

## BEYOND TRADITIONAL LEARNING: A HEUTAGOGICAL APPROACH TO ONLINE LEARNING FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

Interest in online learning has grown over the past decades, with the heutagogical approach gaining traction, especially in doctoral programs requiring learner autonomy. This study aims to explore doctoral students' lived experiences with the heutagogical approach in online learning, including their perceptions of its effectiveness and their interpretation of learning outcomes and quality assurance processes. Using a phenomenological design, data were collected from graduate students at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia, through in-depth interviews and classroom observations over one semester. Observations revealed three key phases: (1) design (students co-developed learning objectives and project scopes aligned with their dissertations); (2) development (students conducted self-directed research with weekly discussions and iterative feedback); and (3) implementation (peer evaluations and final project submission for formal review). Students perceived the approach as effective, recognizing its flexibility and autonomy, while also acknowledging challenges such as demands for self-regulation, technical constraints, and limited face-to-face interaction. The approach proved effective in balancing independent learning with academic achievement, reflected in scientific publications and intellectual property rights. This study highlights the heutagogical approach as a viable pedagogical model for doctoral online learning, emphasizing the critical balance between learner autonomy, structured guidance, and institutional support to ensure sustained academic excellence.

**Keywords:** Heutagogy approach, online learning, doctoral education, self-directed learning, phenomenological research.

## INTRODUCTION

Digital advancements are reshaping education through pedagogical transformation, fundamentally changing how students' access, engage with, and experience learning. Over the past decade, this process has undergone substantial shifts, marked by a growing preference for internet-based and computer-assisted learning modalities (Patel et al., 2014). This transition has been driven by the development of e-learning tools, which offer various features that enhance convenience, such as access to recorded lectures, flexible revision opportunities, the ability to learn from any location, and improved comprehension through the review of previous videos and presentations (Patel et al., 2014; Syahbrudin et al., 2024). Additionally, the global demand for online education has also risen significantly (Fidalgo et al., 2020; Ortagus, 2017). A longitudinal study in the United States by Allen and Seaman (2013) revealed that interest in online education among universities and colleges continues to grow at a faster pace than that of traditional campus-based programs. The covid-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift, normalizing distance education as a widely accepted instructional format. This trend reflects the inherent strengths of online education, particularly its emphasis on flexibility, accessibility, and convenience in balancing personal, academic, and professional commitments (Mather & Sarkans, 2018; Syahbrudin et al., 2024).

Recent scholarship has increasingly associated online and blended learning environments with the principles of heutagogy, or self-directed learning (Dewantara & Dibia, 2021; Dewantara & Tantri, 2022). This self-directed learning is the basis for the heutagogy approach. Heutagogy positions learners at the center of the educational experience, while educators serve primarily as facilitators who provide guidance and resources (Blaschke, 2017; Blaschke & Hase, 2016; Moore, 2020). In this approach, learners are encouraged to define their own learning goals based on personal interests and needs (Agonacs & Matos, 2019; Handayani et al., 2021) and to determine how best to achieve them (Dewantara & Dibia, 2021), including the design of individualized learning strategies (Wehmeyer et al., 2017).

Such an approach aligns closely with the pedagogical requirements of doctoral education, where learner autonomy is critical. In programs such as the Doctoral Program in Technology and Vocational Education and the Doctoral Program in Educational Research and Evaluation at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia, independent study is integral to the curriculum. In these contexts, lecturers provide general guidance regarding course outcomes, while students are granted autonomy to determine the projects they wish to develop, the knowledge areas they intend to master, the strategies they choose to employ, and the final outputs they aim to achieve. These practices demonstrate that, either consciously or unconsciously, they have implemented a heutagogical approach to learning. Furthermore, previous findings support the relevance of heutagogy for adult learners in online environments, particularly for doctoral candidates, as it provides greater flexibility and fosters learner independence (Moore, 2020; Russell, 2021).

Given the increasing emphasis on learner autonomy in doctoral programs, this study seeks to critically examine the implementation and effectiveness of the heutagogical approach in online settings, particularly in relation to learning outcomes and their quality control. Although heutagogy offers significant flexibility, existing evidence suggests that flexibility alone may not guarantee successful learning outcomes without proper contextualization and quality assurance mechanisms (Abdullah & Mohamad Said, 2022). Grounded in a phenomenological perspective, this study aims to explore: (1) how doctoral students experience the application of the heutagogical approach in online learning environments; (2) how they perceive its effectiveness in supporting their academic development; and (3) how they interpret the quality and effectiveness of their learning outcomes, including their experiences with the processes intended to ensure those outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Heutagogy Learning Approach

Heutagogy, or self-determined learning, is an instructional paradigm that represents a significant evolution beyond self-directed learning (SDL). Originally conceptualized by Blaschke (2012, 2017); Blaschke & Hase (2016); Gillaspay & Vasilica (2021); Handayani et al. (2021), heutagogy emphasizes learner agency, metacognitive reflection, and capability development, which together form the foundation for autonomous, personalized, and future-focused education. While SDL enables learners to manage their learning within pre-existing curricular goals (Garrison, 1997), heutagogy goes further by granting learners the authority to define what, how, and why they learn—aligning learning trajectories with personal relevance and professional aspirations (Blaschke & Hase, 2016; Lynch et al., 2021), thus serving as a powerful tool for promoting meaningful student activity driven by autonomy and personal relevance (Hamdan et al., 2021). This concept aligns with the postulates proposed by Bykasova et al. (2021), which describe heutagogy as goal- or outcome-oriented learning, and students are required to be active in learning and continue learning, while the teacher plays a role in organizing learning.

Double-loop learning in heutagogy fosters metacognitive reflection, enabling learners to understand and refine how they learn—promoting greater autonomy and self-directed learning (Blaschke, 2017; Gillaspay & Vasilica, 2021). This contrasts sharply with traditional pedagogical models, which are teacher-directed, andragogical models, which focus primarily on adult learners' motivation (Knowles, 1984). In heutagogy, learners become architects of their own educational experiences, taking responsibility for designing learning goals, choosing relevant content, and evaluating their own progress (Mohamad et al., 2020), making it a truly learner-centered instructional strategy or approach (Moore, 2020).

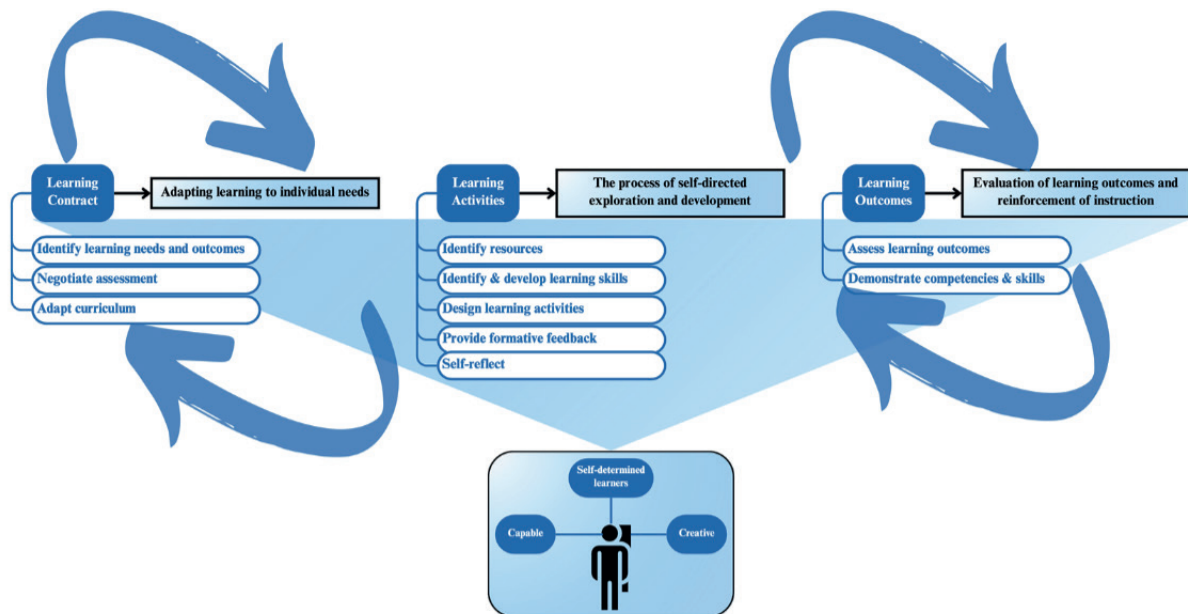
Three core principles distinguish heutagogy from SDL and other conventional learning approaches. First, it emphasizes capability over competence, prioritizing learners' ability to adapt and apply knowledge in unfamiliar and evolving contexts rather than merely performing established tasks (Blaschke, 2012). Second, heutagogical learning is non-linear and co-constructed, with learning pathways emerging organically through exploration, collaboration, reflection, and relevance to each learner's needs and context (Gillaspay & Vasilica, 2021; Rahayu et al., 2021). Third, it promotes complete learner agency, in which the educator serves not as an authority figure but as a facilitator who creates an enabling environment for project-based inquiry, goal setting, self-assessment, and peer feedback (Shpeizer & Glassner, 2020).

This approach holds particular relevance for doctoral education in online settings, where learners are expected to demonstrate high levels of intellectual independence, adaptability, and critical thinking. Heutagogy offers a framework that aligns with the growing need for flexible, authentic, and lifelong learning, while also preparing learners to engage in complex problem-solving and knowledge creation. Its emphasis on learner autonomy, reflective practice, and capability development makes heutagogy not only a responsive pedagogical model for the digital age but also a strategic foundation for fostering academic excellence and professional readiness in a dynamic, knowledge-driven society (Carpenter & Green, 2017; Handayani et al., 2021; Mohamad et al., 2020).

### Practical Steps in the Heutagogy Approach

Several scholars have proposed practical steps for implementing heutagogical approach effectively. Shpeizer and Glassner (2020) outlined two key practices: (1) cultivating curiosity and expanding learning choices, and (2) fostering a dialogical critical thinking environment. In the first practice, educators introduce core ideas or key issues and articulate the intended learning outcomes of a course. This initial exposure enables learners to explore and construct their own learning pathways based on individual interests and aspirations. In the second practice, students engage in discussions about their learning goals, motivations, beliefs, challenges, and obstacles. They are also encouraged to reflect critically on their attitudes, preferences, and decision-making processes, ultimately building confidence in their learning achievements.

Meanwhile Blaschke and Hase (2016) formulated more detailed practical steps in the heutagogy approach. In general, two things need to be done when you want to use a heutagogy approach: understanding the design process and developing a heutagogy learning environment. There are three main steps in understanding the design process for the heutagogy shown in (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Heutagogical design process (adapted and visualized by the author from Blaschke & Hase, 2016)

The first step is to define the learning contract. Students and teachers work together during this phase to identify learning needs and outcomes. What do students want to learn/achieve? What should be the result of the learning experience (learning outcome)? In addition, learning outcomes related to the demands of the institutional environment also need to be considered. Next, students and teachers negotiate the assessment process. How will learning be assessed, and who will assess it? The available curriculum must also be adapted to learning outcomes and during the learning process. After that, create and agree on learning contracts.

The following process is the development of learning activities through challenge, autonomy or freedom, and support. So, the teacher needs to create challenging but achievable and valuable tasks, give students as much autonomy as possible in completing them, and don't forget to provide support based on solid and collaborative relationships. After reaching an agreement regarding the learning design and the tasks to be completed, choose which media or tools can be used to support learning activities. During this phase of the process, the teacher must support students in defining activities for learning, provide constructive and ongoing feedback, and provide opportunities for students to reflect on the new knowledge gained and the learning process.

The last step addresses the assessment of learning outcomes and the identification of newly acquired capabilities. Here, students are positioned as the primary evaluators of their learning, in line with the learner-centered ethos of heutagogy. Achievement of learning outcomes is measured against the original learning contracts, emphasizing both the fulfillment of negotiated goals and the learners' reflective understanding of their own development.

### Online Learning Process with Heutagogy Approach

There are three phases in online learning with a heutagogy approach, as modified from (Russell, 2021) below.

#### Phase 1: Design

This phase focuses on the design of a feasible study and develops an initial overview document. In this case, the alignment between the gaps in the problem to be resolved, the topic, the conceptual framework, the methodology and the significance or merits of the study. In practice, educators or mentors engage in synchronous online weekly design meetings to allow students to plan their study (project) overview principles with the support of the mentor's expertise as a more knowledgeable person. Mentors and students can share

their screens, actively reviewing and revising documents or projects to be worked on. In this phase, another essential thing that mentors need to do is to provide access to various resources to facilitate independent and continuous learning and encourage learners to take full responsibility for their learning.

This active collaboration contributes to creating a shared vision. It also lays the foundation for mentor and learner collaboration during the learning process. During this phase, the mentor poses questions to draw potential ideas from the student's project and provides an opportunity to focus on the problem area and ascertain whether students can conceptualize research as it might be in the field. This discussion is critical to move them towards a process orientation of project completion.

### **Phase 2: Development**

During this phase, the learner conveys the project's progress, and the mentor provides ongoing feedback. This interaction should also be carried out synchronously online at certain times according to a mutually agreed schedule.

### **Phase 3: Implementation**

The final stage is implementing the study and writing the results. During this phase, the mentor discusses each procedural step of implementing project development and provides feedback at each step. The interactions in this phase are also carried out synchronously online and designed so students can discuss their learning outcomes to practice advanced critical and evaluative thinking skills. The main focus of this interaction is on the students' thinking regarding the findings or results at each step of project completion and analysis.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a phenomenological approach, which is well-suited for capturing the shared lived experiences of individuals regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). The phenomenon under investigation was the implementation of a heutagogical approach in online learning among doctoral students, focusing on three key aspects: (1) how students experience and interpret learning autonomy within a heutagogical setting; (2) their perceptions of the effectiveness of this model in supporting academic achievement; and (3) the quality of learning outcomes, including the mechanisms used to ensure their credibility.

Data were collected through direct observation and in-depth interviews with students enrolled in the "Measurement and Testing Practice" course, part of the Doctoral Program in Educational Research and Evaluation at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This course was deliberately selected for its intentional use of heutagogical principles, including collaborative goal setting, project-based assessment, learner reflection, and peer feedback. Nineteen doctoral students from the 2021 cohort, all specializing in measurement, participated in the course. The one-semester (14 weeks) course was conducted using Russell (2021) heutagogical online learning framework, comprising three sequential phases: design, development, and implementation.

In the design phase, students and the instructor collaboratively planned synchronous sessions to establish learning objectives aligned with each student's dissertation focus, identify expected outcomes, and define technical guidelines for tracking progress. Curated digital resources were provided to support self-directed exploration and individual commitment. During the development phase, students worked independently on projects and submitted weekly progress reports. These reports were reviewed in peer and instructor feedback sessions, fostering reflection, dialogue, and iterative improvement. The implementation phase focused on peer evaluation of the final projects. The instructor primarily served as a facilitator, promoting learner autonomy while ensuring alignment with academic standards.

Throughout the semester, one of the researchers acted as a participant-observer in the course, enabling insider access to patterns of learner engagement, autonomy, and institutional support systems. Observations concentrated on two domains: (1) the actual implementation of the heutagogical approach in online learning, with a particular emphasis on students' autonomy in setting learning goals, selecting strategies, and

managing their own learning processes; and (2) the perceived effectiveness of learning outcomes, including the mechanisms employed to ensure their validity and relevance. This involvement enabled systematic observation of student performance, engagement, self-regulatory practices, and institutional strategies to maintain learning quality.

To mitigate potential bias and enhance the credibility of findings resulting from the researcher's dual role, several strategic measures were employed: (1) the observer consistently documented both the stages of heutagogical implementation and their own reflexive assumptions about learning effectiveness (outcomes and assessment mechanisms) in a reflexive research journal; (2) regular peer debriefing sessions were held with fellow researchers to critically review emerging insights; and (3) data analysis was conducted collaboratively with another researcher uninvolved in the course, to validate interpretations and minimize subjective influence.

Additional data were gathered through in-depth interviews with six students from the same class. Interviews were conducted both in-person and online, depending on participant availability and preference. This mixed-method strategy ensured comprehensive coverage of the research questions by capturing both subjective experiences and objective practices in heutagogical learning environments. Following Sanjani (2020), interviews were selected as the primary data collection method for their effectiveness in eliciting rich, detailed narratives of participants' experiences.

Each interview, conducted in Indonesian and later translated into English for analysis, lasted approximately 30 minutes (excluding introductory and closing remarks). To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all respondents. Interviews were intentionally concise to minimize participant fatigue and promote focused, high-quality responses. A semi-structured interview protocol was employed to explore perceived strengths and limitations of the heutagogical approach in fostering self-directed learning among postgraduate students. The protocol investigated participants' perceptions of the approach's flexibility in time management, cost-efficiency, access to learning resources, and its capacity to support the integration of academic, professional, and personal responsibilities in an online learning context.

The data were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis for two key reasons: first, it allows for systematic exploration of divergent participant perspectives while highlighting commonalities and contrasts (Braun & Clarke, 2006); and second, it offers tools to summarize the most salient features within large datasets (King, 2014).

Data analysis involved triangulating data from both observation notes and interview transcripts. The process began with initial coding based on Miles et al. (2014) to systematically connect the data to the research questions (Atkinson, 2002). Codes were then grouped into subthemes based on conceptual similarity. Initial inductive codes were derived from repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes. For instance, "time management," "logistical efficiency," and "scheduling flexibility" were categorized under the subtheme flexibility and autonomy. Meanwhile, "environmental distractions," "need for face-to-face interaction," and "technical barriers" were clustered under implementation challenges. These subthemes were further synthesized into broader themes, such as the implementation of heutagogical approaches in online learning. Other codes followed a similar process. Final themes were reviewed and refined through peer discussion. This analytical process yielded three overarching themes: (1) implementation of heutagogical approaches in online learning, (2) learning effectiveness from the learner's perspective, and (3) control and credibility of learning outcomes. The final themes that emerged from this process are presented in the following section.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Thematic analysis of triangulated qualitative data—comprising interview transcripts and observational field notes—identified three overarching themes that reflect doctoral students' lived experiences within a heutagogical online learning context. These themes are: (1) the implementation of heutagogical approaches in online learning, (2) learning effectiveness from the learner's perspective, and (3) the control and credibility of learning outcomes. Each theme captures distinct yet interconnected dimensions of how doctoral students engaged with autonomy, self-directed learning, and reflective practice throughout the course.

To enhance analytical transparency and improve comprehensibility, Table 1 provides a structured summary of the research findings derived from observation notes and interview transcripts. It outlines the main themes, corresponding subthemes, inductively generated codes, and illustrative participant quotes to support a deeper understanding of how insights were developed from the qualitative data.

**Table 1.** Summary of Research Findings from Observation, Document Analysis, and Interviews

Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Illustrative Quotes
Implementation of Heutagogical Approaches in Online Learning	Flexibility & Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time management</li> <li>- Logistical efficiency</li> <li>- Scheduling flexibility</li> <li>- Mobility reduction</li> </ul>	<p>"I can drop off and pick up my child while attending classes."</p> <p>"No time wasted commuting."</p> <p>"Online helps me keep going without abandoning my job."</p>
	Implementation Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Technical barriers</li> <li>- Digital fatigue</li> <li>- Environmental distractions</li> <li>- Need for face-to-face interaction</li> </ul>	<p>"Internet disruptions during rain."</p> <p>"Headache from screen time."</p> <p>"Zoom discussions feel limited."</p>
	Phased Learning Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Co-designed goals</li> <li>- Iterative feedback</li> <li>- Peer assessment</li> </ul>	<p>"We collaboratively set goals via Zoom."</p> <p>"Peer reviews improved my manuscript."</p> <p>"Weekly YouTube progress reports."</p>
Learning Effectiveness from Learner's Perspective	Perceived Learning Comfort & Mastery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear content delivery</li> <li>- Recording &amp; replay benefit</li> <li>- Convenience in learning tasks</li> <li>- Content engagement</li> </ul>	<p>"I find the explanations clearer when the lecturer delivers them via Zoom."</p> <p>"Online lets me rewatch Zoom recordings."</p> <p>"I can start working on assignments immediately after class."</p> <p>"The material is clearly delivered through online learning."</p>
	Motivation & Work-Life-Study Balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cost &amp; energy saving</li> <li>- Integrated time use</li> <li>- Family/work/study prioritization</li> </ul>	<p>"I can study and work at the same time."</p> <p>"Online classes allow me to take care of my child while managing my academic responsibilities."</p>
	Interaction and Social Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Depth of discussion</li> <li>- Miscommunication risks</li> <li>- Emotional/social engagement</li> </ul>	<p>"Face-to-face avoids misunderstandings."</p> <p>"Face-to-face interaction makes me feel more refreshed."</p>
Control and Credibility of Learning Outcomes	Self-Regulation and Learner Autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time/task management</li> <li>- Distraction control</li> <li>- Study independence</li> <li>- Role balancing</li> <li>- Procrastination risks</li> </ul>	<p>"PhD students discover things on their own."</p> <p>"Don't be lulled by the flexibility, or you might end up wasting time."</p>
	Quality Assurance Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supervisor guidance</li> <li>- Peer review validation</li> <li>- Feedback integration</li> </ul>	<p>"Peer scores improved my writing."</p>
	Tangible Learning Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learning Outcomes</li> <li>- Practical skill transfer</li> </ul>	<p>"Now I manage my own IPR."</p> <p>"Published articles from peer feedback."</p>

The following sections elaborate on each of these overarching themes in greater depth, beginning with the implementation of the heutagogical approach in online learning.

## **Application of The Heutagogy Approach in Online Learning**

The learning process in this study followed the three phases of heutagogical online learning as conceptualized by Russell (2021), namely design, development, and implementation. These phases were identified through triangulation of data collected from classroom observations, transcripts of online interactions or student reports, and field notes.

In the design phase, instructors and students engaged in structured synchronous meetings via Zoom. This phase was designed to facilitate collaborative discussions and negotiations regarding learning objectives, students' dissertation topics, expected learning outcomes or deliverables, and mechanisms for monitoring learning progress. The design phase was identified through participatory observation during Zoom meetings (which were recorded and transcribed), as well as document analysis of collaboratively formulated learning goals in Google Docs. During this stage, the instructor also provided curated references and resources to support self-directed learning and foster students' commitment to completing their learning projects. This phase established a transparent, learner-centered framework in which students took responsibility for their own goals, while instructor-student collaboration laid the foundation for a well-structured heutagogical approach.

In the development phase, students engaged in independent learning and worked on projects aligned with their dissertation topics. Each week, they submitted progress reports via WhatsApp or uploaded presentations to YouTube, detailing achievements and challenges encountered. These reports served as the basis for structured feedback sessions conducted via Zoom, where students received input from instructors and peers, and developed follow-up strategies. This mechanism fostered critical dialogue and iterative refinement, enabling students to evaluate both their own and others' work reflectively—aligning with the core principles of heutagogical learning. The validity of these findings was reinforced through triangulated data from participatory observations, transcripts of online interactions, and student report documentation.

The implementation phase was characterized by a structured peer-assessment system. Students were grouped by research cluster and tasked with evaluating their peers' projects using assessment rubrics they had developed themselves, based on their respective dissertation instruments. This process encouraged critical and constructive feedback, as evidenced in peer evaluation documents and students' reflection notes. Each student then analyzed the quality of their instrument based on peer scores and feedback, and subsequently drafted it into a scholarly article manuscript. At the end of the semester, final projects were submitted to a shared Google Drive repository for formal evaluation by the instructor. Although the instructor functioned primarily as a supervisor in this phase, the learning outcomes had undergone multiple layers of validation, demonstrating enhanced student skills in reflection, evaluation, collaboration, and project management.

The entire process reflected a strong implementation of the heutagogical approach, where students played an active and autonomous role in their learning. Throughout the course, the instructor was not merely a passive facilitator; rather, they performed a dynamic and adaptive role across all three phases. In the design phase, the instructor guided students in collaboratively formulating personalized learning goals aligned with academic standards. During the development phase, they served as a dialogic partner—providing formative feedback, clarifying conceptual doubts, and ensuring critical engagement through structured reflection sessions. In the implementation phase, the instructor assumed the role of academic supervisor, assessing final outputs while minimizing direct intervention to uphold student autonomy in managing their own learning. This flexible pedagogical structure ensured a balanced integration of student independence and institutional support, affirming that the heutagogical approach was effectively applied in the online learning context.

## **The Essence of Learners' Lived Experiences with the Heutagogy Approach in Online Learning**

This section presents the findings on the application of the heutagogical approach in doctoral education delivered online. Semi-structured interviews with doctoral students explored their experiences and perceptions regarding the implementation of this learning approach. The analysis focused on three main aspects: (1) the application of heutagogy in online learning practice, particularly in fostering autonomy and flexibility in learning, (2) the effectiveness of learning assessed through academic outcomes and the

students' perspectives as self-directed learners, and (3) the control over the appropriateness and feasibility of learning outcomes. The findings are analyzed with reference to theory and previous research to strengthen interpretations and deepen the understanding of heutagogy implementation in higher education, as will be discussed in the following sections.

### Implementation of the Heutagogical Approach in Online Learning

The findings of this study illuminate how doctoral students, when immersed in heutagogically designed online learning environments, came to a renewed awareness of themselves as autonomous learners. Their lived experiences reveal not only the practical aspects of engaging with online learning but also the deeper transformation of their personal and cognitive orientations. The essence that emerged was one of becoming self-directed, where participants redefined their roles, not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active agents shaping their own learning journeys. The transcendence of spatial and temporal boundaries created a sense of liberation, allowing participants to reflect, adapt, and reconstruct their learning in ways that resonated with their individual contexts.

A central theme that surfaced was the empowering meaning of flexibility in online learning. For these doctoral students, flexibility was not a mere logistical feature; it represented a lifeline for sustaining multiple roles as scholars, professionals, and individuals navigating everyday responsibilities. Nayro captured this survival dimension when stating, *"Because I spend so much time commuting, online learning helps me keep going without having to abandon my job."* For Jusan, the essence of flexibility was found in reclaiming wasted time: *"Online assignments are more flexible; we don't waste time commuting."* Daer highlighted how online learning preserved energy for academic focus: *"After class, I can focus immediately on assignments... I don't have to go anywhere."* These expressions converge to reveal that flexibility carried the essence of sustaining academic perseverance while protecting personal well-being. Moreover, online platforms opened a reflective space through recorded sessions, as noted by Jusan and Yamul: *"We can replay the recordings."* This possibility extended learning beyond the classroom, enabling continuous reflection, self-review, and deeper engagement, which reinforced their autonomy as learners.

These reflections illuminate that flexibility in online learning transcends its technical utility, becoming a vital conduit for sustaining personal agency. Doctoral students experienced flexibility not as a convenience but as a means of harmonizing their learning with the rhythms of their lives, blending academic obligations with professional and personal responsibilities. Nayro, Jusan, and Daer's experiences, as previously cited, demonstrate how flexibility allowed them to reclaim time and energy, reinforcing a sense of autonomy. From a phenomenological perspective, the essence of these experiences is the active authorship of one's learning journey, where each learner navigates a non-linear path shaped by their authentic needs and lived realities. This finding aligns with Chen (2023), who emphasized online learning's strengths in flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and accessibility, and is further supported by Collie et al. (2024) and Dennis et al. (2020), who argued that flexibility enhances agency through contextualized learning autonomy. As Majid et al. (2023) emphasize, heutagogical learners are not passive recipients but architects of knowledge, and this study confirms that the experience of flexibility is inseparable from the cultivation of ownership and agency in learning.

Yet, this autonomy and flexibility come with profound responsibility. Without external structures enforcing rigid schedules, students must summon self-discipline, focus, and effective time management. Tabin described this tension: *"At the PhD level, online learning is more comfortable... but the demands for autonomy and self-regulation are higher."* Diyuw echoed the difficulty of maintaining attention: *"Maintaining focus is difficult... distractions easily creep in when studying online."* Nayro's reflection deepens the insight: *"Balancing time is difficult. I'm still learning how to balance time, but once it's achieved—especially during working hours—I can carve out time to engage in academic discussions with peers, colleagues, or professors."* The essence captured here is that autonomy is inseparable from the continuous negotiation of self-regulation, where learners must cultivate habits and strategies to manage their own learning landscape.

Over time, the students' experiences revealed a transformative reorientation of learning and self-understanding. Engaging in heutagogically designed online learning prompted them to redefine their perceptions of time, space, purpose, and the learning process itself. This finding reaffirms two fundamental dimensions of

heutagogy: learner autonomy and individual responsibility, as emphasized by Blaschke (2012) and Blaschke & Hase (2019). Tabin's observation, "*The online class was well-facilitated... we all participated in online discussions with full awareness,*" together with Jusan's comment, "*PhD students tend to learn independently, discovering many things on their own,*" and Diyuw's insight, "*learning was no longer about waiting for instruction, but about defining one's own direction,*" collectively illustrate the essence of becoming a self-directed, reflective, and responsible learner. Phenomenologically, these accounts capture the lived experience of transformation, where autonomy and individual responsibility emerge not as abstract concepts but as deeply felt realities shaping the learners' identities and engagement with knowledge.

These reflections reveal that doctoral students internalize learning as an essential component of their personal and professional identity. Learning is experienced not merely as an academic obligation but as a transformative journey of growth, self-formation, and reflective agency. The students' lived experiences underscore that autonomy and reflective engagement are central to their understanding of what it means to be a responsible and independent learner. As Mills (2016) asserts, meaningful learning involves constructing deep conceptual understanding, transferring knowledge across contexts, and applying it in relevant ways. In this study, the essence of experience is captured in the students' sense that learning is personally lived, shaping not only what they know but who they are as scholars and professionals.

Participants also described that technology, while enabling flexibility and autonomy, simultaneously evokes challenges that shape their lived experience of online learning. Tabin remarked, "*If the internet is bad, everything gets disrupted—especially when it rains,*" and Jusan noted, "*Signal issues, power outages, and bad weather all interfere with learning.*" These reflections illustrate how technological dependence intersects with the embodied experience of learning, creating moments of frustration and adaptation. However, observations indicated that technical access issues were not a dominant concern, with minimal digital disparity in access or readiness. The hybrid delivery model—combining limited synchronous sessions (e.g., Zoom discussions) with asynchronous engagement through recorded lectures, reflection documents, and WhatsApp communication—enabled learners to actively navigate and manage their own learning trajectories, mitigating the impact of occasional technical disruptions.

Despite the affordances of flexibility, students consistently expressed that human connection is indispensable for sustaining engagement and meaning in their learning experiences. Yamul noted, "*Face-to-face discussions with professors and peers feel more comfortable... they're freer and less prone to miscommunication,*" while Daer shared, "*Honestly, I don't like being online all the time. It's just me and my laptop. I once stayed home for several days doing online classes and assignments—my head hurt—I need to interact with other people.*" These testimonies capture the essence of social and emotional dimensions in online learning: that autonomy and reflective practice are intertwined with relationality, dialogue, and shared presence. From a phenomenological perspective, the experience of learning is inseparable from both individual agency and social connectivity, forming a balanced and meaningful engagement with knowledge.

While heutagogical online learning emphasizes autonomy and flexibility, students' experiences reveal that these affordances come with challenges that require careful balancing. Learners must negotiate freedom with social connectedness, self-direction with collaborative engagement, and flexibility with structured guidance. This study demonstrates that, when supported by adaptive instructional design and adequate technological infrastructure, students can cultivate reflective, meaningful, and transformative learning experiences. The lived experience of heutagogy is thus not merely about managing content or completing tasks, but about actively shaping one's own learning journey—a process that is empowered by supportive structures, reflective spaces, and a harmonious balance between autonomy, self-regulation, and social interaction. These findings reaffirm that heutagogy offers strong potential as a foundation for future higher education, grounded in the authentic, lived experiences of learners.

### **The Lived Experience of Learning and Autonomy in Heutagogical Online Environments**

The findings of this study reveal the lived experiences of doctoral students engaging with the heutagogical approach in online learning, highlighting profound awareness of their own autonomy, understanding, and motivation. Participants' reflections emphasize that flexibility is experienced not merely as a convenience but as a vital enabler of self-directed learning. Nayro expressed, "*When working on my dissertation, I prefer online*

*from home because it aligns with my learning style,*” while acknowledging that intensive supervision sometimes requires face-to-face interactions. Daer similarly observed, *“Direct interaction with the professor is better than online communication,”* yet recognized the practical constraints of travel, which Yamul emphasized: *“It takes extra time to go to the learning place.”* Through these reflections, the essence of the experience emerges: learners navigate online learning in a way that reconciles efficiency, personal circumstance, and the demands of doctoral study. Tabin highlighted, *“Online learning makes it easier to manage time and budget, especially as a mother,”* revealing that domestic responsibilities and role management are deeply entwined with their experience of learning autonomy.

When considering learning outcomes, participants emphasized that self-directedness transforms their engagement with knowledge. Jusan remarked, *“There is no difference in how well I understand the material between online and offline learning because PhD studies tend to be more self-directed.”* He even added that online learning offers an additional advantage: *“We can replay the recordings,”*. However, it is important to note that its effectiveness highly depends on the academic maturity of learners in managing self-directed learning and the quality of institutional support in providing easily accessible materials and facilitating interactions that support the learning process (Poondej et al., 2025). Without adequate support, students who are less prepared may become overwhelmed by the demands of autonomous learning (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2014).

Nevertheless, in practice, the implementation of this approach has been supported effectively by the institution. Yamul acknowledged the ease of accessing online learning resources: *“We can search for materials on the internet,”* but criticized the heavy workload that *“Consumes time, leaving little room to explore other knowledge,”* indicating a tension between structured learning and the need for independent exploration. Despite these demands, Yamul still expressed satisfaction with material delivery: *“Feeling comfortable and clear when delivered online... this can be used as study material to review repeatedly.”* These reflections illuminate that while heutagogy fosters autonomy, the quality of experience is shaped by accessible resources and the ability to engage in iterative, reflective learning.

Developing critical and reflective thinking emerged as a central dimension of the lived experience. Students described autonomy as intertwined with self-discipline and proactive engagement. Jusan reflected, *“Sometimes we have to push ourselves to learn. Learning from a position of comfort can make us complacent and, in the end, we gain nothing,”* highlighting alignment with double-loop learning in heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012). Yamul noted that online learning facilitates independence: *“At the PhD level, we are expected to learn independently,”* while also allowing peer-led discussions outside class hours: *“Peers are very helpful for discussions, creating their own forums outside of class hours.”* These narratives capture the essence of learner autonomy as both a challenge and an opportunity, in which reflection, peer interaction, and self-regulation are inseparable components of meaning-making in learning.

The participants’ experiences collectively suggest that the heutagogical online format resonates with the realities of adult doctoral learners, especially those balancing professional and personal commitments. As Syahbrudin et al. (2024) noted, online learning enables life balance, while Gopalan et al. (2021) affirmed that collaborative and discussion-based learning can still occur effectively. Students reported that their learning experience was not diminished by the online format, as they were able to engage meaningfully with peers and instructors. Nayro described high satisfaction: *“Very happy”* with the flexibility to manage non-academic work. Tabin reinforced this sentiment: *“With online learning, time management becomes much easier,”* while Diyuw candidly shared, *“We’re getting too comfortable with online learning.”* Jusan emphasized that self-learning is the core of PhD studies: *“There’s more self-learning and self-exploration, so whether it’s online or offline, it’s basically the same,”* even suggesting, *“If possible, we should maintain online learning going forward.”* In sum, these insights suggest that online learning enhances motivation, autonomy, and self-directed learning readiness, and is perceived as highly compatible with the needs and lifestyles of adult doctoral students.

These findings support the fundamental principles of heutagogy, which place learners as the primary agents in designing their own learning pathways, emphasizing flexibility, critical reflection, and adaptability (Blaschke, 2012; Hase & Kenyon, 2001). The online learning model empowers students to manage their time, select learning resources, and control the mastery of materials independently — key elements of a heutagogical approach. Thus, heutagogy-based online learning appears highly suitable for doctoral students,

aligning with Blaschke (2017) assertion that heutagogy is ideally applied to professional learners and part-time students. This also resonates with Chao et al. (2007), who noted that technological advancements have made this approach increasingly relevant for adult learners over 25 years old, who typically demonstrate greater academic responsibility. Moreover, as highlighted by Sinclair et al. (2015) and Syahbrudin et al. (2024), online learning offers students the opportunity to remain engaged in their studies from a convenient location, allowing them to balance professional development with personal and occupational commitments.

In conclusion, the essence of doctoral students' experiences with heutagogical online learning reflects enhanced understanding, autonomy, and motivation. Flexibility is deeply valued as it enables efficient time management and work-life balance, while self-directed learning aligns with the expectations of doctoral study. Challenges persist in the areas of social interaction and discussion depth, as digital platforms cannot fully replace face-to-face engagement. The students' narratives illuminate that the success of heutagogy relies on a carefully balanced interplay between learner autonomy, social support, and high-quality instructional materials, highlighting both the transformative potential and the nuanced lived realities of online doctoral education.

### Control of Learning Outcomes Suitability and Feasibility

Doctoral students' experiences in heutagogically designed online learning revealed that control over the appropriateness and feasibility of learning outcomes is deeply intertwined with their self-regulation and flexibility. Tabin reflected on this, noting, *"What matters is good self-management, and if there are schedule changes, they shouldn't be made suddenly,"* highlighting that time management is experienced not as a mere skill but as an essential enabler of successful learning. Through such reflections, it becomes evident that learners actively negotiate their own learning trajectories, embodying the heutagogical principle of self-directed management (Blaschke, 2012). Yamul further illustrated this lived experience: at the doctoral level, *"the proportion is much greater for self-study,"* and informal peer collaboration, including *"organizing their own forums,"* emerges as a lived strategy that enriches understanding beyond formal instructional boundaries.

Participants also shared that the freedom to select projects or final assignments aligned with personal interests and goals was experienced as deeply meaningful. Jusan expressed that the assigned project *"Fit my needs,"* and Tabin reflected, *"The project matched my needs, and I'm very happy; now I can even manage my own IPR (intellectual property rights). Wekwek (laughs)."* These reflections convey the essence of learning as personally relevant and motivating, illustrating how autonomy in task selection nurtures both engagement and a sense of ownership over one's scholarly work. Such experiences resonate with the heutagogical principle of centering learning around individual needs and aspirations (Handayani et al., 2021).

Flexibility in learning was not only perceived as convenience, but as a critical condition for sustaining agency and efficiency. Students described the availability of recorded lectures as enabling repeated reflection, adaptive pacing, and deeper understanding. Yamul noted, *"Most of my time was spent completing assignments,"* reflecting how a substantial workload also serves as a structural mechanism to uphold academic standards while simultaneously shaping the lived experience of balancing autonomy with formal expectations. Time and cost efficiency emerged repeatedly as indicators of successful learning, revealing that the lived experience of heutagogy involves navigating both freedom and responsibility.

Feedback and supervision were also central to students' experiences of learning quality. Nayro shared, *"For discussions with supervisors, face-to-face meetings feel better, but online is fine as long as it's one-on-one,"* pointing to the nuanced experience of supervision: one-on-one interactions are personally validating, yet constrained in group online settings. Yamul added, *"In one forum session, we have to take turns speaking, so it's not as free to discuss with friends or lecturers,"* illustrating the experiential limitations of structured digital forums. Despite these constraints, participants created their own peer-support systems. Yamul recalled, *"Having smart friends really helped me learn online. If there were tasks or material that I didn't understand, friends were very helpful, setting up their own discussion forums outside of class hours,"* underscoring the essence of collaborative, peer-mediated learning as an intrinsic part of their heutagogical experience (Blaschke & Hase, 2019).

Overall, quality control mechanisms within the heutagogy approach encompass various dimensions, such as self-regulation, flexible task design, and social interaction support. However, to optimize learning strategies,

Jusan suggested a combination of online and offline approaches. He noted, *“For peer discussions, online is fine, but for discussions with lecturers, offline feels more comfortable,”* with the caveat that time flexibility should remain a priority. Jusan also added, *“To access materials, I’m comfortable with online learning. But... for discussions with lecturers, offline feels better,”* indicating the need for differentiated approaches depending on the stage and nature of the learning process.

## **Effectiveness and Quality Control of Online Learning Outcomes through a Heutagogical Approach**

In the heutagogical approach, students are given full autonomy to determine their learning themes, the strategies they wish to employ, and the targets they aim to achieve. Although this approach allows students to be more engaged in the learning process and provides opportunities to explore their interests, it remains necessary to verify whether the knowledge acquired is valid and aligned with academic standards. Based on observations, lecturers periodically conduct online meetings to facilitate discussions about students’ learning progress and ongoing projects. Students are also required to record their learning progress in video format, upload it to YouTube, and subsequently receive corrections and feedback from lecturers when necessary.

In this setting, lecturers act as facilitators, providing guidance and feedback to ensure that the learning process remains aligned with academic objectives. The provision of constructive feedback is crucial in training doctoral candidates to become competent researchers (Carter & Kumar, 2017), and quality written feedback has been recognized as a critical factor in establishing effective online classrooms (Sawicki & O’Rourke, 2017). Moreover, feedback is a vital component of all learning processes across educational levels, contributing significantly to academic growth and success (Lipnevich & Panadero, 2021; Natesan et al., 2019; Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2022; Rukanuddin et al., 2021; Sarkany & Deitte, 2017).

Effective feedback encompasses several dimensions, including helping students understand learning goals, assess the quality of their work, and use the information to improve future performance (Molloy et al., 2020). As facilitators, lecturers play a key role in delivering timely, specific, and actionable feedback that supports students’ academic growth and development (Coll et al., 2014; Gormally et al., 2014). When providing feedback, lecturers must also consider several factors, such as the complexity of tasks, the method of feedback delivery, and the assessment criteria used to evaluate student performance (Gormally et al., 2014). Furthermore, maintaining the relevance, specificity, clarity, and timeliness of feedback is essential to maximize its impact on student learning (Sawicki & O’Rourke, 2017).

At the doctoral level, effective feedback should specifically identify areas for improvement (Raaijmakers et al., 2019) and be accompanied by explanatory comments (Evans, 2013; Van der Kleij et al., 2015). Such explanatory feedback should be informative rather than overly controlling, guiding students toward the most critical areas to address, which consequently reinforces learner autonomy and facilitates significant and targeted improvements in their academic performance.

Observations revealed that although students demonstrated autonomy in their learning process, lecturers consistently provided support and guidance to ensure academic success. Feedback was carefully delivered, identifying specific areas for improvement for each student. Moreover, the feedback not only offered precise directions but also encouraged students to take initiative in their learning process and make substantial progress. These findings illustrate that the learning process aligned with the heutagogical approach, with lecturers effectively fulfilling their role as facilitators, while also emphasizing the importance of supervision and guidance to ensure the effectiveness and quality control of online learning outcomes.

The research findings further demonstrated impressive achievements, with most students successfully producing scientific publications and intellectual property rights (IPR) as tangible evidence of their knowledge application and academic accomplishments throughout the semester. These results confirm that the heutagogical approach applied in online learning has yielded substantial outcomes in verifying the understanding and application of knowledge at the doctoral level.

Moreover, the production of scientific work and IPR reflects significant improvements in learning outcomes and stands as a testament to the doctoral students’ ability to independently manage their learning. This achievement directly affirms the success and effectiveness of the heutagogical approach in fostering learner

autonomy, creativity, and academic excellence. Thus, it can be concluded that the heutagogical approach not only enhances the quality of doctoral students' learning experiences but also ensures the quality control of learning outcomes by promoting active participation, critical engagement, and meaningful academic achievements.

Although this study was conducted at a single higher education institution in Indonesia, several contextual factors contributed to the successful implementation of the heutagogical approach. The university's commitment to academic autonomy, the availability of flexible learning platforms, students' readiness for self-directed learning, and lecturers' experience in facilitating adult education all played a crucial role. Digital infrastructure—including access to a reliable LMS and recording tools—supported asynchronous, independent learning, which proved essential in minimizing the impact of technical disruptions. These contextual enablers should be carefully considered when adapting heutagogical practices to other institutional or cultural settings.

## CONCLUSION

The advancement of online learning has driven a shift in doctoral students' preferences toward more flexible and autonomous learning systems. Heutagogy, which positions students at the center of a needs-based learning process, has become increasingly relevant at the doctoral level, particularly in digital environments. Grounded in this phenomenon, this study explored the implementation, students' perceptions, and learning effectiveness through academic outcomes and quality assurance mechanisms that ensured both the rigor and appropriateness of the learning process and outcomes.

The findings confirm that heutagogy serves as an effective framework for addressing the demands of doctoral online learning, requiring academic autonomy and accountability while transforming the role of lecturers from instructors to academic mentors. Its implementation followed three structured phases: design, development, and implementation. In the design phase, lecturers and students collaboratively co-developed learning maps, set research goals and focus areas, and established achievement criteria, fostering early alignment of academic expectations and commitment. During the development phase, students engaged in independent exploration of their research projects, supported by iterative feedback from both lecturers and peers, maintaining a critical balance between learner autonomy and structured guidance. In the implementation phase, students participated in multi-tier peer evaluations prior to final validation by lecturers, fostering the development of their critical, reflective, and evaluative thinking skills, as well as collaborative skills and research project management.

Students generally perceived the heutagogical approach as effective, recognizing its flexibility, autonomy, and material accessibility despite acknowledging challenges such as demands for strong self-regulation, technical constraints, and limited face-to-face interaction. These findings underscore that the effectiveness of heutagogy depends not only on learning design but also on students' readiness and institutional support. In the case of the university where this study was conducted, the success of heutagogical practices was strongly supported by specific contextual factors: a robust learning management system (LMS), a learning culture that fostered autonomy, and experienced academic staff familiar with heutagogical principles. These conditions created an environment conducive to self-directed learning and helped mitigate common challenges, including digital fatigue and low self-regulation.

Moreover, the heutagogical approach effectively balanced self-directed learning with high academic achievement. Students demonstrated tangible academic outcomes aligned with higher education standards, such as the production of scientific publications and the acquisition of intellectual property rights. The quality and validity of these outcomes were assured through a rigorous, multi-layered quality assurance system integrating structured task planning, periodic progress reporting, tiered peer reviews, and supervisory validation, implemented within a facilitative rather than strictly sequential framework. Crucially, the strength and credibility of these outcomes were inseparable from the institutional context, especially the rigorous multi-layered quality assurance system and the final validation by academic supervisors, who also acted as course instructors. These mechanisms not only safeguarded the validity of students' work but also reinforced the alignment between self-directed learning and institutional academic standards.

Ultimately, this study highlights that the success of heutagogical implementation in doctoral online learning lies in achieving a critical balance between learner autonomy, structured guidance, and institutional support. This balance is contingent upon institutional learning culture, technological infrastructure, and organizational readiness, which collectively mediate the extent to which heutagogical practices can be effectively enacted and sustained. Therefore, while this study provides empirical evidence of heutagogy's potential in doctoral-level online education, its transferability to other contexts requires careful consideration of institutional flexibility, digital readiness, learner readiness for self-directed learning, and the capacity of instructors to facilitate heutagogical practices. This underscores the need for future research to examine heutagogical practices across diverse educational environments to strengthen the generalizability of findings.

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