

# Exploring the Relationship Between Year of Studies and Student Autonomy at Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia Kampus Keningau

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the relationship between the academic year and student autonomy at Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia Kampus Keningau. The main goals are: 1) to measure student autonomy in different academic years and programs, and 2) to discover if the year of study affects how autonomous students feel. We used a questionnaire called the Autonomous Learning Scale to gather information from students across four academic years and analyzed the data with statistical methods to compare and find connections. The findings show that students in the early years of their studies feel more autonomous, which means they feel more in control of their learning. However, this feeling of autonomy decreases as the students progress through the higher academic years. Based on these findings, it is recommended that educational strategies be revised to enhance support for autonomy across all academic years. Enhancing these strategies could enhance students' independent learning capabilities, thereby enriching their overall educational experience and preparing them more effectively for professional challenges.*

**Keywords:** Student Autonomy, Institut Pendidikan Guru

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## 1. Introduction

### Exploring the Definitions of Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning is defined by Holec (1981) as the ability of a learner to take charge of their own learning process, which involves setting goals, picking resources, and monitoring progress. Benson (2013) and Richards and Rodgers (2014) elaborate on this idea, highlighting the significance of learners actively engaging and making informed decisions regarding their learning strategies and resources. They highlight the cognitive, managerial, and content-related dimensions of autonomy. Littlewood (1996), Wenden (1998), and Little (2000) define autonomous learners as individuals who possess the ability and willingness to independently make choices regarding their learning, emphasizing their proactive and constructive attitude toward education. This method is advantageous for both acquiring language skills and promoting continuous learning. Autonomous learners, who are known to experience higher academic success and happiness as well as a lower likelihood of dropping out, benefit from this strategy (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013; Martin & Evans, 2018).

The adoption of autonomous learning represents a movement from pedagogies that prioritize the teacher to those that prioritize the student. This change in approach transforms educators into facilitators and co-learners, fostering independence and mutual support among learners (Lau, 2017; Morris, 2019). This shift in perspective is reflected in other terms, such as independent learning, which highlights the importance of active engagement and learner involvement in the design of the course (Benson, 2013; Lindström et al., 2021). Autonomous learning strategies promote learner autonomy by encouraging them to take initiative, make important decisions, and collaborate with others.

### **Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Keningau**

At Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia Kampus Keningau (IPGM Keningau), there has been a strong focus on teaching the students how to learn by themselves, a skill known as autonomous learning. As a higher learning institution, IPGM Keningau has a responsibility to help the students become independent learners. This is very important, especially for those training to be teachers. Moir (2010) has mentioned how important this skill is for students because it could help them handle their own learning and grow professionally. By learning how to manage their studies, these future teachers can adapt better to different teaching situations and keep improving their pedagogical knowledge and skills. In this study, we are looking into how much IPGM Keningau has helped the students with this skill in order to prepare them to be effective teachers who can adjust and learn throughout their teaching careers.

### **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of this quantitative research study are as follows:

- i. To measure the students' autonomy according to different groups defined by academic programs and year of study.
- ii. To explore the correlation between the year of studies and the level of autonomy, providing insights into how autonomy evolves as students progress through their training.

### **Problem Statement**

Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia Kampus Keningau is a key place for training future teachers in Malaysia. It is very important for these future teachers to develop strong skills in working and learning by themselves. This skill, called learner autonomy, helps them adapt to different teaching environments. Some teachers may work in remote areas, while others might teach in well-established schools in cities. They need to handle these situations on their own.

However, it is not clear if IPGM Kampus Keningau's current courses, activities and assessments give enough support for students to develop the autonomous learning skill. If students do not learn how to be autonomous, they may face difficulties in their teaching careers, especially in challenging environments. Additionally, very few studies have looked into this issue in Malaysia, especially in the context of teacher training institutes in the current setting.

This study will investigate whether IPGM Kampus Keningau is doing enough to help its students become autonomous. It will check if the programs and tests at the institute encourage students to learn and work independently. The results of this study will help improve how teachers are trained at IPGM Kampus Keningau, making sure they are ready for any teaching situation they might find themselves in.

## 2. Literature Review

### **Autonomous Learning, Deep Approach and Surface Approach**

The emphasis on learner autonomy has shifted the pedagogies across the globe from teacher-centered to more learner-centered approaches. The shift would give more space for learners to take charge of their own learning. Autonomy in learning not only facilitates more personalized and effective educational experiences, but also prepares learners for lifelong learning processes. As the educational landscape evolves, understanding and implementing strategies to promote learner autonomy would play an important role in shaping future educational practices. This holistic approach ensures that education is not just about transferring knowledge but also about developing empowered and capable individuals who can navigate their learning and personal growth independently.

Learner autonomy means learners are able take charge of their own learning. There are a few important parts in this idea: students feel responsible for their own success, which is called an ‘internal locus of control’ (Macaskill & Denovan, 2011). The learners also have confidence in their abilities to achieve their goals, which is also known as self-efficacy. Additionally, they take the lead in their learning activities, which is called self-regulation (Macaskill & Denovan, 2011). Autonomous students also try to deeply understand the content of the learning, rather than just memorizing it. This is the difference between a “deep” approach and a “surface” approach (Thomas et al., 2015). A deep approach to learning means focusing on the meaning of what is learned, testing the material against general knowledge, everyday experience, and knowledge from other fields (Jackson, 2012). Students seek principles to organize information. In contrast, a surface approach means capturing material in total without truly understanding it, like copying a diagram without understanding its explanation (Jackson, 2012).

In tertiary education, learner autonomy is crucial because it aligns with the expectation that university students should be different from school pupils by actively pursuing their own educational goals within the higher education setting (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Scott, Furnell, Murphy, & Goulder, 2015; Thomas, Hockings, Ottaway, & Jones, 2015). Autonomous learning encourages students to engage deeply with their studies, promoting a deeper understanding and long-term retention of knowledge, as opposed to simply memorizing information for exams. This deep approach to learning fosters critical thinking and the ability to apply knowledge in various contexts, which are essential skills in higher education and beyond. However, there are two main ideas about whether students develop autonomy during their university studies. One idea is that autonomy is a fixed trait that changes little over time. The other idea is that autonomy can be developed through education, meaning that universities can play a significant role in fostering autonomous learning behaviors in students.

### **Learner Autonomy/Self-Regulated Learning as a Learning Theory**

Over the last two decades, the concept of learner autonomy has gained significant attention as a crucial goal in language education worldwide. Palfreyman and Smith (2003) provide several compelling reasons why it is beneficial for language learners to develop independence in their learning journey. They argue that learners need to take active responsibility for their own educational paths. This involves seizing learning opportunities both within the classroom and in everyday life, as autonomy is considered a fundamental human right. Furthermore, they emphasize that learning independently is often more effective and enriching than traditional, teacher-led instruction. This perspective underscores the importance of fostering an educational environment where students are encouraged to explore, experiment, and take control of their learning experiences.

Benson (2013) contributes to the discussion by categorizing the concept of learner autonomy into three broad perspectives. The first is the "technical" perspective, which focuses on the skills and methods required for learners to study independently. This includes various learning strategies, such as metacognitive, cognitive, and social techniques, as identified by Oxford (1990). These strategies help learners understand and manage their own learning processes. The second perspective is "psychological," which highlights the importance of learners' attitudes and cognitive abilities that enable autonomous learning. This viewpoint suggests that fostering a learner's mindset and mental capacity is crucial for developing independence. The third, the "political" perspective, addresses the empowerment and emancipation of learners through education. It argues that autonomy not only enhances educational outcomes but also contributes to the broader goal of empowering individuals within society.

The articles written by Little (2004), and Dang (2012) discuss various theoretical models that explain how learner autonomy can be developed and understood. Learner autonomy means students take control of their own learning process (Little, 2004; Dang, 2012). The models show different ways this control can be achieved and managed. The first type of models focuses on stages of development. Nunan's (1997) model outlines five stages: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence. In this model, learners gradually move from being aware of learning goals to creating their own goals and connecting classroom learning to the real world. This step-by-step progression helps learners become more autonomous over time. Littlewood's (1999) model distinguishes between reactive and proactive autonomy. Reactive autonomy involves learners organizing their activities after receiving instructions, while proactive autonomy allows learners to set their own directions and goals.

The second type of models focuses on areas of control. Littlewood (1996) described three roles of autonomy: as a communicator, a learner, and a person. This model shows how autonomy is linked to language use, learning strategies, and personal development. Macaro's (1997) model includes language competence, language learning competence, and choice and action. This model highlights that learners need to master language rules, use those skills in different contexts, and make decisions about their learning. Benson (2013) proposed a model with three areas: learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content. Effective control in one area supports improvement in others, showing how interconnected these aspects are. These models relate to learner autonomy by explaining how students can gradually take more control over their learning. They highlight the importance of developing skills in different areas and show that autonomy is not just about working alone but also about making informed choices and managing one's learning effectively. Teachers play a crucial role in guiding and supporting this process, helping students to become more autonomous learners.

## **Past Studies on Learning Autonomy**

### **a. Perceptions about Learning Autonomy**

Henri, Morrell, and Scott (2018) studied how students felt about their autonomy as they progressed through their courses. They surveyed 636 students over two years using the Autonomous Learning Scale. Their results showed that students did not feel more autonomous over time. They called this the "moving goalpost" hypothesis. This meant that even if students became more autonomous, they did not notice it because the course expectations kept rising. The study suggested that to develop independent graduates, it was important to give students opportunities to act autonomously and build confidence.

### b. Autonomy and Academic Performance

The study by Şakrak-Ekin and Balçıkanlı (2019) looks at how learner autonomy affects success in learning English. They studied 267 Turkish university students using a survey. They measured autonomy with the Learner Autonomy Profile-Short Form and looked at the students' GPAs. The study found that students who were more autonomous did better academically. It also found that female students had higher autonomy than male students. The authors suggest that teaching programs should help students become more autonomous to improve their learning. They also recommend more research on other factors that affect learner autonomy and academic success.

### c. Factors Affecting Autonomy

The study by Tran and Vuong (2022) explores factors affecting learner autonomy in English learning at Van Lang University. Using a mixed methods approach, the researchers surveyed 233 English-major students and conducted focus group interviews. The study found that both internal and external factors influence learner autonomy. Internal factors include students' motivation, language skills, and learning strategies. External factors encompass teachers' roles, learning materials, and the learning environment. The study highlights that motivated students with good language skills and effective learning strategies are more autonomous. Teachers who provide guidance and engaging learning materials also support learner autonomy.

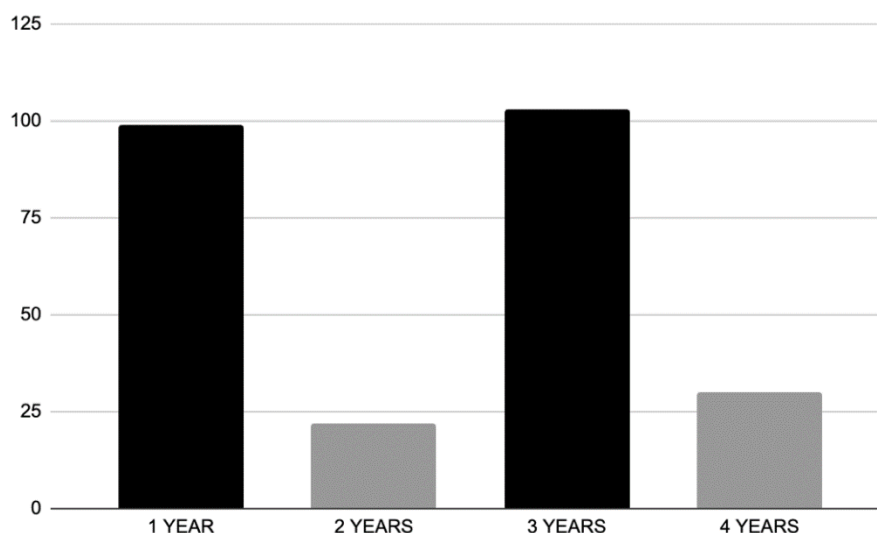
## 3. Methodology

### Research Design

This research employed a quantitative approach to investigate the development of student autonomy in the context of IPGM Kampus Keningau, a teacher training institution in Malaysia. The design was cross-sectional, collecting data at a single point in time from students across different academic years.

### Participants

The participants in this study were selected from the students at Institut Pendidikan Guru Malaysia Kampus Keningau, Sabah. The group consisted of 254 students distributed across four academic years, representing a variety of educational programs designed to prepare future educators. The breakdown of participants is as follows:



**Figure 1: Distribution of survey responses from bachelor's degree students at IPGK Keningau, Sabah, divided by year of study**



**First-Year Students:** This group includes 99 students enrolled in several key programs including Bahasa Melayu (49 students), Pendidikan Islam (18 students), and Pendidikan Seni Visual (19 students). These first-year students are beginning their professional training and represent the initial phase of developing educational autonomy.

**Second-Year Students:** There are 22 students in this group, with 12 in Bahasa Melayu, 8 in Pendidikan Seni Visual, and 2 in Reka Bentuk dan Teknologi. These students are transitioning from foundational studies to more specialized educational paths, potentially reflecting different levels of autonomy as they gain more academic experience.

**Third-Year Students:** The largest group with 103 students, distributed between Bahasa Melayu (43 students) and Reka Bentuk dan Teknologi (36 students). At this stage, students are expected to exhibit increased autonomy as they approach the culmination of their training.

**Fourth-Year Students:** Comprising 30 students in more specialized programs such as Bahasa Kadazandusun (8 students), Reka Bentuk dan Teknologi (13 students), and Sejarah (9 students). As the most senior students, they are anticipated to have the highest levels of autonomy, preparing for their imminent roles as educators.

This study focuses on these diverse groups to explore how autonomy develops over the course of their education at IPGM Keningau. It investigates the correlation between the year of study and the level of student autonomy, crucial for understanding the dynamics of teacher training and professional development in a Malaysian context.

### **Instrument**

The primary instrument for data collection was the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS), which was designed and developed by Macaskill and Taylor (2010). The questionnaire consists of 12 items that measure the autonomy aspects, such as engagement with new learning, perseverance, independence in information gathering, openness to new methods, and personal responsibility in learning. Participants rated their agreement with each statement using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

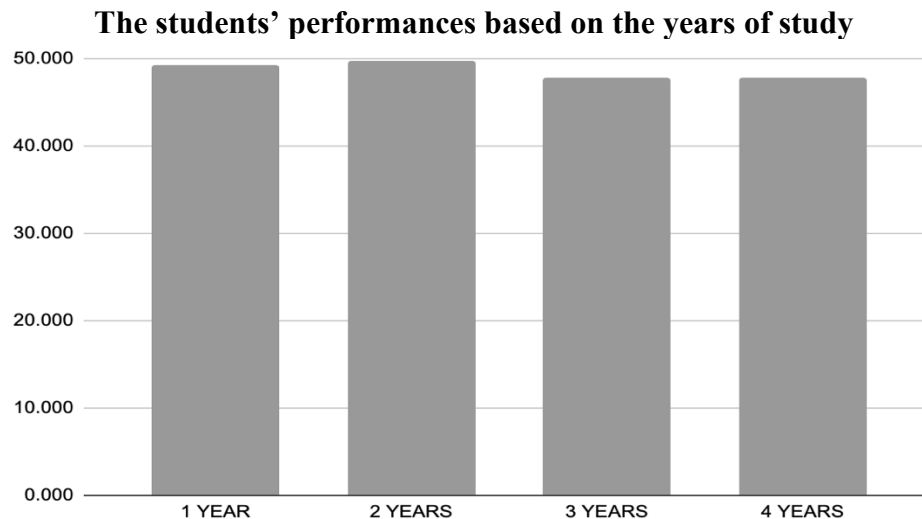
To check how reliable our scale for measuring student autonomy is, we calculated Cronbach's Alpha. We got a value of 0.705, which is considered acceptable. According to Taber (2018) and Tavakol & Dennick (2011), a Cronbach's Alpha between 0.7 and 0.95 is good. We also found a standardized alpha of 0.7403, showing consistent results. Our G6(smc) value was 0.8084, indicating strong reliability, and the average inter-item correlation was 0.192, within the acceptable range of 0.15 to 0.50. These results suggest that our scale is reliable for measuring student autonomy at IPGM Kampus Keningau. Our findings match well with those of Macaskill & Taylor (2010), who reported a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.78 for their Autonomous Learning Scale. This consistency supports the use of our scale in studying student autonomy effectively.

### **Data Analysis Method**

Quantitative data from the ALS were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the overall levels of autonomy among students. To address the first research objective, autonomy scores were compared across different groups using analysis of variance (ANOVA) to assess any significant differences between academic years and programs. For the second objective, correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between students' year of study and their autonomy levels. This analysis helped identify whether autonomy increased,

decreased, or remained stable as students progressed through their academic careers at IPGM Kampus Keningau.

#### 4. Findings



**Figure 2: Representation of Means across the Years of Study**

In assessing student autonomy across different academic years at IPGM Kampus Keningau, both mean scores and standard deviations provide crucial insights. The mean scores reflect the average level of perceived autonomy, while the standard deviations reveal the variability or consistency of these perceptions among students within each year. For first-year students, the mean autonomy score was 49.232 with a standard deviation of 4.766. This moderately high variability alongside a relatively lower mean score compared to the second year—but higher than in subsequent years—suggests that while first-year students generally feel autonomous, there is considerable variability in their experiences. This variation might be due to the transition and adjustment phase as new students adapt to the educational environment and expectations at IPGM.

In contrast, the second year shows a slightly higher mean autonomy score of 49.727 and the lowest standard deviation of 4.516 among all the years. This indicates not only a higher perceived level of autonomy but also greater consistency in these perceptions across the student body. The increase in mean and reduction in variability could reflect effective teaching strategies and curriculum design that particularly support autonomy during this phase of the educational program. The third and fourth years demonstrate a noticeable decline in mean autonomy scores (47.806 and 47.800, respectively) with an increase in standard deviations (4.895 and 4.951, respectively). This pattern suggests a reduction in perceived autonomy and an increase in the variability of students' experiences as they progress in their studies. This may be due to more demanding courses, increased academic pressures, or a curriculum that provides less flexibility and fewer opportunities for autonomous learning as students move toward the completion of their program.

#### **Analysis of the Correlation Between Year of Studies and Level of Autonomy**

In our study at IPGM Kampus Keningau, we aimed to explore how the level of student autonomy varies across different academic years. The results provide a fascinating glimpse into the experiences of students at various stages of their education.

From the data, we observed that first and second-year students report higher levels of autonomy, with mean scores of 49.232 and 49.727, respectively. This suggests that students in the earlier years feel more in control of their learning and are perhaps more engaged with their studies. It's likely that during these initial years, students are still adjusting to the college environment and enjoying the relatively flexible and supportive nature of their coursework.

However, as the students get into their third and fourth years, the mean autonomy scores drop to 47.806 and 47.800, respectively. This decline indicates that students perceive less autonomy as they move towards the later stages of their program. One possible explanation for this trend could be the increased academic demands and more structured coursework that typically characterize the later years of study. As the curriculum becomes more rigorous, students might feel they have less freedom to direct their own learning, which could contribute to a sense of decreased autonomy.

Moreover, the increasing standard deviations in the third and fourth years which are respectively 4.895 and 4.951 suggest that there is more variability in how students experience autonomy at these stages. This means that while some students may still feel quite autonomous, others may struggle with the higher expectations and reduced flexibility, leading to a more diverse range of experiences. This variability highlights the need for more personalized support and resources to help all students feel empowered and capable of managing their studies independently.

In summary, our findings indicate a slight negative correlation between the year of study and the level of autonomy among students. While first and second-year students generally feel more autonomous, this perception tends to decline in the third and fourth years. The increased variability in later years underscores the importance of addressing individual student needs to maintain and enhance their sense of autonomy throughout their academic journey. By understanding these trends, educators and administrators at IPGM Kampus Keningau can develop strategies to better support students at all stages, ensuring they feel confident and autonomous in their learning.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the correlation between the year of studies and the level of autonomy among students at IPGM Kampus Keningau. Our findings reveal significant insights into how student autonomy varies across different academic years, and these results can be contextualized within existing literature on student autonomy and educational practices.

### a. Higher Autonomy in Early Years

Our study found that first and second-year students reported higher levels of autonomy, with mean scores of 49.232 and 49.727, respectively. This is consistent with findings from previous research which suggests that students in the early stages of their academic journey often experience a greater sense of autonomy. For instance, Macaskill & Taylor (2010) developed the Autonomous Learning Scale and reported a coefficient alpha of 0.78, indicating good internal consistency. Their findings support the idea that early exposure to autonomous learning practices can foster a strong sense of independence among students.

### b. Decline in Autonomy in Later Years

Conversely, our results indicate a decline in perceived autonomy among third and fourth-year students, with mean scores dropping to 47.806 and 47.800, respectively. This trend is echoed



in studies by Tavakol & Dennick (2011), who discuss how increasing academic demands and structured curricula can impact students' perceptions of their autonomy. As students advance in their studies, the complexity and intensity of coursework often increase, potentially limiting opportunities for self-directed learning. This aligns with our observation of higher variability in autonomy scores (SD of 4.895 and 4.951) in the later years, suggesting that students' experiences of autonomy become more diverse as they progress through their academic programs.

### **c. Implications of Variability**

The increased standard deviations in the third and fourth years highlight the diverse range of experiences regarding autonomy. This finding underscores the importance of individualized support to help students navigate the challenges of advanced coursework while maintaining a sense of control over their learning. Taber (2018) emphasized the necessity of personalized educational strategies to address the varying needs of students, particularly as they encounter more demanding academic environments. By offering tailored support and flexible learning opportunities, educators can help mitigate the decline in autonomy and ensure that all students continue to feel empowered in their studies.

## **6. Recommendations for Practice**

Based on our findings and the supporting literature, several recommendations emerge for enhancing student autonomy at IPGM Kampus Keningau. First, it is crucial to maintain and build on the high levels of autonomy observed in the early years by integrating similar autonomous learning practices into the curriculum of later years. This could involve incorporating more project-based learning, opportunities for student choice, and fostering a culture that values independence and self-directed learning. Moreover, providing targeted support and resources for third and fourth-year students can help address the increased variability in autonomy experiences. This might include mentorship programs, academic counseling, and workshops focused on developing autonomous learning skills tailored to the specific challenges of advanced coursework.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, our study highlights a slight negative correlation between the year of study and the level of autonomy among students at IPGM Kampus Keningau. While first and second-year students enjoy higher levels of autonomy, this perception declines in the third and fourth years. These findings align with existing research and suggest that educational strategies should be adjusted to support student autonomy throughout all academic years. By understanding and addressing these trends, educators can better support students' development as autonomous learners, ultimately enhancing their overall educational experience.

### **Recommendations**

One of the limitations noted in this study pertains to the unequal distribution of participants across the different cohorts. This disproportionality may have influenced the results, particularly given that smaller cohorts might be more susceptible to variations from individual scores. Future research would benefit from ensuring an equal or near-equal number of participants from each cohort to achieve a more balanced representation. Such a methodological revision might lead to different findings, offering a potentially clearer picture of the understanding of social constructivist approaches across academic years.

The absence of a pilot test for the questionnaire might have resulted in certain overlooked biases or misinterpretations. While the questionnaire sought to gauge the students' understanding, it's possible that some questions may not have captured the essence of the students' real comprehension levels as effectively as intended. It is recommended that future studies engage in a rigorous pilot testing phase to ensure that the instrument used is both valid and reliable. This step would also ensure that questions are clear, appropriate, and meaningful in assessing the desired constructs.

The findings from this study, specific to IPGM Keningau, may not necessarily reflect the understanding levels of students at other teacher training institutes. Differences in curricula, teaching methodologies, institutional cultures, and student demographics can result in varying comprehension levels of social constructivist principles. Therefore, while these results provide valuable insights into the understanding levels at IPGM Keningau, they cannot be broadly generalized to all teacher training institutes. It is advisable for similar studies to be conducted across various institutes to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the situation at a larger scale.

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