The Effects of Online Supervisory Feedback on Student-Supervisor Communications during the COVID-19

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Abstract: This study focuses on online supervisory written feedback on PhD supervisees' performance, given explicitly through online communication, particularly during the first wave of COVID-19. This unusual situation has brought many different effects on students' academic lives. This scenario has influenced both students' and teachers' mutual communication. A directed qualitative content analysis (DQCA) approach was adapted from previous research and modified for the present context. The current study planned to bring forth the supervisee and supervisors' perception of the communication and feedback process, considering that online feedback and communication has been a new experience for most students. According to the findings, teachers/supervisors give feedback on students' production, whereas teacher-student communication also seemed crucial for the performance improvising of learners. The result brought forth a wide range of social, educational, and surprisingly psychological issues both supervisees and supervisors faced during online communication during COVID-19.

Keywords: *Communication, ESL, supervisory feedback, online feedback, performance.*

Introduction

The written feedback supports the learning process by enhancing learners' knowledge and performance. Therefore, feedback practice may occur in every educational setup (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Vattøy & Smith, 2019), considering it an essential base for students' effective learning and performance (Mohamadi, 2018). Supervisors have also started to provide feedback on theses/dissertations online at the postgraduate level (Hounsell, 2021) during the pandemic replacing the classical (physical/face-to-face) process. This online feedback model was adapted, utilizing online communication systems, i.e., Zoom, Teams, or Google Meet (Aslam et al., 2021), due to the extended closure of universities. It also involved modern technological gadgets (i.e., desktop, laptop, pad, or mobile) (Barzani et al., 2021); however, it seemed less effective (Steele & Holbeck, 2018).

No doubt, physically corrective written feedback, on all related areas of teaching/learning, attracted researchers' great attention (Benson & DeKeyser, 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Lee, 2019; Lee, 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Li & Vuono, 2019; Mao & Crosthwaite, 2019; Mao & Lee, 2020; Zhang & Cheng, 2021). However, the present research intends to examine the role of feedback through online systems, specifically focusing on supervisory feedback delimiting the current investigation to the supervisor's feedback to doctoral students via an online medium (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) for mediums of feedback. Therefore, the study would explore the corrective written feedback that may increase learning output (Reynolds & Kao, 2021) to fill the gap between learned and better learning output(s) (Zhang, 2021). The unusual situation of COVID-19 has caused great distances in communication ways/terminologies between supervisors and supervisees, leaving fewer choices to adapt communication methods to provide feedback.

The most affected area of this level concerns the research process where supervisees look for the supervisors to discuss and communicate where feedback is needed more critically, but sometimes online communication may cause misunderstandings. This study explores what difficulties supervisors and supervisees faced during online feedback and communication, specifically in the last two years. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to evaluate the

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communication experiences of doctoral students and supervisors specifically while conducting these academic practices online. This synthesis between feedback and online learning/supervising (during any type of long-pandemic) would conceptually make this study distinct from previous studies. It encourages the present researchers to work further in feedback, online supervision, and online learning, specifically at the doctoral level, from the perspective of digital ways of online communication, specifically supervisory feedback during COVID-19. The other objective of the present study was to observe the effects on students' perceptions of learning outcomes after communicating with their supervisors in the process of supervisory feedback via online mediums. The study would answer the following questions;

1. What type of communicative problems do supervisees and supervisors face regarding online supervisory feedback during COVID-19?

2. How have these communicative problems in online supervisory feedback affected supervisees' academic performance?

Literature Review

Due to rapid lockdowns concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges in every field of life have become graver than ever (Iqbal et al., 2020), affecting the higher education sector. Consequently, Feedback practices/experiences of the teachers/learners were also got affected (Yang et al., 2021). Likewise, PhD supervisees have undoubtedly faced trouble while communicating and getting feedback from supervisors. It directly influenced their academic performance and research, which allows them no chance of making mistakes.

According to Bitchener et al. (2011), supervisors' constructive feedback is a key to solid doctoral dissertations. It is a characteristic of good supervision practice. It is also emphasized that knowledge is gained and created through and within the feedback process, significantly when it facilitates (Azman et al., 2014). Doctoral students are high-levelled candidates, and they are competent and fully motivated to finish their research work. Therefore, a successful relationship between supervisor and supervisee can foster positive development and active engagement in feedback practices (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2021; Pyhältö et al., 2012). Neupane Bastola (2021) investigated engagement and challenges from the perspective of supervisory feedback to students. The study also revealed marked differences in supervisors' and the students' perceptions. For instance, differences were student engagement, students' research experiences, and different factors contributing to the challenges in supervisory feedback. However, Zhang et al. (2020), evaluating master's thesis texts, suggested six thematic solutions relevant to supervisory feedback; a) Gaining reassurance from the supervisor's compliments, b) Trusting the supervisor's feedback due to position and authority, c) Following supervisor's advice selectively, d) Engaging in more academia by incorporating more citation, e) Getting not proper feedback and f) Letting it go and moving on it too.

Supervisory feedback differs between local and international students (Fan et al., 2019). According to Fan et al. (2019), a supervisor's support affects students' innovation and fosters citizenship behaviour; similarly, it also raises creativity and innovation among international doctoral students.

The present study's theoretical gap was delimited to online supervisory feedback and communication of PhD supervisors and supervisees, specifically in online means of communication. Although, various researches have been conducted during the period (2020-2021). However, they seemed distinctive from the present gap. For instance, Anderson (2021) conducted a study on feedback and doctoral students. However, academic discourse socialization and written feedback were explicitly examined in the sociocultural and interactional contexts. The findings of this study were delimited to socialization, academic identities, and discourse practices. Mydin and Surat's (2021) found that participants' research capabilities developed significantly under close supervision and guidance, even though doctoral students usually practice self-study individually. Hawari et al. (2022) conducted a study based on supervisors' perspectives on graduate students' problems in academic writing involving 9 Malaysian supervisors supervising 21 Jordanian doctoral students, bringing forth some concerns about writing production. The study highlighted some issues mentioned by supervisors, such as lack of vocabulary, grammatical issues, less motivation, and writing apprehension. Overall, it can be concluded that the communication bond between supervisors and supervisees holds significant status in the whole tenure of doctoral programs.

According to the present arguments, PhD supervisors also adopt various ways to assist their students' online feedback processes. Most supervisors communicate with their supervisees through synchronous instruction systems using the latest technological online communicative tools such as Zoom, Google, audio-video aids, or Tencent to provide a real-life study environment. The long pandemic (1 and half years till to date) forced them to conduct online meetings and provide online corrective written feedback for a long time. In contrast, previous studies, specifically relevant to master's supervisory feedback, were conducted under normal environmental circumstances, focusing on the effectiveness of writing, feedback, and peer feedback.

The theoretical gap of the present research may be discussed in two ways; a) the current study was conducted on online supervisory feedback and communication of doctoral students, focusing on the technical, behavioral, or meeting room concerns. The previous researchers might not have considered these concerns necessary as the research was

conducted in normal circumstances. b) According to Inouye and McAlpine (2019), master's research keeps a limited and restricted scope working as a monologue in the communication perspective. However, Ph.D. research retains a broad spectrum as a dialogue supporting the larger scholarly community.

Methodology

Research Design

Under the qualitative paradigm, a directed qualitative content analysis (DQCA) approach was employed, adapted from Assarroudi et al. (2018); modified for the present context. For instance, in the current scenario, the unit of analysis was the interviews' transcription (Graneheim et al., 2017). Extracting the related meaning from the data (Elo et al., 2014) based on the coding rules, categories were developed based on the previous research and theory (Mayring, 2000, 2015), i.e., supervisees' academic performance technological, behavioural, and educational issues. More than one researcher was involved in the present study; therefore, to increase inter-coder reliability (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), each researcher interdependently encoded the data and discussed the difficulties of reducing the differences (Assarroudi et al., 2018). After inter-author discussions, the anchored samples, selected from the meaning units, were assigned to categories. Afterwards, the data analysis was performed at the final stage by extracting the meaning units focused on the study's aims and categorization matrix from reviewed content (Mayring, 2015).

Directed Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)

The present study has employed Qualitative content analysis (QCA), adapted and modified from the PhD study of the second author of this paper, interpreting the interview data through a systematic coding process (Assarroudi et al., 2018). It analyzed data specifically from the perspective of communication, which might be considered a type of data (Kibiswa, 2019; Mayring, 2000). It further developed categories and patterns for data analysis (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) by refining and testing using Qualitative Content Analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In the present case, supervisors' and supervisees' communication and feedback processes were evaluated by employing Directed QCA on the text of interviews interpreting the specific characteristics of arguments (Holsti, 1968). The research adopted and modified directed QCA from Assarroudi et al. (2018) as follows.

Sample Design

The researchers completed the first step-1, which recommended acquiring general research skills. The researchers devised the sampling strategy in step-2, which was implied to include 'key informants' (Elo et al., 2014). It guided the data collection process from participants (who participated voluntarily) for interviews by adapting the purposive sampling method (Coyne, 1997). In step-3, the researchers decided that they may focus on transcribed data that were extracted from interviews (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Data collection process

In step-4, the researchers developed the interview guide (see Appendix) containing open-ended questions based on the aims of the present study, which further followed the main research questions relevant to the main categories, and it was devised following the previous research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Then in step-5, the interviews were conducted, and data were carefully (Seidman, 2013) transcribed after each session (Poland, 1995). 30 PhD students/supervisees and 15 supervisors from different departments of social sciences of Zhengzhou University China were targeted for interviews. However, after inclusion/exclusion, 15 supervisees and eight supervisors were finally interviewed. Their answers were recorded. They were asked to be as honest and genuine while sharing their experience. They were assured that their identity would be kept unrevealed. The study's interviewed data were analyzed by employing directed qualitative content analysis.

Specifying the Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis may include an organization, a person, a program, a classroom, an interview, coded text, or a transcript (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Following step-6 of the QCA model of Assarroudi et al. (2018), the interview (the transcriptions) was specified as the unit of analysis.

Data Analysis Process

In the step-7 of the directed QCA model of Assarroudi et al. (2018), the interview data were reviewed as many times as suggested; the communicators' identity, the place of communication, what type of communication and why was it happening, and when it was happened (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). For instance, in the result, the related meaning to the research was extracted from the immersed data (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Elo et al., 2014; Kyngäs, 2020).

In step-8, relying on the previous research, the major categories for analysis were generated inductively (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In step-9, subcategories were defined objectively based on the current theoretical framework's links to earlier

research (Mayring, 2000, 2015). For example, *Technical concerns, Behavioral concerns, and classrooms/meeting room concerns were* objectively and precisely developed. In step-10, based on the theoretical definitions, coding standards for main categories and subcategories were described (Mayring, 2015). The clear distinction between the main categories and subcategories' matrix was represented by coding rules that may further enhance the study's trustworthiness. Therefore, the theoretical coding rules would be extracted from the theoretical definitions. Finally, following Step-12, samples were anchored to main categories and subcategories focusing on the meaning units (Mayring, 2015).

Following the Step-13-15 of the directed QCA model of Assarroudi et al. (2018), the data were analyzed according to the aims and categorization matrix reviewing content summarising the meaning units (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) applying preliminary coding (Mayring, 2000, 2015) to the data. The data was then ordered and categorized through inductive derivation, seeing similarity/dissimilarity and establishing links between generic and main categories employing the constant comparison method (Wildemuth, 2016).

Interview Design and General Questions

a. Questions for Student participants

1. In what ways you used to communicate with your supervisor during COVID-19?
2. How do you feel about the online supervisory feedback during COVID-19?
3. What problems did you face while getting online supervisory feedback?
4. How did online supervisory feedback affect your performance?
5. Do you think online supervisory feedback negatively or positively affects your academic grades?

b. Questions for Teacher participants

1. In what ways you used to communicate with your students during COVID-19?
2. What problems did you face while giving online supervisory feedback?
3. Do you think online supervisory feedback negatively or positively affects your academic performance?
4. Have you successfully transformed educational leadership to your students so that they academically perform further through written feedback via online means?

Participants Labeling

Supervisee participant: SP

Teacher (supervisors) participant: TP

Zhengzhou University: ZZU

Findings / Results

The present study involved an interview questionnaire about the effects and ideas of students about online supervisory feedback additionally how teachers think about the feedback they provided to students during the academic tenure of COVID-19. The research brought many aspects of online supervisory feedback from students (supervisees) and teachers (supervisors).

Communicative problems regarding online supervisory feedback during COVID-19

RQ 1. What type of communicative problems do supervisees and supervisors face regarding online supervisory feedback during COVID-19?

The interview with participants and supervisors brought forth some general concerns related to online supervisory feedback during this particular scenario of COVID-19, and these issues can be summed up as follows,

Table 1. Categorical Concerns of the Participants

Technical concerns	Behavioural concerns	Classroom environment concerns
Internet instability	Students become passive	No group activities
Lack of technical knowledge to handle devices	Less interest during lectures	No smooth classroom discussions
Software operating issues	No social bonding with fellow students	No classroom codes and conducts experience
More room for false ways of examinations	Lack of understanding of facial gestures and body language.	No formal classroom setting experience
Time differences	Tiring and frustrating process	No face-to-face interaction

Table 2. Categorical Concerns of the Supervisors

Technical concerns	Behavioural concerns
Internet instability	Lack of interest among students
Time differences	Language barriers
Software operating issues	No certainty about the understanding of the conversation
Difficulty in examination invigilation	Lack of understanding of facial gestures and body language.

Technical Concerns

> RQ 2: How have these communicative problems in online supervisory feedback affected supervisees' academic performance?

Table 3. Technical Concerns the Supervisors and Participants

Supervisors	Participants
Internet instability	Internet instability
Lack of technical knowledge to handle devices	Time differences
Software operating issues	Software operating issues
More room for false ways of examinations	Difficulty in examination invigilation
Time differences	

The majority of participants stated the same means of online communication through widely used applications, such as WeChat, Tencent meeting, Zoom, or Superstar. Students used these applications to communicate and submit assignments and almost all academic work for some examinations. TPs responded to the same ways of communicating with their students, such as through WeChat, Zoom, and Tencent meetings. They were widely used to communicate online. SP 1 stated, "I usually use WeChat and Tencent meetings to communicate with my supervisor. The major problem I usually face is the time-lapse difference between me and my supervisor's hometown."

SP 4 majorly reported one issue causing communication to be almost a frustrating process because of the time difference between the regions of students and teachers. The student talked about 8 hours' time-lapse difference between students and supervisor's country that made him attend some teaching sessions and meetings at midnight or even late.

ZZU Supervisee participants stated one common issue related to technology and the internet as the gravest reason for miscommunication between students and supervisors, ultimately causing an insufficient feedback process. Internet stability and smooth online communication are essential to successful supervisory feedback and output. In particular, students usually suffer from this issue in underdeveloped countries, underprivileged areas, and villages, especially concerning Wi-Fi and internet connections. Students suffer while scheduled classes and sessions by supervisors if they get disconnected due to poor network connection, which causes supervisors annoyance most of the time.

SP 13 expressed his frustrated feelings and said, "I live in a quite underprivileged area of my country and here poor WIFI facility sometimes it makes me feel frustrated when we are in the middle of serious discussion, sharing ppt and giving any presentation online and suddenly my internet shuts down."

SP 2 expressed her grave concerns about software handling issues. Since the rapid development of technology, new and innovative academic soft wares and examination links have also caused students to get frustrated during the online communication and feedback process. Online classes and examination scenario is quite uncertain for many students, not knowing whether they will be able to communicate on time or be able to attend examinations or feedback sessions from their teachers on time or not. This reason has been reported by more than half of the participants during the interviews.

The most significant concern of supervisors was technology and internet issues that always proved to be a considerable hindrance during communication. This problem has to be taken into account by supervisors. Still, TP 2 and 5 shared their experience about internet issues being used as an excuse by many inactive and non-serious students. TP 2 stated, "I think students sometimes make it an excuse that they face technical issues like internet and software whereas I believe if they try little, this problem can be solved."

Classroom Environmental Concerns

Table 4. Categorical Classroom Environmental Concerns of the Participants

No group activities
No smooth classroom discussions
No classroom codes and conducts experience

No formal classroom setting experience
No face-to-face interaction

SP 15 reported their concerns as not having a great classroom environment experience. They shared their intense feelings about missing classroom settings and interaction with fellows during discussion sessions and group activities. Participants considered online communication and feedback hard to understand. They stated, "… because of so many reasons no smooth discussion and less participation of students during online supervisory feedback and discussion there is less room for improvement, and less sharing of ideas from students means less learning and variety…."

Almost all supervisors who participated in the study raised a general point: a misunderstanding between the students and them because of no physical presence, which hinders a more comprehensive feedback process. Many cases reported miscommunication and wrongly understood feedback by supervisors to students, which ultimately caused chaos for both sides, and adverse effects of online communication were witnessed.

SP 11 shared, "my idea when I admitted myself here in China was only to get my degree and interact with different cultures and students from all over the world, but because online classes have changed the whole scenario."

SP 7 expressed during her interview, "…no learning and exposure of various cultures and languages because of online communication. I miss offline classes and meetings."

Overall, the idea of training and experience with education was lost because of abnormal education situations in epidemic tenure, and students felt highly disappointed about it.

Behavioral Issues

A stimulating concern was shown by SP 3, 7, and 13 by stating their experience of misunderstanding their supervisors' tone and gestures while giving feedback on their work and providing suggestions. They said they could not understand whether the feedback and discussion were sarcastic, or they might have misunderstood the supervisors' tone, which confused them later on.

SP 22 said, " …sometimes I feel supervisors are not interested in communicating online and maybe they prefer students to freeze their degree until the COVID situation goes normal…."

Some students felt a little demotivated as they could not get that positive or maybe energetic response from teachers as they used to get face-to-face, which makes them feel ignored. This feeling causes a great deal of trouble for research work and progress.

SP 1 shared a severe matter of causing misunderstanding between the supervisee and supervisor over dissertation contents because of the language barrier. Both sides have different L1 but use English (second language) as a communication medium. Both the student and supervisor have to communicate online, making communication and supervisory feedback quite tricky for the student to understand—this misunderstanding results in the wrong choice of topic and, finally, failure in proposal defence. SP 5 and 14 stated the same problem of miss-communication that caused them to face loss in their proposal pre-defence presentation.

TPs are concerned about students' behaviour towards online supervisory feedback and discussion sessions. They reported students' non-serious attitude towards attendance, mainly in group sessions, and needed students' contribution and feedback. However, during one-to-one/face-to-face sessions, there are fewer chances to be passive and less attentive.

Discussion

The present study has revealed many types of information about the actual scenario of supervisory feedback during exceptional circumstances of COVID-19 where supervisees were facing many psychological imbalanced emotional states. The particular situation of COVID-19 has brought various uncertain and unexpected events in the educational and learning process throughout the system. The research conducted to investigate the communication scenarios between supervisees and supervisors for the doctoral program has found many aspects influencing academic performances, such as technology. Extended lockdowns have gravely affected every field of life (Iqbal et al., 2020). Technological feedback can lead to ambiguity and cause much misunderstanding while communicating (Langer et al., 2019; Lundgren et al., 2019). Online feedback and communication can negatively influence learners' writings (Zhu et al., 2020), especially those unfamiliar with online technology or who cannot access the computer facilities. Since supervisors expect doctoral students to be great writers and it seems their close supervision and guidance can help students perform well (Mydin & Surat, 2021). Writing a dissertation is a major significant part of a doctoral degree, and it is focused by every supervisor to lead students in academic writing skills. It can only happen through robust and effective communication between them (Hawari et al., 2022). The present study has been conducted to highlight issues that may harm the future to explore the problems during the online communication process.

Many academic, psychological, and technical difficulties have been faced from the supervisee's perspective. Moreover, these difficulties proved to be significant barriers to learning processes, especially feedback and communication.

The first and foremost barrier reported by most supervisees is the technology and the use of devices, software, and the internet's unsustainability. Even a student reported not owning a personal computer because of financial reasons, and getting in contact with a supervisor at the prescribed time becomes hard sometimes because, in university, they do have a computer lab and office computer facility. Supervisees' attitude toward online feedback and communication also influences the learning atmosphere. It sometimes creates distrusting environment between supervisee and supervisor.

This unique scenario of COVID-19 has also deprived students of face-to-face classroom experience and in-person meetings with teachers/supervisors and vice versa. Understandably, supervisees sometimes feel frustrated that they have no chance to enjoy the company and physical presence of fellows and teachers, and they miss the department's existence in so many ways.

There are undeniably significant benefits of using online feedback delivery methods. However, not everything that sparks is attractive, so the use of technology and soft wares cannot be viewed as a panacea. Even though most students prefer online-based techniques to get quick feedback, these methods and techniques should only be utilized if they benefit their academic performance.

First, although technology has improved academic ways and young learners are becoming more technologically educated, technical concerns remain in providing online feedback (Bridge & Appleyard, 2005; Buckley & Cowap, 2013). The right technology can only benefit students' online learning engagement. Students themselves show concerns about the online system. Students' incentive to access their online feedback is essential to consider. According to a recent study on assessment feedback access, students only go through around one-third of all feedback files, and this ratio reached 40% when they could not view their grades unless they went through the feedback first (Mensink & King, 2020). Another scenario to be taken into account is that students with low graded seemed to be less connected to online feedback, and most of them seemed less likely to adopt the online study system as they did not even view provided feedback files (Davies & Graff, 2005; Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

Online learning approaches seem not to be providing equal learning opportunities to learners of all capabilities if we consider personal abilities, technical support, and individual motivation levels (Lust et al., 2012). Consequently, learners' motivation and eagerness to learn may vary from person to person. Most students already carry certain expectations about their academic performances, and there is little room for improvement when they get higher scores as they already know through grades and would not welcome additional feedback. If they get low scores as not expected, they might not accept criticism (Carless, 2006; Pitt & Norton, 2017; Winstone et al., 2017); additionally, the importance of assessments should not be ignored as assessment records do directly affects the final results and grades of a learner. These assessment scores affect final examinations, which ultimately leave impacts on the final results of the degree, and that direct connection between assessments and final examinations may lead to considering the importance of feedback (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008).

Another critical consideration for learners about online feedback is that there is more room for some misunderstood feedback or misinterpreted feedback that can indeed lead to confusion and frustration sometimes as there is no instant source of communication and clarifying the confusion, unlike face-to-face feedback (Andrade & Cizek, 2010; Hast & Healy, 2018; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Because students may obtain their feedback when staff is not immediately available, there may be delays in the explanation process, especially given the benefits of remote access to feedback. This lack of connection to the online system might have negative consequences. Learners may get demotivated and frustrated by the process (McCabe et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The current study has brought forth many issues faced during supervisory feedback and communication between supervisors and supervisees, significantly when online learning methods directly influence their research and academic performance. After interviewing 15 supervisees and eight supervisors from different departments, it has been found out that since the crucial situation caused by COVID-19, learning and communication systems have been changed entirely. Significant issues related to the internet and software have been witnessed, which come under technological concerns by both supervisees and supervisors. The second major field of difficulty is behavioural concerns. For centuries, learners have been habitual in attending the traditional education system and physically experiencing specific classroom settings and environments. Sudden diversion of the education system, particularly feedback and communication differences, led students and teachers to face particular barriers. Traditionally during online classes, teachers and students may have frequent lessons and contact better at the high school and college level; however, at the PhD level, supervisor and supervisee communication have the most significant/crucial part of the education. This paper has discussed many difficulties the students have faced throughout this online communication process; most importantly, feedback by supervisors has been misunderstood, which fails the idea of supervisory feedback—considering these difficulties, many steps can be taken to avoid such misunderstandings and misinterpretations of supervisory feedback. Most developed and user-friendly devices and software for online communication and learning

can be developed. The language barrier is another reason for the supervisee's frustration during online feedback, which supervisors can consider some reliable ways to avoid such ambiguities. However, many issues stated by supervisees can be challenging to address, such as in-person learning experience and face-to-face communication at a certain point because of still going on COVID-19 situation and its after-effects on the overall education system.

Recommendations

The study has highlighted many issues and presented various scenarios while observing supervisory feedback and communication, contributing to a successful or less-successive learning process. The study has reported many cases which displayed miscommunication and misunderstanding on behalf of supervisees while comprehending instructions and feedback from supervisors. This article would assist both supervisees and supervisors conceptually to know the problems they face, and thus, they can remove or at least minimize these kinds of barriers in communication found by the researchers in the present research.

The present study has aimed to investigate variant experiences of PhD students, in online learning processes, at higher education institutions in Zhengzhou University, China, during the COVID-19: the main objective of the present study was to observe students' difficulties and barriers to online feedback, during communication with their supervisors, in the process of supervisory feedback via online mediums. The study was specifically conducted to seek how these communication(s) have affected students' learning outcomes and approaches to their research work.

The study has covered PhD supervisees and supervisors from various departments from Zhengzhou University; however, there is much room for further research while considering students of master's since their academic tenure involves both course work first and thesis, which involves supervisors, in particular, many subject teachers. Further research can be held considering many participants and sample size to validate the issue in more depth and detail. The present state clearly defines an unpredictable ongoing scenario of COVID-19 and similar viruses where it is hard to say when we will enjoy the previous educational and social experiences. We have to learn or compromise by adopting those ways that may help us survive in the current situation for a very uncertain long time. So, considering this element, there are many areas and gaps where researchers can still explore and bring forth many facts and ways to cope with online learning and feedback processes, particularly for higher education levels. There is also room for further inventiveness in the delivery of criticism. For example, students may lack interaction while online text feedback, but audio feedback is perceived as more interactive (Hast & Healy, 2018). Much previous research has shown positive effects of audio feedback methods than other ways (e.g., Gould & Day, 2013; Parkes & Fletcher, 2017); thus, now would be an excellent time to reconsider. Although video feedback may necessitate more resources, it can increase student-faculty feedback exchanges.

Limitations

The present study was conducted during the first wave of COVID-19 in China under the lockdown scenario. Therefore, the sample size of the study may be limited. Only 30 PhD students/supervisees and 15 supervisors only from the department of social sciences of Zhengzhou University China were targeted for online interviews. However, after inclusion/exclusion, 15 supervisees and 8 supervisors were finally interviewed. Moreover, the method for these types of studies often follows video interviews. However, the interviews were conducted via online emails in the present study. Hence, the online video interviews were also conducted, yet the past researcher often suggested that the live video interview was impossible due to strict lockdowns. Henceforth, to increase/ensure the study's trustworthiness, the research employed the directed qualitative content analysis method.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Rasool: Conceptualization, data analysis, writing. Aslam: Theoretical framework devising, methodology, editing/reviewing, critical revision, writing. Cheng: Supervision, editing/reviewing. Barzani: Reviewing, design, analysis.

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