Engagement with and challenges in supervisory feedback: Perceptions of supervisors and students

Engagement with supervisory feedback is central to developing graduate students' research and writing skills. Such engagement, however, is not the students' sole responsibility because different factors might mediate the process. Supervisors' and students' differing perceptions of supervisory feedback can create misunderstandings, might inhibit the latter's engagement with such feedback, and reduce its learning affordances. This article reports a study examining the perceptions that Nepalese master's supervisors and students held of student engagement with and challenges in supervisory feedback. The study drew on questionnaire data collected from 30 thesis supervisors and 50 master's students and the follow-up interviews with five supervisors and five students at a public university in Nepal. The findings show a marked difference in supervisors' and the students' perceptions. The observed differences are considered in terms of the nature of student engagement, the participants' research experience, and factors contributing to the perceived challenges in supervisory feedback.

Keywords: master's thesis supervision; supervisory feedback; student engagement; challenges; Nepalese higher education

Introduction

Master's students tend to find thesis writing an arduous task due to a lack of such experience (Li et al., 2017), limited understandings of thesis requirements (Bitchener et al., 2010), and the high standard required of a thesis (Basturkmen et al., 2014).
Consequently, they often perceive that thesis writing "equals or outweighs the energy they spend during their whole studies" (Sadeghi and Khajepasha 2015: 357). In this regard, supervisory feedback is crucial to socialize students into academic discourse (Kumar and Stracke, 2007), help them gain disciplinary membership (Li et al., 2017), facilitate independent learning (Bitchener et al. 2010), and contribute to the timely completion of a thesis (Basturkmen et al., 2014). However, supervisory feedback can achieve these goals only if supervisors provide useful feedback, and students actively and productively engage with it. Supervisors' and students' perceptions of supervisory feedback play a vital role in this regard because differing viewpoints can distort potential learning opportunities (Carless, 2006). If supervisors believe that their students will not engage with their feedback, they are unwilling and unlikely to invest time and effort to provide feedback (Ali et al., 2015). On the other hand, when faced with

insurmountable challenges, even highly dedicated supervisors may find it tough to support and promote their students' learning. Equally important are students' perceptions of supervisory feedback because such attitudes can not only mediate their learning efforts but also influence their supervisors' feedback beliefs and practices (Van der Schaaf et al., 2013). Thus, an investigation into supervisors' and students' perceptions of engagement with and challenges in providing supervisory feedback is essential.

The study was conducted at the Central Department of Education (CDE) of a public university in Nepal. An unconducive combination of factors – for example, limited access to required resources, and lack of academic writing instruction to support thesis writing – makes supervisory feedback an important source of input for disciplinary learning and virtually the only mechanism for ensuring the quality of thesis research. Graduate supervision has received little research attention in the Nepalese context, although there is a growing concern regarding the quality of graduate research (Acharya, 2016; Pokhrel, n.d). The limited body of scholarship presents reflections of supervisors (Bhattarai, 2009; Karn, 2009) and students (M. Rai, 2018; T. Rai, 2018) or technical advice on formatting a thesis (Avasthi, 2009). Bhattarai (2009) highlights students' struggle in selecting a research topic. She suggests that students should first start with a broader area and review relevant literature to make an informed topic selection. Karn (2009) believes that thesis writing is fraught with challenges because students seem to subscribe to several misconceptions rather than working rigorously. Students' reflections also reveal their struggle in selecting a worthy research topic, preparing and executing a research plan, and reporting the research. Their difficulties notwithstanding, they highlighted invaluable learning experiences (M. Rai, 2018; T. Rai, 2018). These studies shed light on striking differences in supervisors' and students' perceptions of thesis writing. Against this backdrop, this study aimed to explore graduate supervision in the Nepalese higher education context and provide input for the formulation of supervision policies and the development of effective supervisory practices.

Student engagement with feedback

The usefulness of supervisory feedback has been found to depend heavily on students' responsibility for, and agency in making sense of and engaging with the feedback received (de Kleijn et al. 2013; Handley et al., 2011) because feedback is a dialogue between supervisors and students (Winstone et al., 2017). Engagement with feedback is a prerequisite to the uptake of feedback (Ruegg, 2015). From this perspective, even the most informative and desirable feedback remains untapped and, consequently, useless without student engagement (Price et al., 2011).

Student engagement with feedback is a multi-stage temporal process, which starts with the collection of feedback and goes through reading and reflection to acting on it (Price et al., 2011). Price et al. argue, "Action resulting from feedback cannot be the ultimate measure of engagement with feedback" (2011: 891) because students might choose to reject the feedback eventually after careful consideration. However, the lack of action resulting from feedback might be perceived as a lack of engagement because engagement devoid of action often remains invisible (Handley et al., 2011). It can occur in multiple dimensions: affective, behavioural, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004; Handley et al., 2011; Yu et al., 2018).

Affective engagement encompasses both positive and negative reactions to learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Positive affect involves motivation, interest, and experience of a warm and caring relationship, whereas negative affect includes boredom, sadness, anxiety, humiliation, and irritation (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In the case of supervisory feedback, affective engagement manifests in students' enthusiasm for or anxiety over supervisory feedback as well as their "emotions expressed upon the receipt of feedback and while revising the draft" (Yu et al., 2018: 2). Behavioural engagement refers broadly to students' participation and involvement in different academic and social activities that contribute to a positive academic outcome (Fredricks et al., 2004). This dimension of engagement also includes "effort, intensity, persistence, determination, and perseverance in the face of obstacles and difficulties" (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012: 24). Behavioural engagement is not only the primary driver of actual performance, but behaviourally engaged students also tend to elicit better responsiveness and receive more support from teachers (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In the context of supervisory feedback, students' revision operations and strategies to improve their writing indicate their behavioural engagement (Yu et al., 2018). Cognitive engagement indicates the investment in deep learning, self-regulation, perceived future relevance of learning, thoughtfulness, and willingness to exert necessary efforts (Fredricks et al., 2004; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Cognitively engaged students are involved in 'heads-on' participation and desire to do more than what is required (Skinner and Pitzer, 2012).

Research on higher education coursework has shown that students are often not engaged with feedback (Adcroft and Willis, 2013; Carless et al., 2011; Price et al., 2011). Adcroft and Willis (2013), based on their study of undergraduates' engagement with assessment feedback, concluded that students with good performance are more likely to engage with feedback than those performing poorly because the latter may find feedback demotivating. Other factors that contribute to low engagement include students' poor self-regulatory skills (Carless et al., 2011), feedback providers' illegible handwriting (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton, 2001), and students' inability to interpret the feedback and integrate it into their existing knowledge (Sadler, 2010). A

recent survey study by Ali et al. (2015) revealed that students' low engagement with feedback became worse in subsequent years.

Compared with coursework, student engagement with feedback on thesis writing has received far less attention. Few studies on doctoral supervision are broadly relevant to the present study. This body of research has shown that doctoral students engaged with specific and constructive feedback that "acknowledges their individuality and encourages them to grow as writers" (Eyres et al., 2001: 155). In another study (Wang and Li, 2011), the students with high self-confidence and academic competence were more engaged with feedback than those with low self-confidence and academic competence. East et al. (2012) observed that supervisors' interest and engagement with students' thesis promoted student engagement with supervisory feedback.

Xu (2017) explored her own experience and found that she responded to supervisory feedback in three ways: reject, modify, and accept. She rejected the comments that were too abstract, illegible, and negotiable. As a self-regulated learner, she made more changes than suggested by her supervisors and accepted all comments related to linguistic issues because of her "lack of confidence in the English language" (251). In her case, even "no change" signified active engagement because she rejected comments only after careful consideration. In another study (Carter and Kumar, 2017), PhD supervisors reported that their students tended to ignore supervisory feedback "to their own detriment" (72). Yu et al.'s (2018) study of master's students' engagement with peer feedback on their theses at a Macau university showed that students' emotional engagement was negative, cognitive engagement was superficial, and behavioural engagement was perfunctory. The study revealed that the students' emotional reactions to peer feedback played a crucial role in their efforts to understand and use the feedback in revision.

Challenges associated with supervisory feedback

Student engagement with feedback is a shared responsibility of supervisors, students, and institutions. Different challenges facing supervisors and students can negatively affect student engagement. One such challenge in an English-as-a-second-language (L2) context like Nepal is students' insufficient command of English. In Bitchener and Basturkmen's (2006) study, all supervisors reported that "the level of English proficiency of L2 students, in general, could sometimes be a hindrance" (10), and students found this "as the major stumbling block to their writing well" (11). Previous research (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2010; Sadeghi and Shirzad Khajepasha, 2015) found that L2 students often had difficulty in maintaining accuracy and appropriateness in their writing, developing ideas, and expressing them coherently.

Students are likely to take feedback seriously and act on it if the feedback is detailed and timely. However, providing a thorough response to students' thesis work is a highly demanding and time-consuming task (Ali et al., 2015). The demand is exacerbated by students' lack of English proficiency and, consequently, the need for supervisors to spend an inordinate amount of time on language issues (Carter and Kumar, 2017; Ridgway, 2017). Thus, Carter and Kumar's (2017) study identified time demand as one of the significant barriers facing PhD supervisors and urged them to be aware of this constraint.

A further challenge is students' lack of action on the feedback provided by their supervisors, causing supervisor frustration because they have to provide the same feedback repeatedly (Carter and Kumar, 2017). A body of research reports students' lack of interest in learning from feedback (e.g., Winstone et al., 2017) and lack of access to necessary resources to make sense of and act on supervisory feedback as causes of students' inaction (Carless, 2006). In the context of Nepal, supervisors and students have limited access to resources (e.g., journal articles and books published in English).

Although supervision is a highly demanding process, supervisors rarely receive any formal preparation for the complex role (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2011; Pare, 2011). Amundsen and McAlpine's (2011) study showed that doctoral supervisors in Canadian universities heavily relied on their own experiences as a doctoral student to guide their supervision. The situation in Nepal is challenging because many supervisors hold only a master's degree, which some of them completed without writing a thesis. Although some disciplines at the concerned university have some supervision guidelines, CDE has no such provisions in place, and supervision focused training such as the ones described in Van den Ende and Jiang (2014) are rare.

The review of existing research indicates a paucity of research on student engagement with and challenges in supervisory feedback on master's theses. Although several studies were conducted on teacher feedback on coursework and PhD supervision, this body of research makes a rather limited contribution to our understanding of master's thesis supervision for several reasons. First, a master's thesis is distinct from coursework because of "the duration of the project, the individual nature of the supervision, and the complexity of the goals" (de Kleijn et al., 2013: 1013). Second, compared with PhD candidates, master's students typically have little experience with research and extended academic writing and, consequently, may depend more on hand-holding in the form of supervisory feedback and guidance (de Kleijn et al. 2013). Third, supervisory feedback is contextually and culturally embedded and mediated (East et al., 2012; Price et al., 2011), which means that findings obtained in other learning and cultural contexts may not be extrapolated to

graduate students writing their master's theses in the Nepalese context. This study aimed to fill these research gaps and set out to answer the following questions.

(1) What are supervisors' and students' perceptions of student engagement with and challenges in supervisory feedback?
(2) Are there differences in their perceptions? What are the differences in their perceptions?

Methodology

The study employed an explanatory mixed-methods research design by collecting data using questionnaire surveys and follow-up interviews. Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated to achieve triangulation and complementarity (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

Context and participants

The study was conducted at the Central Department of Education (CDE) of a public university in Nepal involving thesis writing Master of Education (M. Ed.) students and their supervisors. The M.Ed. Degree at the concerned university is a 69-credit two-year (4-semester) program. Like most graduate programs elsewhere, the M.Ed. program requires students to complete a six-credit thesis in the last semester. A thesis is typically supervised by a single faculty member and written in English, a second language for most Nepalese students. Finally, students defend their thesis before a research committee composed of the Head of the Department, an external evaluator, and the thesis supervisor.

Thirty supervisors (27 males and three females) and 50 students (32 males and 18 females) participated in the study. The selection of participants was motivated "by the principle of maximum variation subject to the available resources and access to participants" (Lei and Hu, 2015: 30). The supervisors, aged between 35 to 62 years, had supervisory and teaching experiences ranging from seven to 25 years. Seventeen of the supervisors had PhDs, whereas 13 of them had only a master's degree. The students were an average age of 25, had completed a bachelor's degree in Education and had limited teaching experience. They had defended their theses at the time of data collection. Following the questionnaire surveys, five supervisors (three with 15-20 and two with 5-10 years of supervisory experience) and five students (three with overall A and two with B grades in the previous semester) were interviewed. Each audio-recorded interview lasted for about 30-45 minutes. The participants were duly informed about the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and confidentiality. Written informed consent was also obtained from the participants.

Materials and procedure

The supervisors and students completed different versions of the same 12-item questionnaire (8-item student engagement scale and 4-item challenges scale) worded differently. Following the theoretical framework of student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Handley et al., 2011; Yu et al., 2018), the items on the engagement scale subsumed behavioural, emotional, and cognitive aspects. The four items in the challenge scale were about students' English language proficiency, supervisor's time for providing feedback, students' focus on completion rather than learning, and students' lack of access to resources (Carter and Kumar, 2017). The questionnaires consisted of items on a five-point Likert scale (i.e., 1= very true for me; 2= true for me; 3 = quite true for me; 4 = sometimes true for me; and 5 = not at all true for me). Two open-ended questions in the questionnaire asked the participants to describe their supervisory experiences and provide suggestions for improving such practices.

Data analysis

First, the data were entered into SPSS and screened for any errors and outliers. Next, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted to examine the construct validity of the questionnaires. For these data, the KMO values for two scales (i.e., student engagement 0.82 and challenges 0.81) showed the adequacy of the sample size for factor analysis (Field, 2009). At first, eight items in the student engagement scale loaded into two components, and all four items in challenges scale loaded into a single component explaining 62.53 and 56.66 percent of the variances respectively. However, the second component in the student engagement scale had only two items. Therefore, PCA was rerun by omitting those two items, which provided a 6-item single factor solution explaining 58.24 percent of the variance. The 6-item single-factor solution for student engagement scale was kept because it slightly increased the reliability estimate of the scale from 0.84 to 0.85 and brought only a small difference (i.e., about 4%) in the variance explained. Table 1 shows the component matrix along with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the two scales. Finally, the descriptive statistics for the scales were computed to examine central tendencies, variability, and the distribution of raw data. The data were generally normally distributed, and variances among the groups were equal (See Table 2). As the assumptions of normality were met, independent samples *t*-tests were used to compare the supervisors' and students' perceptions of student engagement with and challenges in supervisory feedback (Field, 2009). Effect sizes (Cohen's *d* values) were calculated to measure the magnitude of differences.

Table 1. Component matrix and reliability of student engagement with and challenges in supervisory feedback

Items	**Student engagement**	**Challenges**

Cronbach's alpha reliability	**0.85**	**0.74**
Revising one's text carefully according to feedback	0.80	
Reading qualitative feedback	0.81	
Using feedback for improving learning	0.60	
Self-assessing work before submitting	0.81	
Welcoming (challenging) feedback	0.80	
Asking for clarification if there is confusion with feedback	0.74	
Students' low language proficiency		0.70
Supervisors lacking enough time to provide feedback		0.74
Students' focus on completion rather than learning		0.81
Students' lack of access to resources		0.75

Results

Student engagement with supervisory feedback

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of supervisors' and students' perceptions of student engagement with and challenges in providing supervisory feedback. An independent samples *t*-test showed a significant difference, t (78) = 7.70, p = 0.001 (two-tailed), in the supervisors' and the students' perceptions of student engagement with supervisory feedback. The students perceived that they were more engaged with feedback (M = 1.63, SD = 0.59) than their supervisors thought they did (M = 2.78, SD = 0.74). The smaller mean indicates the perception of better engagement. The magnitude of the difference in mean was very large (i.e., Cohen's d = 1.71) (Cumming, 2012). In their answers to the open-ended questions and the follow-up interviews, the supervisors frequently commented on students' less than satisfactory engagement.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of student engagement with and challenges in supervisory feedback

Items	**Supervisors**		**Students**	
	M	SD	M	SD
Engagement				
Revising one's text carefully according to feedback	2.87	0.90	1.70	0.91
Reading qualitative feedback	2.67	0.92	1.76	0.96
Using feedback for improving learning	3.53	1.14	1.66	0.93
Self-assessing work before submitting	3.43	1.25	1.62	0.85
Being receptive to (challenging) feedback	3.00	1.11	1.52	1.07
Asking for clarification if in confusion with feedback	2.23	0.85	1.52	0.84
Challenges				
Students' low language proficiency	1.57	0.97	3.02	1.30

Supervisors lacking enough time to provide feedback	1.83	0.91	3.52	1.40
Students' focus on completion rather than learning	1.60	0.93	3.74	1.35
Students' lack of access to resources	1.60	0.81	2.56	1.33

Affective engagement: Affective engagement is related to students' positive or negative emotions associated with feedback. Receiving feedback can be an emotional enterprise for students. The data revealed an abundance of negative affect that students felt during the process of writing a thesis. Supervisors faced students who "tore his thesis and said 'I cannot complete my thesis' when I corrected most of the ideas with red ink" (T12), "cried in front if I become too critical" (T4), and "think that the supervisor is intentionally giving them a burden" (T9)

Students were disappointed because their supervisors "discouraged me by saying this and that" (S31), provided "negative comments…and [used] abusive words" (S32), and "insulted me even though there was a minor mistake" (S36). The absence of clear guidance made one student feel "frustrated" (S1), whereas another felt pinched, touched, and challenged by a word used by a research committee member during her proposal defense. However, few students had positive feeling of being "encouraged" (S10) by "very cooperative" (S18) supervisors who provided "proper and constructive feedback" (S22).

Behavioural engagement: Behavioural engagement refers to students' revision practices in response to feedback. The supervisors complained that the students "ignored the feedback given to them" (T6) and "repeatedly made the same mistakes" (T22). They identified multiple reasons for students' minimal uptake of feedback. First, students might not attend to feedback because they are not sensitive to the purpose of feedback (T7), are not competent enough, or are not disposed to work seriously (T15). Second, they may choose to ignore feedback "due to the lack of consistency among supervisors regarding the academic standard of students' work" (T7). Third, the less rigorous institutional research culture might have oriented students towards thinking that "it is not necessary to work seriously" (T2).

In contrast, all the students in follow-up interviews stated that they attended to feedback provided by their supervisors "as far as I could" (S4). However, in some cases, the students did not accommodate the feedback when clear guidelines were not provided as illustrated by the following extract:

> One of the members in the proposal viva suggested me to make changes in the conceptual framework. However, he did not tell me how I should improve the framework. Therefore, I did not incorporate that feedback. (S2)

Besides, they did not respond to feedback if they thought the feedback provider exerted less power on the approval of their theses. One student "did not follow my supervisor rather revised the draft as suggested by the external supervisor and HoD because they were the ones to approve my thesis" (S4).

Cognitive engagement: Cognitive engagement indicates students' seriousness in work and self-regulation of learning. Supervisors expected their students to be dedicated and meticulous in their work. However, contrary to their expectations, in general, students did not take thesis writing seriously, seemed "to concentrate more on getting through the undertaking as early as possible rather than on taking it as an opportunity for learning" (T4). Besides, students tended to "feel as if they are working for others" (T21) and did not understand "the gravity of writing the thesis" (T27). Some supervisors acknowledged that "some students were really good" (T9) and "come with new topics and force me to read in new areas" (T17).

Challenges with supervisory feedback

As can be seen in Table 2, the supervisors' and students' views also differed regarding common challenges facing them. An independent samples *t*-test showed a significant difference, $t\ (78) = 8.21$, $p = 0.001$ (two-tailed), in their perceptions of challenges. The supervisors felt the challenges more acutely ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 0.68$) than the students did ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.81$). The magnitude of the difference in mean was very large (Cohen's $d = 2.08$) (Cumming, 2012). The supervisors' and the students' answers to the open-ended questions, and the interviews were particularly informative.

Students' language constraints: Thesis writing requires logical and coherent presentation of ideas. In the absence of clear communication, even excellent and innovative ideas remain incomprehensible. The supervisors expressed that most of their students "have problems with academic writing skills" (T12), and their writing was "either copied or superficial" (T18). In the follow-up interviews, all supervisors raised this issue. One supervisor said, "Students do not have basic research and writing skills" (T3), and another supervisor identified low language proficiency as "a barrier to producing a good thesis through supervision" (T5).

In contrast, students rarely considered their English language proficiency as a barrier except for one student who "felt difficulty in bringing variation in the language while analyzing the data" (SI2). The qualitative data corroborates the quantitative finding that supervisors found students' low (academic) English language proficiency more challenging than the students themselves did.

Supervisors' time constraints: Twelve supervisors in response to the open-ended questions and all the supervisors in the follow-up interviews admitted that they were unable to provide prompt and detailed feedback because they "have many students to supervise" (T2) in addition to a "full teaching load" (T13). A professor revealed a shocking experience as an external examiner when a supervisor during a thesis defense nonchalantly admitted to not reading his students' work. However, one supervisor emphasized, it was supervisors' responsibility to manage time once they agreed to supervise students. He argued, "If they cannot manage time, they should not take responsibility in the first place" (T1).

In their answers to open-ended questions, some students shared that they could not "meet the supervisor for a long period" (S27), their supervisor "did not give time to provide feedback" (S32) and "never read the thesis completely" (S31). One student could not meet his supervisor "even when he gave me an appointment" (S14), and another revealed, "Many students have to waste their time waiting for their supervisors" (S9).

Students' focus on completion rather than learning: Ten supervisors, in response to open-ended questions, complained that their students were interested only on the completion of their thesis to such an extent that thesis writing was just "a ritual for the majority" (T12). Contrary to the supervisors' complaints, the students valued thesis writing as a learning experience because, during thesis writing, they studied more than what they "studied in whole two years of the M.Ed." (S2), developed a sense of "confidence of being expert in the topic" (S2), enlarged their "horizon of knowledge" (S11), and developed research skills "to do more research" (S25). Students viewed thesis writing as an excellent opportunity to develop their academic writing skills and research skills.

Resource constraints: All the supervisors in the follow-up interviews considered the lack of resources as a formidable challenge. One supervisor claimed that resource constraints deprived the students of much-needed ideas and insights and prompted them "to reproduce what has been written before" (T12). Nonetheless, they complained, "Students do not even utilize the resources that are available" (T1, T3). Two supervisors viewed that it was supervisors' responsibility "to provide students with or help students in locating required resources" (T4). Three students in the follow-up interviews shared the troubles they faced because neither the library nor big bookstores in Kathmandu had the resources they needed. They heartily acknowledged the support they received from faculty members and retired professors in getting reference materials.

Discussion

The findings from this study, in general, indicated that the students perceived themselves to be more engaged with supervisory feedback than the supervisors did. Previous research on assessment feedback also notes such differences in perceptions (Careless, 2006; Carless et al., 2011). The differences were so striking that they deserve an explanation. First, the supervisors and the students possibly had different understandings of "engagement" (Price et al., 2011). The supervisors tended to consider engagement in terms of the changes made and the quality enhanced. However, for the students, "active inaction" that is choosing not to enact feedback after careful consideration (Xu, 2017) might also have meant engagement. Therefore, only an "action resulting from feedback cannot be the ultimate measure of engagement" (Handley et al., 2011: 891). Second, linguistic as well as non-linguistic problems in students' writing might have led the supervisors to conclude that the students did not self-assess their work. However, the students might have failed to notice the problems or been unable to address them. In such situations, student engagement with feedback might have remained "invisible" for the supervisors (Handley et al., 2011; Price et al., 2011). Third, the supervisors' and the students' differing research experience might have contributed to the differences in perceptions. The supervisors might have perceived the students "approaching a task in a similar way to themselves" (Carless, 2006: 221), though the students were attempting such an arduous task for the first time. Despite these possible explanations, it still holds that students were not as responsive to feedback as expected by their supervisors.

The findings revealed differences in supervisors' and students' perceptions regarding challenges with supervisory feedback. The supervisors more acutely perceived language-related issues as a barrier to students' performance than the students themselves did. The supervisors' observation is in line with the literature which reports that students' minimal command over English caused a serious problem to supervisory feedback (e.g., Basturkmen et al., 2014; Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006; Bitchener et al., 2010; East et al., 2012). However, the students in the present study seemed to be less aware of the linguistic barrier. They appeared to suffer the Dunning–Kruger effect, "in which poor performers in many social and intellectual domains seem largely unaware of just how deficient their expertise is" (Dunning, 2011: 248).

In consonant with the existing literature (e.g., Carter and Kumar, 2017), the supervisors felt it difficult to provide timely feedback to several students, and students felt less supported. The whole endeavor of supervision is questioned if the supervisors cannot or do not manage time to provide feedback. Although sometimes supervisors have no choice but to take many students under their supervision, they can and should act more responsibly to help students develop their research and academic writing skills.

In line with the findings reported in the literature (e.g., Carless et al., 2011; Higgins et al., 2001), the students' views consistently challenged the supervisors' beliefs that the students were not interested in learning from feedback. This striking difference in the supervisors' and the students' perceptions might have resulted from their varying conceptions of what constituted 'learning'. The students seemed to take pride in learning small things, but the supervisors appeared to focus on more advanced forms of learning. In this regard, the supervisors' "tendency to underestimate how long it will take another person to learn something new or perform a task that we have already mastered" (Brown et al., 2014: 115) might have led them to misjudge students' learning efforts. The finding suggests, "What some lecturers seem to think about their students may not be fully borne out" (Carless, 2006: 220). Therefore, it is incumbent upon supervisors to see supervision from students' perspectives.

Limitations and future research

Empirical studies inevitably have some limitations. In acknowledging the limitations of the study, I am confident that none of these limitations has severely affected the study findings. First, the study was limited to self-reported data from the supervisors and the students. However, the mixed-methods research examining supervisors' and students' perceptions has contributed to the validity of the study. In future research, it would be interesting to match such self-report data with observational data comprising of students' real work in progress. Second, the sample of the study was rather modest and comprised the supervisors and the students from a single department, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings. Further research in this area should, therefore, aim for a larger sample and compare disciplinary variations.

Third, although supervisors and students were from the same department, they were not paired-up. The supervisors might have based their perception on all students they have supervised in general, whereas the students focused on their own practices. Therefore, further research should aim for such pairings to better understand their perceptions.

Implications

The findings reported above have several implications. First, it is essential to minimize the gap between the supervisors' and the students' perceptions because misunderstandings might break students' "fragile shell of success" (Carter and Kumar, 2017: 73). Towards this end, the supervisors need to bear in mind that it takes students time to develop even simple research skills (de Kleijn et al., 2013). Therefore, they should provide manageable feedback without overwhelming students with red ink (Yeo, 2018) and value students' efforts because they are

new to such academic tasks (Carter and Kumar, 2017). It might be necessary to communicate even obvious and common-sense knowledge explicitly to students because it may be entirely new for them (Carless, 2006). What students desperately need is motivation, encouragement, respect, and support, which they truly deserve. Second, to make students responsible for their work, supervisors can ask them to list the comments they have or have not incorporated with a justification (Carter and Kumar, 2017). Besides, supervisors themselves should be able to exhibit a sense of seriousness, responsibility, and credibility in their supervisory works because students tend to learn much from what their supervisors do.

Third, it is also vital to help students to improve their academic English language proficiency by talking through their writing, focusing on a specific problematic aspect at a time (Carter and Kumar, 2017), and involving them in peer review (Yu et al., 2018). Academic writing courses and language support workshops to thesis writing students might be useful. Finally, yet importantly, the university should take initiatives to prepare supervisors for supervision (Paré, 2011), limit the number of students per supervisor, and increase the required resources to create a better and conducive supervision environment.

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