

Fostering Learner Autonomy and Global Competence through Digital Symposium Participation in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of technology-mediated symposium activities in fostering learner autonomy and global competence among university students in Aceh. Focusing on eight undergraduate students from IAIN Langsa who participated in an international student research symposium, the research further investigates how the use of digital tools, virtual academic engagement, and authentic presentation tasks shapes students' autonomy and global communication skills. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through focus group discussions, observations, and in-depth interviews. The data were analysed by using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that symposium participation encouraged students to take greater responsibility for their learning, make independent decisions about their research topics, and utilize digital platforms to support their self-directed work. Students also demonstrated improved global competence, particularly in their ability to present research in English, interact with international audiences, and adapt their communication strategies across cultural contexts. The study highlights that integrating technology-mediated academic experiences into higher education not only enhances learner autonomy but also equips students with essential 21st-century skills needed for active participation in global academic settings. These findings emphasize the importance of technology-enhanced learning environments in fostering more independent, reflective, and globally oriented learners.

Keywords: *learner autonomy, global competence, technology-mediated learning.*

1) INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, higher education institutions are expected to equip students not only with academic knowledge but also with the skills necessary to participate effectively in a digitally connected global environment. Thus, fostering learner autonomy and cultivating global competence have emerged as critical priorities in modern higher education. Benson (2010) describes learner autonomy as students' ability to take responsibility to their own learning through planning, monitoring, and evaluating their academic progress. This perspective emphasizes the importance of self-direction, accountability, and intentional learning habits as foundations for academic independence. Meanwhile, global competence refers to the ability to engage thoughtfully with global challenges, communicate across cultural boundaries, and appreciate diverse perspectives in interpersonal and societal contexts

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(OECD, 2018) as cited in (Sälzer & Roczen, 2018). As higher-education continue to expand their international viewpoint, this competence has become increasingly essential for enabling students to navigate and contribute to multicultural academic and professional settings.

The broader shift toward learner-centred education has increasingly positioned autonomy as a central element of contemporary pedagogy. Students who demonstrate strong autonomous learning skills tend to exhibit higher motivation, better self-regulation, and readiness for lifelong learning (Ma & Guo, 2023; Saad & Abdullah, 2025). These skills are essential in an era where knowledge develops rapidly and learning continues beyond the classroom. Global competence has been recognized as a key learning outcome in internationalized higher-education curricula, reflecting the need for students to engage effectively with cultural diversity, global issues, and cross-border collaboration (Helm, 2023; O'Dowd, 2020).

Global competence has emerged as an essential skill that enables students to collaborate and compete effectively in multicultural settings. Within this context, digital symposiums, which represent virtual academic forums that facilitate academic presentations, dialogue, and collaboration, have gained attention emerging platforms that offer students to present their work, interact with peers from various backgrounds, and participate in academic dialogues beyond the constraints of physical learning spaces. As dynamic spaces for knowledge exchange, these online platforms enable students to share their research, engage with international peers, and participate in academic discourse beyond the physical classroom. As a pedagogical tool, digital symposium participation offers authentic, interactive, and cross-cultural learning experiences that closely resemble actual academic and professional environments (Deng et al., 2021). Participating in meaningful opportunities for students to develop key competencies, particularly learner autonomy and global competence, in ways that align with the demands of contemporary higher education. Digital symposiums have gained attention as emerging platforms that offer students meaningful opportunities platforms that offer students meaningful opportunities for academic engagement.

Recent research highlights the importance of these interrelated competencies in the digital environment. Wahid et al. (2025) for instance show that digital literacy and metacognitive strategies are key factors in strengthening learner autonomy, particularly within online learning environments. Similarly, Higgins (2024) reports that virtual exchanges contribute significantly to the development of global competence by enabling students to interact with culturally diverse peers and engage in

collaborative tasks. Cruz et al. (2025) add that creative forms of digital participation not only foster independent learning but also broadening students' awareness of global issues, and academic practices. However, despite these contributions, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning how learner autonomy and global competence intersect within the context of digital symposium participation. Most existing studies examine learner autonomy and global competence separately or focus primarily on virtual exchange programs. Far less attention has been given to specific pedagogical value of digital symposiums, and fewer studies explore how students themselves experience these activities in relation to their academic and professional development (Almelhes, 2025; Higgins, 2024; Jehangir et al., 2024; Mohebbi, 2024; Rahmasari et al., 2025; Saeed, 2021; Tathahira, 2020).

This research seeks to address this gap by investigating how participation in digital symposiums supports the development of learner autonomy and global competence among undergraduate students, particularly at IAIN Langsa. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do technology-mediated symposium activities influence learner autonomy and global competence among undergraduate students at IAIN Langsa? This study aims to shed light on how digital symposium participation shapes the students' independent learning practice, intercultural communication abilities, and broader global awareness. Consequently, it seeks to clarify the specific role that digital symposiums can play within localized higher education context.

2) METHODS

This research used a qualitative descriptive design to explore how technology-mediated symposium activities contribute to the development of learner autonomy and global competence among undergraduate students. Hall & Liebenberg (2024) describe that qualitative research plays a crucial role in exploring complex phenomena, offering a distinctive capacity to capture the rich and nuanced experiences of individuals. By engaging closely with participants' accounts, qualitative research helps reveal perspectives and insights that are not easily captured through numerical based methods.

A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because it offers a straightforward way to present participants' experience and interpretations without imposing an extensive theoretical framework. This approach is commonly used in education research where the goal is to describe how learners make sense of instructional practice, classroom interactions, and new learning environments. In this study, it enables the researcher to centre students' voices and document how they navigate the digital

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symposium setting. Eight undergraduate students from IAIN Langsa participated in the study. They were selected purposively based on their involvement in the symposium.

To collect data, the researcher used three main techniques including Focus Group Discussions (FGD), observation, and in-depth interview. The FGD involves a focus on specific issues, with a predetermined group of people, participating in an interactive discussion (Hennink, 2014). It was conducted to explore impressions of the symposium and to encourage dialogue about the challenges and learning process they experienced. Observations were carried out during the symposium sessions, allowing the researcher to document how students interacted, participated in discussions, and managed digital tasks in real time. Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant to gain deeper insight into their personal experiences, interpretations, and reflections. These interviews provided space for students to discuss their experiences more personally and to reflect on changes in their confidence, independence, or intercultural awareness.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher began by reading the transcripts several times to become familiar with the content. Initial codes were then developed to capture meaningful ideas. These codes were organised into broader themes that reflected patterns in how the participants described their learning process, interactions with peers from different backgrounds and how they manage the digital symposium.

3) RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study showed that participation in technology-mediated symposium activities contributed positively to students' academic, communicative, and intercultural development. The analysis demonstrates that these digital symposium experiences promoted stronger self-directed learning behaviours, enhanced students' global competence, and strengthened the participants' academic English skills. The key points that emerged from the data are presented below.

a. Technology-mediated symposiums supported the development of students' self-directed learning skills.

The use of technology-mediated symposiums played an important role in enhancing students' self-directed learning skills. Most of the participants proposed that preparing for the symposium encouraged them to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Tasks such as outlining ideas,

selecting relevant literatures, preparing presentation slides, practicing their delivery independently or with peers, required careful planning and initiative. These activities helped them develop important metacognitive strategies, including setting goals, monitoring their progress through practice notes or peer feedback, and reflecting on their performance after each session. The participants also noted that access to digital materials allow them to revisit content whenever needed. This flexibility enables them to deepen their understanding and extend their learning out of regular class hours.

b. Symposium participation developed students' global competence through exposure and collaborative interaction.

The participants' participation in the digital symposiums also played a meaningful role in strengthening their global awareness and intercultural competence. They were exposed to a variety of perspectives that broadened their thinking beyond their familiar environment through interactions with presenters from other institutions. Several participants described how these encounters encouraged them to reflect more critically on local issues by comparing them with global trends. Moreover, most of the participants admitted that presenting to and communicating with audiences who are native English speakers boosted their confidence in using English for intercultural communication. For many participants, this experience was a meaningful step toward developing the communicative skills required for academic and professional engagement in an increasingly interconnected world.

c. Digital symposiums participation strengthened students' academic language use and communicative competence.

Most of the participants stated that the digital symposiums generated an engaging space for them to develop their academic English and communication skills. They insisted that presenting their research in English provided massive opportunities to practice formal language within an authentic academic setting. Regular involvement in public speaking and interactive question and answer sessions also helped them to practice their pragmatic communication skills, such as clarifying ideas, responding to spontaneous questions, manage turn-taking, and expressing complex concepts more concisely. These experiences were essential for building confidence and competence in academic communication.

These findings align with broader shifts in higher education that place increasing emphasis on students-centered learning and the development of 21st century competences. In this context, students are encouraged to take a more active role in directing their learning, including making decisions and engaging in self-regulated academic practices. Meanwhile, the rapid development of digital learning tools and virtual exchange initiatives has reshaped how learners access information and participate in academic communities. These online platforms reduce geographical constraints, allowing institutions to foster interaction across cultures and expose students to a wider range of viewpoints. The rising need for graduates who can communicate effectively in international settings and collaborate across cultural boundaries underscores the urgency of integrating these principles into higher education teaching and learning.

Research conducted by Faza & Lestari (2025) highlights that digital learning environments support key metacognitive processes, including goal setting, self-monitoring, and reflective thinking, all of which are central to the development of self-directed learning. In line with that, Lee & Chang (2025) whose study propound a meta-analysis effectiveness of self-directed learning within K–12 digital learning environments. The finding underscore how self-directed learning practices contribute to learners' academic outcomes, engagement, and ability to manage their own learning processes. A particular emphasis is placed on the development of metacognitive skills including self-monitoring, goal setting, and reflective thinking, which consistently emerge as key factors that enable learners to navigate online learning tasks more effectively. Roy & Gandhimathi (2024) also add mobile-assisted learning environments to enhance learner autonomy as it provides flexible access to learning resources and allows students to review materials according to their individual pace and needs. The engagement of technology-mediated symposiums in higher education has proven to be an effective way to foster students' self-directed learning abilities.

Digital symposiums serve as a meaningful intersection where learner autonomy and global competence mutually reinforce one another. These platforms are purposefully structured to encourage active participation, collaborative interaction, and independent exploration. Engaging in such activities requires students to prepare their performance, and manage their time, all of which develop their capacity to take responsibility for their learning processes. Simultaneously, digital symposiums expand students' global viewpoint by providing access to a range of international perspectives, thereby fostering intercultural understanding and communication skills. Through exchanges with participants

from varied cultural and academic backgrounds, students learn to navigate cultural nuances, articulate their ideas effectively, and appreciate diverse scholarly viewpoints. Thus, digital symposiums create authentic learning environments in which both autonomy and global competence can be developed simultaneously.

In preparing for the symposium, students took an active role in selecting appropriate readings, creating power points, and practicing their presentations on their own and with their colleagues. These tasks reflect the stages of the self-directed learning cycle constructed by Zimmerman (2010), which involves planning, engaging in performance, and evaluating an individuals' learning. The symposium structure aligns well with this process, as learners are required to anticipate the expectations of their audience, deliver their work in a formal setting, and thoughtfully consider the feedback they receive. The technology-supported language learning environments also introduce students to a wide range of linguistic and cultural experiences, which helps cultivate intercultural awareness. The symposium setting mirrors real-world situations in which learners must interpret cultural subtleties and communicate their ideas effectively to diverse audiences (Chapelle, 2019; Zheng et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the participants mentioned that engaging with international speakers and peers expanded their perspectives and prompted them to reflect across cultural contexts. It demonstrates that well-designed digital interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds can foster global awareness, empathy, and stronger communication abilities. The findings further indicate that digital symposiums and comparable online formats serve as valuable platforms for building global competence through ongoing intercultural engagement (Zhang, 2025). Integrating global competence into higher education is also essential for preparing graduates to thrive in today's rapidly evolving international professional landscape (Robertson, 2021). It reinforces the idea that exposure to international speakers and peers stimulates reflection across cultural contexts and helps students develop intercultural competence, global awareness, and communication skills. Whether through exchange programs, internationalized curricula, or English-Medium Instruction, learners consistently report that such experiences broaden their perspectives and deepen their ability to navigate cultural diversity (Goh et al., 2025; Syam et al., 2024).

4) CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research showed that technology-mediated symposium activities hold an essential role in promoting key dimensions of contemporary higher education learning. The flexible nature of digital symposium participation provides valuable opportunities for students to practice extensive control over their learning processes. By preparing presentations, managing timelines, and engaging actively with peers, students develop a stronger sense of autonomy and responsibility, which those two competences are pivotal for successful lifelong learning. Moreover, the intercultural features of these digital platforms significantly develop learners' global competence and communication abilities.

Exposure to diverse perspectives encourages learners to articulate their ideas clearly, respond thoughtfully to others, and navigate cultural differences with sensitivity and confidence. These competencies are increasingly critical as higher education institutions continue to internationalize and prepare students for participation in global academic and professional environments. The technology-mediated symposium activities support the development of independent and reflective learners. These activities direct students to think critically about their learning choices, evaluate their performance, and improve their strategies through feedback and self-reflection. The digital symposium promotes the autonomy, global awareness, and academic readiness needed for success in an interconnected world.

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