

# Exploring the complexities of thesis writing in the distance mode: postgraduate students' perspectives, challenges and strategies

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the complexities faced by postgraduate students at Universitas Terbuka (UT) during their thesis writing process in a distance learning environment, focusing on their perspectives, challenges and strategies.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research employed a mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design, incorporating both quantitative data from 146 online questionnaire responses and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with 16 students. This comprehensive methodology enabled a detailed examination of the students' experiences. The participants were from seven study programs in the Postgraduate Schools of UT.

**Findings** – The study identifies key themes impacting thesis writing in a distance learning context, including self-discipline, time management, access to resources, technological adaptation, feelings of isolation, motivation and supervisory interaction. The findings highlight the critical role of structured support systems, technological infrastructure and adaptive strategies such as online study groups and productivity tools in mitigating these challenges. Regular, constructive feedback from supervisors and the establishment of a supportive academic community are crucial for student success.

**Research limitations/implications** – The research emphasizes the need for educational institutions to enhance their digital platforms and provide comprehensive training to bridge the gap in resource accessibility and technological proficiency. Further studies could expand on the specific needs of different demographic groups within the distance learning framework.

**Practical implications** – Institutions should implement targeted interventions such as time management workshops, regular mentoring sessions, and the development of interactive and collaborative online platforms to support distance learners effectively.

**Social implications** – By addressing the unique challenges of thesis writing in distance education, this study contributes to improving academic outcomes and enhancing the overall learning experience for postgraduate students, fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

**Originality/value** – This research provides valuable insights into the specific experiences of postgraduate students at UT, offering actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers to support thesis writing in distance learning contexts.

**Keywords** Distance learning, Thesis writing, Supervision interaction, Self-regulated learning

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Thesis writing serves as the culmination of years of study, showcasing students' research, critical thinking and subject expertise (Wu, 2021). Crafting a thesis involves a deep dive into uncharted territories of knowledge, pushing students to synthesize complex ideas and generate new insights. This intellectual journey is transformative, melding scholars, fostering innovation and driving knowledge forward. However, the thesis writing process is even



more complex in distance learning contexts, where students face additional barriers such as isolation, limited access to resources, and the need for heightened self-discipline and time management skills (Dorovolomo, 2020; Jusslin and Hilli, 2023).

Thesis writing demands rigor, analytical reasoning and methodical writing. These essential skills not only ensure academic success but also enhance employability and professional development. These skills transcend disciplinary boundaries. These skills equip postgraduate students for a dynamic and ever-evolving job market, enhancing their employability and career development (Quinto, 2022). Thesis writing empowers students to become critical thinkers and effective communicators, attributes that are highly valued in any professional setting. Furthermore, the process instills a sense of discipline and perseverance, preparing students to tackle complex challenges and contribute meaningfully to their fields and society at large (Musyarofah, 2021; Rapp and Kauf, 2018).

A prime example of adapting thesis writing to distance learning is UT Indonesia, which has innovatively tackled these challenges. UT exemplifies the integration of distance learning with the rigorous demands of thesis writing. As a pioneer in providing higher education through distance mode, UT has devised strategies to support its postgraduate students in navigating the complexities of thesis writing. The university's approach is tailored to cater to the unique needs of distance learners, who often balance academic pursuits with professional and personal commitments. By leveraging technology and fostering a supportive virtual community, UT ensures that geographical and time constraints do not hinder students' academic journeys (Yunus *et al.*, 2023).

Despite the flexibility offered by distance education, students of UT, like their counterparts globally, face unique challenges in thesis writing. The absence of face-to-face and direct physical interaction can lead to feelings of isolation, making it difficult for students to stay motivated and engaged. Additionally, distance learners need to develop a heightened level of self-discipline and time management skills to navigate the dual demands of their studies and other responsibilities (Niku, 2023; Noraini *et al.*, 2023). Access to resources and direct mentorship can also be challenging, requiring both students and faculty to employ innovative communication and research strategies to overcome these barriers (Sükan, 2022).

Research on thesis writing in distance education has illuminated numerous challenges and emphasized the need for structured support systems. Notably, a three-tiered framework involving mentoring has significantly enhanced student engagement in New Zealand, underscoring the benefits of structured guidance and robust support (Jonnavithula and Bai, 2023). Additionally, the integration of technology and student-oriented teaching methods has been pivotal in maintaining engagement and satisfaction across various international contexts (Gu, 2020). These studies highlight a shift toward interactive and supportive environments tailored to distance learners' needs (Nurkamto *et al.*, 2022).

Psychological aspects, particularly motivation and the impact of isolation, are also critical. Studies suggest that virtual peer groups and regular interactions with supervisors and peers can mitigate feelings of isolation and enhance motivation (Misdi, 2020). Brune *et al.* (2022) emphasize the need for individualized support strategies to address the diverse needs of distance learners, advocating for a flexible, student-centered educational framework. This emphasis on personalized support aligns with findings by Saputra *et al.* (2020), who identified that tailored communication and feedback mechanisms are instrumental in reducing learners' sense of detachment and promoting a more connected and engaging learning experience.

While existing research provides a valuable foundation for understanding the general challenges and strategies associated with thesis writing in distance learning contexts (Dorovolomo, 2020; Pu, 2019), it often overlooks the unique experiences of postgraduate students at UT. The diverse backgrounds of these students, combined with the distinctive characteristics of Indonesia's higher education system and the evolving nature of distance learning modalities, present specific challenges that are not sufficiently addressed in the broader literature. These challenges include managing time effectively amidst personal and professional commitments, accessing specialized resources remotely and navigating limited

direct interaction with supervisors. Recognizing these gaps, this article aims to delve into the complexities faced by UT's postgraduate students during their thesis writing process. By focusing on the unique challenges, strategies and perspectives prevalent in UT's distance learning environment, this study seeks to enrich the broader discourse on postgraduate education in distance modes. The findings are intended to inform educators, policymakers and students, providing actionable insights that can enhance support systems, refine pedagogical approaches and ultimately improve student success in thesis writing within distance learning frameworks.

**Research method**

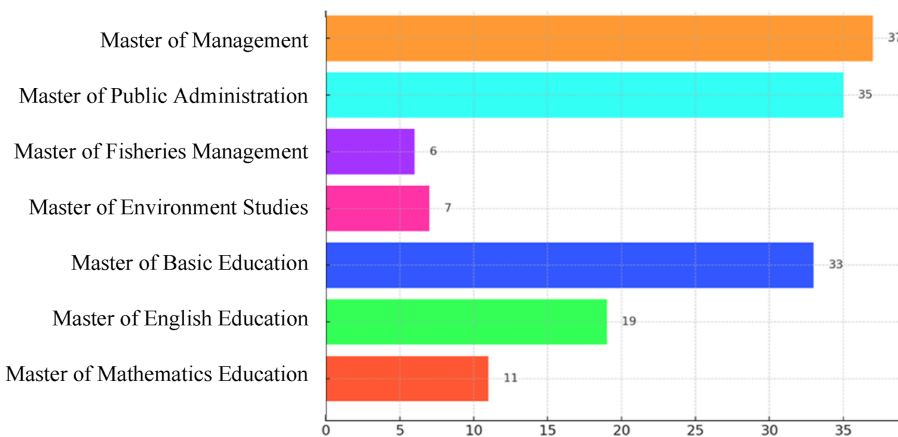
*Research design*

This research uses a mixed methods approach with a convergent parallel design, which involves collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously to provide a comprehensive understanding of postgraduate students' thesis writing challenges and strategies. This design facilitates simultaneous collection and analysis of both data types, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research questions. The rationale for choosing a mixed methods approach is that the quantitative data provides a broader perspective on the experiences of UT postgraduate students through a questionnaire. In contrast, the qualitative data gathered through interviews explores the lived experiences to understand the rationale behind the quantitative findings (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011).

*Research participants*

The study was designed to involve postgraduate students actively engaged in thesis-based programs at UT. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants currently enrolled in a postgraduate program at UT and actively engaged in writing their thesis. The participants were drawn from a wide range of seven distinct study programs in the Postgraduate School of UT to capture the varied academic landscapes and supervisory methodologies. For the quantitative phase of the study, data was collected from 146 participants through an online questionnaire using G-form.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents across the seven study programs within the Postgraduate School at UT. This visualization highlights the proportional representation of



Source(s): Figure by authors

**Figure 1.** Distribution of respondents to the questionnaire based on study programs

participants, providing an overview of the diversity in academic disciplines and supervisory practices. The figure also demonstrates the heterogeneity of the sample, which is essential for understanding the broader academic experiences of postgraduate students engaged in thesis writing. By showcasing the composition of respondents, the figure emphasizes the inclusiveness and representativeness of the quantitative phase of the study.

Following the quantitative data collection, the research delved deeper with a qualitative approach involving 16 students in semi-structured interviews. These participants were chosen based on their study program and the depth and variety of their survey responses, aiming to cover a broad spectrum of experiences, challenges and adaptive strategies. The semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, facilitating an in-depth dialogue. This two-tiered methodological approach ensured a comprehensive and detailed exploration of the student's academic journeys at UT.

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of participants in the semi-structured interviews. The table categorizes participants by their study program and gender, offering a clear overview of the demographic and academic distribution of the interviewees. The total of 16 participants ensures the representativeness of both male and female students from across diverse fields of study. This stratified approach reinforces methodological rigour and supports the study's aim to capture a wide range of perspectives on the challenges and strategies involved in thesis writing.

#### Research instruments

Two research instruments were employed, namely the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. These two instruments are presented and discussed below.

**Questionnaire.** An online self-administered questionnaire, developed using Google Forms, was employed to collect quantitative data on the participants' experiences with thesis writing in a distance learning context. The tool was designed to gather comprehensive information, including demographic details (age, gender and program of study) and participants' perceptions of the unique challenges posed by remote thesis writing compared to traditional on-campus approaches. Specifically, it assessed obstacles such as limited access to resources, time management difficulties, sustaining self-motivation and communication barriers with supervisors. The questionnaire integrated both closed-ended and open-ended questions to ensure a robust and nuanced exploration of these experiences. Closed-ended items, using a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), provided structured quantitative data for analysis, while open-ended questions allowed participants to share detailed reflections, uncovering personal insights beyond predefined categories. This dual-method approach ensured a comprehensive examination of participants' challenges and strategies, delivering critical insights into the complexities of navigating thesis writing in distance education environments.

**Table 1.** The participants of the interviews

| No    | Study program                         | Male | Female | Total |
|-------|---------------------------------------|------|--------|-------|
| 1     | Master of Management (MM)             | 1    | 2      | 3     |
| 2     | Master of Public Administration (MPA) | 1    | 2      | 3     |
| 3     | Master of Fisheries Management (MFM)  | 1    | 0      | 1     |
| 4     | Master of Environment Studies (MES)   | 1    | 1      | 2     |
| 5     | Master of Basic Education (MBE)       | 1    | 2      | 3     |
| 6     | Master of English Education (MEE)     | 0    | 2      | 2     |
| 7     | Master of Mathematics Education (MME) | 1    | 1      | 2     |
| Total |                                       | 6    | 10     | 16    |

**Source(s):** Table computation by authors

*Semi-structured interview.* A semi-structured interview guide was developed and employed to enrich the findings from the questionnaire and gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences. This guide was specifically crafted to complement and expand upon the key themes identified in the initial quantitative data. The flexible format of the semi-structured interviews allowed for a dynamic exploration of topics, providing the opportunity for researchers to probe further into specific aspects of participants’ experiences that emerged during the conversations. During these interviews, the participants discussed their initial expectations and how their perceptions had evolved regarding thesis writing in a distance learning environment. They detailed specific challenges they encountered and described the impact of these challenges on their thesis progress. Furthermore, the participants shared the strategies they developed to overcome these hurdles and evaluated their effectiveness. They also offered suggestions for improvements in UT’s support systems for distance learning thesis students.

*Data analysis*

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaire was meticulously analyzed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to ensure a thorough examination of the various aspects of the study. The primary purpose of CFA in this context is to confirm whether the observed data fit a hypothesized measurement model based on the theoretical understanding of the constructs. On the qualitative front, the data gathered from the interviews was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture the detailed essence of each conversation. Thematic analysis was then conducted on these transcripts, allowing for the identification of recurring themes and patterns that painted a vivid picture of the participants’ experiences. The researcher engaged in a systematic coding process, categorizing the data into emergent themes that highlighted the various challenges, strategies employed and overall perceptions of the thesis writing process. This methodical approach to data analysis enriched the research findings, offering a deep, nuanced understanding of the academic journeys of the participants.

**Results**

*Self-discipline and time management*

The data analysis provides valuable insights into the self-discipline and time management strategies employed by postgraduate students engaged in thesis writing. Table 2 presents the factor loadings, standard errors, T-values and p-values for constructs related to self-discipline and time management among distance learning postgraduate students.

**Table 2.** Self-discipline and time management items

| No                                             | Items                                                                                      | Loading | SE   | T-value | p-values |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|------|---------|----------|
| 1                                              | I am able to set clear goals for my thesis writing                                         | 0.81    | 0.03 | 27.00   | 0.00     |
| 2                                              | I consistently adhere to the schedule I set for completing different sections of my thesis | 0.78    | 0.02 | 39.00   | 0.00     |
| 3                                              | I can prioritize my thesis work over other responsibilities                                | 0.71    | 0.04 | 17.75   | 0.00     |
| 4                                              | I often find myself procrastinating on thesis-related tasks                                | 0.79    | 0.03 | 26.33   | 0.00     |
| 5                                              | I feel confident in my ability to self-regulate my study habits                            | 0.88    | 0.04 | 22.00   | 0.00     |
| 6                                              | I effectively manage my time between thesis writing and other commitments                  | 0.84    | 0.02 | 42.00   | 0.00     |
| 7                                              | I regularly reflect on my progress and adjust my plans accordingly                         | 0.71    | 0.04 | 17.75   | 0.00     |
| 8                                              | I find it challenging to maintain a consistent stud routine                                | 0.81    | 0.04 | 20.25   | 0.00     |
| <b>Source(s):</b> Table computation by authors |                                                                                            |         |      |         |          |

The statistical results highlight that goal setting, adherence to schedules, prioritization and self-regulation are critical for successful thesis completion. The high T-values and significant  $p$ -values (all  $<0.05$ ) provide compelling evidence that these elements are not only correlated with but are significant predictors of the effective management of thesis writing tasks. For instance, goal setting, with a factor loading of 0.81 and a T-value of 27.00, is a critical predictor of successful thesis progression. Similarly, time management, as reflected in items such as adherence to schedules and effective prioritization (loading of 0.84 and T-value of 42.00), demonstrates a significant contribution to academic success. These quantitative findings underscore the importance of structured and self-regulated behaviors in distance learning environments, where students often have limited face-to-face interaction and direct oversight.

Moreover, qualitative responses further support the significance of self-discipline and time management. Respondents emphasized that while the autonomy inherent in distance education provides flexibility, it also necessitates a higher level of discipline to maintain progress. One participant noted, "I often have to manage my time independently, which, while allowing flexibility, also increases the challenge of staying on track without external prompts." This sentiment resonates with the statistical data, highlighting that self-regulation and effective time management are essential for sustaining academic momentum in a distance learning context.

The findings also suggest that the challenge of balancing academic demands with external responsibilities, such as work and family obligations, exacerbates the difficulties students face in maintaining consistent progress. Many participants, especially those working full-time or managing family responsibilities, reported difficulty in allocating sufficient time for thesis work. As one participant said.

Dividing time between work, family, and studies is difficult and almost impossible. Often, I had to sacrifice my study time for family matters, which ultimately hindered my academic progress and made me feel depressed and unproductive.

These insights point to a critical issue: the conflict between academic and personal responsibilities often leads to compromises in one or more aspects of students' lives. This finding underscores the necessity of robust time management skills, which are not merely useful but critical for success in completing a thesis. The respondents voiced the need for more structured support from academic institutions, with one participant suggesting, "I hope there will be more support from the campus, such as time management workshops or scheduled mentoring sessions, regardless of the activities already in place."

This feedback reveals that while flexible learning formats offer certain advantages, they also demand a level of self-management that many students find challenging without sufficient institutional support. Therefore, there is an urgent need for universities to provide tailored interventions that address these unique challenges. Recommendations include the development of time management workshops, mentoring sessions and the creation of a more interactive, supportive learning environment.

The role of educational institutions in fostering academic success through proactive support is also emphasized by these findings. Participants recommended the integration of time management applications, online collaboration platforms and progress monitoring tools to help students navigate their responsibilities more effectively. Additionally, skill-building programs such as workshops on self-management and time regulation techniques could empower students to overcome the common barriers they face in balancing academic and personal commitments.

It is important to note that the absence of adequate institutional support can significantly hinder students' ability to progress with their thesis work. This is particularly true for students at institutions like UT, where distance learning models limit opportunities for direct interaction and on-campus resources. Without appropriate intervention, postgraduate students in distance learning environments are at risk of significant delays in thesis completion, which can adversely affect both their academic performance and overall well-being.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the dual nature of autonomy in distance learning: while it provides students with flexibility, it also requires them to exercise a high degree of self-discipline and time management. The significant role of goal setting, prioritization and self-regulation in thesis completion cannot be overstated. Furthermore, the challenges posed by external responsibilities underscore the need for universities to develop more structured, supportive interventions. By incorporating tailored strategies, such as workshops, mentoring and the use of technology, institutions can better assist students in overcoming these obstacles and ultimately enhance their academic success.

*Access to resources and technology adaptation*

The results provide significant insights into how postgraduate students’ access to academic resources and their adaptation to technology impact their thesis writing. As presented in Table 3, access to academic resources, familiarity with digital tools and the availability of effective IT support are identified as critical factors influencing the successful adaptation to technology in thesis work.

The analysis reveals a high degree of student satisfaction with access to essential academic resources and digital tools. The consistently low *p*-values (all <0.05) demonstrate the statistical significance of these findings, emphasizing the crucial role that access to resources and technical proficiency play in the thesis-writing process. These results strongly suggest that enhancing the availability of training and technical support can significantly improve the overall research experience for postgraduate students.

Further corroborating these findings, qualitative data indicate that while distance education offers flexibility, it simultaneously creates significant barriers to academic engagement, particularly in terms of accessing resources and maintaining direct communication with supervisors and peers. Geographical and logistical constraints were frequently cited as obstacles, with one participant explained, “The distance from the regional office makes it difficult to meet academic staff and supervisors, leaving me feeling isolated.” This isolation reinforces the need for enhanced, personalized support systems to address the unique challenges faced by distance learners.

Moreover, while digital communication tools offer convenience, they often fall short of facilitating the depth and efficiency of face-to-face interactions. This study highlights the need for more advanced platforms that support real-time collaboration and specialized online tutoring. Despite the availability of digital resources, many students report underutilization, primarily due to insufficient outreach and the lack of effective socialization programs. This

**Table 3.** Items of access to resources and technology adaptation

| No | Items                                                                                                  | Loading | SE   | <i>T</i> -value | <i>p</i> -values |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|------|-----------------|------------------|
| 1  | I have adequate access to academic resources necessary for my research                                 | 0.76    | 0.03 | 25.33           | 0.0              |
| 2  | The online library services of UT meet my research needs                                               | 0.72    | 0.02 | 36.0            | 0.0              |
| 3  | I am comfortable using digital tools and platforms provided by the university for my research          | 0.8     | 0.03 | 26.67           | 0.0              |
| 4  | Technical issues often disrupt my thesis writing process                                               | 0.7     | 0.04 | 17.5            | 0.0              |
| 5  | I feel proficient in utilizing reference management software                                           | 0.85    | 0.02 | 42.5            | 0.0              |
| 6  | The university provides sufficient training on using academic databases                                | 0.78    | 0.03 | 26.0            | 0.0              |
| 7  | I have access to the necessary software for data analysis and thesis writing                           | 0.71    | 0.03 | 23.67           | 0.0              |
| 8  | The IT support provided by the university effectively resolves technical issues related to my research | 0.82    | 0.03 | 24.7            | 0.0              |

**Source(s):** Table computation by authors

underutilization underscores the necessity for targeted interventions to ensure that students fully leverage the potential of these tools.

Technological challenges also remain a significant issue in distance learning environments. Variations in students' digital literacy levels hinder their ability to effectively use research tools and platforms. One participant noted, "Not all students have the same ability to use technology, which is a significant challenge." To address these disparities, institutions must provide tailored training programs, incorporating advanced tools such as artificial intelligence to support thesis writing. Furthermore, the persistent issue of unreliable internet connectivity remains a substantial barrier, disrupting virtual mentoring, webinars and access to critical resources.

The compounded impact of limited interaction, technological inequalities and inconsistent internet access intensifies feelings of academic isolation and demotivation. As one student said, "I often feel alone and less motivated without direct support, especially for discussions with my supervisor." These challenges underscore the importance of fostering a strong sense of community and support among distance learners. Initiatives such as peer mentoring, structured online study groups and dynamic discussion forums can help mitigate feelings of isolation and sustain student motivation.

Ultimately, the findings indicate a pressing need for universities to address these challenges by investing in robust digital infrastructure and inclusive support mechanisms. Educational institutions should prioritize the development of advanced digital libraries, expand access to academic journals, and offer comprehensive training to both students and staff on the optimal use of educational technology. By adopting these innovative strategies, institutions can create a more equitable and empowering learning environment, transforming distance education into a more effective and supportive experience for postgraduate students.

#### *Feeling of isolation and lack of motivation*

The impact of feelings of isolation and lack of motivation on thesis writing is shown in the CFA results in [Table 4](#).

The data from the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) reveal a strong and statistically significant relationship between feelings of isolation and lack of motivation and the students' experiences with thesis writing in a distance education environment. The factor loadings for each item, ranging from 0.72 to 0.85, indicate a robust relationship between these psychological factors and the students' academic challenges. The statistical significance ( $p$ -values  $< 0.05$ ) further underscores the critical role these feelings play in shaping students' academic progress and motivation.

The qualitative findings support the quantitative results, highlighting how isolation in distance education settings significantly inhibits academic progress among postgraduate students. Many respondents reported feeling disconnected from their academic community, a sentiment that reflects the limited social interaction characteristic of traditional in-person

**Table 4.** Items of feeling of isolation and lack of motivation

| No | Items                                                             | Loading | SE   | T-value | p-values |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|------|---------|----------|
| 1  | I often feel isolated while working on my thesis                  | 0.76    | 0.03 | 25.33   | 0.00     |
| 2  | I struggle with maintaining motivation throughout my thesis       | 0.78    | 0.04 | 19.50   | 0.01     |
| 3  | The lack of physical interaction with peers impacts my motivation | 0.80    | 0.03 | 26.67   | 0.03     |
| 4  | I feel that online study groups or forums help me stay motivated  | 0.72    | 0.05 | 14.39   | 0.01     |
| 5  | I am able to motivate myself despite the challenges of isolation  | 0.85    | 0.02 | 42.50   | 0.00     |
| 6  | I often feel overwhelmed by the solitary nature of my thesis work | 0.74    | 0.04 | 18.50   | 0.02     |

**Source(s):** Table computation by authors

educational settings. This isolation, coupled with the absence of direct peer interactions, was perceived as a key barrier to sustained academic motivation and engagement.

I feel lonely and disconnected from the academic environment. There are no friends to discuss in person. The isolation faced by UT postgraduate students significantly inhibits their academic progress ... feel disconnected from the academic community, which reduces opportunities for the rich exchange of ideas.

An important finding of this study is the diverse perspectives among students on the impact of isolation. Some students reported that the lack of a structured campus environment and physical interactions significantly hindered their motivation, making it difficult to engage in sustained, intensive research. In contrast, others suggested that isolation allowed them more focused time to work independently, though they still faced challenges in staying motivated without regular feedback and peer interaction.

These responses suggest that the challenges of distance education can erode students' confidence, particularly as they lack immediate validation and constructive feedback from peers and lecturers. This lack of engagement undermines students' ability to navigate the demanding process of research and academic writing, highlighting the essential role of a supportive academic community in fostering motivation, resilience and a sense of academic belonging.

*Supervisory interaction and feedback*

The impact of supervisory interaction and feedback on thesis writing is a critical aspect of postgraduate students' academic experiences. Table 5 presents the results from the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) on supervisory interaction and feedback.

The CFA results indicate a strong consensus among respondents regarding the quality of supervisory interaction and feedback in a distance learning environment. All items exhibit high factor loadings, suggesting that timely feedback, regular interactions and a supportive supervisory relationship are essential components of postgraduate thesis success. The factor loadings range from 0.71 to 0.90, with *p*-values indicating statistical significance (all <0.05). These results underscore the importance of effective communication and support from supervisors for academic progression in distance learning settings.

One of the key findings of this study is that the dynamics of thesis guidance in distance education are influenced by the fluctuating nature of interactions between students and supervisors, often affected by geographical constraints, technological limitations and issues with Internet access. These barriers often hinder effective communication, reducing both the

**Table 5.** Items of supervisory interaction and feedback

| No | Items                                                                       | Loading | SE   | T-value | p-values |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|------|---------|----------|
| 1  | My supervisor provides timely and constructive feedback on my thesis drafts | 0.71    | 0.04 | 17.67   | 0.00     |
| 2  | I have regular and productive interactions with my thesis supervisor        | 0.72    | 0.04 | 17.91   | 0.00     |
| 3  | I feel that my supervisor understands the challenges of distance learning   | 0.80    | 0.04 | 19.93   | 0.00     |
| 4  | The feedback I receive from my supervisor significantly improves my thesis  | 0.90    | 0.04 | 22.53   | 0.00     |
| 5  | I am satisfied with the level of support and guidance from my supervisor    | 0.82    | 0.04 | 20.55   | 0.00     |
| 6  | I find it easy to communicate with my supervisor despite the distance       | 0.81    | 0.04 | 20.21   | 0.00     |

**Source(s):** Table computation by authors

frequency and quality of feedback, which are crucial for iterative thesis revisions. As one participant noted, “I once had an experience where I had to wait a long time to get feedback from my supervisor. This delay disrupted my workflow and hindered my thesis progress,” reflecting how delays in feedback can undermine students’ momentum and motivation, leading to potential setbacks in thesis completion.

Additionally, the reduced face-to-face interaction inherent in distance education amplifies challenges in establishing strong mentor-mentee relationships. Virtual communication, while necessary, often fails to capture the nuances and complexities of academic discussions, making it harder for students to clarify doubts and receive detailed guidance. An important finding is that reliance on technological infrastructure for feedback can significantly limit opportunities for immediate clarification, which is critical for meaningful academic progress. Although video conferencing tools can mitigate some of these challenges by preserving non-verbal cues, the absence of in-person interactions diminishes the opportunity to foster deep, enriching academic relationships that are instrumental in enhancing learning experiences.

Obstacles in online tutoring are further compounded by difficulties in finding mutually available times for communication between students and supervisors, as well as by poor internet connectivity, which can disrupt the flow of academic discussions and reduce the effectiveness of guidance. Although online platforms offer an adequate medium for communication, students often report that key details are lost during virtual consultations. Following are the quotes that represent what the participants perceive.

Challenges in online supervision include difficulty in scheduling mutually convenient times for communication between students and supervisors. In addition, poor internet network quality often hampers communication, making academic discussions less effective and reducing the quality of guidance received.

Although communication through online platforms is quite adequate, students often feel that there are important things that are not conveyed well in virtual consultations. Nuances and details that can normally be explained directly are often lost, reducing the effectiveness of guidance.

The study also highlights the psychological and academic challenges faced by postgraduate students in distance learning environments. These include feelings of frustration, uncertainty and diminished motivation due to delayed feedback and ineffective communication. Moreover, the lack of personal interaction contributes to a sense of isolation and disengagement, further hindering students’ academic progress. These findings underscore the critical need for universities to invest in improving technological infrastructure and establishing clear communication protocols that ensure timely and constructive feedback.

## Discussion

This study provides valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges that postgraduate students encounter during thesis writing within a distance learning environment, as well as the adaptive strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. The findings underscore the pivotal role of self-discipline and time management in determining academic success within this context. Distance education, by nature, offers students significant autonomy, which, while beneficial in fostering flexibility, also requires enhanced self-regulation. Without structured schedules or direct oversight, students are often susceptible to procrastination and inconsistent study routines. This aligns with previous studies that underscore the critical role of self-management skills in remote education ([Asyutina and Kostyukova, 2021](#); [Wagener, 2018](#)). As such, institutional support mechanisms, such as workshops focused on time management and consistent mentoring, are indispensable in helping students develop these competencies and mitigate the inherent challenges of independent learning ([Geng and Wei, 2023](#); [Tabuenca et al., 2022](#)). The use of productivity-enhancing technologies, such as Trello and Google Calendar, further assists students in organizing tasks, setting priorities and tracking progress in real time, addressing time management challenges effectively ([Stahlberg, 2022](#); [Zhang, 2022](#)).

Furthermore, external responsibilities, particularly work and familial obligations, significantly compound the complexities of time management for postgraduate students. Balancing these competing demands often necessitates trade-offs, where academic progress is sacrificed in favor of work or family obligations, potentially compromising both academic outcomes and students' mental well-being. These findings resonate with the existing literature, which highlights the detrimental effects of role conflict on student performance in distance learning environments (Bondarenko, 2022; Zatrochova and Spirko, 2023). To address these challenges, tailored interventions, such as flexible scheduling and empathetic academic policies, are essential to support students in balancing their dual roles effectively (Zuhairi *et al.*, 2020). Structured mentorship, including regular virtual meetings with supervisors, has also proven to be a critical strategy in providing timely feedback and ensuring academic clarity, as highlighted in this study. These sessions help students maintain consistency and direction, especially in contexts with limited face-to-face interaction (Noraini *et al.*, 2023; Tabuenca *et al.*, 2022; Zaheer and Munir, 2020).

Access to academic resources and technological adaptation emerged as critical themes in this study. Geographical and logistical constraints frequently impede students' engagement with supervisors and peers, limiting the collaborative and interactive elements that are vital to the research process. Although digital tools such as video conferencing and collaborative platforms provide alternative means of communication, their effectiveness is often diminished by insufficient infrastructure and inadequate training. The findings corroborate previous research that underscores the importance of robust institutional investments in technological infrastructure to foster academic equity in distance education (Gu, 2020; Neroni *et al.*, 2019; Seliverstova and Solnyshkina, 2021). Additionally, the formation of online study groups offers an innovative solution to isolation and resource constraints, as students can collectively exchange research ideas and refine their hypotheses through peer discussions (Kaschuck, 2021; Noraini *et al.*, 2023).

Isolation and lack of motivation were identified as significant barriers to student engagement and productivity. The absence of face-to-face interaction in distance learning environments often leads to feelings of disconnection from the academic community, diminishing students' enthusiasm and sense of belonging. This isolation not only impedes social interaction but also negatively impacts academic performance, as students struggle to maintain motivation without regular, in-person engagement. Previous studies support these findings, emphasizing the necessity of fostering a strong sense of community in online learning contexts (Crisanto, 2018; Noraini *et al.*, 2023; Ravari *et al.*, 2023). Online study groups, guided by supervisors and supported by digital tools like Google Drive, enhance social interaction and provide platforms for exchanging constructive feedback, mitigating intellectual isolation and fostering academic collaboration. Such interventions serve to alleviate isolation and foster a greater sense of community among distance learners (Kaschuck, 2021).

The importance of supervisory interaction and timely feedback was also highlighted in this study. Delays in receiving constructive feedback can disrupt students' workflow and diminish their motivation, underscoring the need for timely, structured supervisory engagement. Previous research consistently emphasizes the importance of frequent and meaningful feedback in supporting student progress (Guin, 2019; Nurie, 2020; Zhang, 2022). To enhance the effectiveness of feedback in distance education, institutions should implement systematic feedback protocols and leverage digital tools to improve communication efficiency. Regular virtual meetings with supervisors not only ensure timely feedback but also reinforce structured academic engagement, addressing both the intellectual and emotional needs of postgraduate students (Musyarofah, 2021; Niku, 2023; Wagener, 2019).

Finally, the study revealed that postgraduate students actively employ innovative strategies to overcome the challenges of distance learning. By forming online study groups, utilizing productivity tools and engaging in self-regulated learning practices, students manage their workloads effectively. These strategies not only enhance students' productivity but also demonstrate resilience and ingenuity in navigating the complexities of remote education

(Stahlberg, 2022; Zhang, 2022). Institutions should recognize and support these initiatives by fostering collaborative networks, enhancing digital tools and promoting student-driven strategies that encourage sustained academic success in distance learning environments (Pinto-Guillergua *et al.*, 2022; Wolters and Brady, 2021).

## Conclusion

In summary, this study reveals the multifaceted challenges faced by postgraduate students at UT in their thesis writing process within a distance learning environment. The primary issues identified include self-discipline, time management, access to resources, technological adaptation, feelings of isolation, motivation and the nature of supervisory interactions. Students often struggle with maintaining effective self-discipline and time management due to the autonomy required in distance education. The balance between academic pursuits and external responsibilities, such as work and family, further complicates their academic progress.

Moreover, access to resources and adaptation to technology emerged as significant barriers. Geographic and logistical constraints limit direct interactions with supervisors and peers, leading to feelings of isolation and a decreased sense of academic community. The findings underscore the critical role of robust digital infrastructure and comprehensive training to enhance resource accessibility and utilization. The lack of social interaction inherent in distance education affects students' academic enthusiasm and productivity, highlighting the importance of fostering a supportive and interactive online learning community.

Educational institutions must implement targeted interventions to address these challenges and support distance learners effectively. Strategies such as time management workshops, regular mentoring sessions, and the development of interactive online platforms can significantly enhance students' academic experiences. Providing timely and constructive feedback from supervisors and fostering a sense of community through virtual peer groups and collaborative tools are essential to mitigate feelings of isolation and sustain motivation.

Further, institutions should prioritize strengthening their technological infrastructure and ensuring reliable internet connectivity for all students. Comprehensive training programs on the use of digital tools and academic resources are crucial for bridging the gap in technological proficiency. By adopting innovative solutions and providing tailored support, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and effective distance learning environment that empowers postgraduate students to succeed in their academic endeavors.

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