

Student Agency in Higher Education: Concepts, Practices, and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

Student agency has become a key principle of learner-centered higher education, emphasizing students' active participation, autonomy, and shared responsibility in learning. This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the PRISMA 2020 framework to examine student agency in higher education. Studies published in the last five years were synthesized using a framework-based thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: the evolution of student agency, conceptual frameworks, educational practices, educational outcomes, and future directions. The findings indicate that student agency extends beyond learner autonomy by integrating learner ownership, partnership, empowerment, and institutional engagement. Student-centered learning, curriculum co-creation, students-as-partners initiatives, and learner-centered assessment enhance engagement, self-regulated learning, and graduate readiness. The review highlights student agency as a strategic foundation for advancing learner-centered and sustainable higher education.

Keywords: Curriculum Co-Creation, Higher Education, Learner-Centered Learning, Learner Empowerment, Students as Partners.

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1. | INTRODUCTION

Higher education has undergone a profound transformation in response to changing societal expectations, technological advancements, and evolving conceptions of learning. Universities are increasingly expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate graduates who are capable of critical thinking, lifelong learning, collaborative problem-solving, and responsible decision-making. These expectations have accelerated the transition from traditional teacher-centered instruction toward learner-centered educational approaches that position students as active participants in constructing knowledge and shaping their educational experiences. Within this transformation, the concept of student agency has emerged as a fundamental principle for promoting meaningful learning and preparing students for increasingly complex academic and professional environments.

Student agency refers to learners' capacity to intentionally influence their own learning through decision-making, self-regulation, active participation, and purposeful engagement within educational settings. Rather than viewing students as passive recipients of instruction, agency-oriented education recognizes learners as capable individuals who exercise autonomy, responsibility, and initiative throughout the learning process. Klemenčič (2023) conceptualizes student agency as the intentional capacity of students to act independently while simultaneously interacting with institutional structures, educational practices, and social contexts that shape learning opportunities. This perspective positions agency as both an individual capability and a socially constructed process that develops through meaningful educational experiences.

Growing recognition of student agency reflects broader developments in learner-centered pedagogy. Contemporary educational models increasingly emphasize active learning, collaborative knowledge construction, authentic learning experiences, and student participation in curriculum development and assessment. Hoidn and Klemenčič (2021) argue that learner-centered higher education requires instructional environments that encourage students to assume ownership of learning while developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflective capabilities. Similarly, Doyle (2023) emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when students actively engage in constructing understanding rather than passively receiving information, reinforcing the importance of learner agency as a central educational objective.

Recent research further demonstrates that student agency contributes to multiple educational outcomes beyond academic achievement. Stenalt and Lassesen (2022), through a systematic review, found that agency-oriented learning environments positively influence student engagement, motivation, self-regulated learning, and overall learning quality. Likewise, Gupta et al. (2024) highlight that learner agency extends beyond concepts of autonomy by integrating self-directed learning, self-regulation, and intentional participation, enabling students to adapt effectively to increasingly dynamic educational environments. These findings suggest that fostering

agency supports not only academic success but also lifelong learning competencies and graduate readiness.

The growing emphasis on student agency has also transformed relationships between students and higher education institutions. Universities increasingly encourage students to participate as partners in curriculum design, teaching innovation, assessment, and institutional decision-making. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) distinguish between traditional student representation and genuine student partnership, arguing that authentic partnership empowers students to contribute meaningfully to educational improvement rather than merely providing feedback. Similarly, Chadha et al. (2023) demonstrate that involving students as partners in redesigning teaching practices promotes shared responsibility, mutual trust, and more responsive learning environments. These developments indicate that student agency increasingly extends beyond classroom participation toward broader institutional transformation.

Alongside these developments, digital learning environments and rapidly changing educational contexts have created new opportunities and challenges for student agency. Flexible learning models, blended education, online collaboration, and digital learning platforms have expanded students' capacity to manage their own learning while simultaneously requiring greater responsibility, self-regulation, and independent decision-making. Otto et al. (2024) report that emerging digital practices can strengthen learner-centered education by supporting participation, collaboration, and personalized learning experiences. However, these opportunities also require institutions to design educational environments that actively cultivate agency rather than assuming that technological access alone promotes meaningful learner engagement.

Despite growing scholarly attention, research on student agency remains conceptually fragmented. Existing studies variously examine learner autonomy, student voice, student-centered learning, students as partners, curriculum co-creation, assessment for learning, and self-regulated learning, often treating these constructs independently despite their close theoretical relationships. While these perspectives collectively contribute to understanding learner participation, there remains limited synthesis explaining how student agency has evolved conceptually, how educational practices foster agency, and how universities can systematically develop agency-oriented learning environments. Consequently, a comprehensive synthesis of current research is needed to consolidate these diverse perspectives and identify future directions for student agency in higher education.

Accordingly, this study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) using the PRISMA 2020 framework to examine student agency in higher education. Drawing upon studies published between 2021 and 2025, the review synthesizes evidence concerning the evolution of student agency, conceptual frameworks, educational practices, educational outcomes, and emerging future directions. The findings are expected to provide educators, researchers, and higher education institutions with a comprehensive understanding of student agency as a key principle for advancing

learner-centered education and supporting sustainable transformation in higher education.

2. | LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of Student Agency

Student agency has become an increasingly influential concept in higher education as universities shift from traditional instructional models toward learner-centered approaches that emphasize active participation, autonomy, and shared responsibility for learning. Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of knowledge, contemporary educational theories recognize learners as active agents capable of making decisions, directing their own learning, and contributing meaningfully to educational processes. This conceptual shift reflects broader changes in higher education that prioritize graduate capabilities such as critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, and lifelong learning in response to rapidly changing social and professional environments.

Early discussions surrounding student agency were closely associated with learner autonomy, self-directed learning, and constructivist theories of education. These perspectives emphasized students' ability to regulate their own learning processes and make independent academic decisions. However, contemporary scholarship has expanded this understanding by recognizing that agency is not solely an individual characteristic but also develops through interactions between learners, educators, institutional structures, and learning environments. Klemenčič (2023) proposes a comprehensive theory of student agency in higher education, arguing that agency emerges through the dynamic relationship between students' intentional actions and the opportunities, constraints, and support provided by educational institutions.

Growing empirical evidence has strengthened the educational significance of student agency. Stenalt and Lassesen (2022), through a systematic review of higher education research, conclude that student agency positively influences learning quality by promoting active engagement, deeper learning, and greater responsibility for academic development. Their findings demonstrate that students who exercise higher levels of agency are more likely to engage meaningfully with learning activities, monitor their academic progress, and participate actively in educational decision-making. These findings position student agency as a central mechanism supporting effective learner-centered education.

The rapid expansion of digital learning environments has further influenced the evolution of student agency. Digital technologies have increased opportunities for personalized learning, flexible study pathways, collaborative knowledge construction, and learner independence. Stenalt (2021) introduces the concept of digital student agency, emphasizing that agency within digital environments extends beyond technological competence to include learners' ability to critically navigate digital learning spaces, make informed decisions, and exercise control over their educational experiences. Similarly, Jääskelä et al. (2021) propose student agency analytics as an

emerging approach that utilizes learning analytics to better understand how students exercise agency throughout higher education, providing institutions with valuable insights into learner participation and engagement.

Recent developments have expanded student agency beyond individual learning toward collaborative educational participation. Universities increasingly encourage students to become partners in teaching innovation, curriculum development, assessment, and institutional improvement rather than limiting their involvement to classroom activities. This evolution reflects a broader understanding of agency as an institutional and relational concept in which learners actively shape educational experiences alongside educators and university stakeholders. Consequently, student agency has evolved into a multidimensional educational construct that integrates learner autonomy, participation, collaboration, empowerment, and institutional engagement, making it a foundational principle of contemporary higher education.

Conceptual Frameworks of Student Agency

As research on learner-centered education has expanded, numerous conceptual frameworks have been developed to explain the multidimensional nature of student agency within higher education. Rather than defining agency solely as learner autonomy or independent learning, contemporary frameworks emphasize the interaction between individual capabilities, educational environments, institutional structures, and social relationships. These perspectives position student agency as a dynamic process through which learners actively influence their educational experiences while simultaneously responding to opportunities and constraints within higher education.

One of the most comprehensive theoretical contributions is presented by Klemenčič (2023), who conceptualizes student agency as the intentional capacity of students to act purposefully within institutional contexts while negotiating structural opportunities and limitations. This perspective emphasizes that agency is neither entirely individual nor entirely determined by educational systems. Instead, agency emerges through continuous interaction between learners' intentions, available resources, institutional culture, and educational practices. Such an understanding broadens the concept beyond personal autonomy by recognizing the influence of social and organizational environments on students' capacity to act.

Another important conceptual perspective links student agency with self-regulated and self-directed learning. Gupta et al. (2024), through a scoping review, argue that learner agency extends beyond self-regulation by incorporating intentional decision-making, learner ownership, and proactive engagement throughout educational processes. Their analysis suggests that while self-regulated learning focuses primarily on managing learning strategies and monitoring academic progress, learner agency encompasses broader capabilities related to initiating action, shaping learning opportunities, and influencing educational environments. This distinction reinforces

student agency as a more comprehensive educational construct that integrates cognitive, motivational, behavioral, and contextual dimensions.

Recent scholarship has also emphasized agency as a relational and participatory construct. Lee (2024) highlights learner agency within feedback processes, demonstrating that meaningful feedback depends not only on educators' instructional practices but also on students' willingness to actively interpret, evaluate, and apply feedback to improve learning. Similarly, Jääskelä et al. (2021) introduce student agency analytics as a framework for understanding how agency manifests through observable learning behaviors, allowing educators to examine learner participation, decision-making, and engagement using educational data. These perspectives illustrate that agency develops through continuous interaction between learners and their educational environments rather than through isolated individual actions.

Another emerging framework conceptualizes agency through student participation and educational partnership. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) distinguish between student representation and genuine student partnership, arguing that authentic agency requires learners to participate meaningfully in educational decision-making rather than merely providing opinions or feedback. This perspective aligns with broader learner-centered philosophies that emphasize collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual respect between students and educators. Collectively, these conceptual frameworks demonstrate that student agency represents a multidimensional construct integrating autonomy, intentional action, participation, collaboration, empowerment, and shared educational responsibility. Such theoretical diversity provides a comprehensive foundation for examining how educational practices can effectively cultivate agency throughout higher education.

Educational Practices Supporting Student Agency

The development of student agency depends not only on learners' individual capabilities but also on educational practices that intentionally create opportunities for participation, autonomy, collaboration, and meaningful decision-making. Contemporary higher education increasingly recognizes that agency flourishes within learner-centered environments where students are encouraged to actively construct knowledge, solve authentic problems, reflect on their learning, and contribute to educational processes. Consequently, instructional design has shifted from emphasizing content transmission toward facilitating learning experiences that empower students to become active participants in their own education.

Student-centered learning represents one of the primary pedagogical approaches supporting student agency. Unlike traditional teacher-centered instruction, student-centered learning positions learners as active contributors who assume responsibility for setting learning goals, participating in classroom discussions, and evaluating their own progress. Hoidn and Klemenčič (2021) argue that learner-centered education encourages students to develop independence, critical thinking, and reflective learning while enabling educators to function as facilitators rather than sole providers of

knowledge. Similarly, Treve (2024) demonstrates that student-centered approaches consistently promote deeper engagement and greater learner participation compared with conventional instructional models.

Authentic and active learning strategies further strengthen student agency by connecting academic learning with real-world contexts. Project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, collaborative problem-solving, and experiential learning encourage students to make decisions, investigate complex issues, and apply knowledge in meaningful situations. Dada, Laseinde, and Tartibu (2023) emphasize that student-centered learning tools designed around active participation significantly enhance learners' cognitive development and engagement. Likewise, Falkner and Stålbrandt (2023) argue that authentic learning scenarios strengthen learner agency by enabling students to assume ownership of knowledge construction while simultaneously developing competencies relevant to graduate employability.

Recent scholarship has also emphasized the importance of students as partners within higher education. Rather than positioning learners solely as recipients of educational services, partnership models encourage collaborative relationships between students and educators in curriculum design, teaching innovation, assessment, and institutional development. Liang and Matthews (2021), through a scoping review, demonstrate that students-as-partners initiatives increasingly promote shared responsibility, mutual learning, and collaborative decision-making across diverse higher education contexts. Similarly, Chadha et al. (2023) report that involving students as partners in redesigning teaching practices improves educational relevance while strengthening learner ownership and institutional responsiveness.

Curriculum co-creation has emerged as another educational practice supporting student agency. Co-creation involves students working alongside educators to design learning activities, assessment methods, and curriculum content, thereby recognizing students as legitimate contributors to educational development. Galpin et al. (2022) illustrate how values-led curriculum co-creation encourages meaningful collaboration between students and academic staff while fostering trust, inclusivity, and shared educational responsibility. Likewise, Ahmadi (2023) demonstrates that curriculum co-design strengthens student voice by reducing traditional power imbalances and encouraging learners to participate actively in shaping educational experiences.

Digital learning environments have further expanded opportunities for fostering student agency. Flexible online learning, blended education, collaborative digital platforms, and personalized learning technologies provide students with greater control over the pace, timing, and organization of learning activities. Otto et al. (2024) found that emerging digital practices developed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic have strengthened learner-centered environments by supporting collaboration, flexibility, and individualized learning pathways. However, the authors also emphasize that technology alone does not guarantee agency; rather, digital environments must be

intentionally designed to encourage active participation, reflection, and learner ownership.

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that student agency develops through educational practices that intentionally empower learners to participate actively, make informed decisions, collaborate with educators, and assume responsibility for their learning. Student-centered learning, authentic educational experiences, partnership models, curriculum co-creation, and thoughtfully designed digital environments collectively create conditions that enable agency to flourish, reinforcing learner-centered education as a central principle of contemporary higher education.

Educational Outcomes of Student Agency

A growing body of research demonstrates that student agency contributes to a wide range of educational outcomes extending beyond academic achievement. Learners who actively participate in educational processes are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of engagement, motivation, self-regulation, resilience, and lifelong learning capabilities. Rather than serving as an isolated educational objective, student agency functions as a catalyst that enhances the overall quality of learning experiences while preparing graduates to navigate increasingly complex academic and professional environments.

One of the most consistently reported outcomes of student agency is increased student engagement. Agency encourages learners to take ownership of their educational experiences by actively participating in classroom activities, setting personal learning goals, and monitoring their academic progress. Stenalt and Lassesen (2022) conclude that agency-oriented learning environments significantly improve engagement because students become more invested in learning processes when they perceive themselves as active contributors rather than passive recipients of instruction. This increased participation subsequently promotes deeper learning and stronger commitment to academic success.

Student agency is also closely associated with the development of self-regulated and self-directed learning. Gupta et al. (2024) argue that learner agency expands upon self-regulation by encouraging students not only to manage learning strategies but also to initiate learning opportunities, exercise intentional decision-making, and assume responsibility for educational outcomes. This broader perspective suggests that agency equips learners with adaptive capabilities that support continuous learning beyond formal educational settings. Such competencies are increasingly valued as higher education seeks to prepare graduates for rapidly changing professional environments requiring ongoing knowledge acquisition and independent problem-solving.

Another important outcome concerns learner empowerment and confidence. Hammond (2024) emphasizes that educational practices promoting learner empowerment strengthen students' confidence to express ideas, participate in discussions, and engage critically with academic content. Likewise, Doyle (2023) argues that learner-centered education enhances students' confidence by encouraging

active knowledge construction, reflective practice, and meaningful participation throughout the learning process. These experiences contribute to stronger academic self-efficacy and greater willingness to assume responsibility for learning.

Student agency also supports graduate employability by fostering transferable competencies valued across diverse professional contexts. Falkner and Stålbrandt (2023) demonstrate that authentic learning environments promoting agency help students develop collaboration, communication, critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving skills that are directly applicable to workplace settings. By encouraging learners to take initiative and engage actively with authentic challenges, agency-oriented educational practices strengthen graduates' readiness for increasingly dynamic labor markets.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that student agency generates educational outcomes extending well beyond classroom performance. Through enhanced engagement, self-regulation, learner empowerment, lifelong learning, and employability, agency contributes to the holistic development of students while supporting the broader mission of higher education to cultivate independent, reflective, and socially responsible graduates.

Future Directions of Student Agency in Higher Education

The reviewed literature indicates that student agency is evolving from a pedagogical concept into a strategic principle for institutional transformation in higher education. Rather than focusing solely on improving classroom participation, contemporary research increasingly positions agency as a foundation for creating learner-centered universities where students actively contribute to curriculum design, educational governance, assessment practices, and institutional innovation. As higher education continues to respond to social, technological, and economic change, fostering student agency is expected to become an essential component of sustainable educational development.

One emerging direction involves strengthening students' roles as active partners in educational decision-making. Traditional models of student participation often limit learners' involvement to consultation or feedback mechanisms. However, recent scholarship advocates partnership approaches that recognize students as collaborators capable of contributing to curriculum development, teaching innovation, quality assurance, and institutional policy. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) argue that genuine student partnership differs fundamentally from student representation because partnership involves shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making throughout educational processes. Similarly, Boyle et al. (2024) demonstrate that staff–student partnerships in curriculum design promote mutual trust, educational relevance, and stronger learner ownership while encouraging continuous institutional improvement.

Another important direction concerns the establishment of learner-centered institutional cultures. Developing student agency requires educational environments that consistently encourage autonomy, participation, inclusion, and reflective learning across academic programs rather than within isolated courses. Kartal and Bıkmaz (2025) propose a comprehensive framework for learner-centered higher education that integrates institutional policy, curriculum design, assessment, faculty development, and quality assurance into a coherent educational model. Such institutional approaches recognize that agency develops through consistent educational experiences supported by organizational commitment rather than through individual instructional practices alone.

Future research is also expected to examine the relationship between student agency and increasingly diverse learning environments. Flexible learning pathways, interdisciplinary education, blended learning, and international learning experiences require students to exercise greater independence while adapting to complex educational contexts. Otto et al. (2024) suggest that emerging digital learning environments offer significant opportunities for strengthening learner agency by supporting collaboration, flexibility, and personalized learning. Nevertheless, they emphasize that educational technologies should function as tools that facilitate meaningful participation rather than replacing intentional pedagogical design. Consequently, future investigations should explore how evolving educational environments can balance flexibility with appropriate guidance to sustain learner agency.

Assessment represents another area requiring continued development. Contemporary assessment practices are increasingly shifting from measuring learning outcomes toward supporting learning processes that encourage reflection, self-assessment, and continuous improvement. Arnold and Willis (2024) argue that assessment for learning becomes more effective when students actively participate in interpreting assessment criteria, monitoring progress, and making decisions regarding their own learning. Likewise, Willis and Cowie (2025) emphasize that learning environments and classroom interactions influence opportunities for learner agency during assessment, suggesting that assessment design should actively promote student ownership rather than passive compliance.

Finally, future scholarship should continue refining theoretical and methodological approaches for investigating student agency across diverse educational contexts. Although existing research has substantially advanced conceptual understanding, greater attention is needed to longitudinal studies, cross-cultural comparisons, standardized measurement instruments, and discipline-specific investigations that capture the dynamic nature of agency over time. Further research should also examine how student agency interacts with related constructs such as belonging, inclusion, resilience, graduate employability, and educational equity to provide a more comprehensive understanding of learner development within higher education.

Overall, the future of student agency extends beyond promoting individual learner autonomy toward transforming higher education into collaborative, inclusive, and learner-centered ecosystems. Universities that intentionally cultivate agency through partnership, curriculum innovation, learner-centered assessment, and institutional commitment will be better positioned to prepare graduates capable of independent learning, responsible decision-making, and lifelong adaptation in an increasingly complex global society.

3. | RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the conceptual development, educational practices, outcomes, and future directions of student agency in higher education. The review synthesizes contemporary scholarly evidence regarding student agency as a multidimensional educational construct that supports learner-centered education, active participation, and institutional transformation within universities.

The review followed the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework proposed by Page et al. (2021). The review process consisted of four systematic stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of relevant studies. Applying the PRISMA framework ensured transparency, methodological rigor, and reproducibility throughout the literature identification and selection process.

Relevant literature was identified through Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, ERIC, Google Scholar, Wiley Online Library, and SAGE Journals. The search strategy combined keywords including *student agency*, *learner agency*, *student-centered learning*, *students as partners*, *student voice*, *curriculum co-creation*, *learner empowerment*, *learner-centered education*, *assessment for learning*, and *higher education*. Only English-language publications published between 2021 and 2025 were included to capture recent developments in student agency research within higher education.

The inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and systematic literature reviews addressing student agency and learner-centered education in higher education. Studies examining conceptual frameworks, educational practices, student partnership, curriculum co-creation, learner-centered pedagogy, assessment, and educational outcomes were included. Editorials, opinion articles, duplicate publications, dissertations, and studies conducted outside higher education contexts were excluded from the review.

Data were synthesized using a framework-based thematic analysis, allowing the literature to be organized according to major conceptual dimensions of student agency rather than individual research findings. Five analytical themes emerged from the synthesis: (1) the evolution of student agency, (2) conceptual frameworks of student agency, (3) educational practices supporting student agency, (4) educational outcomes

of student agency, and (5) future directions of student agency in higher education. This analytical framework provides a comprehensive understanding of student agency from its theoretical foundations to its implications for institutional transformation and learner-centered educational practice.

4. | RESULTS

The thematic synthesis identified five interconnected themes that explain how student agency has been conceptualized, fostered, and implemented within contemporary higher education. Across the reviewed studies, student agency consistently emerged as a multidimensional educational construct that extends beyond learner autonomy to encompass active participation, shared responsibility, collaborative decision-making, and institutional engagement. The findings further demonstrate that educational environments intentionally designed around learner-centered principles provide greater opportunities for students to exercise agency, resulting in improved educational experiences and broader institutional transformation.

The reviewed literature indicates that student agency has evolved from a relatively narrow focus on learner autonomy toward a comprehensive educational framework emphasizing active participation and shared responsibility within higher education. Earlier perspectives primarily associated agency with students' capacity to regulate learning independently and make individual academic decisions. However, recent scholarship increasingly recognizes that agency develops through dynamic interactions between learners, educators, institutional structures, and learning environments, making it a relational rather than purely individual construct.

Stenalt and Lassesen (2022) demonstrate that research on student agency has expanded substantially over recent years, particularly within learner-centered educational reforms. Their systematic review concludes that agency contributes positively to learning quality by encouraging students to participate actively in educational processes rather than relying solely on instructor-directed learning. Similarly, Klemenčič (2023) argues that student agency should be understood as the intentional capacity of learners to influence educational experiences while simultaneously responding to institutional opportunities and constraints. This theoretical perspective shifts attention from individual independence toward collaborative educational participation.

Digital transformation has further influenced the evolution of student agency. Stenalt (2021) introduces the concept of digital student agency, emphasizing that learners increasingly exercise agency through online learning environments, digital collaboration, and technology-supported educational activities. Likewise, Jääskelä et al. (2021) propose student agency analytics as an innovative approach for examining learner participation through educational data, enabling universities to better understand how agency develops throughout students' academic journeys. These developments indicate that student agency has become increasingly intertwined with contemporary educational innovation and institutional development.

Overall, the reviewed evidence suggests that student agency has evolved into a central principle of learner-centered higher education. Rather than representing a single learner characteristic, agency is increasingly viewed as a dynamic educational process shaped through meaningful interactions between students, educators, curriculum, and institutional environments.

The reviewed studies consistently conceptualize student agency as a multidimensional construct integrating autonomy, intentional action, participation, empowerment, collaboration, and learner responsibility. Although individual studies emphasize different dimensions, they collectively describe agency as learners' capacity to actively shape educational experiences while interacting with institutional structures and educational practices.

Klemenčič (2023) provides one of the most comprehensive theoretical frameworks by conceptualizing agency as intentional action occurring within broader institutional contexts. This perspective emphasizes that agency is simultaneously influenced by learners' motivation, educational opportunities, organizational culture, and institutional support. Rather than treating agency as an isolated personal attribute, the framework highlights the reciprocal relationship between learners and educational environments.

Several studies also associate student agency with self-regulated and self-directed learning while emphasizing important conceptual distinctions. Gupta et al. (2024) argue that learner agency extends beyond self-regulation by incorporating proactive decision-making, learner ownership, and intentional participation throughout educational processes. Similarly, Lee (2024) conceptualizes learner agency within feedback processes, demonstrating that students actively construct learning by interpreting, applying, and responding to feedback rather than passively receiving instructional information.

Another recurring conceptual perspective emphasizes participation and partnership. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) distinguish between student representation and authentic student partnership, arguing that genuine agency requires meaningful involvement in educational decision-making. Likewise, Jääskelä et al. (2021) demonstrate that learning analytics can provide valuable insights into observable indicators of student agency, including participation patterns, learning behaviors, and educational decision-making. Collectively, these frameworks illustrate that student agency encompasses cognitive, behavioral, social, and institutional dimensions that collectively support learner-centered higher education.

The reviewed literature identifies learner-centered pedagogies as the primary educational practices fostering student agency. Student-centered learning environments encourage learners to assume responsibility for learning, participate actively in educational activities, collaborate with peers, and engage in reflective practice. Such environments shift instructional emphasis from knowledge transmission toward facilitating learner participation and meaningful educational experiences.

Hoidn and Klemenčič (2021) argue that learner-centered education provides conditions necessary for developing independence, critical thinking, and reflective learning. Likewise, Doyle (2023) emphasizes that students become more engaged when instructional approaches encourage active participation and learner ownership. Dada et al. (2023) similarly report that student-centered learning tools designed around active engagement significantly enhance cognitive development and educational participation.

The literature further highlights students-as-partners initiatives as an increasingly important practice supporting agency. Liang and Matthews (2021) found that partnership approaches encourage collaborative relationships between students and educators while strengthening shared responsibility for educational improvement. Chadha et al. (2023) similarly demonstrate that involving students as partners in teaching redesign promotes mutual learning, educational innovation, and stronger learner ownership.

Curriculum co-creation represents another educational practice consistently associated with student agency. Galpin et al. (2022) demonstrate that collaborative curriculum development strengthens learner participation while fostering trust and inclusivity within educational communities. Ahmadi (2023) further argues that curriculum co-design amplifies student voice and reduces traditional power imbalances between educators and learners. Together, these practices illustrate that student agency is most effectively cultivated through educational environments that intentionally empower students to participate in shaping their learning experiences.

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that student agency contributes to a broad range of positive educational outcomes extending beyond academic performance. Rather than functioning solely as an instructional approach, agency enhances learners' cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social development by encouraging students to assume responsibility for their educational experiences. As learners become active participants in decision-making and knowledge construction, they develop competencies that support academic success, personal growth, and lifelong learning.

Student engagement emerged as one of the most frequently reported outcomes associated with agency. Agency-oriented learning environments encourage students to participate actively in classroom discussions, collaborative projects, assessment activities, and curriculum development, resulting in deeper involvement in learning processes. Stenalt and Lassesen (2022) conclude that student agency significantly improves learning quality by promoting active engagement and increasing students' commitment to academic tasks. Similarly, Jessop (2023) argues that transforming assessment and feedback through agency-oriented practices encourages students to become active contributors to learning rather than passive recipients of evaluation, thereby strengthening sustained engagement throughout higher education.

Another important outcome concerns the development of self-regulated and self-directed learning. Student agency enables learners to establish academic goals, monitor

learning progress, evaluate performance, and adapt learning strategies according to changing educational demands. Gupta et al. (2024) demonstrate that learner agency provides a broader conceptual framework than self-regulation by emphasizing intentional action, learner ownership, and proactive participation in educational decision-making. These competencies enhance students' ability to learn independently while preparing them for lifelong learning beyond formal education.

Learner empowerment also represents a significant educational outcome of student agency. Educational environments that encourage student participation, voice, and collaborative decision-making strengthen learners' confidence, autonomy, and willingness to engage critically with academic challenges. Hammond (2024) argues that integrating learner empowerment into higher education pedagogy creates inclusive learning environments in which students are encouraged to express ideas, take initiative, and assume greater responsibility for educational outcomes. Likewise, Doyle (2023) emphasizes that learner-centered instructional practices increase students' confidence by allowing them to actively construct knowledge rather than relying exclusively on teacher-directed instruction.

Student agency further contributes to graduate employability and professional readiness by developing transferable competencies required in contemporary workplaces. Authentic learning environments encourage students to solve real-world problems, collaborate effectively, communicate ideas, and make independent decisions. Falkner and Stålbrandt (2023) demonstrate that authentic learning scenarios strengthen the relationship between higher education and graduate employability by enabling students to develop practical competencies through active participation. Such experiences foster adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills that are increasingly valued across professional contexts.

Collectively, these findings indicate that student agency produces multidimensional educational benefits extending beyond traditional academic achievement. Enhanced engagement, learner empowerment, self-regulated learning, lifelong learning capabilities, and graduate readiness collectively demonstrate that agency contributes to the holistic development of learners while supporting the broader objectives of learner-centered higher education.

The reviewed literature suggests that student agency is increasingly viewed as a strategic priority for the future development of higher education. While earlier studies primarily focused on learner autonomy and classroom participation, contemporary research emphasizes institutional transformation, collaborative governance, learner-centered assessment, and sustainable educational innovation. These emerging perspectives indicate that future higher education will require more comprehensive approaches to cultivating student agency across teaching, curriculum, assessment, and institutional policy.

One prominent direction involves strengthening student partnership within higher education institutions. Rather than limiting students' participation to course evaluations

or advisory roles, recent scholarship advocates meaningful collaboration between students and educators throughout curriculum development, educational innovation, and institutional governance. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) argue that authentic partnership requires students to become active contributors to educational decision-making rather than simply representing student perspectives. Similarly, Boyle et al. (2024) demonstrate that staff–student partnerships in curriculum design enhance educational quality while fostering mutual trust, shared responsibility, and institutional responsiveness.

Institutional transformation toward learner-centered education also represents an important future direction. Kartal and Bıkmaz (2025) propose comprehensive standards for learner-centered higher education that integrate curriculum design, instructional practice, assessment, faculty development, and institutional quality assurance. Their framework suggests that student agency should become embedded within institutional culture rather than being implemented through isolated classroom interventions. Such approaches recognize that sustainable agency development requires organizational commitment alongside pedagogical innovation.

Assessment reform constitutes another important area for future development. Contemporary higher education is increasingly moving away from assessment models focused exclusively on grading toward approaches that actively support learning and learner ownership. Arnold and Willis (2024) argue that assessment for learning becomes more meaningful when students participate in interpreting assessment criteria, monitoring progress, and making informed decisions regarding subsequent learning strategies. Likewise, Willis and Cowie (2025) demonstrate that learning spaces and classroom interactions significantly influence opportunities for students to exercise agency during assessment processes, highlighting the need for more participatory assessment designs.

Future research should also continue exploring student agency across increasingly diverse educational contexts. Flexible learning pathways, interdisciplinary education, internationalization, hybrid learning environments, and rapidly changing graduate competencies require students to exercise higher levels of independence and adaptability. Otto et al. (2024) suggest that emerging digital learning environments provide significant opportunities for strengthening learner agency through personalized learning and collaborative educational experiences. However, these environments require intentional pedagogical design to ensure that technology enhances rather than constrains meaningful learner participation.

Finally, further research is needed to strengthen theoretical and methodological understanding of student agency. Existing studies employ diverse conceptual definitions and measurement approaches, making comparisons across contexts challenging. Future investigations should therefore focus on longitudinal studies, cross-cultural comparisons, standardized measurement instruments, and discipline-specific applications that capture the dynamic and evolving nature of agency throughout higher

education. Greater attention should also be directed toward examining relationships between student agency, educational equity, inclusion, belonging, resilience, and graduate success.

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that student agency is evolving from a pedagogical concept into a guiding framework for learner-centered institutional transformation. Universities that intentionally cultivate agency through partnership, inclusive educational practices, curriculum innovation, learner-centered assessment, and supportive institutional cultures will be better positioned to prepare graduates capable of independent learning, responsible decision-making, and continuous adaptation throughout their personal and professional lives.

5. | DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic literature review demonstrate that student agency has become a foundational concept underpinning learner-centered transformation in higher education. Across the reviewed studies, agency consistently extends beyond learner autonomy to encompass intentional participation, collaborative decision-making, shared educational responsibility, and institutional engagement. Rather than functioning as an isolated learner characteristic, student agency emerges through interactions between students, educators, curriculum, assessment practices, and institutional environments. This broader conceptualization reflects the growing recognition that meaningful learning occurs when students actively shape, rather than merely experience, their educational journeys.

A central finding of this review is that student agency should be understood as a multidimensional educational construct rather than a synonym for learner autonomy. While early research frequently associated agency with independent learning and self-regulation, contemporary frameworks position agency as an integration of intentional action, learner ownership, participation, empowerment, and collaboration. Students are no longer viewed solely as consumers of educational services but increasingly as partners who contribute to curriculum development, assessment processes, and institutional innovation. This shift aligns with the broader movement toward learner-centered higher education, where educational quality depends not only on instructional effectiveness but also on meaningful learner participation.

The review also highlights that educational practices play a decisive role in fostering student agency. Student-centered learning, authentic learning experiences, curriculum co-creation, and partnership-based pedagogies consistently provide opportunities for learners to exercise responsibility and make meaningful educational decisions. These approaches create learning environments in which students actively construct knowledge, collaborate with peers and educators, and engage in reflective practice. Consequently, agency is not developed through autonomy alone but through educational environments intentionally designed to encourage participation, dialogue,

and shared responsibility. This finding reinforces the importance of pedagogical design as a critical determinant of learner agency.

Another significant finding concerns the relationship between student agency and educational outcomes. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that agency enhances student engagement, self-regulated learning, learner empowerment, academic confidence, and graduate employability. These outcomes suggest that agency contributes to holistic learner development rather than improving academic performance alone. By encouraging students to assume ownership of learning and participate actively in educational processes, agency supports the development of transferable competencies including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, adaptability, and lifelong learning. Such competencies are increasingly important as graduates navigate rapidly changing professional environments characterized by continuous learning and complex problem-solving.

The review further indicates that student agency is increasingly influencing institutional transformation within higher education. Universities are progressively adopting partnership models that involve students in curriculum design, quality assurance, educational governance, and institutional decision-making. These developments demonstrate that agency extends beyond classroom pedagogy to become an organizational principle supporting collaborative educational cultures. Institutions that value student voice and partnership are better positioned to develop responsive curricula, strengthen educational relevance, and create inclusive learning communities where students and educators share responsibility for educational improvement.

Despite these positive developments, several challenges continue to influence the implementation of student agency. The reviewed literature reveals considerable variation in conceptual definitions, pedagogical practices, and institutional approaches, limiting consistency across higher education contexts. In addition, traditional assessment systems, hierarchical institutional structures, and unequal power relationships may restrict opportunities for meaningful learner participation. Student agency therefore requires more than instructional innovation; it also depends upon institutional commitment, supportive organizational cultures, and assessment practices that encourage learner ownership rather than compliance. Addressing these challenges will be essential for ensuring that agency becomes embedded throughout higher education rather than remaining confined to isolated educational initiatives.

Overall, the findings suggest that student agency should be regarded as a strategic priority for higher education institutions seeking to prepare graduates for increasingly complex and uncertain futures. Developing learner agency enables students to become active participants in knowledge construction, responsible decision-makers, collaborative partners, and lifelong learners capable of adapting to changing social and professional environments. Future institutional efforts should therefore focus on strengthening learner-centered pedagogies, expanding student partnership, redesigning

assessment for learning, and embedding agency within institutional policy and educational culture.

6. | CONCLUSION

This study examined student agency in higher education through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the PRISMA 2020 framework. By synthesizing studies published between 2021 and 2025, the review explored the evolution of student agency, conceptual frameworks, educational practices, educational outcomes, and future research directions. The findings demonstrate that student agency has evolved into a multidimensional educational construct that supports learner-centered education, collaborative participation, and institutional transformation across higher education.

The review indicates that student agency extends beyond learner autonomy by integrating intentional participation, learner ownership, self-regulation, collaboration, empowerment, and shared educational responsibility. Educational practices such as student-centered learning, authentic learning experiences, students-as-partners initiatives, curriculum co-creation, and learner-centered assessment create environments that enable students to actively shape their educational experiences. These practices contribute to improved engagement, self-directed learning, learner empowerment, graduate employability, and lifelong learning capabilities.

The findings also emphasize that fostering student agency requires institutional commitment in addition to pedagogical innovation. Universities should develop learner-centered cultures that promote meaningful student participation in teaching, curriculum development, assessment, and educational governance. Strengthening student partnership and redesigning assessment practices will be essential for creating educational environments that encourage responsibility, critical reflection, and collaborative learning.

Overall, student agency represents a strategic foundation for the future of higher education. Universities that intentionally cultivate learner agency through inclusive educational practices, partnership-based approaches, and institutional transformation will be better positioned to prepare graduates capable of independent learning, responsible decision-making, continuous adaptation, and meaningful contribution to society. Future research should focus on longitudinal investigations of agency development, cross-cultural comparisons, standardized measurement frameworks, discipline-specific applications, and the relationships between student agency, educational equity, belonging, resilience, and graduate success.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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