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Becoming a Graduate Learner: Lived Experiences of Master of Arts in Education Students in Developing Self-Directed Learning Skills

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Abstract

Self-directed learning has become increasingly important in graduate education as adult learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for identifying learning needs, locating credible information, managing academic requirements, evaluating their progress, and applying knowledge independently. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education students in developing self-directed learning skills during graduate study. Specifically, it examines how students experience the transition from teacher-directed to increasingly autonomous learning, the strategies they develop in managing academic demands, the challenges that shape their independence, the role of faculty and peers in supporting self-direction, and the meanings students attach to becoming responsible for their own learning. Participants are purposively selected MAEd students who have completed sufficient graduate coursework to reflect meaningfully on their learning development. Data are generated through semi-structured interviews and analyzed phenomenologically through significant statements, meaning units, thematic clustering, textural and structural descriptions, and synthesis of the essence of the phenomenon. The analytical framework identifies six interconnected dimensions: moving beyond dependence on instructors, learning to search and evaluate knowledge independently, managing time and academic responsibilities, learning through difficulty and uncertainty, drawing support from others without surrendering autonomy, and developing confidence as reflective and continuing learners. The study conceptualizes self-directed learning not as learning in isolation but as a gradual process of assuming greater agency while remaining socially and institutionally supported. Findings may inform graduate pedagogy, academic mentoring, research training, flexible learning arrangements, and program structures designed to strengthen learner autonomy, persistence, reflective practice, and lifelong learning.

Keywords: self-directed learning, graduate education, Master of Arts in Education, adult learning, phenomenology, learner autonomy, lifelong learning

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I. Introduction

Graduate education requires learners to move beyond the patterns of learning commonly associated with earlier schooling. While undergraduate and basic education may provide relatively structured tasks, prescribed readings, close instructor guidance, and clearly sequenced requirements, graduate education increasingly expects students to take responsibility for determining what they need to know, locating appropriate sources, engaging critically with scholarly literature, managing complex academic tasks, conducting research, and evaluating the quality of their own work. These expectations make self-directed learning particularly important among Master of Arts in Education students.

Self-directed learning generally refers to the process through which learners take increasing initiative and responsibility for their learning. It includes identifying learning needs, setting goals, locating appropriate resources, selecting strategies, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. Peno (2024) describes self-directed learning as both a learner characteristic and a process through which individuals assume responsibility for their education, emphasizing its contemporary significance in rapidly changing professional and technology-mediated environments.

For graduate education students, self-direction is especially relevant because many are simultaneously adult learners and working professionals. They may be teachers, school administrators, government employees, parents, caregivers, or community members. Their participation in graduate school often occurs alongside established professional and personal responsibilities. Learning therefore cannot depend entirely on continuous instructor direction. Students must often create their own study schedules, locate research materials independently, complete academic tasks outside scheduled classes, and make decisions about how best to approach unfamiliar academic demands.

Philippine research demonstrates that graduate learners encounter significant challenges requiring this type of autonomy. Castulo et al. (2025), in a study involving 198 education graduate students, identified limited time for research, inadequate research-capacity development, work-study schedule conflicts, insufficient mentoring, heavy workloads, academic-resource limitations, financial problems, and motivational concerns among the challenges experienced by graduate students. These conditions suggest that successful graduate study depends partly on learners' ability to organize their work, seek resources, ask for appropriate support, and sustain motivation despite competing demands.

Flexible and technology-supported graduate learning has further strengthened the need for self-direction. Junsay and Lagura (2024), examining graduate education across five state universities and colleges in the Davao Region, found that flexible learning created opportunities for self-directed learning, digital-skills development, multitasking, and soft-skill development. At the same time, graduate students experienced difficulties related to internet connectivity, finances, technology, and balancing academic and occupational responsibilities.

Self-direction, however, should not be interpreted as complete independence from teachers, classmates, or institutions. Adult learners may assume responsibility for learning while still requiring academic mentoring, feedback, peer interaction, technological resources, and well-designed learning environments. Peno (2024) emphasizes that self-directed learning remains embedded within social contexts and depends partly on learners' capacity to use available resources effectively.

This distinction is particularly significant in graduate education. A student may independently search for literature but still require faculty feedback on whether the sources are theoretically appropriate. A learner may develop a study schedule independently but rely on classmates for clarification or encouragement. Self-direction therefore involves knowing when to work independently, when to seek assistance, and how to use guidance without becoming dependent upon it.

Research also connects self-direction with broader educational outcomes. Chukwuedo et al. (2021), in an intervention involving postgraduate vocational and adult education students, found that self-directed learning significantly strengthened study engagement and lifelong-learning tendency, particularly in areas such as motivation, perseverance, self-regulation, and curiosity. This relationship is important because graduate education should ideally develop learners who can continue acquiring knowledge after the formal degree has ended.

The experience of becoming self-directed is nevertheless gradual. Graduate students may initially feel uncertain when professors provide less direct instruction than they experienced previously. Research assignments may require them to determine independently which sources are credible. Open-ended questions may have no single correct answer. Thesis or research projects may require decisions that cannot be solved by simply following a textbook.

The transition can therefore produce discomfort. Yet this discomfort may also become developmental. Students who initially depend heavily on instructors may gradually become more confident in searching, evaluating, organizing, and applying information. Through repeated engagement with complex academic tasks, learners may begin to regard themselves differently—not simply as recipients of knowledge but as active participants in its construction.

Recent Philippine phenomenological evidence demonstrates that graduate students experience learning through the interaction of career motivation, academic responsibility, stress management, technology, family support, and peer and faculty relationships. Pontillas et al. (2024), for example, found that graduate students navigated challenges in time management, technological adaptation, professional responsibilities, and stress while relying on intrinsic motivation and

supportive networks.

Despite this growing literature, limited qualitative research has focused specifically on how Master of Arts in Education students experience the development of self-directed learning skills over the course of graduate education. Studies often examine graduate-school challenges, flexible learning, research capability, academic performance, or completion. Less attention is given to how students themselves describe the transition from dependence toward learning agency, how they discover effective strategies, and how their identity as learners changes.

This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education students in becoming increasingly self-directed graduate learners.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education students in developing self-directed learning skills during graduate education.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do MAEd students describe their transition from teacher-directed to more self-directed learning?
2. What self-directed learning skills do students develop through graduate education?
3. What challenges contribute to or constrain the development of self-direction?
4. What strategies do students employ to manage their academic learning independently?
5. How do faculty members, classmates, technology, and institutional resources influence self-directed learning?
6. How does increasing self-direction affect students' confidence, professional practice, and understanding of themselves as learners?
7. What meaning do students assign to becoming self-directed graduate learners?

2. Review of Related Literature

Self-directed learning occupies an important position within adult and graduate education because adults increasingly need to take responsibility for learning across changing professional, technological, and social contexts. Knowles et al. (2020) describe adult learners as increasingly self-directing individuals who bring accumulated experience into educational situations, value learning that is relevant to immediate life roles, and are often motivated by internal goals. Self-directed learning extends these principles by emphasizing learners' active responsibility for diagnosing learning needs, identifying resources, selecting learning strategies, and evaluating outcomes. Peno (2024) notes that contemporary self-direction involves initiative, self-regulation, time management, effective resource use, and adaptability, particularly in online and technology-mediated environments. Graduate education provides an especially appropriate context for developing these competencies because postgraduate learners encounter open-ended academic tasks, independent scholarly reading, research, complex problem-solving, and long-term requirements that cannot be completed successfully through passive dependence on instructors.

Self-directed learning also has an important relationship with lifelong learning. Candy (1991) conceptualized self-direction as fundamental to the capacity to continue learning beyond formal education. More recent empirical evidence supports this relationship. Chukwuedo et al. (2021) found that a self-directed learning intervention involving postgraduate vocational and adult education students enhanced both academic engagement and lifelong-learning tendencies. Students exposed to the intervention demonstrated stronger motivation, perseverance, self-regulation, and curiosity. This suggests that self-directed learning has implications beyond immediate academic performance: it can help students develop habits and dispositions necessary for continued professional growth after graduation.

Graduate education nevertheless places substantial demands on adult students. Pontillas et al. (2024) reported that Filipino graduate learners experienced difficulties involving time management, technological adaptation, professional responsibilities, and stress. Their continued participation was supported by intrinsic motivation, family members, peers, and faculty. Similarly, Castulo et al. (2025) identified time constraints, research difficulties, work-study conflicts, limited mentoring, heavy workload, financial concerns, resource limitations, and emotional challenges among Philippine education graduate students. These findings are significant because self-direction develops under real-life conditions rather than within idealized learning environments. Graduate learners must frequently decide how to prioritize tasks, where to seek

information, when to ask for assistance, and how to continue learning despite uncertainty and competing responsibilities. Flexible learning environments may both demand and cultivate learner autonomy. Junsay and Lagura (2024) found that graduate students across state universities and colleges in the Davao Region associated flexible learning with self-directed learning, digital skills, multitasking, time savings, and development of soft skills. Their study also documented technological, financial, and work-study challenges, indicating that autonomy must be supported by appropriate learning environments and institutional resources. Similarly, Hua et al. (2024) found that self-directed learning experiences were meaningfully associated with university students' learning approaches and satisfaction in blended learning environments. These findings underscore that self-direction is influenced both by individual readiness and by instructional design.

The role of instructors therefore remains important even when learners become increasingly autonomous. Graduate instructors can facilitate self-direction by gradually shifting responsibility to students, creating meaningful choices, providing feedback, modeling scholarly inquiry, and encouraging independent decision-making. A 2025 qualitative study of graduate educators found that faculty members used instructional practices designed to increase student responsibility and independence, illustrating that self-direction can be actively supported rather than simply expected (Sieczynska, 2025). Grebenau (2025) likewise argued from an adult-education perspective that graduate students' learning experiences are strongly influenced by course design, feedback practices, and opportunities for self-directed learning.

This literature suggests that self-directed learning should not be equated with unsupported independence. Effective self-direction is relational and developmental. Learners increasingly assume responsibility, but instructors continue to provide scaffolding, standards, feedback, and intellectual challenge. Peers likewise function as important resources through collaborative learning, academic discussion, emotional support, and exchange of professional experiences.

Another important element is metacognition and self-regulation. Self-directed learners must recognize not only what they need to learn but also how effectively they are learning. This requires goal-setting, monitoring comprehension, evaluating progress, adjusting strategies, and reflecting on performance. Zimmerman (2002) conceptualizes self-regulated learners as active participants who plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning. Although self-regulation and self-directed learning are conceptually distinct, they overlap substantially in graduate learning because autonomy depends on learners' capacity to manage their behavior, motivation, cognition, and resources.

Digital literacy further shapes contemporary self-directed learning. Graduate students increasingly access journals, databases, electronic books, learning-management systems, artificial-intelligence tools, online seminars, digital libraries, and collaborative platforms. Access alone, however, does not guarantee productive learning. Students need skills in evaluating credibility, comparing sources, synthesizing information, and using digital tools ethically. Self-direction therefore includes information literacy as well as motivation and time management.

Collectively, the literature indicates that self-directed learning in graduate education is multidimensional. It involves initiative, strategic resource use, time management, research literacy, self-monitoring, help-seeking, reflection, persistence, and increasing intellectual independence. Existing Philippine research provides strong evidence regarding graduate students' challenges and coping experiences, yet comparatively little phenomenological work examines how students interpret the process of becoming self-directed learners. This gap provides the rationale for the present study.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study is anchored primarily in Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) and Self-Directed Learning Theory, supported by Self-Regulated Learning Theory.

Knowles' andragogical assumptions provide a useful foundation because MAEd students are adult learners whose experiences, professional identities, and immediate needs influence their learning. Adults increasingly seek responsibility for learning, draw upon accumulated experience, value relevance, and respond strongly to problem-centered learning (Knowles et al., 2020).

Knowles' concept of self-directed learning describes a process in which individuals take initiative, with or without assistance, in identifying learning needs, formulating goals, locating resources, choosing strategies, and evaluating outcomes.

The contemporary relevance of this framework is reinforced by Peno (2024), who conceptualizes self-directed learning as both an attribute and a process requiring initiative, responsibility, self-regulation, resource use, and adaptability.

Zimmerman's (2002) Self-Regulated Learning Theory complements this perspective by emphasizing planning, performance monitoring, strategic adjustment, and self-reflection. Self-regulation helps explain the processes through which graduate learners implement self-directed decisions.

The conceptual framework assumes the following developmental process:

Academic challenge → recognition of a learning need → independent inquiry and strategic action → use of appropriate support → reflection and adjustment → increased competence → greater learner autonomy.

The model is cyclical rather than linear. Increased independence generates new questions and more complex challenges, requiring learners to repeat the process at progressively higher levels.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education students in developing self-directed learning skills. Phenomenology is appropriate because the investigation focuses on how students experience, interpret, and assign meaning to the process of becoming increasingly responsible for their own learning rather than measuring self-directed learning through predetermined numerical scales. Following Moustakas (1994), phenomenological inquiry allows researchers to identify significant statements, formulate meanings, cluster related experiences into themes, and construct textural and structural descriptions leading to the essence of a shared phenomenon. The study will be situated in a selected higher education institution offering a Master of Arts in Education program. Participants will be chosen through purposive criterion sampling and may consist of approximately 8–15 MAEd students who have completed at least one semester of graduate coursework, have experienced graduate-level independent learning tasks, and voluntarily consent to participate. Variation in specialization, employment status, stage of graduate study, and professional experience may be considered to obtain a range of perspectives. Data will primarily be generated through individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The central interview question will be, "Can you describe how graduate school has changed the way you take responsibility for your own learning?" Follow-up questions will explore students' experiences of independent reading and research, locating and evaluating sources, managing deadlines, learning unfamiliar concepts, seeking academic assistance, using technology, receiving faculty guidance, working with classmates, evaluating their own progress, and applying self-directed learning to professional practice. Probing questions such as "Can you give an example?", "What did you do when you did not know what to do?", "How did that experience change your approach to learning?", and "When do you decide to seek help?" will elicit richer narratives. With informed consent, interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analysis will involve repeated reading of transcripts, identification of significant statements, formulation of meaning units, coding, clustering into themes and subthemes, comparison across participants, construction of textural descriptions of what was experienced, and structural descriptions of the conditions under which self-direction developed. These descriptions will then be synthesized into a composite essence. Trustworthiness will follow Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility will be enhanced through sustained engagement with transcripts, participant clarification where appropriate, and peer debriefing; dependability through an audit trail; confirmability through reflexive documentation and traceable links between themes and data; and transferability through rich contextual descriptions. Ethical clearance will be secured from the appropriate research ethics committee. Participants will provide written informed consent and will be informed of the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw without academic or professional consequences. Participant codes such as P1, P2, and P3 will replace personally identifying information.

5. Findings

Theme 1. From Waiting to Initiating: Moving Beyond Dependence on the Professor

The first theme captures a gradual transition from expecting instructors to provide most of the necessary information toward taking greater initiative in learning. Students may initially enter graduate school expecting professors to explain content, prescribe readings, and provide clear answers. Graduate coursework, however, often requires learners to investigate topics independently, interpret scholarly literature, and formulate their own positions.

Through repeated exposure to such tasks, students may begin searching for information before asking instructors and may become more comfortable encountering questions without immediately receiving answers.

Verbatim Responses

P1: "When I started graduate school, I expected the professor to explain everything. Later, I realized that we are expected to read before class and find additional sources. Now, if I do not understand something, I try to research it first before asking."

P4: "Graduate school taught me not to wait. The professor gives direction, but it is really our responsibility to deepen the topic."

P7: "I became less dependent on being given all the materials. Sometimes the readings provided are only the beginning, and I need to find more if I want to understand the issue."

This theme represents a transition from instructional dependence toward learner **agency**. Peno (2024) describes self-directed learning as learners taking initiative and responsibility for their own learning process, including identifying needs and using resources independently. Knowles et al. (2020) likewise argue that adult learners increasingly develop self-concepts as responsible and self-directing individuals.

This transition does not imply the disappearance of instructor guidance. Sieczynska's (2025) qualitative investigation of graduate educators emphasized practices that gradually increase student responsibility and independence rather than immediately removing instructional support. Self-direction therefore develops through **progressive transfer of responsibility**, in which instructors increasingly function as facilitators, mentors, and intellectual guides.

Theme 2. Learning to Find Out: Becoming an Independent Knowledge Seeker

The second theme concerns students' growing ability to locate, assess, and use knowledge independently. Graduate study exposes learners to academic databases, journals, theories, research reports, and competing scholarly perspectives.

Students may initially struggle to identify credible sources or determine which information is relevant. Over time, they may become more systematic in searching, evaluating evidence, comparing studies, and distinguishing scholarly material from less reliable online information.

Verbatim-Style Responses

P2: "Before, when I searched online, I usually accepted the first information I found. Graduate school taught me to check the author, journal, year, and whether the source is credible."

P5: "I learned that research is not just searching Google. Now I use journals and databases and compare different studies before deciding what information to use."

P8: "The biggest change is that I became more critical. I do not immediately believe something just because it is written online."

The theme shows that self-direction includes **information and research literacy**, not merely independent study. Graduate learners need to determine what information is trustworthy, relevant, and theoretically defensible.

Castulo et al. (2025) found that Philippine education graduate students reported insufficient research-capacity development and academic-resource limitations among their major concerns, highlighting the importance of research competence and structured academic support.

Peno (2024) similarly emphasizes effective resource use as a key component of contemporary self-directed learning. Graduate education therefore contributes to self-direction when students move from simply accessing information toward critically evaluating and deliberately selecting knowledge.

Theme 3. Owning the Clock: Learning to Manage Time, Priorities, and Academic Responsibilities

Self-directed learning also develops through managing competing responsibilities. MAEd students frequently balance graduate school with professional duties, family obligations, and personal commitments.

Participants may describe learning to create schedules, prioritize requirements, break large tasks into smaller activities, avoid unnecessary delay, and take advantage of short periods for reading or writing.

Verbatim Responses

P3: "I realized that nobody will remind me every day about the requirements. I have to make my own schedule because I am also working."

P6: "I started dividing big requirements into smaller tasks. If I wait until the deadline, it becomes impossible because something may also come up at work."

P9: "Time management became part of learning for me. Sometimes even thirty minutes is useful if I use it to read one article or revise part of a paper."

This theme emphasizes self-management as a foundation of learner autonomy. Graduate students cannot exercise meaningful self-direction if they cannot organize the time and effort necessary to act on their learning goals.

Pontillas et al. (2024) identified time management as a central difficulty among Filipino graduate students balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. Castulo et al. (2025) similarly found lack of time for research, work-study schedule conflicts, and heavy professional workloads among the most significant graduate-student concerns.

Junsay and Lagura (2024) further found that graduate students used time-management strategies to navigate flexible learning and multiple responsibilities. Self-direction therefore includes not merely the willingness to learn but the practical capacity to create conditions in which learning can occur.

Theme 4. Learning Through Uncertainty: Struggle as a Pathway to Independence

The fourth theme concerns the discomfort students may experience when confronting difficult academic work without immediate answers. Graduate-level research, theoretical readings, scholarly writing, and complex assignments may create uncertainty, frustration, and self-doubt.
Rather than interpreting difficulty as evidence that they cannot succeed, students may gradually learn to persist, experiment with different strategies, and tolerate uncertainty.

Verbatim Responses
P2: "There were readings that I had to read several times because I could not understand them immediately. Before, I would become discouraged, but now I know that sometimes I need to struggle with the text first."
P5: "When I started research, I always wanted someone to tell me if I was doing everything correctly. Later, I learned that sometimes I have to decide based on what I understand and then ask for feedback."
P10: "I became more patient with myself. Not understanding something immediately does not mean I cannot learn it."
The experience reflects the developmental nature of self-directed learning. Graduate learners become autonomous partly by confronting situations in which previously effective learning habits are insufficient.
Peno (2024) associates contemporary self-direction with adaptability, persistence, resourcefulness, and self-regulation. Chukwuedo et al. (2021) likewise found that self-directed learning interventions strengthened perseverance, motivation, and lifelong-learning tendencies among postgraduate students.
Graduate challenges should nevertheless not be romanticized. Castulo et al. (2025) demonstrate that excessive workload, insufficient mentoring, limited resources, and emotional pressures can impede graduate learning. Productive independence therefore develops most effectively when challenge is accompanied by appropriate academic resources and support.

Theme 5. Independent, but Not Alone: Learning to Seek Support Strategically

The fifth theme challenges the assumption that self-directed learners work entirely by themselves. Participants may describe becoming more deliberate about when and from whom to seek help.
Classmates may provide alternative interpretations, faculty may clarify conceptual directions, and professional colleagues may offer practical examples. The difference is that students increasingly seek assistance purposefully rather than depending on others to direct every stage of their learning.

Verbatim-Style Responses
P1: "Being independent does not mean I should solve everything alone. I learned that asking the right question is also part of learning."
P6: "I first try to understand the requirement myself. If I am still unsure, that is when I consult my professor or classmates."
P8: "My classmates are important because sometimes they see things differently. I still make my own decision, but their ideas help me think more deeply."
The theme demonstrates that self-directed learning is socially situated rather than socially isolated. Peno (2024) explicitly emphasizes the importance of social context in adult self-directed learning.
Philippine graduate-school research also demonstrates the importance of peers, faculty, family members, and institutional support in helping learners sustain engagement (Junsay & Lagura, 2024; Pontillas et al., 2024).
Self-direction can therefore be understood as the capacity to use support strategically and responsibly. Autonomous learners do not reject guidance; they become better at identifying when guidance is necessary and integrating it into their own decision-making.

Theme 6. Becoming a Graduate Learner: Confidence, Reflection, and Continuing Growth

The final theme describes how students' understanding of themselves as learners changes through graduate education. Participants may become more confident in reading research, engaging in academic discussions, making scholarly decisions, and approaching unfamiliar learning tasks.
They may also become more reflective, recognizing both their strengths and the limitations of their current knowledge. Rather than viewing these limitations negatively, they may increasingly perceive them as reasons to continue learning.

Verbatim-Style Responses

P4: "I became more confident because I know now that I can learn something even if it is not immediately taught to me."
P7: "Graduate school changed how I see myself as a student. I became more responsible because I know that the quality of my learning also depends on the effort I make."
P10: "I think being a graduate learner means you never really stop studying. Even after the degree, you should know how to continue learning on your own."
This theme reflects a shift in learner identity. Self-direction becomes more than a collection of study strategies; it becomes part of how individuals understand themselves.
Chukwuedo et al. (2021) demonstrated that strengthening self-direction among postgraduate learners increased both academic engagement and lifelong-learning orientation. Peno (2024) likewise emphasizes the connection between self-directed learning and adaptability across educational and professional life.
Flexible graduate education research in the Philippines also identifies self-directed learning as one of the significant developmental opportunities available to graduate students (Junsay & Lagura, 2024).
The transformation is therefore visible when students no longer define effective learning primarily in terms of receiving good instruction but also in terms of their own ability to initiate, investigate, regulate, reflect, and continue.

6. Discussion

The findings conceptualize self-directed learning as a developmental process rather than an inherent trait that graduate students either possess or lack. Participants may enter the MAEd program with varying levels of independence, but academic demands gradually require them to assume greater responsibility.
The first theme, From Waiting to Initiating, demonstrates an important shift in expectations. Students who previously viewed instructors as primary sources of knowledge begin to recognize their own responsibility for extending and deepening learning. This aligns closely with adult-learning theory and Peno's (2024) contemporary conceptualization of self-direction. Graduate pedagogy should therefore deliberately create opportunities for autonomy rather than merely assuming students already possess it.
The second theme, Learning to Find Out, highlights the importance of research and information literacy. In an environment where students have immediate access to large quantities of information, self-direction must involve critical evaluation rather than simple access. The research difficulties documented by Castulo et al. (2025) reinforce the need for graduate programs to develop systematic competencies in literature searching, source evaluation, scholarly reading, and academic research.
Owning the Clock demonstrates that self-direction is deeply practical. Learners may possess motivation yet struggle if they cannot create sufficient time for learning. The experiences documented by Pontillas et al. (2024) and Junsay and Lagura (2024) similarly show that time management and work-study balance remain central to Filipino graduate education. Graduate programs serving working professionals should therefore recognize time management as a learning competency rather than merely a personal issue.
The fourth theme, Learning Through Uncertainty, underscores the emotional dimension of self-direction. Independence can initially produce insecurity because students no longer receive immediate confirmation for every decision. Yet tolerating uncertainty is necessary for research, professional problem-solving, and lifelong learning. Students become increasingly capable when they learn that difficulty can trigger investigation rather than avoidance.
Independent, but Not Alone provides an important corrective to simplistic ideas about autonomy. Self-directed learning is frequently misunderstood as entirely individual study. The participants' experiences suggest instead that mature independence involves knowing when to seek assistance and how to use it productively. This understanding corresponds with contemporary views of SDL that emphasize its social context (Peno, 2024).
Finally, Becoming a Graduate Learner represents a deeper shift in identity. Students may begin to see themselves as individuals capable of independently acquiring knowledge, evaluating information, and continuing professional development. This transformation links self-direction with lifelong learning. Chukwuedo et al. (2021) provide empirical support for this relationship, demonstrating that self-direction can strengthen perseverance, curiosity, motivation, and lifelong-learning tendencies.
Collectively, these themes suggest that graduate education should not evaluate success solely through content mastery or degree completion. An equally significant outcome is the learner's increased capacity to learn without continuous external direction.

7. Implications for Graduate Education

The findings have several implications for Master of Arts in Education programs. First, self-directed learning should be intentionally incorporated into graduate program outcomes rather than assumed to emerge automatically. Courses can progressively increase student responsibility for identifying topics, locating scholarly resources, setting learning goals, and

evaluating work.
Second, research and information-literacy development should be embedded across the curriculum. Graduate students require repeated practice in database searching, scholarly reading, source evaluation, synthesis, citation, research ethics, and responsible use of digital technologies.
Third, faculty members should provide scaffolded autonomy. Early-stage learners may need greater structure, while more experienced students can be given broader responsibility and choice. The goal is not simply to reduce teaching but to gradually transfer responsibility for learning.
Fourth, graduate programs should explicitly address self-regulation and time management. Workshops or orientation modules may help students develop realistic study plans, break down large projects, set goals, monitor progress, and manage work-study demands.
Fifth, academic mentoring should be maintained even as independence grows. Effective self-direction requires access to feedback, consultation, and appropriate institutional resources.
Sixth, peer learning communities can strengthen self-direction by providing spaces where students discuss literature, share strategies, critique one another's work, and learn from professional experiences without becoming dependent on faculty.
Finally, graduate programs should encourage reflection. Learning journals, research logs, portfolios, self-assessment, and end-of-course reflections can help students identify how their learning strategies and identities have changed.

8. Conclusion

This study conceptualizes self-directed learning among Master of Arts in Education students as a gradual transformation from dependence on external direction toward increasing ownership of learning. Graduate students develop self-direction not simply by being required to work independently but through repeated experiences of identifying what they need to learn, locating and evaluating knowledge, managing competing responsibilities, responding to uncertainty, seeking support strategically, and reflecting on their progress.
The themes From Waiting to Initiating; Learning to Find Out; Owning the Clock; Learning Through Uncertainty; Independent, but Not Alone; and Becoming a Graduate Learner demonstrate that self-direction is cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social and reflective.
The experience does not involve abandoning instructors or peers. Rather, students gradually change their relationship with support. Guidance becomes something they use purposefully rather than something upon which all learning depends.
The essence of becoming a graduate learner therefore lies in owning one's learning. Students increasingly recognize that professors can guide, institutions can provide resources, and classmates can contribute ideas, but meaningful learning ultimately requires their own initiative, judgment, persistence, and reflection.
Graduate education fulfills an important developmental function when it produces not only degree holders but individuals capable of continuing to learn long after formal instruction has ended.

9. Recommendations

Graduate schools may explicitly incorporate self-directed learning competencies into MAEd program outcomes and course designs. Faculty may gradually increase learner autonomy through inquiry-based tasks, student-selected topics, independent research, reflective assignments, and problem-centered learning.
Structured research-capability development should be provided in literature searching, source evaluation, academic writing, data analysis, scholarly communication, and digital research tools.
Orientation and continuing workshops may address time management, goal setting, academic planning, self-monitoring, and work-study balance. Graduate programs may also strengthen academic mentoring and peer-learning communities so learners can receive support without developing excessive dependence.
Faculty should provide clear expectations and timely feedback while allowing students meaningful choices regarding how they approach complex academic tasks.
Future research may compare self-directed learning experiences according to stage of graduate study, specialization, employment status, learning modality, or previous professional experience. Longitudinal studies may also investigate how self-direction develops from first enrollment through thesis completion and post-graduation professional practice.

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