Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Vol. 5 No. 2 (2026): ISSN (Online): 2958-4558
DOI: https://doi.org/10.58721/eajhss.v5i2.1688
The Dynamics of Online Evaluation: Voices from Student Teachers in an Open Distance e-Learning institution

The Dynamics of Online Evaluation: Voice from Student Teachers in an Open Distance e-Learning institution

Mbusiseni Dube & Carlo Daniels
University of South Africa, South Africa

Article History
Received: 30.09.2025
Revised: 21.04.2026
Accepted: 22.04.2026
Published: 03.05.2026

Keywords
e-Learning
Evaluation
Digital readiness
Student teachers

How to cite:
Dube, M. & Daniels, C. (2026). The Dynamics of Online Evaluation: Voices from Student Teachers in an Open Distance e-Learning institution. *Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 5*(2), 105-118.

Abstract
Teacher education programs worldwide aim to balance theoretical knowledge with practical application, with teaching practice serving as a critical component in this process. While teaching practice traditionally involves face-to-face evaluations, such approaches are not always feasible in Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) contexts due to geographical constraints. Existing studies have explored the virtual teaching practicum and the unique experiences it provides. However, the existing body of literature on the evaluation of student teachers is notably limited, with an even scarcer exploration of their assessment through flexible learning tools. Employing a qualitative survey, guided by technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) as a theoretical framework, this study aimed to examine the dynamics of online evaluation using the voices of student teachers during teaching practice in an ODeL institution. Data were collected through qualitative open-ended questionnaires from 13 purposefully sampled participants in their final year of undergraduate studies who engaged in online evaluations, and the data were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that most student teachers demonstrated adequate preparedness for online evaluations and that the TPACK of university supervisors enabled them to provide constructive feedback. Online evaluations were further valued for their flexibility in overcoming logistical barriers and for fostering technological competence among student teachers. Findings revealed that Technological Knowledge (TK) and Technological Pedagogical Knowledge (TPK) were the most critical domains influencing the effectiveness of online teaching practice supervision. Findings indicate that participants demonstrated adequate TK in using mobile devices and digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams. However, challenges related to connectivity, infrastructure, and limited platform familiarity constrained the effective enactment of TPK during online teaching practice supervision. The study recommended that universities invest in digital infrastructure and training and provide adequate institutional support. Although the findings provide valuable and transferable insights, their generalizability is constrained by the small sample size. The findings highlight the need for ODeL policy and global teacher education programs to move beyond basic digital access (TK) and prioritize the development of TPK, alongside investment in reliable digital infrastructure.

Introduction

Globally, teacher education institutions are committed to providing high-quality instruction to cultivate proficient teachers (Heikonen et al., 2017). In an evolving and dynamic educational landscape, the challenge of improving teacher training is increasingly complex (Ozdas, 2018). In this regard, teacher education programs globally comprise two components: the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and its practical application in teaching practice (Kadir & Aziz, 2021). Teaching practice has become mandatory for all students, primarily to provide student teachers with opportunities to be mentored by experienced educators and educational leaders. Teaching practice can serve as an indicator of graduate success, as student teachers are evaluated in a realistic teaching context (Chan et al., 2019; Ji et al.,2022; Mudra, 2018). A variety of terms are employed to describe teaching practice, including, but not limited to, teaching practicum, practice teaching, student teaching, field studies, in-field experience, internship, and school-based experience.

The objectives of teaching practice are to link theory with practical classroom and school-setting experiences (Hasan, 2023; Kabilan et al., 2020), which are often sidelined in other fields (Lithoxoidou & Georgiadou, 2023). According to the same authors, it is essential to strike a balance between theoretical instruction and practical experience within the teacher-training curriculum. The teaching practice course is instrumental in achieving this balance. In doing so, Anis and Hasan (2025) stated that another objective of teaching practice is to provide student teachers with firsthand experience in lesson development, instructional strategies, assessment techniques, and classroom management. In addition, teaching practice enables students to receive evaluation (from a lecturer employed at the institution where they are enrolled) of their teaching competencies and be provided with feedback (Hasan, 2023). This study focuses on the latter objective.

Student teacher evaluation can take the form of a face-to-face and/or online evaluation. Most South African universities have implemented evaluations of face-to-face teaching practices. In this process, lecturers travel to schools to assess the lessons delivered by student teachers. Since Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) students are enrolled from across South Africa and around the world, it is not always feasible for teacher educators to evaluate students in person due to geographical constraints. For this reason, ODeL institutions have resorted to online teaching practice evaluations, employing digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, Google Forms, Google Classroom, Edmodo, Quizizz, and Socrative (Anggraeni et al., 2024). Cvetkovic et al. (2023) state that these platforms support both synchronous and asynchronous assessment delivery, with synchronous assessments requiring less time to mitigate potential risks such as cheating and technical disruptions. Bunyamin et al. (2021) reported that implementing online assessments offers advantages for student teachers, primarily due to the efficiency of learning and evaluation processes. Some lecturers utilize different digital platforms for video-recorded sessions; however, this paper focuses on an online evaluation method in which student teachers are assessed through live sessions. The evaluating lecturer can engage in real-time with class activities and observe all interactions.

In this context, ODeL institutions have the potential to build student teachers' capacity through online evaluation. In fact, ODeL institutions are renowned for their contributions to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure quality education for all. As an example, in 2022, the Faculty of Education at one African ODeL institution enrolled 93,000 students and graduated 12,844 educators (UNISA, 2022). These institutions enrol a large number of aspiring educators from across Africa (see Okafor 2024), many of whom would otherwise not have the opportunity to attend university (Johanson & Karlsen, 2021) or to be assessed for teaching practice due to their geographic locations.

The body of research on teacher education practicums, especially for early childhood and primary education teachers, is extensive and supported by a substantial body of ongoing literature in this field (García-Noblejas et al., 2023). In addition, existing studies have explored the virtual teaching practicum and the unique experiences it provides (Kadir & Aziz, 2021). However, the existing body of literature on the evaluation of student teachers is notably limited, with even less exploration of their assessment using flexible learning tools. Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine the dynamics of online evaluation using the voices of student teachers during teaching practice in an Open Distance e-Learning institution. To achieve this aim, this paper is guided by the following three research questions. From the perspective of student teachers, how prepared are they and their lecturers to engage in the evaluation of online teaching practice and provide adequate feedback? What are their perspectives and preferences regarding online versus face-to-face evaluations? What challenges do student teachers experience during online supervision?

Literature review

Heinz (2024) found that as student teachers progress in their teaching practice, they receive guidance from school-based mentors, principals, and university supervisors, which can sometimes be inconsistent or conflicting. Compounding this complexity, Tekel et al. (2022) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the nature of teaching practices changed due to school closures and the subsequent shift to remote education. Nonetheless, teaching practice is an essential component of teacher education (Dube et al., 2021). Its significance lies in the fact that student teachers cannot graduate or earn their degrees without being evaluated. Teaching practice provides a platform for student teachers to be guided and supported on how to teach, prepare lessons and mitigate complex classroom challenges. In line with this argument, Dube (2025) argued that if student teachers are properly guided and supported, they are likely to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to become competent teachers. On the same note, Udoh et al. (2024) stressed that teaching practice provides student teachers with the opportunity to be scaffolded into assuming increased responsibility associated with the profession. In short, teaching practices expose student teachers to the realities of classroom and school life (Udoh et al., 2024; Bada et al., 2022). In turn, they gain access to a real-life classroom, enabling them to develop fundamental pedagogical competencies. As a result, the student teachers' teacher identity, confidence, and ability to assume their teaching responsibilities are nurtured.

Internationally, countries such as India, Australia, Chile, China, the United Kingdom, and Uganda follow a practice-based model of teacher education (Cohen et al., 2024). This model is underpinned by the notion that student teachers learn more effectively when they engage in actual teaching (Cohen et al., 2024; Barahona et al., 2021). Additionally, in England, student teachers were required to do their teaching practice online through online courses offered by schools. In countries without the digital capacity to conduct online classes in schools, these nations arranged online practicums at universities, where student teachers delivered lessons to classmates who served as students (Tekel et al., 2022).

The dynamics of online evaluation

Online evaluation is as comprehensive as face-to-face evaluation because it integrates multiple assessment components, including lesson preparation, lesson plan design, classroom management, and teaching performance (Chen, 2024). When evaluating student teachers, the focus is not only on how they teach. Instead, student teachers are evaluated on several aspects that define a teacher. In addition to aspects mentioned above, Hadijah et al. (2021) added that student teachers are also evaluated on issues of content mastery and integration, teaching methods (whether they are student-centred or not), use of learning media and technology, discipline and assessment practices (pre-tests, observations, and evaluations), language use, and closing activities (reflection and feedback). Hence, Batugal (2019) stressed that online evaluation for student teachers assesses teaching performance

across multiple dimensions and competencies. Online evaluation enhances stakeholder interaction, enabling university supervisors and student teachers to communicate beyond geographical limitations through synchronous and asynchronous channels (Kecik et al., 2012).

Similar to face-to-face evaluation, online evaluation reinforces learning engagement and performance while simultaneously improving teaching efficiency in diverse teaching areas (Gameil et al., 2023). After the online evaluation session, student teachers receive feedback from teacher educators about how the lesson presentation unfolded. This type of evaluation allows evaluation to occur regardless of location or timing constraints, eliminating the logistical challenges of coordinating face-to-face evaluations (Ayyoub et al., 2023). The scholarly literature reports that face-to-face evaluation tends to involve too many logistics and challenges. One significant challenge faced by teacher educators, who are responsible for assessing student teachers, is the need to travel substantial distances, often on poorly maintained roads, to conduct their evaluations. However, with online evaluation, this logistical challenge is eliminated. This also highlights the flexibility and versatility of online evaluation, which cultivates autonomous learning abilities (Fehaima, 2024). Online evaluation is perceived to have less anxiety-inducing and more conducive to learning (Shange et al., 2024). Face-to-face evaluation requires a 'stranger' to be part of the class. The presence of a university supervisor can induce an uncomfortable dynamic within the classroom for both the student teacher and the learners. Consequently, it is often challenging for them to maintain a typical classroom atmosphere. In contrast, implementing online evaluations fosters a more conducive and authentic learning environment.

Challenges associated with online learning

Even though online evaluations are ideal for some students and their supervising lecturers, they pose challenges of their own. The first challenge is the administrative and technological complications associated with online teaching practice evaluations. For some students and university supervisors, the complex technical setup and management can be overwhelming (Fitrivah et al., 2021). Consequently, if a student teacher or their evaluating lecturer is not well-equipped with the knowledge and skills to conduct effective online assessments, the evaluation process is likely to be ineffective (Bunyamin et al., 2021). The second challenge concerns the reliability and authenticity of modified online evaluation methods and their efficacy in assessing student teachers' competencies (Morrison et al., 2022). Some educational stakeholders question the reliability of these modified methods and their ability to adequately evaluate student teachers' competencies (Morrison et al., 2022).

Some student teachers conduct teaching practice in rural and remote areas with poor internet access, which can interfere with the smooth flow and execution of evaluation (Chinyere, 2021), accounting for the third challenge. Unstable connectivity can negatively affect the scientific and authentic evaluation of student teachers (Malki et al., 2022). Poor internet access and unstable connections, which are common in rural areas, can interfere with the progress and success of the teaching practice evaluation. Dayal (2023) added that poor internet connectivity will make it challenging to complete evaluations effectively and in a timely manner. Therefore, poor internet connectivity can be perilous for online evaluations. Supervisory support and guidance suffer significantly in online evaluation contexts. The last challenge, identified by Gorni et al. (2024), is that student teachers often do not receive sufficient support during online evaluations, unlike in face-to-face evaluations, primarily due to time constraints.

Theoretical framework

This paper was framed using Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) (Koehler & Mishra, 2005). This theory encapsulates the intersection and dynamic interaction among three fundamental knowledge domains: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and technological

knowledge (Wordofa et al., 2023). The same authors explained that TPACK emphasises the effective integration of technology during teaching and learning activities, which requires a thorough understanding of these components and how they work together to create meaningful learning experiences (Wordofa et al., 2023). Acquiring knowledge in these three domains may be fruitless if the bearer cannot integrate them appropriately during teaching and learning. According to Koehler and Mishra (2005), technological knowledge needs teachers to understand how technology interacts with both pedagogy and content to be used effectively (Salybekova et al., 2023). During the online evaluation of student teachers, there is an interplay of pedagogy, content knowledge, and technology. Student teachers are deemed to have acquired adequate knowledge of these domains and to know how to blend them. The responsibility of evaluating lecturers is to cultivate the necessary competencies in student teachers, enabling them to effectively integrate these three knowledge domains during their teaching practice. This aspect is of paramount importance, as insufficient capacity can result in ineffective online evaluation processes. The theory presented is particularly relevant to this paper, as effective online evaluation requires a comprehensive understanding of these three knowledge domains.

Method

This paper aimed to examine the dynamics of online evaluation using the voices of student teachers during teaching practice in an Open Distance e-Learning institution. To address this aim, a qualitative method grounded in an interpretive paradigm was employed. Qualitative methods and the interpretive paradigm were deemed the most suitable because they both emphasise understanding phenomena from participants' own perspectives (Hallberg, 2008) and hold that reality is subjectively constructed through social interactions with participants (McDonald et al., 2019). The participants were purposively sampled, provided they had undertaken an online teaching practice evaluation. For data collection, open-ended questionnaires were administered via Google Forms, with 13 participants voluntarily completing them. The questionnaire comprised items on student teachers' preparedness and that of their lecturers for online teaching practice evaluation and feedback, their perspectives and preferences regarding online versus face-to-face evaluations, and the challenges they experienced during online supervision. Data were collected from May 2025 to November 2025. The small sample size is justified because in qualitative research, the focus is on the depth and richness of the data rather than on statistical representativeness. The questionnaire was administered after the completion of the teaching practice period. Participants were invited to take part in the study via the teaching practice WhatsApp group, an established communication channel between student teachers and lecturers. A link to the questionnaire was shared in the group, allowing students to access and complete it at their convenience.

Since the data were qualitative, thematic analysis was employed to construct themes through coding. Since the data were qualitative, thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, analyse, and interpret patterns within the dataset. The process began with familiarisation, where the researchers repeatedly read the responses to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. This was followed by initial coding, during which meaningful segments of the data were labelled to capture key ideas related to the research questions. The codes were then reviewed and grouped into broader categories, allowing for the development of preliminary themes. These themes were further refined and reviewed to ensure coherence, consistency, and alignment with the study's objectives. Finally, the themes were clearly defined and named, forming the basis for the presentation and discussion of the findings. Through thematic data analysis, six themes emerged, serving as headings and elaborated in the findings sections.

Before the data were collected and analysed, ethical clearance was obtained from the College of Education ERC ethics committee at the university where the two researchers are employed.

Thereafter, the consent forms were issued to participants, who signed to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. Participants were assured that their identities would be protected and that pseudonyms would be used to maintain their anonymity.

Results

A total of 13 students participated in this study, representing a diverse range of educational phases. The predominant group comprises students in Grades 4 to 6, classified in the Intermediate Phase. This was followed by those from Grades 10 to 12, representing the Further Education and Training Phase. A smaller cohort included students from Grades 7 to 9, categorised as the Senior Phase, while the least-represented group was from Grades 1 to 3 in the Foundation Phase. Regarding the devices used to supervise teaching practice, most participants relied on their cell phones, while a minority used laptops. This preference for mobile devices may be attributed to their affordability, convenience, and portability. All participants identified WhatsApp as the primary communication channel with their supervisors, particularly for addressing immediate queries and seeking guidance. In the context of online applications for teaching practice supervision, participants' consensus was that Microsoft Teams was the most effective platform. They acknowledged the institutional support provided via complimentary access facilitated by the university. Additionally, email was unanimously identified as the preferred method for submitting documents because it provides a verifiable record of ongoing communication.

Through thematic analysis, three themes emerged from the findings. These themes were aligned with the three research questions that guided this research paper. These themes include the preparation of student teachers and university supervisors for online teaching practice evaluation, student teachers' perceptions of face-to-face and online evaluations, and the challenges student teachers experience during their online supervision; they are discussed in depth in the following sections.

Preparedness of student teachers and university supervisors to engage in online teaching practice evaluation

The purpose of this theme was to determine whether both student teachers and university supervisors were prepared to engage in online teaching practice. Two sub-themes under this theme are discussed below: the preparedness of student teachers and the preparedness of university supervisors.

Preparedness of students

One of the participants reflected positively on their readiness for online supervision, stating: "*I felt adequately prepared for online supervision. The technology used was user-friendly, and I had prior experience with similar platforms*." Their sense of preparedness was linked to their Technological Knowledge (TK), as prior exposure to digital tools contributed to their confidence in navigating the online assessment process. Furthermore, their comfort with the platform demonstrates emerging Technological Pedagogical Knowledge (TPK), as they were able not only to use the tools but also to apply them in a supervisory context within teaching practice. At the same time, another participant acknowledged the limitations of this preparedness, noting: "*Having a backup plan for technical issues would have enhanced my preparedness*." Although familiarity and usability are important, students value institutional or supervisory contingency measures to address the unpredictability of technological failures. In the TPACK framework, this reflects the need for pedagogically sound integration of technology that anticipates disruptions.

Preparedness of university supervisors

Across the dataset, all students expressed confidence in the university supervisors' preparedness for online supervision. One participant explained: "*My lecturer was well-prepared and provided constructive feedback through the online platform. The feedback was timely and detailed, helping me understand areas of improvement*." This quote highlights the lecturer's TPK, as indicated by their readiness to engage in online supervision and the pedagogical value embedded in the feedback process. The lecturer's Pedagogical Knowledge (PK) is demonstrated by their ability to provide constructive feedback using technology. Instead of allowing technological tools to impede the feedback process, the lecturer's PK ensured timely feedback. The emphasis on timeliness and detail suggests that the digital medium did not hinder the lecturer's ability to provide meaningful guidance. Instead, it facilitated constructive, actionable support that students perceived as beneficial to their professional growth.

Student teachers' preference between online and face-to-face evaluations

The purpose of this theme was to explore students' perceptions of online and face-to-face evaluations, the reasons for conducting online supervision, and their development as educators, which are presented as sub-themes below.

Perceptions of student teachers' online versus face-to-face evaluations

Although online evaluation may differ in form from traditional approaches, student teachers valued its potential to enhance accessibility, reduce anxiety, and extend opportunities for reflective learning.

Participants expressed generally positive perceptions of online supervision due to its flexibility, efficiency, and accessibility. One participant reflected: "*I believe technology offers a flexible and efficient way to conduct supervision, especially when in-person meetings are challenging. It allows for diverse communication methods and can be just as effective as traditional supervision, given the right tools and preparation*." When supported by appropriate resources, online supervision is not viewed as a compromise. Instead, it is a viable and effective alternative to face-to-face teaching practice assessment.

In some cases, online supervision was perceived to reduce anxiety in the supervisory relationship. As one student remarked: "*I was not shy because I was not seeing my lecturer*." Here, the removal of the lecturer's physical presence appeared to lessen performance pressure.

Another participant pointed to the reflective advantages of digital supervision: "*The main benefits of online observations are that the lessons can be revisited, making it easier for student teachers to reflect on classroom management, instructional strategies, and learner engagement. They can compare their own teaching with observed practices*." The capacity to record and review lessons added pedagogical value to the online format, fostering deeper reflection and self-assessment. Recording and revisiting lessons are examples of TPK. In this context, technology extends pedagogical intent by deepening reflection on teaching content and practice.

Flexibility and reach were again mentioned by another student, who stated: "*The main benefits include increased flexibility, accessibility, and the ability to reach a wider audience*." This reinforces the broader theme that online supervision expands opportunities for participation and reduces barriers linked to geography and time constraints. Through the lens of TPACK, these findings reveal how the thoughtful integration of technology (TK) with supervision practices (PK) creates opportunities for reflection and accessibility.

Reasons for doing online supervision

A recurring justification for adopting online supervision was the logistical difficulty of arranging in-person visits. As one participant noted, "*The school is in rural areas where the lecturer could not easily reach*". Another participant explained that "*Due to geographical constraints and scheduling conflicts, in-person supervision wasn't feasible. Technology played a crucial role in bridging this gap, enabling real-time*

communication and feedback." This suggests that some students opted for online teaching due to geographic constraints and the impossibility of university supervisors to reach deep rural schools.

Geographical distance and conflicting timetables created barriers to traditional face-to-face evaluations. The use of online platforms emerged as a solution, enabling the assessment of teaching practice to proceed without interruption. The sampled participants appeared to value the accessibility that technology provided and its capacity to support real-time interaction. The alignment of technology with pedagogy reveals the adaptive capacity, which is central to TPACK. The lecturer mitigated contextual constraints without compromising the pedagogical intent of the evaluation of the teaching practice.

Development as an educator

Online supervision functions as more than a logistical solution to geographical or scheduling constraints. It actively cultivates digital competence, openness to innovation, and resilience in navigating varied teaching contexts. These qualities are increasingly essential for contemporary educators.

Student teachers explained that online supervision shaped their development as educators, particularly regarding openness and adaptability in using technology. One participant explained: "*They have helped me to be more open-minded and to be more open to using technology in the classroom.*" Exposure to online platforms during supervision served as a medium for assessment and modelled the pedagogical potential of digital tools within classroom practice. Teaching practice evaluation was not limited to assessment. Instead, it represented an enactment of TPK modelling for students on how technology can be integrated into teaching and learning.

Similarly, another participant reflected on the broader implications for professional growth, stating: "*Flexible learning and technological supervision have broadened my understanding of educational technology and enhanced my ability to adapt to different teaching environments. These experiences have been invaluable in preparing me for diverse teaching scenarios.*" The benefits of online supervision extended beyond the immediacy of teaching practice assessment, fostering skills that contribute to long-term professional adaptability. Online supervision has the potential to support the development of TK, PK, and CK, as students learn to use technological tools and to adapt them to varied instructional and disciplinary contexts. In this context, online supervision cultivates transferable skills that enhance long-term professional adaptability, grounded in the integrative principles of TPACK.

Challenges student teachers face during online supervision

Although online supervision is feasible and beneficial, its effectiveness depends on reliable connectivity, users' familiarity with digital platforms, and the availability of basic technological infrastructure. Without these conditions, students may experience disruptions that compromise the smoothness and quality of supervision.

The participants reported several challenges, most of which were related to technological limitations. Issues of internet connectivity were the most frequently mentioned concern. One participant explained: "*Network problem because the supervisor could not hear me clearly, but informed and instructed me to move around for a better connection.*" Similarly, another reflected: "*One challenge was ensuring stable internet connectivity. To navigate this, I had a backup internet plan and communicated proactively with my supervisor about any issues.*" It is essential for students and their supervisors to note that network instability may disrupt the flow of supervision, necessitating proactive communication or backup plans to minimise its impact. These challenges highlighted that technological disruptions can disrupt the supervisory process, requiring students and their supervising lecturers to draw on their TK to develop adaptive strategies to maintain the flow of supervision.

In addition to connectivity problems, a lack of familiarity with the platform created obstacles for some students. As one participant admitted: "*I had a hard time connecting to Teams as it was my first time using Teams on a computer*." For students with limited prior exposure, the learning curve associated with new technology could hinder the supervisory process. Limited prior exposure to digital platforms increases the cognitive load and hinders smooth pedagogical engagement. From a TPACK perspective, it is essential to scaffold technological learning with teaching practice assessment. In turn, technology will not hinder the students' ability to employ their pedagogical or content competencies.

Hardware limitations were also reported. One student described: "*My challenge was that during the observation, my laptop ran out of battery, and the school classrooms are not equipped with electrical power for me to charge. So, I had to quickly switch to Teams on my phone and continue*." Infrastructural constraints within school settings can force participants to adapt during supervision. Even when students possess TK, the lack of reliable physical infrastructure complicates the integration of technology into online lesson supervision. There is a need for institutional and systemic support to ensure that online supervision environments align with the technological and pedagogical demands of teaching practice.

Discussion

This paper aimed to answer three research questions that provided insights into the dynamics of online evaluation, drawing on the voices of student teachers during teaching practice in an Open Distance e-Learning institution. With regard to the first research question, which examined the preparedness of student teachers and university supervisors for online evaluations, the findings revealed that lecturers and students demonstrated adequate TK, as evident in their readiness to engage in online supervision. It was promising to note that the majority of the student teachers in this study, as well as those in a similar study conducted by Salybekova et al. (2023), understood how technology interacts with pedagogy and content (TPACK) and were able to use it effectively during evaluations. For students, prior exposure to digital platforms and the technology's usability fostered confidence and reduced barriers to participation. Even though the teaching practice evaluations were conducted online, student teachers were still exposed to the realities of classroom and schoolwork, which aligns with the findings of Udoh et al. (2024). The TPK of lecturers was consistently perceived as a strength, with students valuing the timeliness, detail, and constructiveness of the feedback provided. This is encouraging, given that lecturers in higher education often show reluctance to adopt online instructional methods due to concerns about student success (Martin et al., 2019). The findings confirm that online supervision is most successful when technological reliability is complemented by strong supervisory practices and institutional support. Supervisors who were comfortable with online evaluation were able to provide feedback without hindrance, which is consistent with Cohen et al. (2024). These authors found that constructive supervisory feedback enhances student teachers' capacity to learn effectively during practice teaching.

In terms of the second research question, which explored student teachers' preferences between online and face-to-face evaluations, the findings suggest that many perceived online supervision as a credible and effective alternative to traditional, in-person evaluation. This indicates that even though evaluations were conducted virtually, students still received the guidance and support they expected, enabling them to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to become competent teachers (Dube, 2025). This finding contrasts with Gorni et al. (2024), who argued that online evaluations often provide insufficient support due to time constraints. Online supervision was valued for its flexibility and accessibility, as it facilitated continued engagement despite geographical or scheduling barriers. Similarly, Kecik et al. (2012) noted that the flexibility of online evaluation enabled supervisors and student teachers to interact through both synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication across distances. Student teachers also highlighted several pedagogical benefits. For some, the online format reduced performance-related anxiety, as the absence of the supervisor's physical presence

made the evaluation environment less intimidating. In addition, the ability to revisit recorded lessons provided opportunities for self-reflection, which allowed student teachers to examine their instructional strategies, classroom management, and learner engagement in ways not always possible during live observation. This supports the claim by Sange et al. (2024) that online evaluations are less anxiety-inducing and more conducive to learning. Furthermore, the process compelled student teachers to engage with technology in practical, meaningful ways, thereby enhancing their TPACK. This echoes the findings of Bunyamin et al. (2021) and Salybekova et al. (2023), who emphasised that integrating technology into teaching practice enables student teachers to understand how technology interacts with pedagogy and content to be used effectively.

Turning to the third research question, which addressed the challenges of online evaluation, the findings revealed that while student teachers generally preferred the online approach, it was not without challenges. The main challenge was unreliable internet connectivity, which disrupted supervision and forced students to adopt adaptive strategies, such as relocating, switching devices, or arranging backup connections. On a similar note, Dayal (2023) reported that poor connectivity hinders the timely and effective completion of evaluations, while Malki et al. (2022) warned that unstable internet can undermine the authenticity and validity of assessments. The dependence on stable connectivity means that without it, no evaluation can take place, thereby limiting opportunities for meaningful learning (Wordofa et al., 2023). This demonstrates that TK alone is insufficient without reliable infrastructure support. Online supervision, therefore, requires both individual resilience and institutional foresight to address connectivity challenges. Nonetheless, online evaluation was seen as a convenient means of bridging geographical barriers, allowing evaluations to occur regardless of location or time constraints. This is supported by Ayyoub et al. (2023), who argued that online evaluation eliminates many logistical challenges of face-to-face supervision and ensures that student teachers in remote areas can be assessed on equal terms with those in urban settings. Regardless of the advantages of online evaluation, infrastructure-related barriers were evident, particularly in rural schools. First-time users of digital tools reported difficulties in connecting to platforms such as Microsoft Teams, while inadequate electrical connections in some classrooms further impeded the evaluation process. This reflects Chinyere's (2021) observation that teaching practice in rural areas with limited internet access can disrupt the flow of evaluations. The findings therefore indicate that while online evaluation is a feasible and valuable approach, its effectiveness can be constrained by poor connectivity and inadequate infrastructure, especially in rural contexts.

Implications of findings

The implications of the findings are made relevant to several stakeholders. Firstly, for student teachers, exposure to digital platforms fosters confidence, reduces barriers to participation, and enhances TPACK. Student teachers should continue to engage actively with digital tools and develop their TK. The engagement with digital tools should not be limited to evaluation purposes. Instead, it should be linked to their broader professional development and used in the classroom towards improving their pedagogical approaches (TPACK). Although online supervision reduced performance anxiety and provided opportunities for reflective practice through recorded lessons, challenges such as unreliable connectivity and limited school infrastructure were reported. In this regard, it is recommended that student teachers develop resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving skills to ensure successful participation in online evaluations.

Secondly, for lecturers, the findings revealed the importance of maintaining and further developing their TPK. Students valued the timeliness, detail, and constructiveness of the feedback they received, suggesting that supervisors play an essential role in supporting student teachers' growth in online learning environments. While many lecturers demonstrated readiness to engage in online supervision, the persistence of technical disruptions suggests that they should prepare contingency

plans and remain adaptable to ensure the integrity of the evaluation. It is recommended that lecturers engage in continuous professional development in digital supervision methods, which will ensure lecturers sustain effective practices (TPACK) as technologies evolve.

Thirdly, mentor teachers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between online evaluations and classroom realities. The findings imply that mentor teachers should support student teachers in applying supervisor feedback to real classroom situations, thereby reinforcing the connection between theory and practice. By modelling effective use of technology and guiding student teachers in adapting to digital expectations, mentor teachers can further strengthen student teachers' TPACK. In short, mentor teachers should collaborate with university supervisors to create a supportive evaluation process.

Fourth, for school principals, the focus is on institutional readiness. The study highlighted the importance of having reliable internet connectivity, access to digital tools, and adequate infrastructure in schools. Principals should ensure that their schools are prepared to host online evaluations by addressing barriers such as poor connectivity and insufficient electrical facilities.

Lastly, the findings carry broader implications for universities. Institutions bear organisational responsibility for ensuring the success of online evaluations. This includes investing in stable technological infrastructure, providing user-friendly platforms, and offering technical support to supervisors and student teachers. Universities should implement clear policies and training programs that promote TPACK, thereby ensuring that all participants can confidently engage in online supervision. Furthermore, universities should invest in their online supervision capacity because it is not merely a temporary solution. Instead, online evaluations are a sustainable model that, when supported by institutional systems and reliable technology, can extend access to quality teacher education across diverse contexts, including rural and remote areas.

Limitations

The study is limited by its small sample size of only 13 participants, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, there is uneven representation across educational phases, with a higher proportion of students in the Intermediate Phase and minimal participation in the Foundation Phase. The heavy reliance on mobile phones for supervision may have influenced participants' experiences, while the focus on specific platforms such as WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, and email limits the applicability of the findings to other technological contexts.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine the dynamics of online evaluation using the voices of student teachers during teaching practice in an Open Distance e-Learning institution. To achieve this aim, this paper focused on the preparedness of student teachers and university supervisors to engage in online teaching practice evaluation and provide adequate feedback, the preference of student teachers between online and face-to-face evaluations, and the challenges that student teachers experience during online evaluations. Following an in-depth analysis of the data, this study concludes that the majority of student teachers demonstrated adequate preparedness for online evaluations. While contextual factors posed challenges to the effectiveness of these evaluations, the student teachers were able to navigate and overcome them. Furthermore, the TPACK expertise of university supervisors enabled them to offer constructive feedback on the student teachers' lesson presentations. The findings reveal that student teachers prefer online evaluations, citing greater relaxation and comfort during their lessons. In contrast, many student teachers report feelings of anxiety when presenting before university supervisors in traditional face-to-face evaluations. In addition, online evaluations enhance the opportunity for self-reflection on teaching practices and facilitate assessment in challenging environments characterised by logistical constraints. Furthermore, engaging in online evaluations

equips student teachers with essential technological skills (TK). However, the study highlights that implementing online evaluations in rural areas remains problematic due to unreliable internet connectivity and insufficient infrastructure. In addition, a lack of familiarity with the digital tools and devices utilised during online evaluations can hinder some student teachers' performance. The findings highlight the need for ODeL policy and global teacher education programs to move beyond basic digital access (TK) and prioritise the development of TPK, alongside investment in reliable digital infrastructure.

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