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A Correlational Investigation into Master Thesis Supervisory Feedback through Online Learning Platforms: Moulay Ismail University Master Students as a Case Study

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Abstract

Many universities and other higher education institutions in Morocco are realizing that distance learning is an advantageous alternative for traditional education. Online research supervision has also been found to play a critical role in the process of conducting research. Research suggests that online supervisory feedback improves the process of research more than that taking place in face-to-face settings. However, many Moroccan university graduate students have encountered numerous challenges in adapting to online learning platforms and successfully receiving feedback on their research theses. The present study aims at investigating the interrelationship between master students' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement. Data were collected from 30 university graduates at the school of Arts and Human Sciences in Meknes. We employed a cross-sectional survey to explore students' attitudes towards different characteristics of supervisory feedback. We also measured their research achievement by analyzing their research thesis scores. The findings suggest that there is a significant relationship between students' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement. However, the results also revealed that online research supervision can be limited when no technical instructions and trainings are provided to both the supervisor and supervisee. Our findings suggest some implications for both university research supervisors and the institutions. Supervisors need to engage more in online research supervision as it has been found to play a significant role in enhancing the quality of research. Technical support should be provided for both research supervisors and students to facilitate their engagement in the supervision and research processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamic between student and supervisor plays a pivotal role in shaping academic outcomes, particularly in the context of thesis supervision within online learning platforms. As

technology continues to permeate educational landscapes, understanding the nuances of this relationship becomes increasingly pertinent. Drawing on a synthesis of existing scholarly literature, this article is a correlational investigation into the multifaceted nature of thesis supervisory feedback within online learning environments. It aims to unravel the intricate web of factors influencing academic success in virtual academic settings by delving into the interplay between feedback mechanisms and student progress.

A large body of research, such as Hattie and Timperley (2007), has emphasized the significance of effective feedback in fostering student learning and achievement across various educational contexts. Within online learning, feedback assumes even greater importance due to the spatial and temporal disparities inherent in virtual interactions. Additionally, studies like Qambar, Farooqi, and Ather (2018) have emphasized the relationship between feedback and academic performance and shed light on how external factors such as district ranking systems can impact students' achievement scores.

Moreover, the advent of online learning platforms has transformed traditional modes of academic supervision. The geographical dispersion of students and supervisors, coupled with the asynchronous nature of virtual communication, presents unique challenges and opportunities. Rowe et al. (2016) advocate for enhancing student learning experiences through group supervision using digital platforms, highlighting the potential of technology to facilitate effective feedback exchange and collaborative learning processes. Furthermore, Zaheer and Munir (2020) acknowledge that there are various issues and challenges associated with research supervision in distance learning, and that there is need for innovative approaches tailored to the online environment.

The burgeoning popularity of online learning platforms necessitates a thorough examination of the efficacy of thesis supervisory feedback in facilitating student success within these virtual spaces. With the rapid expansion of distance education programs, universities and educational institutions are increasingly relying on online platforms to deliver coursework and support student research endeavors. However, the transition to virtual modes of instruction brings forth a host of challenges, particularly regarding the provision of feedback and academic guidance.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of online learning modalities, amplifying the need for comprehensive investigations into the dynamics of thesis supervisory feedback within virtual academic environments. As universities worldwide grapple with the ramifications of the pandemic, understanding how to optimize the provision of feedback in online thesis supervision became paramount. Koh & Hill (2009) highlight the unprecedented challenges posed by the shift to remote instruction and the need for innovative

strategies to maintain the quality and efficacy of supervisory feedback in virtual settings. By situating this investigation within the context of the pandemic, this research aims to offer timely insights into the evolving landscape of online education and its implications for thesis supervision.

This study sets out to explore the factors influencing the provision and reception of thesis supervisory feedback within online learning platforms. Following Koh and Hill (2009), it also aims to explore the complex interplay between feedback mechanisms, technological affordances, interpersonal dynamics, and external contextual factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The ultimate goal is to offer recommendations for enhancing the educational experiences and academic outcomes of students engaged in research within online contexts.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1.Supervisory Feedback In Higher Education

The essence of supervision lies in an "intensive, interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and the student" (Wood & Louw, 2018), where the dynamic and rapport between supervisors and supervisees play a pivotal role in the success of research dissertation (Costa, 2018). As elucidated by Kumar and Dawson (2012), remote students often grapple with comprehending the essence and demands of PhD studies, struggling to adapt to the paradigm shift of fully remote doctoral education from their accustomed learning modalities. The transition to distance-delivered supervision, particularly exacerbated by the pandemic, amplifies challenges, as face-to-face interactions diminish, and the physical absence of supervisors impedes the organic evolution of the supervisory relationship. Consequently, students may experience dwindling morale and uncertainty regarding the caliber of their academic output in an online milieu. Within these circumstances, the supervisor's role assumes heightened significance in fostering an interactive milieu wherein students feel nurtured and emboldened throughout the research journey (Donnelly & Fitzmaurice, 2013).

Feedback in thesis supervision is pivotal because it does not only guide students through complex research processes but also enhances learning and critical thinking skills. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), effective feedback specifically informs students about their progress towards achieving learning goals, thereby helping to bridge the gap between current and desired performance. In the context of thesis supervision, quality feedback can motivate students, increase their engagement, and improve the overall quality of their research (Carless et al., 2011).

Regarding academic supervision, feedback can generally be categorized into two main types: formative and summative. Formative feedback is ongoing, detailed, and focused on guiding students through the learning process. It is usually informal and provided continuously throughout the thesis writing process (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Summative feedback,

on the other hand, is typically provided at the end of a thesis or chapter and aims to evaluate the student's work against set criteria or standards (Taras, 2005). Each type of feedback plays a distinct role in educational settings, with formative feedback particularly valuable for fostering development and learning, while summative feedback is crucial for assessment and final evaluations (Shute, 2008).

2.2.Online Learning Platforms in Higher Education

Several learning management systems (LMS) are widely used in higher education, including Moodle, Blackboard, and Canvas. Moodle is an open-source platform known for its customizability and strong community support (Dougiamas & Taylor, 2003). Blackboard, on the other hand, offers a comprehensive suite of tools for course management and is known for its robust assessment and security features (Watson & Watson, 2007). Canvas is praised for its user-friendly interface and integration capabilities with multiple third-party applications enhancing its functionality (Johnson, 2015).

Thesis supervision through online platforms offers a myriad of advantages, revolutionizing the traditional mentorship model in higher education. However, online thesis supervision also presents unique challenges. The following are the advantages and challenges most highlighted in the literature:

Advantages

1. **Accessibility and Flexibility**: Online platforms allow supervisors and students to interact irrespective of their geographical locations, making it easier to provide timely feedback and support (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).
2. **Enhanced Communication Tools**: Many LMSs include tools for video conferencing, real-time chat, and document sharing, which facilitate more dynamic and interactive supervision sessions (Bawa, 2016).
3. **Tracking Progress**: Online platforms often provide tools that enable supervisors to track student progress effectively, ensuring that students remain on schedule with their thesis work (Bawa, 2016).

Challenges

1. **Technical Issues**: Dependence on technology means that technical problems can significantly hinder the supervision process. Issues such as connectivity problems, software glitches, and incompatibility can disrupt communication and workflow (Al-Fraihat, Joy & Sinclair, 2020).
2. **Reduced Personal Interaction**: While online platforms provide numerous communication tools, they may still fall short of the richness of face-to-face interactions, which potentially influences the relationship between supervisor and student (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009).

3. **Need for Digital Literacy**: Both students and supervisors must possess adequate digital skills to use these platforms effectively. Lack of digital literacy can be a significant barrier to effective supervision (Al-Fraihat, Joy, & Sinclair, 2020).

2.3.Supervisory Feedback through Online Platforms

Online learning platforms are increasingly equipped with sophisticated feedback mechanisms that facilitate timely and detailed feedback. These systems often include tools for inline commenting, real-time discussions, and tracking changes. This allows for more interactive and immediate feedback between supervisors and students (Wanner & Palmer, 2018). For instance, platforms like Turnitin and Google Docs offer functionalities where supervisors can leave comments, suggest edits, and even use rubrics to provide structured feedback (West & Turner, 2016).

The comparison between online and traditional feedback methods reveals several distinctions. Online feedback often provides greater flexibility and immediacy, which can enhance the iterative process of thesis revision (Borup, West, & Thomas, 2015). Additionally, digital tools can facilitate richer multimedia feedback, incorporating audio, video, or hyperlinked resources, which are not typically feasible in traditional paper-based feedback methods (Matheson, 2017). However, traditional feedback methods may still be preferred for their perceived personal touch and the ability to provide in-depth, contextual feedback during face-to-face interactions (Borup et al., 2015).

Koh and Hill (2009) observed that although group work within online educational settings presents challenges, primarily due to the requisite time for team development, the attainment of substantial interaction levels and a cohesive group dynamic can lead to favorable outcomes and member satisfaction. Correspondingly, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) characterized this group cohesion as "social presence," delineating it as the perception of communication or affiliation among cohorts of learners. They outlined three critical elements: unimpeded communication, cohesive interactions, and affective bonds. Scholarly inquiries into social presence or group cohesion have underscored its pivotal role in collaborative learning (Gunawardena, 1995; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The efficacy of online learning is contingent upon achieving social presence, as corroborated in the synthesis provided by Huevelman-Hutchinson (2012). Furthermore, optimal group work necessitates interventions fostering a sense of community among learners, such as frequent small-group interactions, contextually tailored activities promoting familiarity and time management strategies, and educating students on group formation stages and strategies (Koh & Hill, 2009).

Paloff and Pratt (2010) showed the transformative potential of group endeavors in online pedagogy, positing that asynchronous discussion forums afford participants greater

scope for contemplation and meticulous composition. London and Sessa (2007) conceptualized group learning as the collaborative creation, acquisition, and dissemination of knowledge, where individual members evolve through their interactions into a synergistic entity conducive to perpetual learning (Kasl, Marsick, & Dechant, 1997). They delineate three forms of learning interaction: adaptive, generative, and transformative. Adaptive learning denotes the group's automatic response to environmental changes for adaptation. Generative group learning involves purposeful proactivity in generating and applying novel knowledge, skills, and behaviors while retaining the group's identity. Transformative group learning signifies the metamorphosis of the group into a novel entity.

London and Sessa (2007) accentuate the pivotal role of the group facilitator or leader in fostering collaborative group learning, primarily by directing learning stimuli, enhancing group and individual receptiveness to learning, and mobilizing support resources. This facilitation may encompass assertive interventions, demands, challenges, and disruptive opportunities to spur learning. However, groups must exhibit readiness to learn before embracing disruptive stimuli (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). For Palloff and Pratt (2010), effective group work and the cultivation of a collaborative and transformative learning milieu depend on the instructor's proactive engagement. The instructor serves as a motivator and facilitator, allowing students to organize their learning throughout the phases of collaborative activities. Additionally, Palloff and Pratt (1999) highlight the significance of social interaction through dialogue, sustained presence on the learning platform, and cooperative, negotiation-based group tasks in fostering team collaboration.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore the relationship between graduates' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement. One way to measure these constructs is to utilize tests yielding numerical scores as data sets. We carried out a cross-sectional a survey questionnaire with Likert-scale items designed to explore the attitudes of students towards diverse aspects of supervisory feedback. This method allowed for a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted nature of student perceptions regarding feedback received during the research process. Furthermore, to gain a holistic understanding of students' research proficiency, their academic achievements were scrutinized through an analysis of their master thesis grades. This approach provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of supervisory feedback and on the correlation between feedback quality and academic performance.

In terms of participant selection, the study opted for a convenience sampling strategy, which proved to be a pragmatic choice for researchers to attain a viable number of participants

within the given constraints of time and resources. By focusing on university master students who had successfully completed a master's degree program in Applied Linguistics at the School of Arts and Human Sciences, the study ensured a homogeneous participant group with relevant academic backgrounds, enhancing the validity and relevance of the findings to the study's objectives.

In alignment with the research question and hypothesis of this study, both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were utilized, employing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics provide a methodological framework designed to quantitatively describe the sample and key characteristics inherent to the data through metrics such as mean values and standard deviations. Its primary focus is on the detailed analysis and systematic presentation of data. On the other hand, inferential statistics involve conducting statistical tests on the data collected. As noted by Polgar and Thomas (2000), descriptive statistics are essential for outlining the characteristics of the sample and the data's intrinsic qualities, while inferential statistics serve a different purpose. Typically, inferential statistics begin with hypothesis formulation and proceed to evaluate the consistency between the collected data and the proposed hypothesis (Brown & Saunders, 2008). Key functions of inferential statistics include the comparative analysis of data, hypothesis testing, and making predictive inferences about the phenomena under study.

This study seeks to explore the relationship between master students' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement. Specifically, the analysis primarily involved the use of Pearson product-moment correlation and simple linear regression analysis. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r) is a statistical measure that assesses the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two quantitative variables. This relationship can be either positive or negative, with a positive relationship indicating that the variables move together, and a negative relationship suggesting opposing trends. The coefficient 'r' spans from -1.0, indicating diametrically opposite variations in variable values, to +1.0, denoting uniform changes in variable values. In this study, the interpretation of 'r' followed Salkind's (2000) guidelines: 'r' = 0-0.2 suggests no to very weak correlation, 'r' = 0.2-0.4 implies a weak correlation, 'r' = 0.4-0.6 denotes a moderate correlation, 'r' = 0.6-0.8 indicates a strong correlation, and 'r' = 0.8-1.0 signifies a very strong to perfect correlation.

4. RESULTS

4.1.Descriptive Statistics

This subsection is dedicated to examining the correlation between master students' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement, thereby addressing the first research question and testing the stated hypothesis:

Research Question (RQ): Is there a relationship between master students' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement?

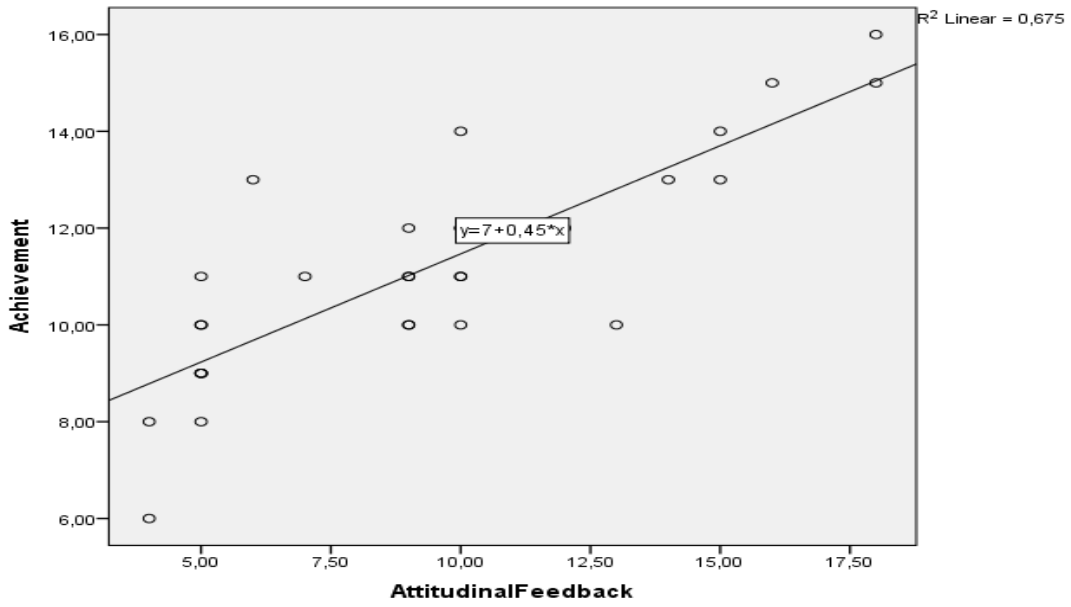
Directional Hypothesis (DH): There is a relationship between master students' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement.

The null hypothesis to be tested is as follows:

Null Hypothesis (NH): There is no relationship between master students' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement.

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between these variables. Accompanying this, a scatterplot was generated to visually represent this correlation, aiding in the interpretation and discussion of the results.

Linearity and homoscedasticity were assessed through a scatterplot depicting the relationship between master students' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement.



Scatterplot of the Correlation between thesis supervisory feedback and achievement

The scatterplot above illustrates the correlation between thesis two quantitative variables: supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and student achievement. The distribution of data clearly aligns along an ascending straight line which indicates a linear relationship between participants' scores on thesis supervisory feedback and achievement tests. This visual observation is substantiated by a calculated R^2 value of 0.675, which suggests a substantial proportion of variance in achievement thesis supervisory feedback scores can be explained by variations in thesis supervisory feedback. The uniform distribution of data points around the line, exhibiting minimal variance in their distance from it, further supports the

assumption of homoscedasticity, indicating that the variance of residual scores is constant across all levels of the independent variable.

Building on this visual inspection and preliminary analysis, a Pearson product-moment correlation test was conducted to quantitatively determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables. This statistical approach is critical for confirming the initial observations and providing a more definitive measure of the correlation between thesis supervisory feedback and achievement.

Correlations

		Achievement	AttitudinalFeedback
Achievement	Pearson Correlation	1	,821**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	N	30	30
AttitudinalFeedback	Pearson Correlation	,821**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	N	30	30

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlation between thesis supervisory feedback and achievement Tests

The table above presents the correlation between participants' scores on thesis supervisory feedback and achievement tests. The table highlights a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (ρ-value) of 0.821 between these two variables. This high coefficient suggests an almost perfect positive correlation, indicating that as participants' scores on thesis supervisory feedback test increase, so do their scores on achievement. The strength of this correlation underscores a robust positive relationship between participants' thesis supervisory feedback and achievement. Such a finding supports the hypothesis that better achievement is closely linked with heightened thesis supervisory feedback, as measured by test. This significant correlation not only reinforces the theoretical link between these constructs but also highlights the practical implications for educational practices focusing on the improvement of thesis supervisory feedback through online platforms.

In sum, the relationship between master students' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement has been thoroughly examined through various statistical methods. Initially, a visual inspection via a scatterplot was conducted to assess the nature and linearity of the relationship between master students' thesis supervisory feedback through online

learning platforms and their achievement. The alignment of data points along a straight line which indicated a linear relationship between the two variables.

Later, the strength and direction of this linear relationship were quantitatively analyzed using the Pearson product-moment coefficient. The correlation coefficient (ρ-value) was found to be 0.821, signifying a strong positive relationship between participants' thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms and their achievement. This robust correlation demonstrates that higher scores in achievement are associated with greater thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms. These findings not only validate the hypothesized link between the constructs but also emphasize the importance of fostering thesis supervisory feedback through online learning platforms to improve achievement.

4.2.Discussion of the Results

The findings highlight a significant correlation between the quality of supervisory feedback delivered through online learning platforms and student achievement in thesis-related tasks. This aligns with prior research suggesting that effective feedback, particularly when facilitated by digital tools, can significantly enhance student learning outcomes (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012). The interactive capabilities of online platforms allow for more timely and detailed feedback, which is crucial for tasks as complex and iterative as thesis writing (Bawa, 2016).

However, the effectiveness of online supervisory feedback is contingent upon the technical proficiency and readiness of both supervisors and supervisees. This limitation echoes the findings of Al-Fraihat, Joy, and Masa'deh (2020), who noted that the lack of proper technical training and instructions could undermine the potential benefits of online education systems. Their study stressed the importance of comprehensive training programs to equip all users with the necessary skills to fully leverage the capabilities of online learning platforms.

Moreover, while online platforms facilitate accessibility and flexibility, the absence of face-to-face interaction can sometimes reduce the depth and contextuality of the feedback provided (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). This suggests a need for a blended approach that combines the best aspects of both traditional and digital feedback methods. Implementing hybrid models, where digital tools are used alongside occasional in-person meetings, could potentially mitigate some of the limitations associated with purely online interactions (He, 2018).

The effectiveness of online supervisory feedback hinges significantly on the technical skills of both supervisors and supervisees. Al-Fraihat, Joy, and Masa'deh (2020) found that a lack of training in digital tools can significantly hinder the effectiveness of online learning platforms. Without adequate knowledge and comfort with these technologies, both students

and supervisors may struggle to use these platforms efficiently, which can lead to miscommunications and a reduction in the quality of feedback. This is particularly problematic in a high-stakes academic task like thesis writing, where clear, precise, and timely feedback is crucial.

Technical challenges can also lead to frustration and disengagement, further impeding academic progress. For instance, simple issues such as difficulty in accessing feedback due to unfamiliarity with platform interfaces or features can delay revisions and prolong the thesis process (Bawa, 2016). This underscores the necessity for educational institutions to invest in comprehensive training programs that are tailored to meet the needs of both students and faculty, ensuring that all parties are proficient in utilizing the full capabilities of the online platforms employed.

While online feedback provides flexibility and immediacy, it sometimes lacks the depth and personal touch offered by face-to-face interactions. He (2018) argues that a blended approach, which combines online and in-person feedback, can optimize the benefits of both modalities. In-person meetings allow for more nuanced discussions where supervisors can provide detailed, context-rich feedback, which complements the more frequent, albeit less detailed, feedback possible through online channels.

Furthermore, face-to-face interactions can enhance the relational aspect of the supervisory process, fostering a stronger mentor-mentee relationship and improving student motivation and engagement (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). This relational component is often diminished in purely online interactions, which can make the supervisory process feel impersonal and transactional.

Empirical studies, such as those conducted by Borup, West, and Graham (2012), have shown that blended learning environments can significantly enhance the sense of community and engagement among students, leading to higher satisfaction and academic achievement. These studies suggest that integrating synchronous, face-to-face feedback sessions within an otherwise asynchronous, online supervisory framework can provide a more supportive and effective educational experience.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm the substantial impact of thesis supervisory feedback delivered via online learning platforms on student achievement, underlining the necessity for robust digital interactions between students and supervisors. This correlation indicates that effective online supervision is not merely an alternative but a critical component of academic success in higher education. As universities continue to incorporate digital modalities into their

curricula, it becomes imperative that these tools are optimized to enhance the supervisory relationship, rather than serving as a mere convenience.

However, the study also identifies significant limitations in the current implementation of online supervisory systems, particularly the lack of technical instructions and training for both supervisors and supervisees. This gap can hinder the potential benefits of online supervision, suggesting that institutions must invest in comprehensive training programs. Such initiatives should aim to equip both professors and students with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate online platforms effectively, ensuring that the supervision process is both efficient and beneficial.

The implications of these findings for university professors are multiple. There is a pressing need to embrace and refine the practice of online research supervision. Becoming proficient in digital tools and communication methods, professors can offer more targeted and constructive feedback, thereby enhancing the educational outcomes of their students. This shift requires not only individual commitment but also institutional support, as faculty members should be provided with ongoing professional development opportunities to stay abreast of the latest digital teaching strategies.

For academic institutions, the study serves as a call to action to prioritize the development of user-friendly online learning platforms tailored for research supervision. Investing in advanced technological infrastructure and support systems will address the current deficiencies and set a higher standard for online academic engagement. Universities can significantly improve the quality of research supervision through fostering a more integrated and interactive online environment, which ultimately would lead to greater student success and satisfaction in their academic pursuits.

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