

A Scoping Review on the Implementation of Autonomous Learning at the University Level in Kuwait: PAAET as a Case Study

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijeld.2013/vol12n82840>

Published October 27, 2024

Citation Alhaji B., Shuqair K.M., AlRubaie R.S., and Alsenafi B. (2024) A Scoping Review on the Implementation of Autonomous Learning at the University Level in Kuwait: PAAET as a Case Study, *International Journal of Education, Learning and Development*, Vol. 12, No.8, pp.28-40

Abstract: *This paper is mainly a scoping review that explores the current body of knowledge related to the presence and growth of autonomous learning at the university level in Kuwait. The review was conducted to answer the research question “Can we implement autonomous learning at the university level in Kuwait?” To support this scoping review, a questionnaire consisting of eight opened-ended questions was designed that asked professors who teach in different colleges in The Public Authority for Applied Education and Learning (PAAET), one of the main and oldest universities in Kuwait, about their opinions on autonomous learning at the university level. The questionnaire served to allow the study to gather valuable primary data that contextualized the scoping review and added real time insights. One of the findings of the paper is that the initiation of the promotion of autonomous learning in Kuwait partially occurred because of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic required universities to engage in digital and remote learning so students’ academic progress could stay on schedule as much as possible. This phase naturally developed some university students’ ability to study in their own time and complete their assignments without an excessive amount of prodding from teachers. However, the literature published after the pandemic does not present a state of widespread proficiency when it comes to university students’ autonomy. Another finding is that current research stressed the effectiveness of interventions that directly target students’ lack of autonomy. However, there is little knowledge about the frequency in which these interventions are recommended or implemented. From a practical perspective, university level teachers will need to improve their communication skills so they can learn how to connect with students as individual learners. In addition, teachers at the university level should develop a line of communication with secondary school teachers in Kuwait. University students’ lack of preparation for autonomous learning is a sign that they are not being properly developed as scholars in their younger years. Teachers at the university level must communicate with secondary teachers to identify where the current gaps in practice are.*

Keywords: Autonomous learning, digital learning, educational technology, PAAET

INTRODUCTION

The autonomy of learners in Kuwait is limited. However, Kuwaiti college students often express surprise at the amount of independence they receive whenever they study abroad (Hamza, 2023). The freedom provided to university students in some areas of the world can be overwhelming to learners who come from rigid and heavily planned environments. That is why a lot of researchers have called for the improvement of Kuwaiti university students' autonomy as learners (Sharafuddin, 2015). Ideally, every college student would possess the independence needed to complete their own studies and avoid any controversies. However, in reality this is not the case, as the presence of contract cheating exists in Kuwait because of students' inability to manage their own workloads and stress (Erguvan, 2022). The current state of educational technology should incentivize university students to be more proactive with their education and the completion of assigned material (Safar, 2012). Likewise, some students' career choices should alert them of the inevitable need to teach younger Kuwaiti learners about the importance of being autonomous when it is their turn to pursue higher education (Alonaizi, 2016). Confusingly, these incentives do not appear to motivate college students in Kuwait to become more independent learners on their own. This lack of initiative on the students' part motivated the researchers of this paper to conduct a scoping review that attempts to explore why college students in Kuwait are not more autonomous and to investigate whether autonomous learning could ever be a mainstream concept in Kuwait-based universities.

Research Question and Objectives of the Study

The main research question for this scoping review is:

Can we implement autonomous learning in Kuwaiti universities?

This research question is important because it determines if certain skills can be embedded within university curricula before the next public emergency arises. Hamed Alashou, et al. (2022) wrote that the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated the growth of e-learning platforms. However, this growth was not accompanied by widespread acclaim from the students who needed these platforms to complete their work. Barriers to the full acceptance of digital and remote learning platforms included technological issues, a lack of access to the internet, and an overall lack of digital literacy (Alashou et al., 2022). These barriers contribute to other problems that may stop college students from being completely independent throughout their studies. As such, it is important to determine if universities and teachers have the resources and availability needed to address students' personal and technological issues while working to make them more self-sufficient learners.

Hence, the objectives of this review are to:

- 1) determine if autonomous learning can be promoted and developed within Kuwait-based government universities
- 2) identify the barriers to autonomous learning's growth in Kuwait-based government universities.
- 3) recommend how teachers and universities can improve as practitioners before focusing on how they will develop students' autonomy.

These objectives were created under the assumption that autonomous learning is not a foreign concept to teachers and universities in Kuwait. However, having knowledge of a concept does not always mean one will be proficient in it. This is why the objectives also assumed that some teachers and universities were already

implementing plans to improve students' autonomy before this scoping review began.

METHODOLOGY

The Scoping Review

To research the possibility of implementing autonomous learning at the higher education level in Kuwaiti government universities, a scoping review compiling the literature that discusses the promotion of autonomous learning was performed. Scoping reviews give researchers the opportunity to explore the amount of knowledge currently available about a subject or issue (Munn et al., 2018). After locating this, researchers can define key concepts, highlight knowledge gaps that must be addressed, and examine the methodologies used by other scholars during their own studies (Munn et al., 2018). In addition to these objectives, scoping reviews can also help researchers explain why a research question has produced limited results (“Reviewing Research: Literature Reviews, Scoping Reviews, Systematic Reviews: Differentiating the Three Review Types,” 2024). These benefits fit well with the project’s objective to determine how much autonomous learning is already being promoted in Kuwaiti government universities and what resources would be needed to increase students’ desire to pursue their education without external motivation from their professors. To support this scoping review, a questionnaire that asked professors who teach in different colleges in The Public Authority for Applied Education and Learning (PAAET) about their opinions on autonomous learning at the university level was created as well. Being one of the two main government university in Kuwait (the other is Kuwait University), PAAET is used as a study case to explore the possibility of implementing autonomous learning in higher public education. PAAET houses five colleges: College of Basic Education, College of Business Studies, College of Technological Studies, College of Medical Allied Professions and College of Nursing. The participants in the questionnaire were randomly selected from these five colleges. The questionnaire served to allow the study to gather valuable primary data that contextualized the scoping review and added real time insights.

To conduct the scoping review, database searches on multiple platforms were completed to find journal articles, theses, and dissertations that covered Kuwaiti government university students’ motivation to integrate autonomous learning as part of their learning experience and the resources they use while studying alone. Some of the keyword searches performed during the scoping review were: “Kuwait university students’ motivation”; “autonomous learning Kuwait government universities”; “independent study Kuwait government university students”; and “self-directed learning for Kuwaiti students”. These keyword searches produced well over 100,000 articles, theses, and dissertations combined, but it was quickly discovered that many of the documents provided did not directly cover Kuwaiti college students’ approach to autonomous learning or Kuwaiti government universities’ promotion of autonomous learning within their facilities. This situation required a stringent exclusion criterion to be created before moving forward.

Documents that did not cover autonomous learning in Kuwaiti universities were removed.

Likewise, papers that only discussed teachers in Kuwait and not the students they educate were excluded from the scoping review as well. Despite the specific phrasing of the keyword searches, there were also search results that did not discuss data from Kuwait at all. This required the exclusion criteria to ensure literature providing data from outside Kuwait was removed as well. This was very impactful since the body of literature covering autonomous learning at the university level was much larger before studies completed outside of Kuwait were removed.

A narrative analysis was performed to analyze the information extracted from the documents compiled for the scoping review. The researchers used a literal interpretation of the texts gathered to extract data from the documents and assess how they helped answer the research question. The lack of human subjects in this scoping review eliminated the need to ask for subjects' informed consent or consult any external ethics bodies. However, the researchers did ensure that the scoping review met the ethical standards of the institution they currently attend.

The inclusion criteria for this scoping review focused on articles that were published within the last 15 years. This wide timeframe gave the scoping review the flexibility needed to consider past trends in student development. Articles that discussed teachers' strategies to make college students more autonomous were included as well. This is because teachers continue to be the connection between students and new knowledge. Finally, literature from any type of publisher could be included as long as the focus of the article or paper was related to Kuwaiti government university students and their autonomy as learners.

Questionnaire

The 8-question questionnaire was distributed to professors who worked at the different colleges in PAAET (the second main government university in Kuwait in addition to Kuwait University) at the time of this study's completion. The professors' official work emails were found by searching staff directories on PAAET's official website. The emails included a copy of the questionnaire, a salutation and an explanation of what the questionnaire was created for. The explanation described the objectives of this study, the problem statement, and how the professors' responses would be used if they decided to participate in the study.

The scoping review was strengthened by the ability to gather information from sources that are not traditionally included in literature reviews. News publications and unpublished papers included information about university students' autonomy that could not be found in many peer-reviewed journal articles. This meant non-traditional sources of information could help fill major gaps that could have led to dead ends and frequent redundancies.

RESULTS

Scoping Review

The database searches for the scoping review produced 15 documents that were eligible for inclusion. These documents were journal articles, theses, dissertations, one news report, and an independent case study. The searches for literature did not locate literature from trade publications, universities, and government agencies that may be invested in the promotion of autonomous learning habits at the university level. This was the first sign of a limited body of knowledge on the topic of focus, but the literature that was found provided information that helped the researchers generate initial conclusions about Kuwaiti teachers and universities' current level of interest in helping students become more autonomous.

Articles like that by Hassan A. Sharafuddin and Chekra A. Allani (2015) highlighted the apprehensions Kuwaiti instructors at the university level experience when implementing technologies that could improve students' autonomy. Also, Inan Deniz Erguvan's (2022) journal article discussed contract cheating in Kuwait and how it is partially caused by university students' lack of motivation to emotionally invest in their own education. Students' motivation to pursue their education passionately is a determinant of whether they will use the resources available to them to become more autonomous over time. The case study, "Helping Kuwait University Students Learn in a Better Way" (2024), discussed how some institutions design their campuses in a way that promotes active learning to students. This means students at some Kuwait-based universities are naturally provided sources of support that can help them become more independent and proactive learners.

In addition to the aforementioned documents, other pieces of literature covered how digital educational technologies are being implemented by university teachers more often to aid students in a post-COVID-19 environment and give them the tools needed to complete their work wherever they are. For example, Ammar H. Safar (2012) covered the rise of bring your own device (BYOD) practices in Kuwait universities and how students' use of their own possessions helped them focus more on their assignments and notetaking. Before drawing any conclusions, Safar saw that educational technologies can increase students' engagement, improve the quality of their work, and help students have fun more often. By using their own devices to complete work, students could amplify the benefits and feel like they held more ownership over their progress. Findings like this helped the researchers determine that the digitalization of education at the university level is a major factor for teachers and universities that want to develop more autonomous students.

In a different paper, Ammar H. Safar (2018) examined students' perception of an online training system that required the use of educational technologies. In the conclusion of his research, Safar found that college students in Kuwait approved of the online program because it meshed well with their current work and academic goals (pp.257-58). These findings are loosely related to Ali A. Taqi's (2019) results, as the students sampled by Taqi promoted the importance of teachers in self-directed learning in the educational process. The study shows that students at the university level are not against becoming more autonomous, but there is at least a portion of learners who want to ensure their studying is guided by experienced experts who are knowledgeable in their areas of

interest (pp.114-116).

Other papers' exploration of the impact of digitalization for Kuwait-based university students' autonomy discussed how online learning can cause burnout (Abbas, et al., 2023) and how COVID-19 increased the need for teachers, students, and universities to acclimate themselves with new educational technologies as soon as possible (Alenezi, 2021, p. 42). In their work about students' dislike of online learning platforms, Hasan A. Abbas et al. (2023) wrote that the workload and exhaustion associated with online learning platforms contributed to the burnout learners experience. This is a detrimental trend because universities would benefit from the complete implementation of digital and remote educational technologies into their student development strategies. That is because digital and remote learning tools can help keep students' education on schedule when public health emergencies occur (Alenezi, 2021, pp.73-75). Alshou et al. (2022) added that a lack of instructional support and technological difficulties can also impact how students perceive their experiences while using digital learning platforms (pp. 47-48).

Mariam S. Alshammari's thesis (2023) highlighted how the Global College of Kuwait struggled to retain students after the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst its struggle to keep students enrolled, the school also had problems improving students' digital literacy. This situation impacted students' ability to use educational technologies and, as a result, they became more independent when doing their work on digital platforms. To address students', lack of digital literacy, Global College of Kuwait implemented a pass/fail digital literacy intervention, which students were required to complete before starting their degree programs. This intervention gave students the foundational skills needed to use digital platforms independently.

There was also a small subsection of the literature that discussed how learner autonomy was prioritized for English Language Learners (ELL). In her dissertation, Anfal M. Aljaser (2015) claimed that universities in Kuwait did not develop students' autonomy effectively. To overcome the environmental barriers preventing Kuwaiti college students from becoming more independent, language teachers addressed the need to develop learners' autonomy themselves. Ali Hamza (2023) described similar trends in his news report, as the journalist claimed that Kuwaiti students struggled to excel while studying abroad because they were not prepared for the autonomy some countries require of their university students beforehand. Hamza highlighted that Kuwait's university system plans a great deal of students' coursework beforehand. However, countries like Canada give students much more freedom when determining how their degrees will progress. A major piece of information from Hamza that helped this scoping review was the journalist's discussion of Kuwait students' homesickness when studying abroad. This homesickness often came from a lack of skill when communicating with strangers. This factor showed the need to consider how college students' holistic development as individuals can impact their growth as autonomous learners.

Finally, the literature found during the scoping review highlighted how rubric can be used to help students in completing assignments on their own. Ronnie Goodwin and Robert Kirkpatrick (2023) found that detailed rubrics helped students write essays since they knew what was expected of them. Teachers could use informative rubrics to push students towards autonomy without forcing learners to follow directions blindly and learn how to complete integral assignments on their own. Goodwin and Kirkpatrick also claimed that rubrics help students in the self-assessment process while completing work and checking it before they submit it. However, the guidance provided by rubrics cannot replace the direct and nuanced feedback human teachers can provide once students ask for it. This is one of the most important aspects of autonomous learning in Kuwait universities, as professors will need to actively teach students how to be more independent instead of expecting them to already have advanced self-study skills once they begin their degree programs.

Questionnaire

In terms of the questionnaire, 22 professors who teach in the five colleges of PAAET responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire (see Appendix) focused on asking professors about what they do to increase students' independence as learners and general skills as scholars. The questionnaire created was semi-structured in nature, so professors could provide the richest answers possible for review. Regarding the question "Do you believe that professors should be responsible for the students' autonomy?" The majority (18 professors, 81.8%) responded negatively to this question. They believed professors should encourage students to develop their autonomy but not take full responsibility for it. In their opinion, autonomy is something students should cultivate themselves through personal effort and experience and the professor can only provide tools and environment. However, those who responded negatively (18.1%) believed that the professors play a crucial role in nurturing autonomy, particularly with students who are still learning to manage independence, like first-year university students. Asked "Are you doing anything to increase your university students' levels of independence?", 17 (77%) professors said that they were doing something to develop students in a positive direction. 12 (54.5%) provided more detailed answers. These answers included private tutoring sessions, online conversations about self-accountability, and extra credit assignments that were self-directed. As for the question "Is there a way that your curriculum could be designed to help university students become more independent?", 16 professors (72.7%) said that the curriculum can be designed to foster students' independence. This involves shifting from passive learning models to active, student-centered learning experiences. Unfortunately, the question "Does your university have a writing lab for students to consult while completing assignments?" did not solicit any positive response from professors. When asked "How can your university help students become more autonomous?", 15 (68.18%) professors said that schools must build a culture of accountability or require secondary school students to have a certain level of independence before they are admitted. As for the question, "Do you think that most of your students are autonomous enough to complete a degree program with little to no direction from their professors?" the majority (20 professors, 90.9%) replied that most of the students are not, and they need help in fostering autonomy. As for the question "Do you believe that students with a higher aptitude for academic performance are more likely to study

autonomously?”, only 5 professors (22%) answered the question with details. According to them, while students with higher aptitude for academic performance often show stronger independent learning tendencies, it is not guaranteed that academic aptitude alone ensures autonomy. Regarding the question “When your students need assistance, do they contact you or their classmates first?”, the majority (19 professors, 86.36%) said that students tend to seek assistance from their classmates rather than their professors.

DISCUSSION

The scoping review revealed that Kuwait-based teachers and universities’ development of students’ autonomy is inconsistent. The effectiveness of an institution’s ability to develop autonomous students comes from the school’s structure, resources, and teaching philosophies. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted how many schools used educational technologies and engaged students who could not physically attend classes (Alenezi, 2021, p.76). Kuwait was not the only country to be rushed into the use of digital learning-focused strategies, but the inability to account for students’ lack of access to technology impeded college students’ development as individuals (Alsahou et al., 2022, pp.38-41). Literature shows that the need to improve students’ autonomy is even a problem for university students who want to be teachers themselves (Alkandari and Al-Failakawei, 2022, p.156). Alkandari and Al-Failakawei (2022) wrote that pre-service teachers’ sense of self-regulation and autonomy was improved after completing a reverse learning exercise. The positive results of the intervention show that there are solutions to university students’ lack of awareness about the need for autonomy. However, the idea of teaching pre-service teachers about the importance of learner autonomy when they are about to lead their own classrooms is a concerning prospect (pp. 155-160).

There is a gap in knowledge when trying to determine why college students in Kuwait have not become more autonomous after COVID-19. The pandemic required many groups to adapt to the logistical consequences of the event (Alashou et al., 2022), and these groups included college students who had to improve their access to digital education technologies and training tools that could help them acclimate to remote learning platforms more quickly.

However, recently published literature does not show a consensus when it comes to the current state of learner autonomy at the university level in Kuwait. This scoping review was done under the assumption that developing learner autonomy would be a somewhat new project for universities in Kuwait. However, the results of the scoping review found that learners’ autonomy is already a point of priority for some teachers and schools. The lack of literature available about autonomous learning at the university level in Kuwait could be a sign that the number of teachers and universities truly developing plans to increase learners’ autonomy is quite small. This would be an issue since it would require the creation of interventions that explain the importance of learner autonomy to university professors and administrators.

Hamza’s reporting (2023) showed that the lack of widespread concern about Kuwaiti university

students' autonomy causes problems at home and abroad. University students who are unprepared to study independently also struggle when communicating with strangers and finding friends when they are away from home. This negatively impacts university students' ability to focus when dealing with the emotional and social issues that come with studying abroad in countries that give students more freedom when designing their plans of study. The lack of preparation to handle the challenges of studying autonomously in a post-pandemic environment shows that university students in Kuwait are not being developed properly by their secondary teachers before they enroll in undergraduate degree programs. This means university teachers' first interactions with students will need to focus on determining what type of learners they are and how their learning styles should be supported throughout the course.

When discussing the sources of support provided to university students, literature does not advocate for excessive hand holding. Instead, it just highlights the usage of rubrics, training programs, and other interventions that teach students how to be more autonomous while also guiding them along during the initial stages of their growth. The literature appears to recognize that universities and university level teachers are somewhat obligated to help students develop their autonomy if they want to implement digital educational technologies more often. Digital educational technologies can give students the chance to use their own devices and learn at their own pace (Safar, 2012, pp. 456-58). Even with technological limitations, BYOD practices can help Students feel like the culture at institutions of higher learning is more democratic than not. This improves students' interest in engaging in the content presented to them and approaching their studies with a more proactive attitude. At the least, it seems like teachers and universities should be implementing practices that gradually increase students' interest in becoming more autonomous over time. This can be a point administrators and other influencers promote while convincing stakeholders of the importance and potential of autonomous learning at the university level.

Erguvan's journal article (2023) highlighted a consequence of students' lack of autonomy and desire to be proactive with their learning. Contract cheating is a topic that is widely discussed. Papers exclusively focused on the issue were not included in this scoping review, but Erguvan's work shed light on why Kuwaiti students decide to outsource their homework assignments. According to Erguvan, the psychological and physical obstacles attached to online learning prevent some students from maintaining a high level of interest. In contrast, students who refrain from cheating are more competitive and possess a positive outlook on honing their skills. Again, this highlights the importance of developing students in a holistic manner as they aim to become more independent when pursuing and completing their degrees.

With the aforementioned information in hand, it is apparent that the growth of autonomous learning in Kuwait universities is not only possible but necessary for the higher education sector to move forward. Students' inability to learn autonomously is a barrier to their productivity as budding academics. Likewise, university level teachers who must develop students' autonomy are

completing a task that should have been done when learners were still in secondary school. The benefits of being an autonomous learner appear to stretch past students' time in university (Alonaizi,2016). This means there are non-academic implications that must be considered by future researchers as well while teachers and universities determine how they will approach the cultivation of students' independence.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This scoping review explored the current body of knowledge related to the presence and growth of autonomous learning at the university level in Kuwait. The review was conducted to answer the research question "Can we implement autonomous learning at the university level in Kuwait?" After reviewing the information available, it is apparent that the promotion of autonomous learning at the university level has already started. The initiation of this promotion partially occurred because of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic required universities to engage in digital and remote learning so students' academic progress could stay on schedule as much as possible. This phase naturally developed some university students' ability to study in their own time and complete their assignments without an excessive amount of prodding from teachers. However, literature published after the pandemic does not present a state of widespread proficiency when it comes to university students' autonomy. Instead, universities' ability to develop and maintain students' autonomy during the pandemic was inconsistent.

Current research stressed the effectiveness of interventions that directly target students' lack of autonomy. However, there is little knowledge about the frequency in which these interventions are recommended or implemented. This gap in knowledge prevented the scoping review from discussing the mainstream strategies teachers and universities use to improve students' autonomy. To learn more about interventions' rate of implementation, scholars should survey universities' administrators and student services departments. Surveying these populations would help researchers learn more about the interventions universities perceive to be the most impactful and cost effective. From there, additional research on the history and prevalence of the interventions identified can be performed.

Also, research on the total range of the benefits of autonomous learning should be completed as well. Hamza's work, for instance, reveals the social drawbacks of not being an autonomous learner. However, there could be political, economic, and professional consequences that students, universities, and the entire country of Kuwait experience when universities do not produce independent lifelong learners. Answering this research problem will require an expansive study that defines what Kuwait's goals are for its workforce and education sector and how Kuwait-based universities are supposed to help achieve these goals. Once these goals are defined, the perspectives of students can be solicited after they graduate from university and enter the workforce. While interviewing former university students, researchers can ask if they were developed to be autonomous learners while enrolled and if they used those independent learning

skills to complete their job duties efficiently.

From a practical perspective, university level teachers will need to improve their communication skills so they can learn how to connect with students as individual learners. Improving a student's autonomy requires the consideration of their personal feelings and goals. Teachers cannot learn this information if they adopt a one-size-fits-all perspective when implementing interventions that can improve students' autonomy. The scoping review found evidence that students' social and personal lives can be affected by the inability to learn and work through problems independently. Learning how to identify social cues from students could help university level teachers understand when it is time to implement targeted interventions.

In addition to the previous recommendation, teachers at the university level should develop a line of communication with secondary school teachers in Kuwait. University students' lack of preparation for autonomous learning is a sign that they are not being properly developed as scholars in their younger years. Teachers at the university level must communicate with secondary teachers to identify where the current gaps in practice are. Having these conversations can help both sides craft the interventions and solutions needed to improve students' preparedness before beginning their degree programs at Kuwaiti universities. This would eliminate university teachers' need to dedicate precious instruction time to the cultivation of basic academic skills.

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Appendix

Questionnaire used to Interview Professors at PAAET

SAMPLING QUESTIONNAIRE FOR AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN KUWAIT	
1. Do you believe that professors should be responsible for the development of students' autonomy?	
2. Are you doing anything to increase your university students' levels of independence?	
3. Is there a way that your curriculum could be designed to help university students become more independent?	
4. Does your university have a writing lab for students to consult while completing assignments?	
5. How can your university help students become more autonomous?	
6. Do you think that most of your students are autonomous enough to complete a degree program with little to no direction from their professors?	
7. Do you believe that students with a higher aptitude for academic performance are more likely to study autonomously?	
8. When your students need assistance, do they contact you or their classmates first?	

International Journal of Education, Learning and Development

Vol. 12, No.8, pp.28-40, 2024

Print ISSN: 2054-6297(Print)

Online ISSN: 2054-6300 (Online)

Website: <https://www.eajournals.org/>

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

International Journal of Education, Learning and Development

Vol. 12, No.8, pp.28-40, 2024

Print ISSN: 2054-6297(Print)

Online ISSN: 2054-6300 (Online)

Website: <https://www.eajournals.org/>

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-

UK