection overall, most of the data fitted with the theories. However, the learning process did not consistently happen for each individual participant. According to the participants’ statements, they were passive and dependent at universities in Vietnam, but their learning behavior and attitude positively changed when they first came to Australia to study. Six of the eight participants showed passiveness in some areas whilst exposing their capabilities in other areas. Regarding willingness and initiative in learning, at universities in Vietnam, they had been struggling. They mostly waited and expected the teachers to set up their learning approaches rather than doing it themselves. Additionally, those students learnt obediently rather than enthusiastically. They supposed that the most important thing in their learning was to pass every exam and assignment, and they thought that the higher the score the better. They were not fully aware of the learning quality.
Moreover, those students were less capable in seeking and using learning resources and less motivated in group activities. They were satisfied with information from handouts which were provided by teachers. They were less motivated in seeking information or supporting documents outside textbooks and lectures. In addition these respondents were also reluctant to participate in classroom activities. Whenever participating in learning activities such as group discussions or group work they were not confident and were less interested. Sometimes, in class, even when they understood the issues being discussed, they did not dare say aloud what they were thinking. The main reason for not presenting their own opinions in front of others was that they thought if they said something wrong, other people would laugh at them. They felt comfortable accepting other people’s ideas especially from teachers rather than actively contributing their own opinions. It is more likely that those characteristics arose from a collectivist context like in Vietnam where people often appreciate public ideas rather than those of an individual.

In spite of the above-mentioned negative learning characteristics, six of the eight respondents revealed their academic ability to some degree when they were in first semester at one Australian university. They had been aware of problems that occurred during learning, and initially found possible solutions to handle these. With the teacher’s suggestions and advice, those students became more confident to make decisions in some situations. In accordance with the theoretical model, these characteristics were presumed to be exhibited in the higher level (engaged learner). Hence, this can be seen as one of the mismatches between the theoretical framework and data findings.

Remarkably, in this round of interviews, there were two of eight respondents whose learning progress was more developed than the others. Despite still relying on and expecting the teachers’ guidance to a certain degree both of the students showed motivation in taking responsibility for their learning. They were also quite competent and confident in handling difficulties in learning. It is more likely that at the beginning, while most of other students were still struggling in adapting with a new educational environment, these two students had efficiently and quickly adapted. They initially gained some achievement in their study and nearly reached the level of engaged learner.
Through this stage, and based on characteristics from statements amongst the cohort of students, it can be stated that all of the students were still at the level of dependent learners, but potentially moving forwards. As noted earlier, all of the participants had experienced their education for a long time in Vietnam before coming to Australia to study. In particular they had all successfully finished tertiary studies in Vietnam. No doubt the traditional and stereotypical educational habits were still embedded in their thoughts. In other respects, significant progress made by the cohort of students, suggests that they had initially adapted to a new culture and educational environment.

One of the key findings in the first round of interviews was that Vietnamese students were not permanently passive and dependent learners. It is revealed that they are able to learn independently and responsibly if they are part of a supportive educational environment as occurs in Australia. Additionally, another acknowledgement from the interviews was that when Vietnamese students were required to shift to a new cultural and educational environment, they were able to productively adapt.

In reflecting on my own experiences (as characterized in chapter 4) when first undertaking study in Australia, I realize that I was even more dependent than the participants in some areas. In class I lacked confidence and motivation when undertaking group work, and avoided commenting in class discussions for fear people would laugh at me – should I give the wrong answer. I only presented something if I knew it very well, and felt anxious if the teacher invited further input from me. The above negative behavior in the learning of Vietnamese students, including myself, generally reflected traditional habits from the country of origin. At universities in Vietnam we occasionally understood the lectures quite well, and we also did not accept everything that the teacher said. However, instead of expressing our own opinions openly and honestly, we kept them to ourselves or only shared them amongst our peers.

2. Round 2: engaged learner

In Warring’s learning model, the characteristics of the ‘engaged learner’ were identified as being more confident and motivated in making an effort, but still relied on the teacher’s
guidance. As characterized by Warring, at this level, the learner was still unwilling and unable to learn independently. Theoretically, the learner believed that the teacher and student shared responsibility for learning. At the stage of engaged learner, students still relied on the teacher’s suggestions when making decisions or coping with difficulties in learning. In short, at this stage, the engaged learners had gained a little autonomy in their learning. They were all seen to be more active and confident in carrying out learning tasks. However, the assistance and guidance of teachers were still crucially needed.

As drawn from the data, half of the participants experiences fitted the theoretical model, and half of the data did not match very well with the theoretical characteristics of the engaged learner. In Warring’s model, there was consistency in the progress of the learner in every learning area. Unlike the theory, the data showed that the learning development of the learner happened inconsistently and erratically. A learner may be independent in one area but dependent in another. Additionally, they were temporarily passive in one subject but active in other subjects. Moreover, there were characteristics which according to the theoretical framework, were not assumed to be present at this stage. For instance, some students showed a high level of autonomy in learning, and based on their statements, they performed quite well. In contrast, there were also some students who still exhibited features which were characteristic of dependent learner.

As mentioned above, half of the data from participants fitted quite well with the theory. According to the statements of the participants, they were motivated and capable of setting goals for learning. For instance based on the teacher’s advice, they were able to effectively apply theories from the lectures into tutorial classes. Additionally, when facing problems in learning, those students initially found different ways to overcome problems instead of merely expecting the teacher’s solutions as before. For example, whenever facing challenges in learning, they often made appointments to see teachers or asked for help from peers. Importantly, these students began to realize that working in teams was far more effective than working in isolation. Furthermore, it was revealed that some of the respondents exhibited some learning characteristics that are attributed to the higher stage (in accordance with the learning theory). For instance, the students demonstrated a willingness and competence in seeking and utilising learning resources. They were not only
motivated in grasping physical sources such as books, articles or information technology, but also actively sought help from human sources such as teachers or tutors.

Bearing in mind my own experiences, these students were much more interactive, confident and participatory than I was. As mentioned in chapter six, even in the last semester of my Masters course, I still felt to a certain extent uncomfortable calling Australian teachers by their first name, instead of “thua thay/co” (dear teacher) or professionally addressing them by their title. I was very reluctant to communicate with local students or teachers, and preferred teachers to place me with fellow Vietnamese students when involved in group discussions. This was also the case when facing challenges in learning. I preferred to discuss in order to find out solutions among a cohort of Vietnamese students rather than discussing with the teacher or other international students.

In relation to the other half of the respondents, although some progress had been made, they still showed negative characteristics in learning. They were not active in choosing and setting up their own learning approaches. In addition to this, their belief and responsibility in learning deteriorated in comparison to their previous testimonies. Although these students had initially showed some responsibility for their learning prior to this interview, at this present, they still believed that teachers and parents were mostly responsible for their learning. Sometimes, when facing difficulties in learning, instead of trying to find out possible solutions they were pessimistic and passive, and waited for assistance from teachers or peers. According to the theoretical model, these above characteristics were attributed to the level of dependent learner. In reflecting on my own personal situation, unlike the above students, I was highly aware of my responsibility in learning. At that time, I believed that whether my learning achievement was good or not, it mostly depended on my motivation and ability to learn. When I first came to Australia to study I was consciously aware that I was the main person to take responsibility for my learning.

Overall, through this stage, each of the eight participants had made progress in their learning to differing degrees. Four of the eight participants had reached the level of engaged learner, while another four located between two levels (dependent learner and
engaged learner). It is worth noting that most of the students had shown similar
development in the first semester (round 1 of the interviews), but in the second semester
(round 2), they developed unpredictably and inconsistently. In reflecting on the theoretical
model, during the first round, most of the data fitted with the theory. However, in the
second round there was a significant mismatch between theories and data.

3. Round 3: potential of becoming autonomous learners

Similar to the second round, in the third round of interviews, all the participants moved
forward but at different levels, and the data did not follow exactly with the theoretical
framework. In the theoretical learning model, Warring characterized self-directed learners
as excellent achievers in learning. They were all able to set their own learning goals and
make decisions by themselves instead of relying on the teachers. This theory suggests
students are supposed to take responsibility for their learning, with less guidance or support
from their teachers. As characterized by Hersey and Blanchard (cited in Warring, 2009)
there were no weak points appearing in the level of self-directed learning. The learners in
this level, according to theory, were all assumed to be independent, interactive, creative
and participatory.

Based on the data, until the third semester at the university, only three of the eight
respondents had almost reached the level of autonomous learner. These students had shown
a considerable development in their learning by becoming more capable and confident in
problem solving. For example, initially when facing difficulties in learning, these students
had solely depended on the teacher’s advice. However by this stage in their learning
development, they took some initiative by preparing questions in advance to discuss when
meeting up with their teacher.

Additionally, the three students were also quite competent in applying theories in lectures
to discussions in tutorial class. In lectures they took notes and then brought them to tutorial
classes for discussions. In the interviews, they were confident in stating that sometimes
they found tutorials more useful and interesting than the lectures, but they still regarded the
lectures as highly valuable. They found that learning from and sharing information with
peers was a very effective method of learning. In accordance with the respondents’
statements, they had learnt a lot from peers who had prior work experience before studying.
In an important sense, at universities, in some subjects, if students had practical experience,
they found it easier to do the learning tasks. Based on the understandings of the three
respondents, discussing and sharing information with students who had practical
experience was one of the most productive ways of learning. Following the theoretical
model, those learning characteristics of the three respondents fitted quite well.

As noted above, in the third round interviews, five of the eight participants were still in
between the two levels: engaged learner and autonomous learner. Although a lot of
improvement and effort had been made, those five students still showed limitations to
certain degrees. In group discussions, they were not always willing to share and present
their own opinions with others even though they thought that group work was necessary
and useful to their learning. Moreover, when receiving results which were not as good as
they expected, those students felt this was the teacher’s responsibility. In one positive sense
these students were quite capable of seeking and using learning resources. Even though this
was still partly based on information from handouts provided by lecturers, they gathered
information for assignments and exams from various sources such as the internet, articles,
or books. In brief, it seems that the above learning features of the five participants did not
entirely follow the characteristics of the theoretical model.

4. Erratic development in the process of becoming autonomous learners

Through the above discussion, while it can be summed up that although a whole cohort of
Vietnamese students (eight participants) moved progressively forward during the three
semesters (equivalent with three rounds of interviews) not all of the progress and regress
happened in exactly the same manner. It is illustrated that the learning characteristics in the
data mismatched the characteristics of the theoretical model. The mismatches can be seen
in both aspects of the overall picture and in each individual. Overall, the progress of the
cohort through three rounds of interviews did not follow exactly step by step as indicated in
the theoretical model. In round 1 (dependent leaner), there were two respondents (Chi, Tan)
who almost reached the level of engaged learner, who could possibly reach higher levels
ahead. Nevertheless, in round 2 and especially round 3 of the interviews, the above respondents moved very slowly, and they were only half way to becoming autonomous learners (see figure 1). In contrast, three other participants (Hang, Cao, and Long) started slowly at the beginning, but then they all progressed rapidly. In the final round, they almost reached the level of autonomous learner. As for the other three students (Cuong, Nguyen and Hung) in the early stages of their learning none of them were very productive. However, they progressed consistently to advance beyond the level of engaged learner, towards autonomous learners by round 3. This would suggest they have the potential to become autonomous learner in the near future.

As shown in the bar chart (Figure 1), after three rounds of interviews, which supposed to be equivalent with three learning developmental phases of students, three of the eight participants had nearly reached the level of autonomous learner, compared to the other five respondents who were only half way to becoming autonomous learners. One of the reasons for this dissimilarity among a cohort of Vietnamese students regarding their learning development would have arisen from the students’ background in the country of origin. In Vietnam, the three students who achieved higher learning performance were from the two biggest cities where the living and learning conditions are much more supportive than in other areas. It is more likely that students coming from a better social, economic and educational background would be more able than others to develop their learning skills. In addition, when required to shift to another learning environment, they would find it quicker and easier to adapt. In contrast, the five other students were all from provincial cities and rural areas where the supporting learning conditions egregiously lag behind those from urban areas. Therefore, certainly when shifting to a new cultural and educational environment, they were less adaptable than the others.

As mentioned several times, the data in this project did not fit very well with the theoretical framework adapted from Warring (2009), and that mismatch could be due to a number of reasons. Firstly, the model is only an abstract concept, and it expects and assumes something should happen like that in practice. In other words, perhaps, the theoretical model is hierarchical, linear and compulsive as it inaccurately portrays the practice. Second, people in general and the learner in particular may not all progress and regress in
exactly the same manner. In practice not everybody does things in the same way, and students themselves are no exceptions. A student may be autonomous in one subject but perhaps temporarily dependent in other areas (Grow, 1991; Ariizumi, 2003). There is an English saying that “Reality is the murder of a beautiful theory by a gang of ugly facts” (Robert Glass). This saying appears to be true in the matter of the variance between data of this study and theories.

It is interesting that when writing the literature review chapter, I believed that Warring’s learning model was a pragmatic model which I expected would fit the data in my study. Hence, I adapted the learning model as a theoretical framework in my thesis. Furthermore, I also used that model as the basis to design the questions for the interviews with an expectation that my data would fit the theory. Ultimately, as affirmed earlier, the data of my study did not follow well with the theoretical model. More importantly, during data gathering, coding and analyzing, I found that, the mismatch is one of the most interesting findings of my study (this aspect will be further elaborated in the final chapter).

My study only focused on Vietnamese students learning overseas where the educational environment is supportive to the learner, while the issue of how Vietnamese students learn autonomously in domestic institutions has not yet been addressed. This can be seen as a limitation of this study. In general this concern is less likely to be adequately and sufficiently addressed overnight as it relates to a whole governmental system. It is obvious that education cannot make changes of this magnitude by itself as it closely connects with other factors such as culture, politics and economics. Thus, Vietnamese educators and learners realize that autonomous learning is necessary, but they would perhaps find it challenging to take actions immediately.

5. Review

The discussion presented in this chapter further analyzed the research findings reported in Chapter Six. On reflection of three rounds of interviews and based on the theoretical framework, the learning progress of participants consists of three dimensions, namely Dependent learner, Engaged learner, and Potential of becoming autonomous learner.
of the discussion in this chapter was the relationship between data and the theoretical framework.

The study shows that all of the participants developed their learning capacity, but unlike the theoretical framework, their progress happened unstably and erratically. A summary of the study with key contributions and recommendations is presented in the final chapter.
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Autonomous learning of Vietnamese students overseas

The study identified that even coming from a traditional educational context, Vietnamese students still can learn autonomously and responsibly if their learning is well facilitated and supported, as in Australia. This finding is crucial evidence in reviewing some previous negative statements about Vietnamese students. Many previous studies regarding Vietnamese students’ learning often perceives them as passive and dependent learners. Most of the scholars often see the temporary stereotypical characteristics of Vietnamese students in learning rather than actually and intrinsically characterizing them in a positive way. Moreover, there has been a dearth of research following the learning process of Vietnamese students. Another significant aspect of my study is that the learning process of Vietnamese students and probably students in general, does not happen consistently, stably, and lineally as identified in theories. Instead, it happens erratically and unpredictably.

The process of Vietnamese students becoming autonomous learners when they study overseas is presented in the figure on the following page.
The above learning model was constructed from analysed data and also from my own learning experiences since studying abroad. It reveals a combination of positive learning characteristics (highlighted in blue) and negative learning characteristics (highlighted in grey) that occurred at each stage of learner development. In Stage 1 (dependent learner), although most of the students were dependent, passive learners, to some extent they still exhibited some positive features in their learning. In the higher stages (engaged learner and autonomous learner) there was an increase in positive characteristics that appeared in the students' learning, although some negative characteristics still exist. It is evident that in the higher stages, there were more positive learning characteristics exhibited than negative ones.

This model is based on empirical data of a cohort of Vietnamese students, and is therefore more likely to reflect practice. In practice, students’ learning is not always consistent and linear. Instead it may happen inconsistently and erratically. They may be dependent in some study areas, but more independent in others. Likewise students might learn well at the
beginning of their course but they may not be able to do so after that. Unlike Warring’s theory (2009) that describes the learning process of students as occurring in a linear way, the data in my thesis reveals that the learning process can happen erratically.

This study initially demonstrates the possibility of becoming autonomous learners when they study abroad, while the issue of how Vietnamese students can learn autonomously in domestic institutions still remains. Based on the learning experiences of the cohort of Vietnamese students and associated research, it reveals that it is not easy to learn autonomously if there are constraints and restraints placed on the students’ learning progress.

2. Constraints on Vietnamese students in becoming autonomous learners in domestic institutions.

Undertaking research to identify the development of autonomous learning in Vietnamese students when studying overseas has highlighted a number of deficits in the Vietnamese tertiary education system which deserve mention here. Taking into account Vietnamese cultural and socio-economic characteristics, my own educational experiences, and the results of this study in identifying those issues, the following section looks at the constraints inhibiting Vietnamese students from becoming autonomous learners, and presents some recommendations that may bring about positive change. (See figure 3 in the next page)
As already identified in the earlier chapters, autonomous learning requires an enabling environment where multiple perspectives are encouraged. This particular concept does not currently exist in the educational environment in Vietnam, and hence fails to support students to learn autonomously. There are huge factors that have directly or indirectly inhibited students’ learning (as described in Figure 3). These include socio-cultural aspects, government and educational legislation, teachers’ pedagogy, current technology, and at the top of this list is economic hardship. There is no doubt that the power of the economy affects every single area of society, including education. In an important sense, it is unreasonable to compare the quality of education in Vietnam where the GDP per capita is 1,362 (US$) (International Monetary Fund (2011 estimate) with a country such as Australia where the GDP per capita is ranked 5th in the world: 66,984 (US$) (International Monetary Fund (2011 estimate). There is a saying in Vietnam that “Cái khó bó cái khôn” (poverty hinders the application of intelligence). Apparently economic difficulties considerably handicap the progress of Vietnamese education in general, and students’ learning in
particular. In addition, the deep influence of socio-cultural aspects on education, particularly Confucian ideology, generally dictates how students should learn, and does not encourage autonomous learning. As examined in the literature review chapter, key characteristics required to become an autonomous learner include independence, responsibility, critical thinking, and decision-making. However, those aspects may seem very out of place in the Vietnamese educational environment.

3. Recommendations

In this section I propose some recommendations based on my own learning experiences, findings from the literature review and analysis of the data collected. The suggestions put forward are not aimed at bringing about major reforms in governmental policies, the education system or curriculum design, as this is less likely to occur in Vietnam. Instead, in a minor scope of the study, I am presenting implications for tertiary students and teachers in some areas in which they are more likely to take action to support autonomous learning, and which may not significantly affect a whole institutional system.

3.1 For Vietnamese students

As already identified in the earlier chapters, it is more likely that Vietnamese students are able to learn autonomously when they study overseas, where they may not be able to do so in domestic institutions because of insufficient support. As shown in the data analysis, the main reason Vietnamese students go overseas to study is that they desire to learn in a more supportive educational environment, which current domestic universities are not able to provide. It is apparent that when students are sufficiently supported and facilitated in their learning, they learn more effectively. Unfortunately, only a small number of students can afford to study abroad, while the majority of Vietnamese students have to study in their homeland. To learn more productively these students should take action themselves to change their learning styles, rather than merely waiting for the domestic system to change.

One of the key points is that students need to learn responsibly and independently as it is seriously needed for tertiary students. As documented previously, common thinking
Amongst Vietnamese students is that they go to school or university to gain knowledge from teachers, and teachers and parents are mainly responsible for student learning. Additionally, students often learn purposely to pass exams to achieve a high mark, without actually gaining in-depth learning. They are of the belief that attaining high marks indicates that they are good learners. Students should not totally rely on learning this way, because they become more passive in learning and more dependent on teachers. Particularly, if merely depending on and following teachers and parents, they would find it difficult to learn independently, responsibly and effectively if they are required to do so. Students need to be aware that high marks in exams and tests do not always mean that they are excellent learners. Those high marks may give the appearance of excellence while actually compromising student learning. This could be detrimental to students after leaving university when they enter the workplace. Obviously part of the problem arises from a lack of responsibility and independence in learning at universities where students mostly rely on the teacher as most trusted source of knowledge rather than actively and independently seek different ways of learning.

Additionally students need to be aware that the crucial purpose of their learning is to gain knowledge for the workplace, rather than solely focusing on attaining high results for their degree. Students should not place their learning responsibility on teachers or parents alone. They should be made aware that knowledge received from teachers only contributes to part of their learning. Littlewood (1999) draws attention to the reality that teachers cannot accompany students throughout their lives, a factor that usually impacts on students when they leave university. Hong Hanh (2011) wrote an article about the quality of university graduates in Vietnam and cited comments from a number of well-known Vietnamese educators and researchers regarding the reality of Vietnamese university graduates. One of the main points in the article was the concern that although graduating from top universities in Vietnam and holding a ‘bang do’ (excellent degree), new graduates were still unsuccessful in securing employment during their probationary period in the workplace.

However, in an important sense, learners should not totally ignore achieving high marks. In both Vietnam and in Australia, marks do matter. They matter in getting a course at universities. It is understandable in a highly competitive country like Vietnam where many
more students are vying for places at universities, that getting high marks is important. Thus, getting high marks and developing to be an autonomous learner could and should occur concurrently. In fact being an autonomous learner would help the individual learn better and hence get better marks.

3.2 For Vietnamese university teachers

It is challenging for teachers at universities in Vietnam to change their teaching styles, due to teaching traditions, and expectations that they adhere to the government curriculum. However, in some areas and to a certain degree, they could renew their teaching approaches to support students to learn autonomously. As discussed in the literature review chapter, to help students learn more productively, the role of teacher cannot be absent, especially in a Vietnamese context where the impacts of teachers are still important on student’s learning. But in an attempt, teachers may need to move away from authoritarian practices to the role of facilitator of student learning.

One thing teachers can do is get to know their students’ learning styles in order to assist students in improving their learning productivity. The students who attend universities in Vietnam usually come from different areas such as the city/suburbs, rural and even remote areas, and often bring with them their own cultural and educational characteristics from different ethnic groups. Therefore it is important that teachers avoid simply transmitting one-way knowledge in the classroom, without considering their student’s personal characteristics. Teachers need to understand more about their students in order to stimulate their students' learning motivation (Nguyen, 2012). For instance, according to participants’ statements and my own academic experiences, during question time in lectures, teachers often only called on those students who put their hand up, while the rest of the class rarely had an opportunity to contribute their own opinions. It is worth noting that the students who rarely contributed to the discussions in the class were generally from rural areas, and they were usually shy and lacked confidence when presenting in front of a crowd, even when they knew the answer. In this situation teachers should pay more attention to these students, and encourage them to engage in discussions. Teachers may not get positive feedback initially, but at least these students may gain more confidence in speaking in front
of class. In this way students receive support not only from teachers but also from their peers. Additionally, by using this approach, teachers assist students in improving their critical thinking, confidence and cooperative learning, which are essential skills in autonomous learning.

Another thing that Vietnamese teachers could implement is the fostering of a holistic teaching-learning environment in the classroom. According to holistic educators, in a holistic educational environment, teachers take care of the students as a ‘whole’ by catering to the student’s mental, spiritual and emotional growth, as well as academic development. Holistic theory was developed by Miller (1998) and reflects aspects of Western culture which may be at odds with the Vietnamese educational tradition. However, Vietnamese teachers could implement some aspects of holistic education to a certain degree. For example, in the final lecture of the day, both teachers and students often feel tired and less interested in participating in teaching and learning activities. Nevertheless, to meet the requirements of lesson plans and curriculum, teachers have to try to transmit information to students. Likewise, students also have to digest that information even though they really do not want to. Hence, this rigidity is more likely to be counter-productive to both teaching and learning activities. Attending these lectures may become a burden for both teachers and students. To reduce that stress, the flexibility of teachers in teaching is crucial. For example, teachers holding lectures at the end of the day should avoid overloading students with academic jargon and include more examples and their own personal experiences in relation to the content of the lecture. This way, teachers can effectively involve students in teaching-learning activities and make the lectures far more interesting. More importantly, students should feel more passionate and motivated in their learning.

There is a Chinese proverb that states, “better to light one candle than to curse the darkness”. This saying can be understood as meaning it is better to do something about a problem than just complain about it. Further, a candle is a small answer to a large problem, but it is still a worthy step in the right direction, rather than just bemoaning the problem (of darkness). This proverb appears to be appropriate to Vietnamese teachers. Instead of merely waiting for major changes in education, they should do something to assist students to learn effectively and productively. If one teacher does it well, it means that he or she has
lit one ‘candle’, and the situation would be much better improved if there were hundreds and thousands of candles lit, and therefore the ‘darkness’ would be dispelled.

4. Limitations

As intended at the beginning of this study, I expected to create my own model of autonomous learning for Vietnamese students, but it has not yet occurred. It is evident that to learn autonomously, the endeavour of students is not enough, as it needs significant support from other factors. In a minor sense, autonomous learning involves the assistance and availability of both human and physical resources such as teachers, tutors and peers, as well as curriculum and educational policy. To a broader extent, the issue as to whether or not students are able to learn autonomously is more closely linked to socio, cultural, political and economic factors. Whereas in Vietnam, a developing country in which there are other areas beside education that also need attention, the above factors have not been adequately and sufficiently supported for autonomous learning yet to be developed.

Additionally my study is not generalised with regards to all Vietnamese students studying overseas as it was conducted only on a select group of Vietnamese students who undertook their study in one Australian university. The findings from this project are more likely to be applicable to Vietnamese students studying abroad where the educational environment enables students to learn autonomously. The learning model of domestic Vietnamese students has not yet been created and this would be a valuable topic for future research.

5. Conclusion

As discussed, education is always closely and tightly linked with cultural, socio-economic and political factors. Whereas, in Vietnam, there are still constraints and difficulties occurring in every area, and education is no exception. Hence, the idea of enormous remodelling of the Vietnamese educational system in general, and an immediate implementation of autonomous learning at higher education are less likely to be practical. Instead, changes need to be implemented step by step. Currently, the Vietnamese government is making an effort to strengthen the country in every area including education.

Chapter Six
As indicated in the introduction, educational agendas and new policies have been implemented in recent times, with changes in teaching and learning at universities a number one priority. More importantly, referring to the result of this study and my own experiences, it is clear that Vietnamese students are able to learn autonomously in Western educational environments, and that they have the potential to do so in Vietnam if they are more adequately and sufficiently supported.
REFERENCES


Litlle, D. (2000). We're all in it together: exploring the interdependence of teacher and learner autonomy. *All Together Now, Papers from the 7th Nordic Conference and Workshop on Autonomous Language Learning, 45-56.*


APENDIX 1:

Information Sheet, Consent Form and questionnaires of interviews.
Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: Autonomous Learning at higher education in Vietnam.

Researcher: Cao Thanh Nguyen  
EdD student, Education Faculty La Trobe University  
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Email: cao.nguyen@latrobe.edu.au

Supervisors  
1. Dr Peta Heywood, lecturer of Education Faculty La Trobe University  
Phone: 0394792641  
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2. Dr Tricia McCann, lecturer of Education Faculty La Trobe University  
Phone: 0394792638  
Email: p.mccann@latrobe.edu.au

Dear

As part of my EdD research I wish to find out the experience of students in terms of your learning experiences as higher education students in Vietnam and at La Trobe University. The people I am inviting to participate in this research are all university students coming from Vietnam, and they are undertaking their study at La Trobe University.

Would you be willing to take part in this study which will involve a 30-45 minute interview?

If you agree to participate, I will make an appointment to meet with you, at a time and place convenient to you, about your experiences of studying at university in Vietnam and at La Trobe. I will record our discussion on audio cassette. The transcripts of the interviews of the project will be provided to you. If you wish to read the completed thesis, that can be arranged.

The findings of the project will be included in my thesis and may also be reported at conferences or included in an article or book for publication, either in print or electronic form. The findings may also be forwarded to relevant or interested organisations.
Confidentiality will be maintained by using pseudonyms for participants in both the transcripts of the interviews and the thesis. I will use secure storage for the data and password protection on my computer. The interview data will be de-identified for possible use in another project.

Your participation in the project is voluntary. You are free to participate or not as you wish, and free to withdraw consent and discontinue 4 weeks after participation in the study after 3 weeks, without prejudice.

If you have any questions regarding this project, please contact the researcher (Cao Thanh Nguyen) in the first instance on telephone number 039479 2737 and if necessary the supervisor (Dr Peta Heywood) on telephone 0394792641.

This project has ethics approval from the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee to go ahead.

If you have any complaint about the way you have been treated during the study, or a query that the researcher, supervisor or staff member in charge has not been able to satisfy, you may write to: The Secretary, Education Faculty Human Ethics Committee, Faculty of Education, PO Box 199, Bendigo 3552.

Your sincerely,

Cao Thanh Nguyen
EdD student, La Trobe University
Phone: 0394792737 Email: ct8nguyen@students.latrobe.edu.au
Consent Form

Title of Project:
Autonomous learning at higher education in Vietnam.

Researcher:
Cao Thanh Nguyen
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Supervisors:
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   Phone: 03 9479 2641
   Email: p.heywood@latrobe.edu.au

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   Phone: 03 9479 2638
   Email: p.mccann@latrobe.edu.au

La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)

(a) I,............(the participant) have read and understood the information sheet provided by
    the researcher about this activity, and any questions I have asked have been answered
    to my satisfaction.

(b) I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw after 3 weeks
    of my participation, without prejudice to myself.
(c) I agree that the research results for the study may be published on the condition, that my name is not used.

(d) Copies of the information sheet for this project and this form have been provided to me to keep.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher: Can Thanh Nguyen

Signature:
Questionnaires of interviews

1. How long have you been in Australia?
2. How do you feel about your class here?
3. Could you tell me what are major differences of learning and teaching approaches between universities in Vietnam and at La Trobe University after a few months arriving?
4. Who was responsible for your learning in VN?
5. What differences have you experienced as a student here compared to being a student in Vietnam?
6. Can you tell me about some learning activities you really enjoy?
7. Who do you think is responsible to your learning?
8. How often do you ask question in class?
9. Have you ever argued with teachers if you did not agree with her/him?
10. What do group discussion help you to understand things?
11. What has been the most effective learning activity for you?
12. What do you like most in class in here?
13. What did you find interesting in terms of group discussion?
14. What are the difference between lecture class and tutorial class?
15. What is valuable about lecture class?
16. What is valuable about tutorial class?
17. What are you developing and connecting from lecture class to tutorial class?
18. Do you usually discuss with your peers during your studying?
19. What do you do if you do not understand the issues in class even with teacher’s help?
20. How do you be aware of the plagiarism in writing?
21. How have you expanded your learning behaviour and attitude? And explain
22. What do you do when you get struggle in your learning? And who do you seek help from? Teachers or friends
23. Do you depress when you meet difficulties in learning?
24. Are you consistent in learning?
25. Which kind of sources did you prefer and why?
   a. lectures
   b. internet,
   c. books,
   d. journal articles
   e. other

26. How do you learn for exams or assignments in here?
27. Do you prefer the way you are being taught here?
28. What are your main purposes of going to Australia to study?
29. Do you think that the model of tutorial class should be implemented in Vietnam? And how?
30. Do you think that Vietnamese students can learn independently at universities in Vietnam?
31. As a role of student, what are possible solutions to foster autonomous learning in Vn?
   - classroom
   - curriculum
   - teacher
   - learning resources
   - others
APENDIX 2:

Ethics Committee approval
7/01/2010

Nguyen Cao Thanh
17 Burston Street
Lalor 3075

Dear Thanh

FHEC approval No:     R041/09
Original approval date: 3/11/2009
Approval valid until: 01/09/2011

ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORTS DUE 12 FEBRUARY 2010

In accordance with the conditions of your ethics approval from the Education Faculty Human Ethics Committee as stated in your original approval letter, a condition of approval for your project titled 'Autonomous learning at higher education in Vietnam' requires a Progress Report/Final Report to be submitted to the Committee annually and at the conclusion of your project.

The due date for the submission of all progress reports to cover activities for the previous calendar year is 12 February 2010. Reports will be reviewed and ratified by the Committee and you will only hear from the Committee if changes are requested. Failure to submit a progress report may result in the withdrawal of Human Ethics Approval.

A final report will be due within 6 months after the expiry date of the human ethics approval period.

In order to fulfill your requirement, could you please forward your completed and signed report to the committee by:

Mail: The Secretary, Education Faculty Human Ethics Committee
       Faculty of Education, La Trobe University,
       PO Box 199, Bendigo 3552

Email: educationethics@latrobe.edu.au.     Fax:  61 3 5444 7899

The Progress/Final Report form can be accessed from the following website:
https://www.latrobe.edu.au/research-services/ethics/HEC-application.htm

If you have any queries or require any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me

Yours sincerely

Ms Joan Freeman
Executive Secretary
Education Faculty Human Ethics Committee

cc Supervisor/s Dr Peta Heywood