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Autonomy in Indonesian Counseling Students at Universities: A Comparative Study

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Autonomy in Indonesian Counseling Students at Universities: A Comparative Study



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Abstract: Student autonomy refers to an individual's ability to manage their own learning process, make informed academic decisions, and take responsibility for their personal development. The level of autonomy can vary depending on the campus environment, learning approach, and the type of academic support provided. This study aims to describe and analyze the differences in student autonomy between Universitas Negeri Padang (UNP) and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI). This study used a comparative, descriptive, and quantitative approach. Samples were purposively selected from students at Universitas Negeri Padang and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia who actively attended lectures. The data collection instrument was The Autonomy Questionnaire for Students with the Guttman scale model with "yes-no" formats as answer choices that measured the dimensions of learning autonomy, decision-making, and academic responsibility. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a comparative test (t-test). The results of the analysis showed that Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia students had a higher level of autonomy than students from Universitas Negeri Padang. Most respondents from Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia were in the high autonomy category, while 50.4% of respondents from Universitas Negeri Padang were in the moderate category. The t-test results revealed significant differences between the two groups of students in aspects of decision-making and independent learning management. These differences can be attributed to variations in learning approaches, the role of lecturers as facilitators, and the more supportive academic environment at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. The results of this study emphasize the importance of developing learning strategies and campus culture that can encourage student autonomy more evenly across universities.

Key Words: Student autonomy; higher education; Universitas Negeri Padang; Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Student autonomy is a key element in developing self-competence and individual responsibility in higher education. As Deci and Ryan's intrinsic motivation theory suggests, autonomy is closely related to individual independence in making decisions that impact learning (Deci & Ryan, 2013). Furthermore, students with autonomy are more likely to think creatively and innovatively because they are encouraged to explore multiple perspectives and solve problems independently. A supportive environment can also encourage students to take risks in seeking new solutions, without feeling constrained by strict rules (Amabile, 2018; Hennessey & Amabile, 2016). The ability of students to

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manage their own learning, make academic decisions, and take responsibility for their personal development. Autonomy is a prerequisite for building competence, creativity, and independence.

Students with a high level of autonomy have the ability to direct themselves, make decisions, and adapt to various academic and social demands. Through Self-Determination Theory (SDT), explain that autonomy is a basic psychological need that enables individuals to act based on their personal choices and values (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). When students are autonomous, they are more adaptable to changes in the learning environment because they view challenges as opportunities for growth, not threats. Furthermore, result research found that autonomy is closely related to critical thinking skills, as individuals with autonomous self-regulation are more open to diverse perspectives, able to analyze information, and dare to present original arguments (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). Research by Soenens & Vansteenkiste also supports these findings, showing that autonomy is correlated with internal self-regulation, enabling students to manage their motivation, emotions, and behavior more effectively (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005).

Another study by Reeve confirmed that autonomous students have stronger self-regulation, meaning they can set learning goals, control impulses, and maintain motivation despite academic pressure (Reeve, 2012). This makes autonomous students not only more productive, but also more resilient in dealing with lecture stress. Autonomy facilitates the development of problem-solving skills because students are given the space to explore and develop strategies to address academic challenges, allowing them to learn from their mistakes and gain valuable experience in independent decision-making (Dweck, 2006; Garrison, 1997). This is crucial for university students to develop critical thinking, responsibility, and leadership skills in the academic environment.

Universitas Negeri Padang (UNP) and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) are State Higher Education Institutions of Incorporated Legal Entity or *Perguruan Tinggi Negeri Badan Hukum* (PTNBH). PTNBH, a government-owned university, represents the highest level of autonomy (Anggraini, 2019). This means that universities have full control over their own assets and finances. PTNBH have complete autonomy in managing finances and resources, including faculty and educational staff. Students studying at State Universities with Legal Entities (PTNBH) face several challenges compared to students at other state or private universities. Students face high demands to meet the expectations of the campus and the community, both in academic and non-academic activities (Darlis et al., 2023). PTNBH status grants institutional autonomy but also creates higher demands on students to excel both academically and non-academically. Furthermore, students also face pressure to produce work or research that is recognized internationally. These challenges require resources, networks, and academic capacity that not all students possess (Chapman, 2008).

The campus environment, faculty teaching styles, and academic culture are important factors that directly influence the development of student autonomy. According to Self-Determination Theory, autonomy support in an educational context allows students to feel in control of their decisions and actions, thus fostering stronger intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000a). Students in an academic environment that values freedom of thought, provides opportunities for decision-making, and emphasizes active participation tend to demonstrate higher levels of autonomy. Result of research shows that a faculty's autonomy-supportive teaching style is positively correlated with student engagement, self-regulation, and motivation to learn (Reeve, 2012). This aligns with the findings of Soenens & Vansteenkiste, who revealed that when the educational environment provides space for autonomy, students are better able to develop adaptive attitudes, critical thinking, and readiness to face academic challenges (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Therefore, it can be concluded that the combination of a supportive campus environment, an autonomy-supportive teaching style, and an inclusive academic culture play a significant role in fostering student motivation, independence, and readiness to face the complexities of academic life in higher education.

Based on the challenges faced by students, particularly those studying at state universities such as UNP and UPI, they face educational contexts that present different challenges. Previous research has shown that students in autonomy-supportive environments tend to have higher motivation and better adaptability (Reeve, 2016). However, geographical, cultural, and curricular differences between the two universities can lead to significant variations in the level of student autonomy. Differences in geography, culture, curriculum, and academic policies between Padang State University and the Indonesian

University of Education have the potential to create variations in levels of student autonomy, particularly in decision-making and managing independent learning.

Different geographic and cultural contexts can influence students' values, norms, and interaction patterns with lecturers and fellow students, resulting in variations in the extent to which students are able to manage themselves independently. Furthermore, the curriculum and academic policies implemented at each university also determine the extent to which students are given space to participate in academic decision-making. Result of research found that a cultural context and educational policies that support autonomy significantly contribute to students' self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and learning management abilities (Chirkov et al., 2003). This finding is reinforced by a study by Vansteenkiste et al., which showed that autonomy support in the educational system positively impacted students' learning engagement and critical thinking skills (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). Thus, variations in geographic factors, culture, curriculum, and academic policies across universities play a significant role in shaping the differing profiles of student autonomy. Both universities aim to advance education in Indonesia, but each institution may implement different academic policies and learning cultures, which influence the level of student autonomy. This study aims to examine the extent of differences in student autonomy levels at UNP and UPI, as well as the factors that influence these differences. This research is based on a theoretical approach to autonomy in higher education that emphasizes the important role of the educational environment in facilitating student independence and decision-making (Kahn et al., 2013).

By utilizing data from students at both universities, this study is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of educational policies at state universities in Indonesia and provide guidance for universities to enhance student autonomy as part of improving educational quality. The overall objective of this study was to compare the levels of student autonomy between Padang State University and UPI and to explore the factors contributing to these differences. As a contribution, it enriches the literature on student autonomy in the Indonesian context and offers practical insights for universities to design learning strategies that better support autonomy.

METHOD

Participants

The subjects in this study were Guidance and Counselling students at UNP in West Sumatra and UPI in West Java as shown in Table 1. The data subjects were active students enrolled between 2018 and 2024. This study used purposive sampling, with a total of 254 students as participants. The following is a breakdown of the research participant data. Data collection was conducted by distributing questionnaires directly to participants in 2024. Students were informed of the general purpose of the study and assured that their data would be handled to protect their privacy. All participants were recruited voluntarily without any compensation or incentives from the researchers.

Table 1. Participants by Gender

Participants	Universities	Male	Female	Total
	Universitas Negeri Padang	9	118	127
	Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia	17	110	127
Total		26	228	254

Instrumentation

The instrument is an inventory used to measure and collect data on students' autonomy conditions. The questionnaire on autonomy is based on a study of theory and the suitability of the item items with the conditions to be revealed. The questionnaire used is the result of a synthesis between the Index of Autonomous Functioning (IAF) from Self-Determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Weinstein et al.,

2012) with the Emotional Autonomy Scale (EAS) (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986) with the Guttman scale model. The Student Autonomy Scale (SAS-37) with the Guttman scale model with "yes-no" formats as answer choices. The Guttman scale is used to avoid possible response bias (central tendency bias). The Student Autonomy Scale (SAS-37) was tested for validity (mean outfit MNSQ 0.93) and reliability (person reliability 0.38, item reliability 0.99, and Cronbach Alpha (KR-20) 0.46). Each statement item is presented in Favorable and Unfavorable items.

Data Analysis

The instrument used and prepared was a Google Form platform. The inventory was distributed to research subjects via WhatsApp. The results of the questionnaire completed by respondents were automatically recorded in Google Drive. The collected data were used to analyze the profiles and differences in student autonomy between the two universities. The data collected from the research subjects will then be analyzed and interpreted (Ardi et al., 2021). The data analysis in this study employed a quantitative approach, employing comparative descriptive analysis of the t-test using SPSS with a significance level of 0.05.

RESULTS

Student Autonomy Profile of Universitas Negeri Padang and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Autonomy Distribution accross university

Interval	Universitas Negeri Padang		Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia		Category
	f	%	f	%	
30 – 36	48	37,8	64	50,4	High
25 – 29	64	50,4	60	47,2	Medium
19 – 24	15	11,8	3	2,4	Low
Total	127	100	127	100	

Based on Table 2, the results of this study indicate that the tendency of student autonomy at the UPI is generally in the high category. Most UPI students demonstrate the ability to make independent decisions, manage their own learning processes, and take responsibility for their academic duties and obligations. This is reflected in the average score of respondents, which is in the high range based on the autonomy measurement instrument used. Meanwhile, students at UNP generally exhibit a moderate tendency towards autonomy. Of all respondents at UNP studied, 50.4% fall into the medium autonomy category. This means that more than half of UNP students still demonstrate a suboptimal level of independence. Differences in autonomy between students at Universitas Negeri Padang and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia as shown Table 3.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations

	Group	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. error Mean
Students autonomy	Universitas Negeri Padang	127	28.23	2.846	.253
	Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia	127	29.69	2.695	.239

The mean autonomy score for the UNP student group was 28.23, while for the UPI student group, it was 29.69. Based on these data, it can be statistically concluded that there is a difference in the mean autonomy between Universitas Negeri Padang students and Indonesian Education University students.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-test Results

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Students Autonomy	Equal variances assumed	.643	.423	-4.211	252	.000	-1.465	.348
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.211	251.255	.000	-1.465	.348

Based on Table 4, it is known that the Sig. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances value is 0.423 > 0.05 , which means that the data variance between student in UNP and UPI is homogeneous or the same (Gastwirth et al., 2009; Sujarweni, 2014). Furthermore, in the "Equal variances assumed" section, the Sig. (2-tailed) value is $0.000 < 0.05$, so it can be concluded that H_0 is rejected. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the average autonomy of Universitas Negeri Padang students and Indonesian Education University students. In addition, decision-making based on comparing the calculated t-value with the t-table in the independent sample t-test. It is known that the calculated t value is 4.211 and the t table is 1.969. Thus, the calculated t value is $4.211 > t \text{ table } 1.969$, so based on the basis of decision making, it can be concluded that H_0 is rejected and H_a is accepted, which means there is a difference in the average autonomy between students of Universitas Negeri Padang and students of Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia.

DISCUSSION

Based on the data analysis described previously, differences were found between the autonomy categories of students at UNP and UPI. The autonomy level of students UPI is high. This indicates that the majority of respondents showed independence in decision-making, responsibility for academic assignments, and the ability to manage their learning process independently. These findings indicate that the academic environment at UPI supports the development of student independence in cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. Meanwhile, the autonomy level of students at UNP is moderate. They tend to require direction, support, or guidance to carry out academic activities independently. This could be due to various factors, such as a more lecturer-centred learning approach, limited space for independent exploration, or limited experience in academic decision-making.

Considering these differences, it's likely influenced by several factors, including the academic environment and learning culture, campus policies and support for independence, and the role of lecturers in the learning process (Shen & Tian, 2012; Trowler, 1998; Yusuf, 2021). UPI, one of Indonesia's leading educational institutions, primarily implements project-based learning approaches, open discussions, and collaborative learning, encouraging students to be active, think critically, and make their own decisions. In contrast, UNP tends to employ a more conventional and structured learning approach, which encourages students to wait for instructions rather than act independently.

Both universities share similarities in implementing student programs that promote student autonomy. These programs include independent internships, Field Study and Community Service or Kuliah Kerja Nyata (KKN), organizational activities, and an assessment system based on individual reflection and presentations, all of which foster student autonomy. However, at UNP, the emphasis on developing independence is still not evenly and effectively applied across all faculties. Regarding the role of lecturers, both universities have adopted a facilitator approach, providing students with the freedom and confidence to explore the material. Students can design their own learning media and revise topics without adhering to strict templates, although some may lack the confidence to suggest alternative methods. Each university has different policies and implementations.

Internal Student Factors

Autonomy is strongly influenced by internal factors, including psychological factors (such as motivation and learning attitudes), cognitive and metacognitive strategies, critical thinking skills, and self-efficacy (Celik, 2022; Gurcay & Ferah, 2018). Students with high intrinsic motivation and confidence in their ability to learn independently tend to exhibit higher autonomy. The habit of independent assignments and personal reflection can increase autonomy compared to instructor-led guidance.

External Factors (Academic Environment & Lecturer Role)

A study in Vietnam found that lecturers' teaching styles and task demands are the main external factors influencing autonomy. Teachers who provide space for choice, open-ended assignments, and treat students as active participants encourage higher autonomy (Cao & Pho, 2024). A student-centred learning approach, with project-based assignments and academic freedom, can foster student autonomy compared to conventional methods and structured instruction from lecturers (Boudersa & Hamada, 2015; Rostom, 2019).

Academic Support, Peer Interaction & Campus Culture

Research on blended learning models indicates that lecturer support, resource availability, and peer interaction significantly influence student learning satisfaction and autonomy (Wang et al., 2023). Good academic support and a campus culture that encourages initiative (learning communities and peer guidance) make students feel safe to experiment independently (Handayani & Yuca, 2019; Hasanah et al., 2022; Parmar et al., 2025).

The analysis of the differences revealed several strategies that can address the gap in student autonomy at UNP and UPI. The strategies are as follows:

Cultural Adaptation in Measuring Autonomy

Adapting autonomy measurement instruments to account for the local cultural context at Universitas Negeri Padang and Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia can help reduce the measurement gap (Byrne, 2016; Chen et al., 2015; Pedersen, 1994). Cultural differences between West Sumatra and West Java can influence students' views on autonomy. Therefore, measurement tools must be adapted to local cultures and norms to be more relevant and valid at both institutions.

Improving Facilities and Learning Support Systems

Universities need to strengthen support systems that encourage student autonomy, such as increasing access to learning facilities, career guidance, and programs that support independent learning, which can help increase student autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000b; Patall & Zambrano, 2019). These programs can be designed to provide students with the freedom to choose learning activities, project topics, or courses relevant to their interests.

Implementing Technology to Support Student Autonomy

Technology, such as online learning platforms, can help increase student autonomy by providing the freedom to organize study schedules, choose learning resources, and access information independently (Lazorak et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2015; Means et al., 2013). Universities can leverage technology to strengthen student autonomy, especially in flexible or hybrid learning environments.

Implementing Soft Skills Development Programs

Student autonomy can also be improved through programs that promote the development of soft skills, such as decision-making, time management, and problem-solving (OUBADI &

LAMKHANTER, 2024; Robbins & Judge, 2012; Robles, 2012). Soft skills training programs can help students feel more confident in taking initiative and managing their learning independently.

Strengthening the Role of Supervisors in Enhancing Student Autonomy

Supervisors at universities should play a more active role in fostering student autonomy (Garrison, 1997; Zackariasson, 2020). One way to achieve this is by providing students with opportunities to design research projects, choose mentoring topics, or determine learning paths that align with their interests and needs. Supervisors should act as facilitators, not simply conveyors of information, so that students can develop independence and decision-making skills.

These strategies can help address the gap in student autonomy at UNP and UPI. Through proper implementation, both universities can create learning environments that support the optimal development of student autonomy in academic and professional contexts. The differences in autonomy levels between UPI and UNP students indicate variations in factors influencing student autonomy at each institution. The learning environment, faculty teaching style, institutional support for the development of soft skills, and academic culture likely play a role in shaping this level of autonomy. Therefore, these results can be used by higher education institutions, especially Universitas Negeri Padang, to further encourage learning strategies that strengthen the active role of students, in order to increase their independence and readiness in facing academic and professional challenges in the future.

Based on the previous discussion, differences in autonomy were found between students at Padang State University and the Indonesian University of Education. The research findings can be extended to a broader scope, including other universities as a contrast. This study provides comparative evidence from the Indonesian context and demonstrates how institutional culture shapes the development of autonomy. Limitations of this study, such as the range of universities, self-reports, and gender imbalance, can serve as benchmarks for further research.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study indicate a significant difference in the level of student autonomy between UPI and UNP. UPI students are predominantly categorized as high autonomy, reflecting their ability to manage their learning process independently, make academic decisions, and demonstrate a high level of responsibility in their academic activities. Meanwhile, the majority of UNP students are categorised as moderate autonomy, with a percentage of 50.4%. This indicates that their learning independence is still limited, and they tend to require guidance from lecturers or other parties. This difference is influenced by several factors, including the learning approach, the lecturer's role as a facilitator, academic support, and the level of student self-efficacy and motivation. Campuses with a more participatory and student-centred learning culture tend to be able to optimally encourage the development of student autonomy. It is recommended that Universitas Negeri Padang strengthen its learning approach, which is oriented towards developing student autonomy. These findings have significant implications for higher education institutions, particularly in developing teaching strategies and curricula that support the growth of student autonomy. By increasing autonomy, students are expected to be better prepared to face the challenges of the workplace, think critically, and have the ability to learn throughout their lives. Additionally, the development of autonomy has a positive impact on mental health, academic satisfaction, and student engagement in the learning process.

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