

Reflections on the Challenges and the Prospects of a Post-pandemic Doctoral Supervision in Moulay Ismail University

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How to cite:

Ezzahra, M.F. Mounya, M. & MADANI, E. E. (2022). Reflections on the Challenges and the Prospects of a Post-pandemic Doctoral Supervision in Moulay Ismail University. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies* 3(3).59-70. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v3i3>.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 22/05/2022

Accepted: 29/06/2022

Abstract

There has been an extensive growth of ICT-based models adopted in doctoral supervision as a major avenue in maintaining relationships with doctoral candidates engaged in research at a geographical distance from university and those undertaking research-related activities off-campus. However, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in recommendations of safety procedures and extended restrictions issued by the World Health Organization, has considerably affected doctoral education in ways that have revitalized distance, online supervision and so moved this latter from being an option on the side to a requisite. The main endeavor of this study is to examine the challenges doctoral supervisors have encountered whilst supervising candidates' projects in the present circumstances and also explore the prospects of post-pandemic distance-delivered doctorate programs in the Moroccan university. The study employs a qualitative analysis guided by semi-structured interviews of 17 supervisors to obtain a clearer perception of doctoral supervision practices in light of the pandemic as well as the efficacy of alternative online distance modes. The findings yielded compelling issues grounded on institutional support, financial restrictions, adaptability of existing platforms, as well as technical unpreparedness to move online, all of which demand a critical reflection and strategic attention to build research capacity. Eventually, this study brings in various pedagogical implications sought to enlighten the uptake of online supervision and its integration and efficacy as a current alternative.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19,
higher
education,
research
supervisors,
distance learning

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is currently witnessing a momentous pandemic that has not only paralyzed the global economy but also disrupted political activities and produced an alarming health outbreak in the entire world (Villanueva, 2022, p: 43). Within this, Covid-19 has compelled educational

institutions to close their doors in mid-March 2020 to help to curb the spread of the virus. Following this, higher education institutions worldwide had to revitalize distance and online learning modes and move these from being an option on the side to a requirement under the current circumstances. So to speak, instructors in higher education had to design and provide appropriate content for distance learning and also maintain communication with students they reach merely through screens. Regarding research supervision, the ongoing pandemic has initiated a need for exhaustive considerations on how supervisees at different levels of their thesis and research-related activities are able to undertake these activities off-campus, especially in the absence of customized, face-to-face mentoring from their supervisors.

Given that supervisees at different levels of academic identity development exhibit extensive supervision requirements, under-graduate and post-graduate programs in higher education stipulate the successful completion of a research project under the supervision of a faculty member. Heath (2002) maintains that the progress of PhD programs, by way of illustration, counts heavily on the role of supervisors, who should couple their academic duty with the know-how, availability, and encouragement to improve candidates' research skills and ensure the common standards of research production. When considering doctoral programs, where a reasonable amount of students engage in research at a geographical distance from the university, it is fair to expect distance e-supervision to be integrated more widely (Roumell & Bolliger, 2017). In fact, extensive online coursework is not a novelty to a pre-pandemic doctoral education; however, the absence of a blended learning property has left institutions and school systems with unprepared attempts to reach students through screens (Mette, 2020). About this, a volume of investigations reports that only 60% of students regularly attended online learning all through the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Barnum & Bryan, 2020)

Only in the past two years have empirical studies directly addressed new forms of learning and teaching under the unusual circumstances of Covid-19. Early examples of research into blended learning before and during covid-19 have addressed the reflections of doctoral students and their experiences as graduate students in a blended learning professional doctoral program changed by the pandemic. The study has contributed to the growing body of knowledge on blended learning graduate programs by providing a number of key aspects that may enlighten researchers, cohort-based, blended learning programs, as well as challenges that may arise in the individuality of experiences when dealing with crises the like of Covid-19 (Colpitts, Usick, & Eaton, 2020, p. 3). Further research investigating the ramifications of Covid-19 on higher education has focused on investigating what the new normal will imply for South African higher institutions as the country prepares for a post-Covid-19 environment. The study provides an institutional case study, highlighting some of the challenges and tensions that emerged with specific reference to teaching and learning at undergraduate and postgraduate levels mediated by the current events (Motala & Menon, 2020, p. 80). Meanwhile, Toquero's work (2021) has explored the challenges, strategies, and prospects of teachers for inclusive education during the pandemic. The Findings have yielded compelling issues linked to teachers' experiences with educational apprehensions and psychological crises, demonstrating that these teachers are hoping for more diversity and inclusiveness in school policies and government-led emergency responses for people with developmental disabilities (p.31).

While teachers and students' uptake of distance learning associated with the pandemic have been addressed and fairly investigated, the intent of this article endeavours to evaluate the challenges supervisors have encountered whilst conducting web-based e-supervision in the present circumstances of Covid-19. It further explores the prospects of post-pandemic distance-delivered doctorate programs designed to overcome existing inadequacies in the Moroccan university. In fact, the paucity of empirical studies on the challenges and prospects of distance-delivered research supervision acted as a catalyst for the production of this work, especially in the Moroccan context, where supervisory feedback within undergraduate and postgraduate university studies has been generally approached with little regard.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The prospects of higher education are ever-alternating, considering the growing competition aided by the demands of the global world. A significant catalyst for this alternation is technology integration within universities today. Elevated access to higher education institutions equipped with technological platforms that broaden the reach of offered programs has prompted stronger enthusiasm, especially among students with work or family obligations. A given university's degree of adaptability and the extent to which it has activated distance learning was recently put to the test with the arrival of Covid-19. Colpitts, Usick, and Eaton (2020, pp. 3-4) maintain that many pedagogical and technological inadequacies were manifest when universities were compelled to move online due to the pandemic. Although tremendous efforts to unbending the curve of COVID 19 were positioned by the state of public health (Villanueva, 2022, p: 43), the impact of COVID-19 on ensuring educational continuity was further accentuated by professors' and students' feedback, which revealed how a variety of factors including institutional support, program flexibility, increased pressure coupled with technical unpreparedness, affected the development of the normal patterns and schedules of higher education school systems.

As is known, the Covid-19 epidemic has drastically altered the typical patterns and schedules of global educational institutions since mid-March 2020. The pandemic has led public institutions to move to distinct forms of online learning, where students are reached merely through screens. This was largely due to the difficulty of instructing in person (Mette, 2020). Recent surveys in this regard submit that just 60% of students were actively engaged in online learning throughout the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Barnum and Bryan 2020). Mette (2020, p. 2) contends that as schools in America, by way of illustration, begin another year of schooling, and myriad challenges will manifest, especially those of delivering inclusive and meaningful remote education that outpaces schooling in a time of crisis and meets the needs of all students and families.

Considering the shadow that the coronavirus crisis has cast over the education sector, teachers' readiness to fully integrate technology in the teaching process was among the great concerns that have been aroused in this respect. Away from professors who felt the need to join the wave of technology and slightly go beyond acquiring its basics, such as uploading files and sharing them online, others thought integrating technologies in their teaching was dispensable. The availability of technology is another challenge that hampers the success of e-learning. This being so, there are different levels to this challenge, like the availability of devices, Internet bandwidth, and digital inequities among students. They may have devices, but they may not have internet service at all, or perhaps it is slow and insufficient to cover video presentations and large materials (Alkhatib, 2020).

The ongoing pandemic has profoundly impacted our social and professional life that getting back to normal appears to be a long way off. Higher education, undoubtedly, encounters significant challenges in teaching and research as it must adhere to public health norms, protect the safety of its students and faculty members, and withstand financial hardship (Lee, 2020). With this in mind, students in higher education frequently struggle to finish their research

projects on time (Costa, 2018). The problem even aggravates when conventional modes of supervision are no longer an option. Evidently, supervisors are essential in research supervision, regardless of the supervisory model, conventional or ICT-based (Askew et al. 2016).

Supervision can be delineated as an “intensive, interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and the student” (Wood & Louw, 2018). This makes the interaction and relationship between supervisors and supervisees vital to the success and the completion of a research thesis or dissertation (Da Costa, 2016). According to Kumar and Dawson (2012), distant students encountered difficulties grasping the nature and the requirements of PhD studies; they were often incapable of adjusting to the new context of fully remote doctoral studies since they are used to specific modes of learning strategies. In distance-delivered supervision brought by the pandemic, however, teacher-student modes of interaction are short on face-to-face communication, and the supervisors' physical absence slows the development of the supervisory relationship. Students may grow discouraged and doubtful of the quality of their work due to online delivery. Following this, the supervisor's role becomes more fundamental in creating an interactive environment in which students feel secure and encouraged by the supervisor throughout the whole research process (Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2013).

Although Covid-19 is addressed as an ongoing pandemic with no clear end, a thorough reflection and a comprehensive evaluation of what the “new normal” will mean (Motala & Menon, 2020, pp. 81-82) for Moroccan higher education is highly required. Higher education, in particular, is entrusted with preparing students for a dynamism constantly witnessed in society and economics. African universities, like their counterparts around the world, are expected to contribute to the growth of their societies. This growth must be sustained by new teaching and learning approaches that produce intellectually and socially informed citizens for a fast changing era. The pandemic has brought into sharp focus alternative modes of learning and supervision that are not new but require a whole renewed attention. Although specific data about enrollment in online doctoral programs in the Moroccan university are difficult to locate, today, with the outbreak of the pandemic, the efforts of the state, the ministry of education, along with higher education institutions were able to contain this global crisis. Through coordination with the members that run the university, faculty, and student representatives, Moroccan universities were able to thrive in implementing distance learning and most importantly to determine the position of this one within Moroccan higher education. With reference to this, the president of Ibn Tofail University, El-Midawi maintains that the steps the Moroccan university took in the field of digitization and distance learning, after more than two months of quarantine imposed due to the outbreak of Covid-19, could not be taken within 5 years under normal circumstances (Berguig, 2020). This demonstrates that although the pandemic has brought numerous pedagogical and instrumental deficiencies, it also promises a prosperous and a rather faster adaptation to a post-pandemic virtual university similar to other countries around the world.

Methodology

Having expounded the nature of the research at hand, which has got bearings on exploring the challenges and the prospects of post-pandemic doctoral supervision, we trust that the qualitative inductive approach is the most suitable approach in this respect as it generates theory through the use of data collection. The research method is crucial to the research approach, which stands as “a structure that guides...the execution of the analysis of the subsequent data” (Bryman, 2016, p. 45). This implies that deciding upon a research method provides the researcher with a framework for the collection and analysis of data the same way, it ensures a smooth practicum and a proper alignment with the objectives set for this research. Concerning this, grounded theory, which is a methodology employed to generate a theory based

on the qualitative data gathered and thematically analysed, is used in this study as a systematic inductive method and a fundamental source for any findings prescription (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Within this, the Gioia et al. (2013) method, which is an implementation of the grounded theory, is also employed. In so doing, we will carry out an open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) meant to go over interview transcripts, approach the data and look for lower-level meanings, also referred to as First-order categories. Once the coding of first-order categories is carried out and the number of initial codes is reduced, combining more abstract categories, higher-order themes, and overarching or aggregate dimensions produces what Gioia et al. (2013) name data structure. Following data coding or indexing and increasing the abstraction level will eventually lead the researcher to build a theory which is, according to Gioia et al. (2013), a process that unfolds over time.

The data on which this study is based was collected from Moulay Ismail university, a state-funded Moroccan university. The selection process of participants was carried out per the overall objective of this research. The target population includes Moroccan faculty members who supervise doctoral students from the English department. The respondents were chosen through adopting a convenience sampling that partially allowed the researcher to reach an amount of 17 professors who have managed to organise supervisory meetings via distance under the present circumstances of Covid.

The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of 5 questions about doctoral supervision practices in light of the pandemic and the efficacy of alternative online distance modes. Since semi-structured interviews are flexible, more probing was conducted when needed. The interviews ranged from half an hour to one hour in duration. Following are the questions asked and discussed with informants:

1. As a faculty member, how satisfied are you with available institutional support regarding alternative online learning modes?
2. Was there an existing state-funded platform through which you reached doctoral students besides Gmail? Otherwise, how did you communicate and interact with doctoral supervisees?
3. How many doctoral supervisors you had, and when did you effectively revitalize distance-delivered supervisory feedback?
4. According to your own experience as a supervisor, what challenges have you encountered as a supervisor in the present circumstances of Covid-19?
5. What do you think are the prospects of post-pandemic distance-delivered doctorate programs in Moulay Ismail university and the Moroccan university in general?

With the informants' consent, audio recordings of interviews were carried out. This was followed by transcribing and drawing out the main themes from these interviews. As Steinar (2007) argued, a sample size of 5 to 25 is fairly cogent in qualitative research. In grounded theory, however, theoretical sampling that calls for data saturation is required (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Within the study at hand, data saturation was reached after 13 interviews; the other 4 interviews were conducted to authenticate former interviews' conclusions. Having said that, the approach of Gioia et al. (2013) is employed in this study; the leading themes within this approach are named first-order categories, second-order themes are formed from these categories, and aggregate dimensions are derived from second-order themes. To augment data reliability and ensure a consistent comparison, data from each question was analyzed and compared to other responses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Analysis

The open coding of data yielded lower-level meanings and first-order categories that made up five second-order themes, namely the outbreak of Covid-19, lack of institutional support, financial restrictions, technical unpreparedness and lack of on-campus research

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activities. Figure 1 represents the data structure of the major challenges encountered by supervisors in the distant mode of learning brought by the pandemic. An aggregate dimension of “Communication Barriers” has been deduced from the six second-order themes.

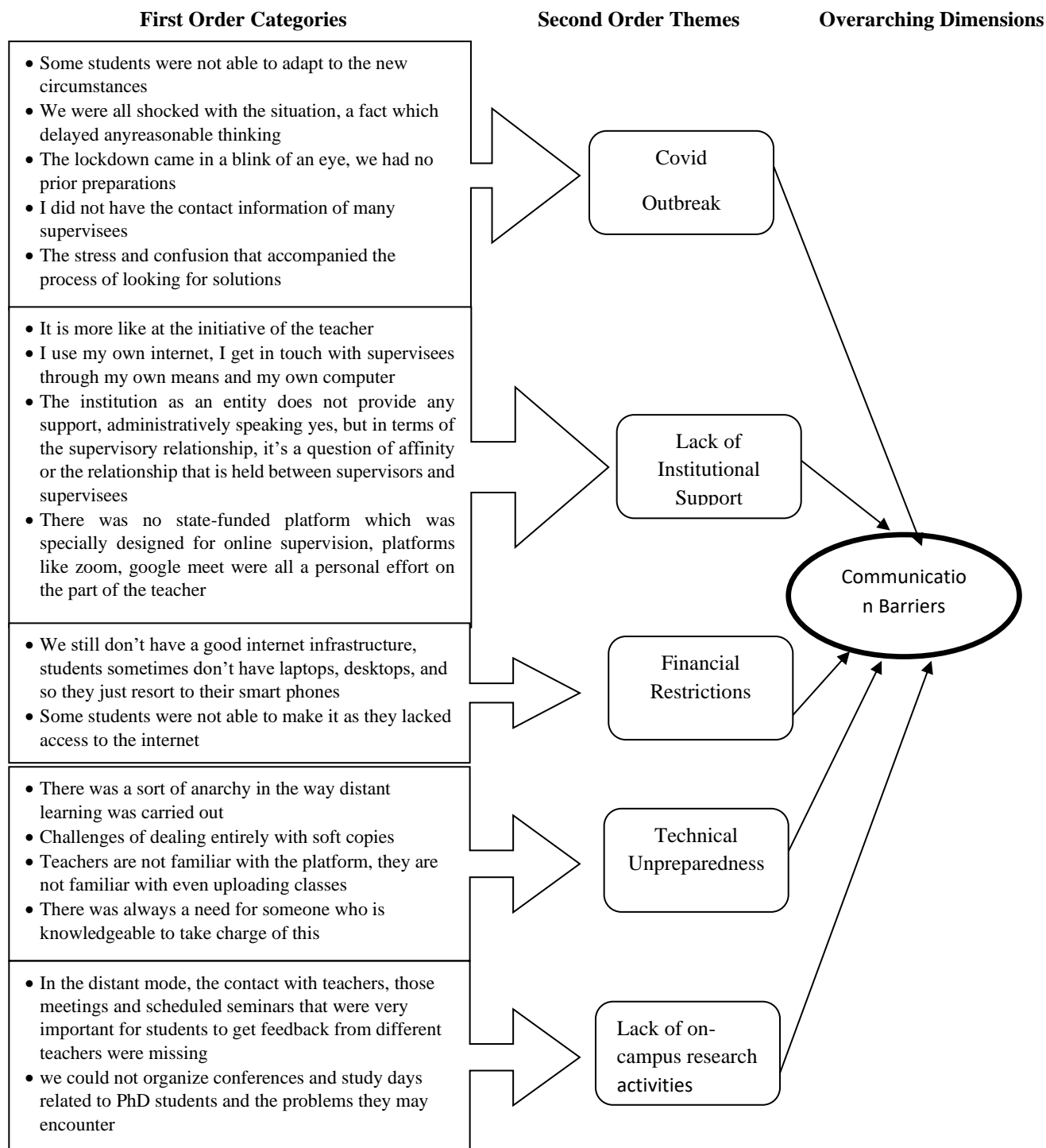


Figure 1: Challenges of Distance-Delivered Supervision ", which swept the world at a terrifying speed, the Moroccan public authorities urgently took several precautionary and preventive measures to contain the pandemic and protect the health and safety of citizens. The measures taken were the suspension of studies in all educational institutions starting from March 16, 2020 and a reactivation of distance learning aimed at ensuring pedagogical continuity. In view of this, perhaps the most prominent theme in this analysis engendering almost all the other themes is the outbreak of Covid-19. With reference to this, supervisors admitted that “we were all

shocked with the situation, a fact which delayed any reasonable thinking “quite akin to this statement is “we needed time to process the whole Coronavirus thing, the lockdown came in a blink of an eye, we had no prior preparations”. Like other universities nationally and internationally, the task of aligning the initiative of distance learning with the aspired expectations in Moulay Ismail university has brought into sharp focus considerations of interdisciplinary shifts, the absence of time and logistical means, psychological, technical and financial readiness to prepare for a “new normal”.

Based on interview transcripts, informants coalesce around a lack of institutional support they received within the ongoing pandemic. In light of this, doctoral supervisors highlighted that existing state-funded platforms were not designed to promote communication and interaction between the supervisor and doctoral students; they were rather a means to merely upload classes and communicate notices to undergraduate and master students. Their responses further reflected major displeasure with the pressure the administration put on them and supervisees, stressing deadlines related to thesis completion and offering quite limited support of how alternative modes of interaction during the pandemic should be carried out. In this respect, an informant maintained that “I have a zoom license and the institution doesn’t pay anything, it’s my own, it’s something like 3 thousand dirhams a year” another supervisor further reported that “platforms like zoom, google meet were all a personal effort on the part of the teacher”. Like other universities across the country, Moulay Ismail university was at the heart of the battle to confront Covid and ensure the continuity of educational activity. However, being an open-access university, keeping pace with the unlimited number of students was somehow challenging, especially at the beginning of the outbreak. The pandemic has uncovered quandaries tightly linked to managing distance learning, especially in the absence of genuine institutional support that would ensure regular contact between supervisors and supervisees and boost research capacity. According to another informant, “when you are obliged to do something, you do it by hook or by crook, but then the quality of how you conducted your online classes or supervision is hardly conducted, it is hardly verified”. The first press release of the ministry of education issuing remote or distant learning as a substitute for in-person learning was not underpinned by an explicit guide and recommendations on providing supervisory feedback and quality advising during the present circumstances.

Technology issues, which were referred to as technical unpreparedness in this study, also pose a challenge as far as distance delivered supervision is concerned. Informants described a shortage of infrastructural and technological support for students’ research projects and them, especially when the distance learning mode was freshly activated. These include internet coverage and speed, interrupted power supply, and both supervisors' and supervisees' readiness to utilise IT devices and platforms. Because of the challenges mentioned above, the active provision and pursuit of supervisory feedback were often damaged. With regard to this, a supervisor reported that “the pandemic happened all of a sudden, distance learning suddenly became a must and no longer an option, but then we weren’t initiated into how to teach or supervise via distant mechanisms” besides “in addition to supervision, enormous efforts have been invested just to instruct students on how to use online interactive platforms appropriately”. Yet supervisors admitted that they majorly had less serious technology issues than students who had technical and financial restrictions, which is another theme and a great concern raised by informants. Some students were short of logistical means and IT devices; others lacked access to the internet or a good internet connection to support video conferences. This,

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unfortunately, has opened doors for debating open-access education in Morocco and made supervisory feedback in some way exclusive, a fact that doesn't align with the 2015-2030 national strategic vision aimed at reforming education and achieving equity among Moroccan students.

When asked about on-campus-based research activities and distant communication and interaction modes, informants indicated that they primarily used e-mails to maintain communication with their doctoral students. Interestingly, supervisors declared that the outbreak of Covid-19 was not much of an obstacle when it came to reaching doctoral students. They further added that, if need be, they used phones, WhatsApp or other audio or video conferencing tools like Zoom or Google meet. However, as face-to-face meetings with supervisees were unattainable under the current circumstances of the pandemic, advisors reported the inadequacy of off-campus research activities. Indeed, the lack of face-to-face meetings and on-campus research activities seemed to pose a problem for supervisees and supervisors. According to an informant, "holding meetings with students in times of lockdown did not seem to be the issue of concern, but then maintaining regular contact and building affinity with supervisees was the issue". The fact that doctoral students were not bound to show up in face-to-face meetings and carry out on-campus research activities like study days and conferences rendered them aloof at times and dormant at others, something that stirred the discontent of supervisors and affected the overall supervisory relationship negatively.

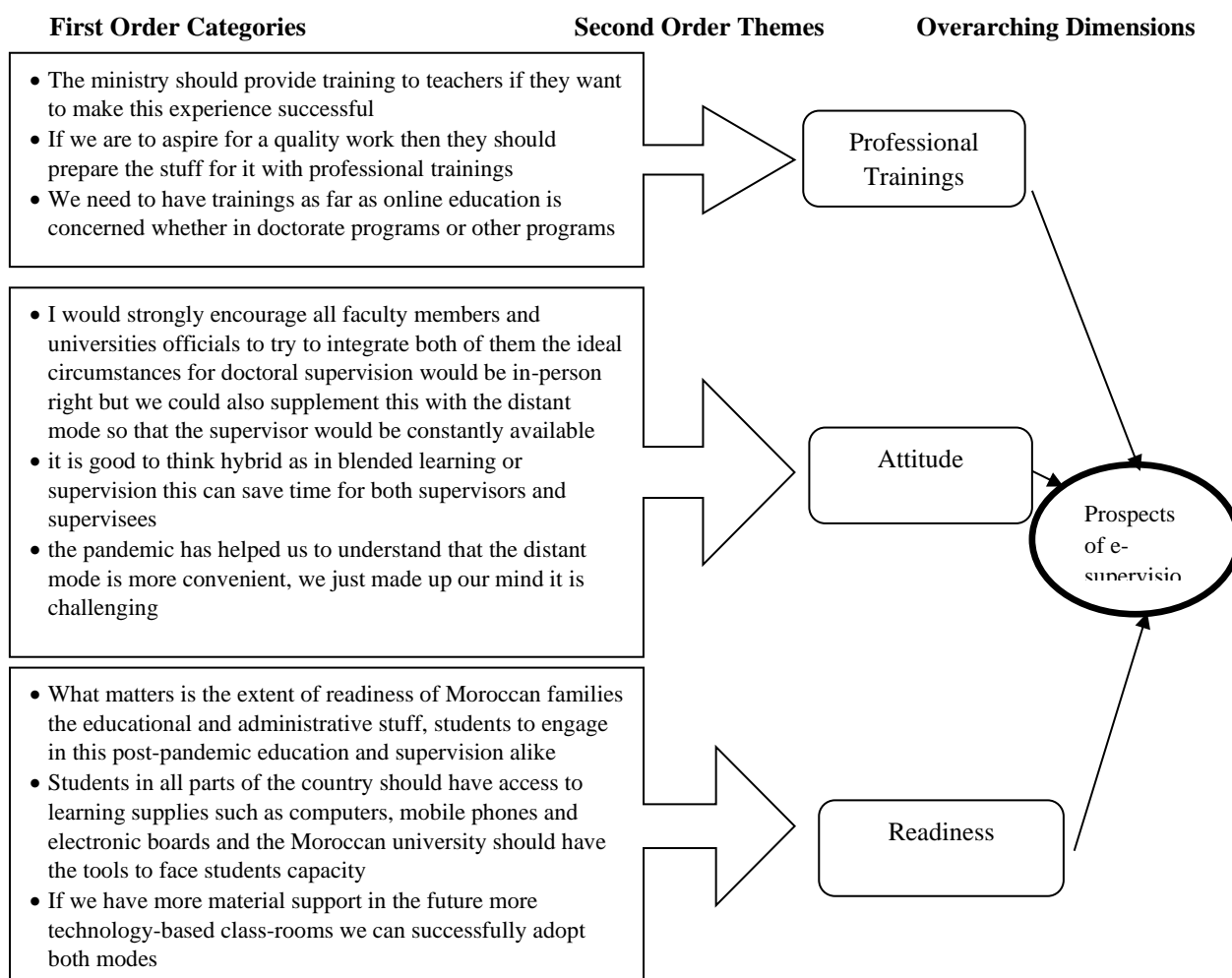


Figure 2: Prospects of e-supervision

The data structure in figure 2 displays the prospects of distance-delivered supervision in the Moroccan university. Three second-order themes, namely professional training, attitude and the extent of readiness of all the societal components in Morocco, were inferred from the informants' interview transcripts.

Informants' responses articulated the need for professional training as a key success factor contributing to a prosperous Moroccan distance learning in general and e-supervision in particular. Besides rarity, pre-pandemic state-mandated training programs for technology integration in teaching were unfortunately short and mostly described as "one-size-fits-all". This implies that they are less tailored to the special needs of individual professors and somehow designed to apply to all teachers regardless of their content area or experience level. Supervisors noted that a critical factor in the success of online delivery is dedicating programs beyond teaching technical skills. Regarding this, Fatmi (2011) contends that professional training preparing teachers for technology integration should keep in view establishing pedagogical connections between technology and single content-specific pedagogies. As explained by a supervisor, "these training should not insult the intelligence of supervisors, they should be relevant to our daily work, and most importantly, they should be able to hold-off crisis like the ongoing one". Clearly, the indication of professional training for supervisors moves from the affordance of "fragmented, intellectually superficial seminars" (Borko, 2004) to establish connections between the affordance of technology and a subject-specific focus (Fatmi, 2011).

Attitude is yet another theme that emanated from the responses of informants. Supervisors are of the view that distance learning is not a substitute for in-person education; they further believe that the experience of distance delivery under the present circumstances has brought several educational and instrumental deficiencies; however, they agree that it remains a bold and positive step in the direction of creating genuine progress in the Moroccan educational system. As was shared by a supervisor, "even in the absence of the pandemic, there are doctoral students with job obligations, those who are geographically distant or those who are disabled or with special needs, these people have the right to attend and access meetings just like the rest of students, higher education has to be inclusive". In fact, online coursework is not a novelty to a pre-pandemic doctoral education and the positive attitude of supervisors towards doctoral programs with fully web-based supervision is a key factor in students' motivation and their improved learning experiences, which is something that they are quite aware of "we don't know what the future would bring, as teachers and supervisors, we have to be a part of the solution not a part of the problem so that no individual student will be left behind".

The third significant theme that was drawn from transcripts was readiness and preparedness to move online. The Moroccan government has undoubtedly taken preventive measures and made enormous efforts to contain the long-lasting effects of the pandemic. However, supervisors admitted that "the extent of readiness of Moroccan families, the educational and administrative staff, students, to engage in this post-pandemic education and supervision" should be kept in view "if we want to invest in a prosperous distance delivery in higher education properly". Setting the ground for a distance delivery requires providing and generalizing digital alternatives where tech devices are secured to everyone. As was maintained

by a supervisor, “students in all parts of the country should have access to learning supplies such as computers, mobile phones and electronic boards, and the Moroccan university should have the tools to face students' capacity”. In line with this, Covid-19 should be an opportunity to reflect on a new normal. The Moroccan government should ensure transforming distance education into a societal culture based on an overall attitude change and solid foundations of auto-learning. Similarly, it should allow the emergence of specialities in the Moroccan university that are conducive to the needs of the job market and a prosperous digital economy.

Conclusion

The present study is a qualitative examination of the challenges and the prospects of post-pandemic distance-delivered doctorate programs in the Moroccan university. The findings yielded compelling issues grounded in the outbreak of Covid-19, institutional support, technical unpreparedness to move online, financial restrictions, and the ramifications of the absence of on-campus activities, all of which made the supervisory experience under the current circumstances of Covid-19 more demanding and somehow challenging. The chief endeavour of this paper was to look into doctoral supervisors' experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the major challenges they encountered whilst supervising candidates' projects during times of Covid. It also explored the prospects of post-pandemic distance delivery in the Moroccan university.

The challenges associated with online delivery reported in this work are not superficial challenges in Moroccan higher education, where Covid-19 adds another layer of complexity to an already debated principle of equity recommended by all reforms in the national chart and the 2015-2030 strategic vision, and where alternative distant modes of learning are still fighting to gain favourable attitudes as well as effectiveness similar to that in conventional modes of learning.

In view of faculty experiences with distance doctoral supervision brought by the pandemic, there seems to be a need for re-envisioning higher education for a post-pandemic world and reconceptualising the role and the position of research supervision and doctoral programs and preparation in blended and distance-delivered environments. Suggestions appertaining to supervisors in Moulay Ismail university in this regard recommend maintaining a two-prong strategy where both modes of learning are adopted in Moroccan institutions. Within this, progress should be sought to re-design a sustainable education where distance delivery becomes an option for students with personal, job or family obligations so that no student would be left behind. As illustrated by this paper's findings, though the pandemic's far-reaching outcomes are still unknown, they have provoked innovative pedagogical practices that insured educational continuity and introduced a prosperous online delivery in Moroccan higher education. This article thus contributes to a future research agenda highlighting the challenges that hamper higher education to move online as well as envisioning a prosperous inclusive, and equitable post-pandemic higher education.

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