



RESEARCH PAPER

The Role of Feedback Quality and Student-Supervisor Relationships in Developing Thesis Writing Skills among Undergraduates in Pakistan

¹Afeef Tahir Butt and ²Dr. Taimur Kayani

1. Lecturer, Department of English, GIFT University Gujranwala, Punjab, Pakistan

2. Head, Department of English, GIFT University Gujranwala, Punjab, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author | afeeftahirbutt@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the effect of supervisory feedback on the improvement of thesis writing skill of undergraduate students at the universities in Pakistan with special focus on the quality of supervisory feedback and relationship between thesis writer and supervisor. Even at the undergraduate level, writing a thesis is difficult due to an insufficiency of resources, delayed response and communication issues. Supervising guidance is crucial to improve academic writing, critical thinking, and academic research. A sequential explanatory mixed method design was utilized. The quantitative data was obtained from 100 students from the undergraduate program using structured questionnaires. Qualitative interviews were also held to gain more insight into experiences with supervisory feedback. Thematic analysis and SPSS Version 27 were used to analyze the data. Results showed that constructive and timely feedback enhanced student's thesis structure, grammar, content quality, and confidence. Supervisory-employee relationships fostered greater motivation, and distancing fostered less motivation and uncertainty. Some moderate challenges remained throughout feedback practices. It proposes structured supervisor training, systems of individual feedback and digital communication systems. Future research is required in post-graduate and cross-cultural scenarios in the academic arena.

KEYWORDS Undergraduate Students, Student-Supervisor Relationship, Key Challenges, Supervisory Feedback

Introduction

Undergraduate The degree of focus on undergraduate thesis writing has increased over the past decade as an essential preparatory stage in academic and career development. However, the process of drafting a thesis is not without a number of challenges especially to undergraduate students who have not had any previous research experience. These challenges are further influenced by the erudite, linguistic, and analytical abilities expected to be exercised in the accomplishment of a thesis (Azmat & Ahmad, 2022). Supervision can assist students in finding their way through the research process, style of writing, and critical analysis of ideas- components that are critical in crafting a coherent thesis (Afful, Ngula, Twumasi, Tetteh, & Mensah, 2022). The commission has also needed PETRONAS's technical competence and funding by providing the request of PKR 120 billion for the federal government (Khan et al., 2021).

Yet only PKR 66. Rs 25 billion was set for the period of fiscal year 2021-22, which is highlighted in Figure 1. From fiscal year 2017-18 to 2021-22, the HEC budget has been generally between PKR 63 billion to PKR 66 billion (Government of Pakistan). This means there is a deficit of nearly PKR 53.75 billion (45%) for fulfilling the demand of HEC to

implement its agenda of higher education in Pakistan. Undergraduate education in Pakistan goes a long way in showing the growth and progress of modernization, however, problems like funding crises and governance continue to affect the variations of higher education reforms.

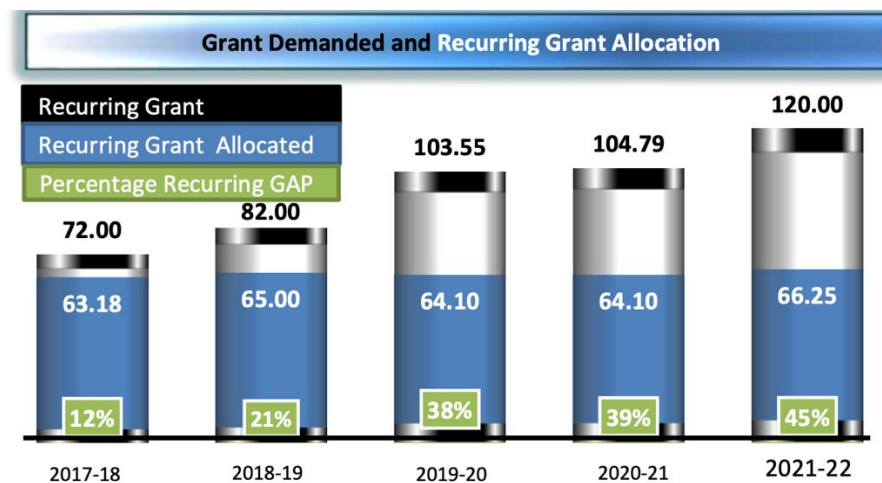


Figure 1 Bagade demand from HEC Source: (Khan et al., 2021)

In Pakistan, The Higher Education Commission (HEC) has also provided standard formats for writing the thesis at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels highlighting the aspects of originality, critical thinking skills and academic integrity (Subhani, Osman, & Nayaz, 2017). Thus, the writing of an undergraduate thesis in Pakistan has its advantages as well as drawbacks. Some of the major issues include poor students' resource endowment, especially considering that many of them study in public universities. Students also lack research materials and there are always challenges of qualified supervisors who can help in critiquing the research works (Rehman, Khan, & Waheed, 2023). Also, students experience difficulties arising from language differences because most universities use English as the medium of communication while many students write well in their home languages (Latif, Razaq, Nijabat, & Sohail, 2023).

The problems of students in developing the necessary competences to produce quality thesis work are still experienced. While supervisory feedback is a major determinant in thesis development, it is not fully utilised and understood by both students and supervisors. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the effect of supervisory feedback on undergraduate students' thesis writing skills in Pakistani universities with a view to improve the process of feedback and increasing the quality of students' outcome. Muhammad, Ali, and Aslam (2024) identify a gap in research understanding about the effect of supervisory feedback on students' research performance and motivation. Supervisors are limited in their understanding of the impact of their feedback on students, potentially leading to imprecise and critical comments that discourage learning. Delayed feedback also doesn't allow errors to be corrected in a timely fashion, and it may also be interpreted as a criticism of the student, which can decrease self-confidence. To tackle this, the authors suggest that training is needed for supervisors to enhance feedback and communication, ultimately fostering a more supportive research environment (Muhammad et al., 2024). The study is significant for students, supervisors, institutions and academic community because it provides both theoretical and practical insights of supervisory feedback in the writing of undergraduate thesis in Pakistani universities.

It fills a research gap and provides actionable recommendations to improve academic practices. It also highlights the need for supportive supervisor student

relationships to enhance effective and frequent feedback processes (Wang, Xin, Zhang, Du, & Wang, 2022).

Literature Review

Role and types of feedback

According to Allal (2021), reported that the feedback given to students can be of two types: formative and summative. Formative feedback is ongoing and offered at various stages of the writing process to support student development and revision step-by-step. It can be in the form of written feedback, tracked changes, or in person feedback and is intended to enhance the quality of the current paper as well as students' future writing and critical thinking abilities (Morris, Perry, & Wardle, 2021). In contrast, summative feedback is provided after completion of the work, and evaluates overall quality, organisations and creativity. It is primarily assessment based, but may also include recommendations for future improvement (Koenka, 2022).

Technological feedback delivery can also be analyzed according to its type of use by recipients or audience. Traditionally, feedback has been given in the form of written comments attached to drafts or oral explanations in supervision sessions. Written comments provide students with specific and well-detailed feedback that they can read on their own (Rodríguez-Hidalgo, Tan, Verlegh, Beyens, & Kühne, 2020). The interactional aspect of oral feedback often provides greater clarity to the feedback when compared to the written report retrials (Halim, Jelley, Zhang, Ornstein, & Patel, 2021).

Student-Supervisor Relationships

The student-supervisor relationship is significant to the academic success, character development, and educational experience of undergraduate students. A strong supervisory relationship enables better academic projects performance especially in conducting independent research and writing the dissertation. It also plays a role in the realization of the research objectives, and greatly affects students' satisfaction with learning (Jiang & Yan, 2020). Communication is vital in the student-supervisor dynamic and plays a direct role in the productivity of supervision. Effective supervision involves frequent meetings and discussion of research goals and objectives. Supervisors who focus on communication keep students engaged, de-focused, and always supervised during the research process (Neupane Bastola, 2022). Supervisor feedback has a significant effect on students' performance. It should be clear, positive and helpful.

But, when it is general or negative feedback, it can discourage and demotivate students. Students should also be encouraged to take responsibility for learning and make improvements from their errors (Bastola & Hu, 2023; Luo & Hu, 2024). A strong student-supervisor relationship creates a positive learning environment by promoting effective working relations and healthy interpersonal communication. Supervisors who listen to students, encourage open discussion, and are not too controlling or unresponsive tend to have effective mentoring practices (Kushwah & Navrouzoglou, 2022).

Challenges in Thesis Supervision

Undergraduate In Pakistan, the undergraduate's research experience is greatly dependent on the supervisory feedback which makes the feedback practice essential. There are, however, many cultural and institutional factors that limit the efficacy of this feedback.

In Pakistan, the power relations or hierarchy between the students and the supervisors determines the feedback practices, which limits free communication and critical interaction (Hina Batool, Ali, & Safdar, 2022); Waheed, Gilani, and Zafar (2021).

In Pakistan, there are some factors that influence the effectiveness of supervisory feedback, such as the supervisors' availability and commitment. Many supervisors are responsible for several tasks, and because of this, they may be unable to provide timely or adequate feedback. The students also noted that there was limited responsiveness from the supervisors and poor communication skills, which made them feel helpless and disappointed during the research process (Oparinde, 2022). Besides, there are also problems of language games, as quite a few students lack the proper language proficiency for academic writing, and this adversely affects the understanding of the feedback. This targeting remains ineffective since many supervisors do not consider the language ability of the students, which adds further problems to the teaching and learning aspect (Jaffer, 2010)

Material and Methods

Research Design

This research employs sequential explanatory mixed methods approach in accordance with the suggestions of (Bowen, Rose, & Pilkington, 2017; Subedi, 2016). It includes the collection and analysis of quantitative data first, then the collection and analysis of qualitative data to explain and interpret the quantitative data.

Data Collection Tools

Quantitative Instrumentation

The quantitative phase aimed at the undergraduate students from Pakistani universities who are actively involved in thesis writing under the guidance of their supervisor, the study population in this phase. The survey was developed to comprehensively assess the engagement with and challenges in the feedback of supervisor. The participants were selected through a purposive sampling technique, and a sample of about 100 people were selected in whom the required experience in the supervisory feedback process was found. A validated questionnaire developed by (Neupane Bastola, 2022) was modified and a 5-point Likert scale was used to build the questionnaire. These were structured around two constructs: engagement such as revising work in response to feedback; reading and applying comments; self-assessment; seeking clarification; and challenges such as limited language proficiency; limited availability of supervisor; limited resources; and focus on completion over learning.

A pilot test was conducted on a small number of respondents to check on items of uncertainty and to refine the wording prior to final distribution. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was used to check the reliability of the instrument, and the content and the relevance of the instrument to the research objectives were checked for validity by expert opinions. All ethical procedures were adhered to, such as informed consent from the participants, voluntary participation, confidentiality of the responses and anonymity in the reporting of the data. Table 3.1 shows the explanation of items for each category such as engagement and challenges.

Table 1
Measurement of Variables

Variables	Items	Measurement	Source
Engagement	Revising one's text carefully according to feedback	Five-point Likert Scale	(Neupane Bastola, 2022)

	Reading qualitative feedback	
	Using feedback for improving learning	
	Self-assessing work before submitting	
	Being receptive to (challenging) feedback	
	Asking for clarification if in confusion with feedback	
Challenges	Students' low language proficiency	(Neupane Bastola, 2022)
	Supervisors lacking enough time to provide feedback	
	Students' focus on completion rather than learning	
	Students' lack of access to resources	

Qualitative Instrumentation

The interview protocol was designed by the researcher to attain an in-depth insight regarding the categories and frequency of supervisory feedback (Neupane Bastola & Hu, 2021). It was also focused towards attaining the perceptions of students and supervisors regarding the engagement and challenges. The questions were developed based on objectives of the study.

Data Analysis

The quantitative component of the study involves analyzing the categories, frequency and effectiveness of supervisory feedback from the survey data supervisor student dyad. Uses descriptive and inferential statistics, with descriptive statistics giving an overview of patterns and trends of feedback practice. The data is analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27), with the ability to use charts and graphics for visualizing the data, as well as conducting statistical tests. The qualitative phase consists of intensive interviews and qualitative analysis of drafts of theses, and thematic analysis is applied to detect and report patterns. This follows Braun and Clarke's six-step framework to ensure a detailed and accurate interpretation of supervisory feedback experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Results and Discussion

Findings from the Interview

Table 2
Evidence and Generated Coding from Transcript

Evidence from Transcript	Coding
1. How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor during the thesis writing process?	Theme I: Nature of relationship with supervisor <i>Theme I(a): Supportive vs. Distant</i> <i>Theme I(b): Impact of communication on comfort levels</i>
Q2: In what ways does the feedback of your supervisor motivate or discourage you?	Theme II: Impact of supervisor feedback on student motivation <i>Theme II (a): Recognition and constructive criticism</i> <i>Theme II (b): Vague or Unclear feedback</i>
Q3: How do you think the quality of your relationship with your supervisor influences the feedback you receive?	Theme III: Impact of relationship on feedback quality <i>Theme III (a): Personalized and constructive feedback through positive relationships</i> <i>Theme III (b): Brief feedback through distant relationships</i>

Question 4: How have your drafts changed after receiving feedback from your supervisor? Can you provide specific examples?	Theme IV: Impact of feedback on draft improvement Theme IV(a): Enhanced clarity and structure Theme IV(b): Strengthen analytical depth
Question 5: What challenges or improvements have you noticed in your work after each round of supervisor's feedback?	Theme V: Challenges and Improvements Theme V(a): Difficulties in managing feedback Theme v(b): Improvements in writing clarity and structure.

Theme I: Nature of relationship with supervisor

Theme I(a): Supportive vs. Distant

Students' experiences of thesis writing vary based on the level and type of support received from supervisors. Supervision is friendly and interactive, enabling students to easily ask for help and voice concerns. Some respondents indicated that they felt well supported because they have frequent check-ins and are being truly guided by their supervisors. Respondent noted that

"Very positive! I have a great supervisor, and for the first time in my life, I feel he is genuine in his intent to help me. I am very comfortable. He, which helps." (R5)

Several students indicated they had a distant relationship with their supervisor, making it difficult for them to seek advice. Another

"I would say it's a bit distant. My supervisor is busy, so I don't get as much feedback as I'd like. It is not very comfortable because the relationship is distant." (R13)

Theme I(b): Impact of communication on comfort levels

The nature and intensity of the interaction between students and supervisors significantly affects student's comfort level in writing a thesis. Good communication establishes trust and lessens confusion, poor communication causes discomfort. The participants commented that they are comfortable talking to their supervisors about their progress and difficulties when it is easy to communicate with them. One of them said:

"It's very supportive. My supervisor is always available and quick to respond, which helps me stay on track. Extremely comfortable! My supervisor.....discussions." (R15)

Students who have a formal relationship with supervisors tend to feel distant and disconnected when most formal communication occurs. Respondent noted,

"Not very comfortable. I wish there was more open communication. We seldom meet physically and most of our interaction takes place online." (R8)

Theme II: Impact of supervisor feedback on student motivation

Theme II (a): Recognition and constructive criticism

Feedback from the supervisor is a significant factor in student motivation. Most students stated that when they are praised for their efforts and feedback, they are more motivated. Respondents also noted that when supervisors acknowledge their hard work and point out areas for improvement, they feel encouraged to further refine and improve their work.

"It is more or less constructive criticism which makes me better and work harder. Yes, there are a few motivational moments..... It pushes me to keep going." (R1)

In the thesis process, constructive feedback must include positive reinforcement along with suggestions for improvement. Students are more receptive to feedback that not only brings attention to their errors but also to their strengths. Another response:

"It motivates me because he always focuses on improvement rather than just pointing out mistakes. Yes, when he praised my analysis, it motivated me to keep going." (R9)

Theme II (b): Vague or Unclear feedback

Students can become demotivated when the feedback given by the teacher is vague or unclear. Respondents indicated that vague comments without direction and explanations leave them in a state of confusion and uncertainty about how to make improvements. One student stated,

"The feedback is all about what's wrong and not offering suggestions on how to proceed. There have been times when feedback felt overly critical and demotivating." (R2)

This confused feedback is seen as especially destructive because students need to be directed on how to move forward. Without positive feedback or constructive suggestions, motivation, confidence, and interest in thesis work diminish.

"It is sometimes discouraging because the feedback feels vague and leaves me unsure about what to do next. I've felt demotivated when the feedback.....on how to improve." (R11)

Theme III: Impact of relationship on feedback quality

Theme III (a): Personalized and constructive feedback through positive relationships

Most of the respondents have complained that in those relationships where they do not have direct access to their supervisor, the feedback they receive is generally vague, general and sometimes even negative. One respondent noted,

"I believe our positive relationship allows for more supportive and personalized feedback. Yes, because a good relationship fosters open communication, which improves feedback." (R3)

Theme III (b): Brief Feedback Through Distant Relationships

Respondents said close or informal relationships with supervisors usually lead to the short, generic and even negative feedback. The absence of interaction results in vague feedback which makes the students feel that the feedback is not specific and that the student is not adequately being addressed regarding his/her unique academic problems. As R11 said:

"[...] if we communicated more frequently, I think the feedback would be more specific to my needs." (R11)

Feedback in remote supervisor-student interaction is generic since there is poor knowledge of the work done by a student. In this regard R2 said:

"It is a more formal relationship, so the feedback given to me is also very brief and critical. Definitely, I think more informal conversations would allow for better understanding." (R2)

Theme IV: Impact of Feedback on Draft Improvement

Feedback also had a highly significant effect on the structure of the arguments of the different sections of the drafts. Some of the respondents claimed to have observed enhanced logical organization of their results and discussion sections. In this context, R10 said:

"I've restructured my arguments in the results section based on feedback, making it more coherent. My results are now better organized, and the arguments flow more logically." (R10)

Theme IV (a): Enhanced Clarity and Structure

Feedback by supervisors enhances organization and refinement of ideas and increases coherence and clarity in academic writing. Respondents have indicated that drafts became more precise, clear and focused with the inclusion of feedback. Introduction sections have been greatly enhanced with supervisors giving particular directives. In this context, R11 said:

"My introduction improved after I was advised to clarify my research question and objectives. My introduction is clearer and now better aligned with my research objectives." (R11)

Theme IV (b): Strengthened Analytical Depth

Supervisor feedback helped to develop analytical parts of academic drafts, which included more detailed and critical evaluation. Specific guidance enhanced discussion and results sections promoted greater engagement with data and use of evidence to support arguments, reflection, more developed interpretation and better understanding of findings. R13 said:

"My analysis became more detailed and focused after my supervisor encouraged me to dive deeper into the data. My data analysis became more insightful and focused on key findings." (R13)

Theme V: Challenges and Improvements

Theme V(a): Difficulties in Managing Feedback

One of the challenges that were highlighted was the amount of feedback. Students struggled to answer a lot of comments. Though feedback proved useful, too many suggestions were overwhelming especially when the learners had to take on numerous suggestions in a short period of time. In this context, R2 said:

"The feedback has helped me refine my arguments, but implementing everything can feel overwhelming. It's challenging to address every single point in a meaningful way." (R2)

Theme V(b): Improvements in Writing Clarity and Structure

According to the students, supervisory feedback helped them to make their work better in terms of clarity and organization. There were significant improvements observed which many would attribute to the guidance. Indicatively, one of the respondents emphasized the overall improvement in the quality of writing because of the consideration of feedback. R9 said:

"My writing has become more concise (...)" (R9).

Feedback was used to support students to present ideas in a coherent, effective and clearly. The respondents also cited enhanced literature reviews because of the guidance by their supervisors in making their literature reviews relevant, in classification of studies, in the comprehension of relationship and in the general organization of arguments for the thesis. R16 said:

"(...) One particular change was the improvement I made in my literature review section. My supervisor proposed a different classification scheme of the literature that helped to better understand relationships between the studies and thus make the argument more coherent." (R16)

Table 2
Summary Table for Thematic Analysis of Interviews

Aspects	Respondents
Supportive vs. Distant relationship	1, 3, 4, 6, 15, 19
Communication enhances comfort levels	2, 3, 6, 8, 12, 14, 18
Supervisor feedback increases student motivation	1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19
Personalized and constructive feedback through positive relationships	1, 3, 4, 9, 12, 14, 14, 17
Brief feedback through distant relationships	2, 11, 12
Enhanced clarity and structure	2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 13
Strengthen analytical depth	6, 10, 13, 14, 20
Difficulties in managing feedback	1-20
Improvements in writing clarity and structure.	1, 5, 9, 10, 19

Findings from the Survey

To explore the academic problems faced by students, descriptive statistics and cross tabulation are used in this section. It examines the effect of academic background and type of university on student experiences. The overall moderate levels of challenge are reflected in the CC1CC4 categories (ranked 1-5) with slight differences between the areas shown in the table below:

Table 3
Descriptive Summary of Challenges

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
CC1	100	1	5	2.20	1.239
CC2	100	1	5	2.22	1.244
CC3	100	1	5	2.19	1.237
CC4	100	1	5	2.27	1.278
Valid N (listwise)	100				

The average scores of the categories of challenges are moderate (2.19-2.27) which show that the students generally face some level of difficulty. But the SDs larger than 1.23 indicate significant differences in perceived difficulty. These statistics give a picture of student problems, and a background to the analysis of the impact of academic background and type of university.

Discussion

Supervisory feedback is one of the most important factors affecting the academic socialization of undergraduate students, especially when they are writing their thesis, which requires them to be competent in research, analysis, and academic writing. In Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of Pakistan, which are facing many obstacles in their academic life like scarce academic resources, high workloads of supervisors, and communication barriers, effective supervisory feedback plays a very vital role to enhance

student learning outcomes (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). This study's results suggest that the quality and frequency of supervisory feedback have significant effect on the development of students' thesis writing, especially on improving the depth of analytical development, coherence, and structure. Supervisory feedback is shown to be a form of teaching that encourages intellectual development and academic autonomy as well as evaluation. Baecher, Dalpino, and Yamaguti (2023) stated that constructive feedback helps to develop higher order thinking and enhances academic writing skills.

Similarly, digital tools such as collaborative writing software enable feedback to be streamlined, with live feedback options and revisions and communication between supervisors and students being more effective. Results support (Li & Gao, 2016) who emphasize that collaborative and technology-based feedback spaces foster the growth of students' writing and involvement. Students who indicated that their supervisors were supportive and approachable were more confident, motivated and satisfied in the process of writing their thesis. Morales, Grineski, and Collins (2021) who argue that positive mentoring relationships can have a positive impact on academic success and student satisfaction. The results of the study indicate that better supervisor-student relationships lead to effective feedback that enhances the clarity of thesis, its structure, and analysis, and contributes to the undergraduate academic growth in Pakistani universities.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to discuss the effectiveness of supervisory feedback in the development of thesis writing skills of undergraduate students in the Pakistani universities. Using both qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis in the study, the complexities of feedback and its implications on students' learning and performance have been revealed in the research. This work shows that if feedback is carried out to a positive appreciation, then aspects of enhancement are noted with particular emphasis to the support given to the sound establishment of a constructive learning climate where students feel competent to participate in their study. Based on the analysis of the data collected on students' attitudes, it was concluded that there is value in developing good working relationships with supervisors with regards to feedback provision. Interestingly, this type of feedback improves grammatical, structural and content mastery of the thesis by the students largely. Similarly, low contact inhibits constructive and advise oriented appraisals that may prove unhelpful to students' development and demotivating to the learners.

Implications

The study has some theoretical, practical and managerial implications. It contributes to the knowledge of supervisory feedback in Pakistani Universities and connects it with students' performance and cultural context. It can be applied in practice to structured feedback systems, supervision training and technology use. Managerially, it provides focus on policy development and communication to enhance academic quality, reputation, and student retention.

Limitations and Future Research

The study was carried out among limited number of undergraduates of Pakistani universities and self-reported experiences of students only, not supervisors' experiences. Larger cross-cultural samples, postgraduate/doctoral level and supervisor perspective are needed. Future research needs to examine the impact of feedback over time in longitudinal studies and the use of digital feedback tools and compare the effectiveness of written feedback with verbal feedback on the effectiveness of thesis writing results.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the universities in Pakistan should organize structured training courses for supervisors that will improve the quality, clarity and timeliness of feedback for the undergraduate thesis writers. Regular student/supervisor communication and academic relationships should be encouraged through meetings between student and supervisor. In addition, academic writing workshops should be provided in the universities to enhance the students' language proficiency, research techniques and ability to appropriately receive and implement supervisory feedback.

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