

Student Preferences and Experiences in Online Thesis Advising at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

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Abstract

Online thesis advising benefits students and advisors, while traditional face-to-face and telephone advising techniques are still required. This study explored the advantages and disadvantages of providing thesis advice online based on graduate students' perceptions at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand. This is an exploratory study of online platforms for thesis advising by 15 advisees from 4 schools: School of Economics, School of Educational Studies, School of Law and School of Science and Technology at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand. The respondents came from various locations and faculties – all graduated in the academic years 2022 and 2023, and the study was conducted after they passed the thesis examination. An interview guide for the in-depth interview was developed to inquire about students' preferences and experiences in the thesis advising process and their perception of the use of online platforms during the advising process. The result showed that while online thesis advising provides flexibility, convenience, time and cost efficiency, real-time collaboration, and interactive communication, it is also disadvantageous in terms of being prone to technical issues, difficulty in demonstration and correction, causing physical impairment, and lacking verbal communication, rapport, and focused discussion. The findings conclude that physical consultations are still required for an effective learning process in addition to online learning platforms and communication between students and advisors.

Keywords: *experiences, online thesis advising, open university, perceptions, preferences, Thailand*

1. Introduction

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) is a Thailand distance learning system university established in 1978. STOU's vision is to strive as a world-leading open university utilising technology and educational innovation to provide lifelong education for all. Meanwhile, its missions include (i) to provide lifelong education; (ii) to advance knowledge and innovation for the development of individuals, communities, society, and country through research and development; (iii) to promote academic service through knowledge integration for communal, societal, and national prosperity and sustainability; (iv) to learn, conserve, restore, carry on, and disseminate Thai arts and culture; and (v) to maintain stability, prosperity, sustainability, and good institutional governance. Consistent with the missions and vision, the

STOU distance learning system has made quality higher education easily accessible, allowing students to study and interact according to their circumstances and locations from the very beginning.

In distance education universities like in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, online learning has become an integrated part of the learning system (Ramos et al., 2007; Luschei et al., 2008; Suciati, 2011). The shift from traditional, face-to-face courses to hybrid (integration of face-to-face and online) and then to fully online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic has made many changes and produced mixed reactions, opinions, and views in higher education. Currently, studying for a fully online Master's degree at STOU does not confine students to traditional classrooms. Study programmes comprise many required and elective course blocks. Each course block contains 15 units, and students are expected to complete them at one unit per week (15-week semester). Students must enrol in at least one-course block (6 credits) per semester, with a maximum of two-course blocks for a master's degree. Each student will be assigned an advisor if they have not already chosen one, and the advisees are required to attend tutorial sessions with the advisors at least twice per one-course block. After the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate studies at STOU employed blended learning with printed material (textbooks and workbooks) and an e-learning platform, Moodle, which provides access to course tutorials and an integrated online communication medium for academic and thesis consultation. They usually gain access to eight online material units, which trigger discussions for every course per semester. Students also access two or three class assignments and are to submit the assignments online for marking and feedback from the lecturers. Depending on the course, a course's final grade might be determined based on 60% tutorial performance and 40% final assessment.

At the final stage of the programme, students are required to write a thesis and sit for thesis defence. To be eligible for certification, the students must have a minimum GPA of 3.00 and pass the thesis defence. During the final stage between 2021-2023, advisors and advisees contact each other through online platforms, depending on the convenience of advisors and advisees. Advisors play a crucial role in the success of students' theses since students must seek their guidance in thesis work (Begin & Gerard, 2013; MaCallin & Nayar, 2012). This interaction is vital for learning the research process in each stage – from drafting the research proposal to completing the thesis report according to the objectives. Therefore, advisors must seek effective ways to deliver the courses, consult their advisees, and motivate them while offering emotional support and professional guidance (Lunsford, 2012). During and after the COVID-19 breakout, the Graduate school recommended that advisors and students use online platforms as an alternative to telephones and posts as communication media. These platforms include Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Line application, and email, while phone calls can still be utilised when students need intensive thesis feedback. Regardless, the number of graduates per year in each school is still low. Therefore, whether the recommended methods have been effective or if the students preferred them is not certain. Thus, this paper studies graduates' perceptions, including exploring the advantages and disadvantages of thesis advising through an online format, aiming to find strategies for enhancing advisors' thesis supervision tailored to students at the Open University in Thailand. The findings from this research provide valuable information for promoting advisors and advisees to adapt and utilise these effective communication strategies.

2. Literature Review

There are 12 faculties or schools with various majors in STOU, and they all have offered graduate-level programmes, particularly master's degrees. Those schools are (i) School of Agriculture and Cooperatives, (ii) School of Communication Arts, (iii) School of Economics, (iv) School of Educational Studies, (v) School of Human Ecology, (vi) School of Law, (vii) School of Liberal Arts, (viii) School of Management Science, (ix) School of Health Science, (x) School of Nursing, (xi) School of Political Science, and (xii) School of Science and Technology. Four schools – the School of Economics, the School of Educational Studies, the School of Law, and the School of Science and Technology, were selected as participants in this study. The general information of each school and the number of master's degree students in the academic years of 2022 and 2023 is as follows:

i. School of Economics

Established on 12 March 1982, the School of Economics offers the foundational macroeconomics, microeconomics and quantitative techniques in economic analysis, with an additional range of courses on various sub-disciplines, such as international economics, natural resources and environmental economics, managerial economics and economic development. The school aims to equip students with a sound understanding of the discipline's logic and rigorous analytical skills crucial to logical decision-making processes at all levels. In 2022, there were 165 master's degree students in the first semester and 136 in the second, while 138 and 119 students enrolled consecutively in the first and second semesters of 2023.

ii. School of Educational Studies

The School of Education Studies was established on 7 February 1979. It offers programmes focusing on developing in-service educational personnel who can strengthen their communities with increased academic knowledge and professional ethics. The school also aims to promote research development in teacher education and educational studies, provide academic services to educational personnel and other interested parties, and contribute to preserving and maintaining national arts and culture. In 2022, there were 1069 master's degree students in the first semester and 923 students in the second, while 927 and 815 students enrolled in the first and second semesters of 2023.

iii. School of Law

The School of Law was established on 19 February 1980 to support and develop personnel in legal professions in both government and private sectors. The school also has sought to provide continuing education in law for those holding degrees and diplomas in other areas, as well as for other prospective learners. In 1993, the school established the Centre for Human Rights and Peace Education to disseminate knowledge about human rights law and peace issues. Then, the Institute of International Economics and Business Law Studies was established in 2001 to develop the legal expertise of the school's faculty members and STOU staff to provide relevant information to students and the general public. In 2022, there were 609 master's degree students in the first semester and 510 students in the second semester. In 2023, there were 644 students in the first semester and 518 students in the next.

iv. School of Science and Technology

After extensive preparations, STOU officially established the School of Science and Technology on 12 July 2000. The school provides opportunities for working professionals to develop their capabilities in industrial technology and information and communication technology. To produce skilful students and graduates who can apply their knowledge and abilities in their respective careers, the school aims to provide teaching, learning, and supporting student research endeavours corresponding to digital disruption and Thailand 4.0 National policy. In 2022, there were 145 master's degree students in the first semester and 108 students in the second semester. In 2023, there were 112 students in the first semester and 101 students in the second semester.

2.1. Roles of Online Platforms in Thesis Writing Process

In terms of speed, online communication is inarguably superior to postal communication, which is still used nowadays. Additionally, online platforms are often more convenient as they can be accessed from anywhere as long as there is an internet connection. However, the postal medium was commonly used before the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby thesis advising involved individual and group processes in the university. Some advisors preferred to provide group consultations during the development of students' thesis topics, and some chose to talk individually to their advisees. During this period, advisors used a hybrid approach, combining face-to-face meetings with postal mail delivery and telephone communication. Frequent face-to-face meetings were common during the thesis proposal phase, especially with the students who live near the campus. Some advisors sometimes conducted sessions with the students while teaching at branch campuses. Once students had their thesis topics approved, advisors would talk to the students on the phone and send the feedback through postal mail delivery. Therefore, feedback and thesis corrections from advisors were primarily delivered through regular letter mails. Advisors would manually check the theses and then return them to their advisees.

However, being in the distance education system, thesis advising can benefit more from online platforms, whereby students can send drafts to advisors and have the advisors electronically send comments and corrections synchronously and asynchronously. Accordingly, Suciati (2011) emphasised that using the Internet can contribute to more time-efficient and effective advising between students and advisors in the Graduate Studies department of Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia. Surprisingly, many students still prefer to meet their advisors face-to-face, talk on the phone, and submit their thesis by post. Similarly, some faculties are also hesitant to use online communication, primarily since they prefer the existing methods they are used to. In graduate study programmes, especially during thesis writing, students need intensive thesis feedback, in which phone calls or short messages are hardly adequate for the complexity of responses. Moreover, students from a far distance will have to repeatedly send bales of papers of thesis drafts back and forth to advisors by post, consuming time and cost, which can easily be saved through simple email attachments.

Ironically, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of schools in international higher education to control the spread of the virus (Dwivedi et al., 2020), it accelerated this transition towards online communication media. Since then, the thesis advising process at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University has changed; the advisors must contact their advisees through online platforms while supporting their advisees by providing relevant research resources, such as research articles, software, multimedia, and related official documents via file sharing in MS Teams and e-learning platforms. Resources of research topic-finding guidelines are also provided on these platforms to support students in studying and investigating literature review documents in preference to their expertise. Strategically, Yue and Rui (2017) proposed that students learn theoretical knowledge via online platforms before class and acquire related reference materials to integrate theoretical knowledge and practical skills effectively. Consequently, they can find interesting research topics before the first meeting to gain confidence and prepare for any presentation and discussion among peers. The mentioned online platforms also assist students in determining the appropriate and up-to-date research topics with concrete research methodology and tools.

3. Research Method

The research design for this study employed a qualitative approach. It explored graduates' perceptions and experiences in online thesis advising in the distance learning university, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the researcher selected the schools to study according to the eight fields of education in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011, as stated by UNESCO (2012): 1) Education, 2) Humanities and arts, 3) Social sciences, business and law, 4) Science, 5) Engineering, manufacturing and construction, 6) Agriculture, 7) Health and welfare, and 8) Services. Therefore, the School of Educational Studies represents the education field; the School of Economics and School of Law represents the Social sciences, business and law fields; and the School of Science and Technology represents the Science, engineering and manufacturing fields. Moreover, the School of Educational Studies and Law had many students enrolled at the master's degree level in 2022 and 2023, providing many samples for the study. The researcher started by studying documents, including relevant concepts and theories. Then, an in-depth interview using a semi-structured format related to perceptions of the online platform for the thesis advising process in STOU was conducted online via MS Teams. It lasted up to 60 minutes on average for each school, which means there were 4 in-depth interview sessions to explore participants' perspectives on thesis advisory services. The data were then analysed through content analysis.

3.1. Population and Sampling

The study involved 15 graduate students from different locations and faculties: 5 from the School of Economics, 4 from the School of Educational Studies, 3 from the School of Law, and 3 from the School of Science and Technology at STOU. They were selected through purposive sampling; all graduated in the academic years 2022 and 2023. The researchers were their advisors or co-advisors through online platforms such as Line application, Messenger via Facebook, MS Teams room and emails. The interviews were conducted after they passed the defence examination, whereby a general recruitment e-mail was sent

to the sampling population and those interested in participating were asked to contact the researcher for additional information.

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4. Findings and Discussion

The results of the research are shown in the tables below. They were divided into two tables: Table 1, the advantages of online advising in the four selected schools, and Table 2, the disadvantages of online advising in the same schools. The advantages and disadvantages of thesis advice in an online format in the academic year 2022 and 2023 are then analysed from data collected from the School of Economics, School of Educational Studies, School of Law and School of Science and Technology, respectively.

4.1. Advantages of Online Advising in 4 Schools

4.1.1. Flexible scheduling / Convenience / Time and cost efficiency

The in-depth interview of graduate students regarding online consultation presents varying viewpoints. Students who communicated with their advisors in an online advising session generally reported that it was more convenient. In terms of time, the online advising session is fast and has no time limitation, especially since most of the students in an open university like STOU are working part-time or full-time. One Economics student (Ec1) expressed, *"I don't think it is much different. If we can use all the tools available in research programmes, it's almost the same for presentations, discussions, or queries."* Meanwhile, all students in the School of Educational Studies (Edu1, Edu2, Edu3, Edu4) reported that after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is faster to get responses from their advisors through online communication platforms compared to using mail and parcels by post, whereby they had to wait at least a week to have comments from the advisors. Besides, it might also decrease their effort and motivation to do their thesis.

There was also much support from students that online advice is better due to its convenience for presentations. For example, one student in the School of Economics (Ec2) described that consulting through online systems is much more convenient: *"There's no need to travel to meet the university advisors. It saves appointment time, and presentation quality does not differ much. Those engaged in work or other tasks can listen to each other's presentations because of group advice."* It also aligns with the thoughts of another Economics student (Ec4): *"Online thesis advice is more convenient because some students live in different provinces."* Moreover, one student from the School of Laws (L1) said, *"Students who communicate with their advisors in an online advising session shared that online advising is a truly convenient method."* Furthermore, one of the students from the School of Educational Studies (Edu1) also said that emailing to receive electronic feedback on the document back and forth was very convenient. According to the respondents, they did not have to be concerned about the loss of the parcels. However, it heavily depended on which online platform the students preferred.

Meanwhile, the convenience also contributed to saving on expenses in many aspects. A School of Economics student (Ec3) stated: *"Online advice is incredibly convenient. It saves travel expenses and time."* Two students from the School of Laws (L1, L2) and one from the School of Science Technology (St1) also added that students of an open university like STOU come from all over the country, and some live in the countryside. Therefore, in the case of face-to-face advising sessions, they would need to travel to the campus to meet with the advisors, and that means they have to spend money on allowance and transport. As a result, online advising meetings, which are more flexible, can help the advisees save time and money.

4.1.2. Real-time collaboration

Real-time collaboration is a very important factor that students mentioned in the in-depth interview. By using some online applications like Line or Facebook Messenger, there is a real-time response showing that the message, substance, or file has already been sent and read; therefore, they do not have to worry about losing track of parcels or files. One school of Economics student (Ec5) commented that success in online thesis advice according to schedules was achievable. Depending on each student's responsibility, clear assignments and regular follow-ups lead to timely completion. There were multiple channels to address research issues, making document sharing and communication easy. Another student from the

School of Education (Edu2) believed that achieving success in independent research and thesis work via online systems was more likely than onsite advice. *"Most master's students work simultaneously, which limits their time and resources. It depends on each student's self-management; we can attend presentations of peers and share progress easily through MS Teams, which is more convenient than projectors."* One student from the School of Economics (Ec2) mentioned that *"it ensures success in thesis work as with face-to-face advice, given the constant access to advisors."*

Each shared perspective highlights the advantages and conveniences of online advice for graduate students, showcasing its flexibility and benefits in thesis-related work and discussions. Besides, one student from the School of Laws (L3) said that *"communication with my advisors online through synchronous communication technology – Zoom, MS Teams, and Google Meet is very similar to the face-to-face advising session because it consists of many useful functions."* To explain this, the video conference function helps advisors and advisees listen to each other with precise intonation and tone of voice while seeing the other person's facial expressions. The chatting function also helped advisors and advisees easily send information and resources during the online advising meeting. In addition, the sharing screen and file function helped create a clear conversation between both sides. When the advisors and advisees can edit the files together, it saves time and decreases misunderstandings.

4.1.3. Interactive communication / Encouragement

Interactive communication and encouragement are the most crucial findings in the in-depth interview, particularly for students in the MSc. Digital Technology in the School of Science and Technology. As the most proficient in digital technology and modern communication tools, including e-learning and online meeting platforms, they benefitted extensively from the effectiveness of online tool utilisation. They said that being an open university that provides advanced research consultation and online monitoring, especially in digital technology, a significant protocol is needed to support or promote students' engagement in advanced research consultation. Supervisors can set up the thesis advising protocol to motivate and engage students online to conduct their thesis research. These protocols are not only for individuals but also for groups of students with correlated specific research areas. Furthermore, the Programme Committees promoted strategies involving scheduling meetings for students in the same advisory groups or using the same software or hardware to develop systems or measure results.

Additional online thesis advising was also recommended through online mentorship for each research group. Advisees can share research experiences, guidance, brainstorming, tools, or software coding with peers. All three students from the School of Science and Technology (St1, St2, St3) stated they were motivated and engaged in conducting their thesis research when supervisors conducted group online meetings regularly. Students in the same specific research areas, who utilised the same software or hardware as research tools, brainstormed and shared research experiences with peers. One student (St2) said he learned more about complicated research methodology, software coding, and difficult hardware installation from other students' experiences. Moreover, students from the School of Educational Studies (Edu1, Edu2, Edu3, Edu4) said they had learnt from other students' presentations and discussion sessions in the online group advising. These factors made a driving force and encouraged them to make further research progress and be prompt in the following meetings.

4.2. Disadvantages of online advising in 4 schools

During the in-depth interview, graduate students also shared their reviews of online thesis advice from negative perspectives. These reviews include technical issues and lack of proper equipment, difficulty in demonstrations or correction, lack of verbal communication, physical impairment, lack of rapport among research members, and lack of focused discussions.

4.2.1. Technical Issues/Proper Equipment

This disadvantage is a technical issue due to the lack of proper equipment, including the internet connection, software, and equipment for online thesis advising. One student (Ec4) noted that online advice could have drawbacks when students lack proper communication equipment, hindering the advice process. Some students in the School of Educational Studies (Edu3, Edu4) did not favour online thesis

advising and preferred face-to-face discussions with their advisors due to this reason. Although these students worked full-time as English teachers at schools in various provinces while conducting research, they still needed time to discuss with their advisors face-to-face. The students also added that a student with a computer and telephone line could easily access the internet, while in contrast, other students who had difficulties accessing the internet at home or the office might have some trouble. One School of Law student (L1) also highlighted the same issue. It is stated that there was much diversity in an open university, such as STOU, in terms of age, gender, financial situation, and technological skill. Thus, some students unfamiliar with technological devices and online applications would face some challenges to comply with this method. Surprisingly, digital technology students (St1, St2, St3) were also concerned about operating specialised research tools using software and hardware with online guidance. They said they required supervisors' advice and immediate on-site help when these tools malfunctioned.

4.2.2. Difficulty in Demonstrations or Correction

For some aspects of demonstration or correction, physical presence may be more effective for troubleshooting or revising. Students (Edu3, Edu4) reported that they preferred the advisors to print the thesis to comment, edit, and make corrections on the printed copy. *"It will be easier to read and correct the work than using in-text edit and reading comments via track changes as I missed many corrections and resubmitted drafts, which did not change much from the original version,"* one student (Edu4) stated. Regarding practical issues, students in the School of Science and Technology (St1, St2, St3) said it was ineffective to demonstrate or solve technical problems remotely via online supervision and control machines or even debug software source code via remote internet access. Instead, they had to put effort into determining the solution and resolving such malfunctions independently.

4.2.3. Lack of Verbal Communication

In the absence of face-to-face communication, verbal communication can sometimes lead to misunderstandings or minimal personal interaction among researchers. Samples from all schools gave similar feedback on this issue. A School of Economics student (Ec1) echoed that onsite advice fosters a better advice atmosphere. Another student (Ec3) felt that onsite advice was superior as it allowed students to interact with advisors and peers, aligning with another student's belief that onsite advice facilitated convenience for those comfortable with travel and enabled discussions among student peers. Likewise, a student in the School of Educational Studies (Edu3) still needed verbal explanations: *"I can understand better when discussing with my advisor on the phone."* Additionally, some students from the School of Law experienced the problem of the internet signal, which sometimes was weak or unstable, and that caused a lack of information or expression, especially when discussing technical terms. In addition, a student from the School of Science and Technology, St3, reported that a lack of verbal communication delayed research progression. Instead, in-person communication motivated advisees to continue their research and progress more toward agreement than online communication.

4.2.4. Physical impairment

Although online thesis advising can offer many benefits for advisees and advisors, using a computer for a long time may lead to fatigue or discomfort in physical condition, as some Educational Studies students reported. They stated that reading and doing in-text editing on-screen strained their eyes, so they preferred reading and giving corrections in print.

4.2.5. Lack of Rapport Among Research Members

Communicating online also made some advisees feel less personal compared to the experience in face-to-face interactions. This situation could potentially lead to more formal or distant relationships between advisors, advisees, and team members – resulting in reduced empathy and sense of teamwork. One graduate student from the School of Economics (Ec5), having completed their master's degree, mentioned that initial advice from advisors before starting research was better in face-to-face consultations. That means the student (Ec5) preferred to meet his advisor before doing the thesis to discuss the research topic and design. Afterwards, it was fine for him to speak to his advisor through

online platforms. He thought this arrangement enhanced students' understanding of the research's first steps and tools. Moreover, online learning could also be one of the barriers to the relationship between advisors and advisees. One educational Studies student (Edu3) said study buddies were very important for them; they preferred to have someone to learn with, share their opinions with, push each other, and cry together.

4.2.6. *Lack of Focused Discussions*

Another drawback of home or remote environments is the unacademic atmosphere. Online thesis supervising is not conducive to focused discussions. The student in the School of Educational Studies (Edu3) mentioned that the advisor normally talked to the advisees one-on-one. When asking others about this, most participants said they wanted to learn with others to exchange information and learn together without much distraction. For the School of Science and Technology, although tracking students' progress via online meeting platforms was easy and flexible, it also adversely made students feel too relaxed or unserious, which contributed to postponing participation in the meeting. One student from the School of Science and Technology (St3) said, *"I exercised online channels to re-schedule or delay meetings at any time."* In the case of face-to-face meetings, students must be highly prepared for travelling to the university, which includes requesting a leave of absence, making accommodation arrangements, and planning travel. Thus, official meetings of research progression were rarely changed, and students were forced to prepare for research progression.

5. Discussion

The data in the previous section are reported and discussed according to each school in terms of both the advantages and disadvantages of thesis advice in an online format in the academic year 2022 and 2023, as students in each school have different needs and characters. It is also reported and discussed through each researcher's lens. Consecutively, this section concludes the overall picture and proposes strategies to promote the effectiveness of advisors' thesis advice in the discussion.

From the in-depth interview, all students stated that during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the advisors in each school were normally expected to contact their advisees through online platforms ranging from Line application, Messenger via Facebook, MS Teams, and other chatting platforms to emails when finding difficulties, sending their drafts, and asking questions. They also motivated students during the research writing process by encouraging them to complete the theses through these platforms. However, there were two sides to the study's findings: advantages and disadvantages. It is reported that online advising mostly helped ensure remote learning, especially since students could conveniently contact their advisors. It also reduced the use of travelling resources and other expenses. Conversely, the students had to become self-directed learners and manage their time independently to learn asynchronously at any time while needing to contact their advisors constantly. However, the data from students varies according to their background and characteristics of students.

Overall, the theoretical use of online platforms for thesis advising is promising and beneficial to students and advisors. Nevertheless, potential benefits are not always realised in practice. Even though online advising was reported to be a positive experience, some advisees still value face-to-face advising and, given the choice, are more likely to attend advising sessions in person, even if both modes are offered. This is consistent with the findings by Mynard et al. (2023), who mentioned that some students preferred face-to-face advising to online advising because it would be easier for them to express themselves. Additionally, there would be no time lag or difficulty in observing facial expressions. Meanwhile, some students did not favour asynchronous communication technology like email since they thought it was more likely to be one-way communication, and it usually took more time to get the response without real-time notification indicating that the advisor already got the message, as supported by Ohrablo (2016).

From the interviews, graduate students from four schools agreed that the advantages of online thesis advice include convenience, time-saving in travel, and reduced expenses. However, one graduate student (Ec2) believed that alternating between online and face-to-face advice is beneficial. He emphasised that

the constant online access to advisors helped achieve academic success, as advice was always available. However, the online thesis focuses on technology and internet access issues, highlighting time and travel expenses that might not suit most master's students juggling work and studies. Therefore, this student suggested a blended approach, combining online and face-to-face advice based on the situation. This is in line with Tippayakulpaibroj et al. (2020), who reported that thesis advising is an interactive process between the advisor and the student and a crucial factor influencing the success of thesis work. Moreover, the participants mentioned that understanding the research tools and procedures during the research phase allows smooth remote research work and online consultation with seniors or advisors, ensuring timely completion. In other words, online advice is more advantageous than disadvantageous because students can receive advice from anywhere, even during busy schedules, without compromising other responsibilities. Plus, they can attend peers' presentations and share progress easily through MS Teams, which is more convenient than onsite seminars. It ensures success in thesis work as with face-to-face advice, given the constant access to advisors. Each shared perspective highlights the advantages and conveniences of online advice for graduate students in all four schools, showcasing its flexibility and benefits in thesis-related work and discussions.

However, the success rate still heavily depends on each student's characteristics, learning styles and other contexts, especially the study buddies and groups they were learning with. For online advising, advisors should encourage their advisees to have study buddies or study groups to discuss and talk during the thesis procedures. When learning together, students can share their works, have discussions in specific areas during the research process, and ask questions at any time, which gives them new solutions for research problems, motivation, and encouragement to conduct their research successfully. This is coherent with Hutchings (2017), who found that group counselling promotes mutual support, enhances participation, and reduces the problem of isolation from learning. However, it is crucial to maintain relationships and sustainable connections when providing group counselling. This can be achieved through witnessing presentation rehearsals for thesis defending and academic conferencing. These online activities can also increase student experience in presentation and discussion skills, allowing students more confidence and engagement in the subsequent online seminars.

Furthermore, it also depends on each school's policy and arrangement during online advising. The School of Science and Technology students mentioned that the committee contributed to the online thesis advising session. This online thesis advising programme, called the online research clinic, provides support on academic issues and obstacles to thesis works. Students who have difficulties conducting their research due to many factors, such as lack of practical skills, English language skills, unhealthy conditions, career and financial problems, and personal issues, can attend this online session and ask for further guidelines from their supervisors. Most importantly, supervisors can gain insight into the advisees' problems and give suitable recommendations to encourage them to continue their work. This suggestion corresponds to Pargett (2011), who mentioned that the relationship between a student and their faculty advisor should continue beyond the academic walls. For example, the student and advisor should have a professional relationship containing knowledge about their personal lives, specifically extracurricular activities, hobbies, and work, while online communication focuses on academic advising.

Additionally, during online thesis advising, research procedure and graduation time can be planned and rescheduled appropriately with individual conditions. Students from the School of Educational Studies mentioned that the online seminar their advisors organised for them during the pandemic helped them to learn together and ask more questions during the online workshop than they ever did onsite. However, no school currently has a specific policy about this thesis advising. The university should encourage and recommend that all schools have an online thesis advising strategy. They might need to arrange meetings, study the pros and cons of online thesis advising, and then select the best practice as the policy guideline. Afterwards, the school strategy and policy of online thesis advising in each school of STOU can be studied, followed by the styles and methods of providing thesis advice in other universities. This way, advising strategies suitable for different types of students can be identified, and the appropriate balance between traditional advisory methods and those utilising technology can be achieved. It is also suggested that the perception of the students who drop out of the university during the academic year be studied to find out the reasons and gain a deep understanding of thesis advising in each situation.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, not addressing limitations in technical, technological, and scientific procedures during online consultations could result in inadequate responses from advisors, potentially failing to meet students' needs. Thus, a blended advising method can achieve more transparent, more effective, and more accessible consultation, especially for complex research perspectives that might require additional explanations from advisors. This suggestion is consistent with Maor and Currie (2017), who found that a blended thesis advisory approach, where students and advisors utilise online communication technologies, significantly enhances the working relationship. Moreover, advisors can leverage information technology, understand new technologies, and develop an increased interest in information technology, aligning it with the provision of thesis advisory services. Finally, even though it is theoretically more beneficial, thesis advising during graduate studies can be a difficult phase for students and advisors. Thus, students and advisors need to adapt to the new habit of collaboration and communication and learn the online tools for thesis correction, with the biggest responsibility falling on each learner's shoulders to adapt and learn until they successfully graduate continuously.

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