

Exploring the Advising and Communication Experience among International Doctoral Students in Online Learning Environment

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Abstract: This study examined the international doctoral students' perceptions of graduate advising and communication with their advisors in online learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study used semi-structured interviews to investigate how international doctoral students at Auburn University perceive their advising relationships with academic advisors. The finding of this study indicates that lack of guidance and support are the main concerns in the advising relationship for international doctoral students. Moreover, the communication delivery way is not the key point for them to connect with their advisors and influence communication satisfaction with their advisors.

Keywords: doctoral students; advising experience; online education; students' perceptions

The United States has consistently been the most popular study destination among international students. The statistical data from Open Doors (2022) demonstrates that around 950,000 international students were registered at United States higher education institutions, despite a minor decline throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The graduate advisor refers to a faculty member that graduate students can consider as their academic advisor, research supervisor, or dissertation chair (Rice et al., 2009). Graduate advisors support their advisees in learning about the academic discipline, the university environment, research, ethics, and a variety of other crucial facets of being an academic professional (Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004). During the COVID-19 pandemic, most universities changed their instructional modes to online learning. Doctoral students had fewer opportunities to communicate physically with their advisors during this period. They had to schedule a meeting via Zoom to keep in touch with their advisor. Maintaining good relationships and communication with their advisor for the doctoral student may be challenging. Given the considerable number of international students in the United States, the advising relationships among international students are worthy of examination.

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore international doctoral students' perceptions of their graduate advising relationship and communication with their advisors. We interviewed five doctoral students from Computer Science, Education, and Hospitality Department at Auburn University. These international doctoral students were asked to describe their relationships with their advisors, their expectations and concerns for their advisors, and how they communicated with their advisors in the online learning environment. We gather their perceptions of graduate advising relationships from interviews.

Literature Review

International students prefer to study in the United States due to its high-quality research and education, multicultural environment, and professional advancement (Nicholls, 2018). Also, the United States higher education institutions embrace many international students from almost all continents. International students have made significant and positive contributions to America in economic, innovative activity, intellectual, and cultural areas (Adnett, 2010; Sawir, 2013). During the academic year 2021-2022, international students at U.S. colleges and universities contributed \$33.8 billion and supported 335,000 jobs to the U.S. economy, according to the Association of International Educators (Ruffner, 2022). Also, they can provide opportunities for domestic instructors, students, and U.S. society to encounter diverse cultures, traditions, and languages. For these reasons, understanding international students' learning experience, retention, and success is important.

International students may have different advisors simultaneously, such as a professional advisor, international student advisor, and faculty advisor. In the U.S. academic environment, the relationship with an advisor is among the most influential factors for graduate students' success (Cross, 2018). According to many studies, academic advising considerably affects college students' persistence and achievement. For instance, they helped students to work on their dissertations and timely completion of the degree (Hilliard, 2013; Lovitts, 2002). International doctoral students may have concerns about their advisor as it relates to communication, supervision, and support caused by several reasons, such as language barriers, cultural differences, imitated availability, different research interests, and limited understanding of United States educational systems (Hughey, 2011; Nguyen, 2013).

Scholars found that the graduate advising relationship profoundly affects the doctoral education (Schlosser et al., 2003). An oppressive advisor-advisee relationship can lead to vicious incidents or issues (Welde & Laursen, 2008). One such issue is the doctoral students experiencing mental problems, project-related delay issues, supervisor-related issues, stress about productivity, uncertain career prospects, and advisor relationship (Barry et al., 2018; Mackie & Bates, 2019). Such evidence shows the critical examination of the graduate advising relationship for international doctoral students is vital to explore empirically.

Methodology

This proceeding is based on five interviews with international doctoral students from Computer Science, Education, and Hospitality Department at Auburn University. The demographic information for participants is in Table 1. The semi-structured, in-depth interview lasted 30 minutes to one hour in duration. Respondents were assured confidentiality, and their identities were anonymized in this proceeding paper. Face-to-face interviews were conducted and audio recorded through Zoom (a video conferencing application). Once all interviews were transcribed verbatim, then emerging themes were identified by the primary researcher. The research group then gathered to discuss the themes that each researcher had generated. The group then determined which central themes were recurring in each interview.

Table 1
Participants' information

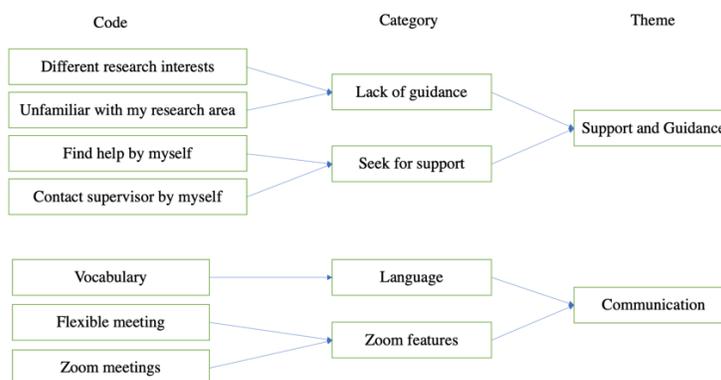
Participants	Gender	Nationality	Age	Ph.D. Program	Years Spent in the Program
A	Male	China	28	Computer Science	5
B	Male	India	32	Computer Science	4
C	Male	China	29	Hospitality	3
D	Female	Iran	36	Education	4
E	Female	China	27	Education	3

Findings

Guidance and Support

We could categorize two themes from participants' perceptions of their graduate advising relationships with their academic advisors: guidance support, and communication in Figure 1. The findings were that doctoral students should identify with their disciplines and research area in Ph.D. programs. Advisors who provide appropriate guidance are helpful to doctoral students.

Figure 1
Coding Process for Themes



Two participants indicated that a poor advisor-advisee relationship comes from a lack of guidance or feedback (e.g., "When I am stuck in a problem, I solve it myself and explore resolutions from Professor YouTube" or "I hope my advisor to give me a clear clue for my research"). One participant responded that he had different research interest from his advisor's, which led to a lack of guidance and support (e.g., "My research interest differs from my advisor, who agrees that I continue working on my research. However, he cannot provide enough help in my research because he is not familiar with my topic").

Suppose that a student's research interests diverge significantly from their advisor's. In this case, the advisor may not have the same expertise or enthusiasm for the student's project, which can make it difficult for the student to receive the guidance and support they need to complete their research. Moreover, doctoral students' perspectives on advisor guidance may differ from programs. Students in Computer Science Department receive more guidance from their advisor for their projects were collaborated and supported by their advisor and their lab mates. However, doctoral students from non-STEM programs have different research fields and do not have as

many opportunities to work with lab mates as STEM students. A female doctoral student in the hospitality program described that her advisor does not give her guidance on her research, stating,

I conduct my research with a professor in business school, for my academic advisor does not have time to be my research supervisor. She focuses on teaching but not on research. So, I contacted my research supervisor by myself. I looked through the business web page and found a professor with my research interests.

Communication

Regular, functional, and timely communication with an advisor benefits doctoral students. However, international students may face challenges communicating with their advisors, such as language barriers. If the students and advisor do not share a common language, it can be difficult for them to communicate effectively. A male participant told us about his experience in communicating with his advisor (see below).

During the first semester, I struggled to understand technical or academic vocabulary in English, which can make it difficult for me to understand instructions or feedback from advisor. And I also felt hesitant or nervous to speak up or ask questions because I am not sure my advisor have already discussed them.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the instruction mode shifted from physical face-to-face to online learning. Three doctoral students said they still go to their doctoral student campus offices but changed to online meetings with their advisors. Two participants in the non-STEM program stated that the delivery method did not influence their communication with their advisors because they do not have regular meetings. All participants thought using Zoom to communicate with their advisor did not affect their communication efficiency. One student believed functions like share screen in Zoom were valuable and convenient for them to share data or paper with their advisors:

I like to have a meeting with my advisor via Zoom. Zoom has many fantastic features, like content sharing and interactive whiteboarding. These functions make our communication goes smoothly and naturally. I think using Zoom to have a meeting is just like a face-to-face meeting.

Also, a female doctoral student studying in the education program, she was a teaching assistant. In this case, she has regular meetings with her supervisor, who is the same person as her advisor. She loves using Zoom because it allows meeting sessions with advisors remotely and saves her time and travel expenses.

I live in Atlanta, and I need to drive for nearly two hours go to campus. I prefer to use Zoom to contact with my advisor, because I think it is a convenient and efficient way to communicate. I appreciate being able to schedule regular meetings without to travel, which can save me time and money. The price of gas is crazy recently. Also, I think communicating with my advisor through Zoom is less

intimidating than in-person meetings, for I can talk to my advisor from the comfort of my home.

Discussion

In this study, the international students expected guidance and support from their advisors, and they did not think that the delivery way of the meeting would influence their communication. Using the video conference application to get an appointment during the COVID-19 pandemic makes communication between advisors and advisees relatively easy. Existing study pointed out that apprenticeship, communication satisfaction, identification-individuation, and rapport positively affect students' perceptions of the advising experience (Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). They gave explanations for each term. *Apprenticeship* refers to the part of the advising relationship where advisors promote the advisee's understanding of graduate school tasks, goals, and processes. *Communication satisfaction* means the extent to which individuals accomplish their communication goals and expectations through conversations and other interactions. *Identification-Individuation* refers to that part of the advising relationship that reflects the degree to which the advisee wants to be like the advisor. *Rapport* reflects the advisor's support and encouragement for the advisee.

Although doctoral students have fewer opportunities to contact their advisors, they still indicated they had a good advising experience if they were helpful and kind. Also, they thought communicating with their advisors through Zoom could make them feel less intimidated than in-person meetings, for they could talk to their advisors from the comfort of their homes, where they feel more at ease.

Limitations

There are some limitations in this study. First, the interview sample needed to be larger (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), which leads this study cannot involve more voices from doctoral students in other doctoral programs and origin countries. Then, the respondents in this study are doctoral students who enrolled in their programs for at least three years. They have time to adapt their programs, advisors, and new culture. Based on the current findings and limitations, future research could consider conducting interviews of focus groups with new international doctoral students who enrolled in their programs in one year. Moreover, a future study could more deeply examine the advisor-advisee relationship for international doctoral students with more participants.

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