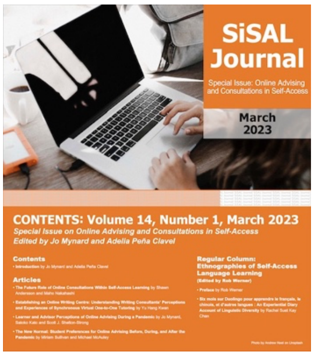

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Learner and Advisor Perceptions of Online Advising During a Pandemic

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Abstract

In this article, the authors describe two research studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the perceptions of online advising from the perspective of learners and learning advisors working in a self-access centre at a university in Japan. Advising is a one-to-one reflective dialogue between a learner and a learning advisor with the purpose of promoting learner autonomy. Advising normally takes place in person, and this article explores user perceptions and whether advisors are able to create an autonomy-supportive climate in a synchronous online setting. Although participants in both studies acknowledged challenges, overall online advising was conducted effectively, with learning advisors anticipating the needs of learners and utilising online tools accordingly. Although initially nervous about attending online sessions, learners felt positive emotions during and after the online session and felt supported by learning advisors.

Keywords: Advising, online learning environments, self-determination theory

Online self-access support services have become commonplace, but before the COVID-19 pandemic, synchronous one-to-one consultations and advising in language learning (henceforth ‘advising’) mainly took place in person. Until recently, little published research investigated real-time online self-access or advising possibilities. At the start of the academic year in Japan in March 2020, we, like other educators worldwide, rushed to transfer our educational services online due to the pandemic. In this paper, we explore staff and student perspectives on the online advising services offered during that time. We begin with a brief literature review and a description of the context. We then give details of two studies where we investigated online advising, one from the perspective of the learners and the other from the perspective of the learning advisors. Finally, we discuss what we learned from the process of offering online advising from undertaking the research.

We (the three authors) work as language educators / learning advisors in a large self-access learning centre (SALC) at a university in Japan that welcomes around 1000 students per day. The purpose of the SALC at our university is to support the development of learner autonomy and language proficiency through various facilities and services. Learner autonomy is defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Benson, 2012). The services available at the SALC for promoting learner autonomy include providing materials, spaces for studying, support for the development of interest-based learning communities, workshops, self-directed learning courses, and a professional advising service. We moved all these services online at the start of the pandemic (see Davies, 2020, for details), but we will only discuss the advising service in this paper.

Advising in Language Learning

Self-access learners normally need support in understanding their needs, accessing resources, and organising their learning, among other things. To support learners, a common support feature of a SALC is an advising service which is an integral part of the SALC at our university. Advising is a one-to-one reflective dialogue between a learner and a learning advisor with the purpose of promoting learner autonomy (Kato & Mynard, 2016; Mozzon-McPherson & Tassinari, 2020; Mynard & Carson, 2012). A learning advisor is a language educator who has the specific role of helping learners to think deeply about their own learning and make their own decisions with support. In advising sessions, learning advisors use dialogue carefully and intentionally to facilitate this process (Kato & Mynard, 2016; Shelton-Strong & Tassinari, 2022). Advising is a professional discipline (Kato & Mynard, 2016; Mozzon-McPherson & Tassinari, 2020; Mozzon-McPherson & Vismans, 2001; Mynard, 2021; Mynard & Carson, 2012) and spans over three decades. As there is a current and increasing interest in positive psychology (and the psychology of language learning in general), advising is well-placed to offer the psychological support that language learners need (Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022; Shelton-Strong & Tassinari, 2022).

Online Advising

Previous research in online advising is limited and has mainly been related to asynchronous modes. One example is the Virtual English Language Advisor (VELA) developed at the University of Science and Technology in Hong Kong. VELA is designed to ask key questions connected with planning self-access learning via an online platform. It helps learners identify their strengths and weaknesses and recommends appropriate learning strategies. It also helps learners to find resources and document learning in a diary. Another example is Kaleidoscope, developed at the University of Helsinki (Kidd & von Boehm, 2012). Kaleidoscope aims to encourage reflection by using web-based awareness-raising prompts related to learners' language learning histories, needs, motivation, learning preferences, and current skills. It then builds a portfolio and a system where ongoing reflections are shared with learning advisors. At our own institution, another synchronous support system we call 'written advising' (Mynard, 2012) has been a regular feature since the SALC opened in 2001 (Mynard & Stevenson, 2017). We offer self-directed learning modules where students set goals and follow a learning plan for a semester. They write weekly reflections on their self-directed work and receive weekly written comments from a learning advisor. Initially, the written dialogue between a learner and a learning advisor was handwritten, but more recently, we have drawn on various online tools to facilitate the process, such as Google Documents, Moxo, and even a self-developed application (see Ambinintsoa et al., 2021, Lammons et al., 2016, and Mynard & Yamamoto, 2018 for details). All of these examples suggest that the advising process is greatly facilitated when learners have access to asynchronous support from a learning advisor or an application that asks reflective questions and encourages planning and taking responsibility for learning.

There have been limited studies related to synchronous online advising. The results of a study by Guban-Casido (2020) conducted in the Philippines during the pandemic showed that online advising supported metacognitive reflection and allowed learners to express their feelings and anxieties. The process enabled learning advisors to support their learners' struggles despite some reports of technological challenges. Other papers published during the pandemic (such as those contained in the special issue of SiSAL Journal edited by Mynard et al., 2020) show how online tools can facilitate real-time support for learners. The focus of most of the publications seems to be on technical language support rather than on the advising process, as we have defined it. Nevertheless, the authors report that in the absence of face-to-face opportunities to meet and support learners, technology provides practical and effective alternatives. In this paper, we aim to add to the literature on synchronous online advising and discover some of the affordances and challenges for learners and advisors.

Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

The theoretical framework we draw on is self-determination theory (SDT), which is a broad theory of motivation and wellness that has been applied to many fields (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Several mini-theories within SDT have received substantial attention in the research literature, demonstrating how humans can thrive when optimal conditions are present (Reeve, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2017). One of the mini theories that has frequently been applied in education—and recently to both advising (Shelton-Strong, 2022a, 2022b; Shelton-Strong & Tassinari, 2022) and self-access (Mynard, 2022; Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2020, 2022; Yarwood et al., 2019)—is basic psychological needs theory. In this theory, the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be satisfied to create optimal conditions for wellness and effective functioning. Decades of research has shown that learners thrive when they feel a sense of *autonomy* (i.e., a sense of control over one's self-endorsed actions), *competence* (i.e., a feeling of growth and efficacy), and *relatedness* (i.e., a sense of social connection, belonging and inclusion).

SDT is ideal for framing self-access learning as it connects three important elements: the environment, a learner's engagement, and their psychological needs. This connection, in turn, "nurtures a learner's interests, curiosity and further engagement within the learning environment" (Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022, p. 2).

Supporting the Basic Psychological Needs Through Advising

Advising fits well within SDT as learning advisors pay close attention to the environment and the dialogic factors that create supportive conditions where learners can feel relaxed, empowered, and motivated (Mynard & Shelton-Strong, 2022). In terms of supporting basic psychological needs, *autonomy* support is about taking a learner's perspective (Reeve, 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2020) and advising always takes the learner's frame of reference as a starting point. A learning advisor is non-judgmental and uses empathetic listening to help learners uncover their needs, motivations and values. Regarding *competence* support, learning advisors offer informative feedback and appropriate guidance through the advising dialogue. They also assist students in identifying needs, setting goals and evaluating their own progress when developing language skills. Finally, as the advising dialogue relies on a trusting relationship and is genuine and reciprocal in nature, it naturally supports the basic psychological need of *relatedness*.

Some previous research on advising shows that learners' basic psychological needs are supported through the advising process, but more research is needed in this field. A study by Shelton-Strong (2018, 2022a) investigated the emotions students reported experiencing during face-to-face advising sessions. There was a clear indication that although students may initially be nervous before attending a session, they reported positive emotions during and immediately after a session, such as feeling empowered, motivated, and cared for by the learning advisor. Results from another study by Shelton-Strong (2022b) indicated that advising sessions supported learners' basic psychological needs and contributed to learners flourishing and well-being, particularly among learners who experienced repeat sessions.

Context and Background to the Studies

Two studies examined the online advising service offered during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The advising service is a prominent support system for language learners in our context and has been predominantly offered face-to-face since it began in 2001. Students can reserve learning advisors for 30-minute appointments to discuss their learning plans, motivation, emotions, struggles, and successes. They can also meet us at the Drop-in Advising Desk without needing a reservation. Although advising sessions are optional, and some students might only attend once, most students view the process as an ongoing conversation about their learning with a trusted and supportive advisor who has a different role from their language teachers. Advising relationships can span the four years of undergraduate education and often beyond.

In early April 2020, the learning advisor team discussed how to offer the one-to-one advising service online. After some practice, we decided to use Zoom video conferencing for real-time dialogues that could be supported by utilising the text, screen sharing, whiteboard, and annotation functions. Students could make a reservation using our usual online reservation system, and the confirmation email would contain the Zoom link. Generally, we continued to use our well-established advising practices and tools to help students reflect on their learning and take action at their own pace. As usual, we continued to use various discursive strategies to facilitate this process, just as we do in face-to-face advising (see Kato and Mynard, 2016, for examples). In our weekly (by then, online) meetings, we discussed some of the challenges of establishing rapport through functions natural in face-to-face contexts but more difficult online, i.e., establishing eye contact and using body language to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Another missing feature was our busy self-access centre's usual buzzing background noise (a factor also noted by Ohara and Ishimura, 2020). Finally, the anxiety that students and staff were feeling at the time could not be ignored. Although most of us had experienced online advising to some degree and were used to dealing with students' emotions, anxieties and insecurities related to their language learning, the pandemic created an unfamiliar and stressful situation for all of us to navigate.

We had experimented with online advising in the past in a limited way (e.g., Mynard, 2018). However, before the present study, we had not conducted research into whether online advising sessions result in the same kinds of positive emotions and closeness to the learning advisor as in face-to-face sessions (e.g., Shelton-Strong, 2022a, 2022b) and if similar autonomy-supportive factors are as easily conveyed or transmitted. As we were forced to move all our advising online in 2020, we wanted to examine whether students were experiencing the same closeness and positive emotions, the extent to which online advising experiences were perceived differently, and how these differences could be interpreted.

We conducted two studies at the end of the first semester (July to September 2020) to collect data that could help us to review our practices, make a report to the university's upper administration, and make any changes for the second semester when we would continue to offer our advising and self-access services online. The first study gathered learner perceptions, and the second gathered advisor perceptions. We will describe both of these and comment on what we learned from the research.

Study 1: Exploring How Students Perceived Online Advising

In this project, we aimed to understand how students perceived online advising sessions, what emotions they experienced, and how autonomy-supportive they felt the experience to be. We were also curious to learn whether students perceived differences when compared with face-to-face advising and, if so, what these differences were.

Research Questions

1. What are the participants' overall perceptions of online advising?
2. What are participants' perceptions of their experiences in online advising sessions *before*, *during* and *after* a session?
3. How do participants' views of online advising differ from their face-to-face advising experiences?
4. How autonomy-supportive do the participants perceive the advisors and the advising session to be?

Participants

We invited all 328 undergraduate students who attended at least one advising session from April to July 2020 to participate in the study by email, and 77 did so. In all, 28 participants had experienced one advising session, 36 had experienced two sessions, and the remaining 13 had experienced three sessions or more. Most undergraduate students at our university are aged between 18 and 22 and are Japanese nationals with a Japanese mother tongue. All students are majoring in languages and cultures and take required English courses regardless of their majors. Advising sessions take place in English, Japanese or another language, if available; the learner decides.

Methods

After we had gained approval from the university ethics committee, we contacted and invited eligible students to complete an anonymous online (bilingual) survey using SurveyMonkey. We adapted the survey from the one administered by Shelton-Strong (2022a); It contained a mixture of multiple-choice responses and some open-ended questions so that students could report the emotions they experienced and how they felt about the relationship with the advisor. The survey was optional, and 77 students completed all or part of it. Participants could complete the open-ended questions in English, Japanese or a mix of the two. We tabulated the results of the open-ended data using the relevant analysis function of SurveyMonkey. We analysed the data qualitatively within an interpretative paradigm, following Shelton-Strong (2022a), allowing the themes to emerge.

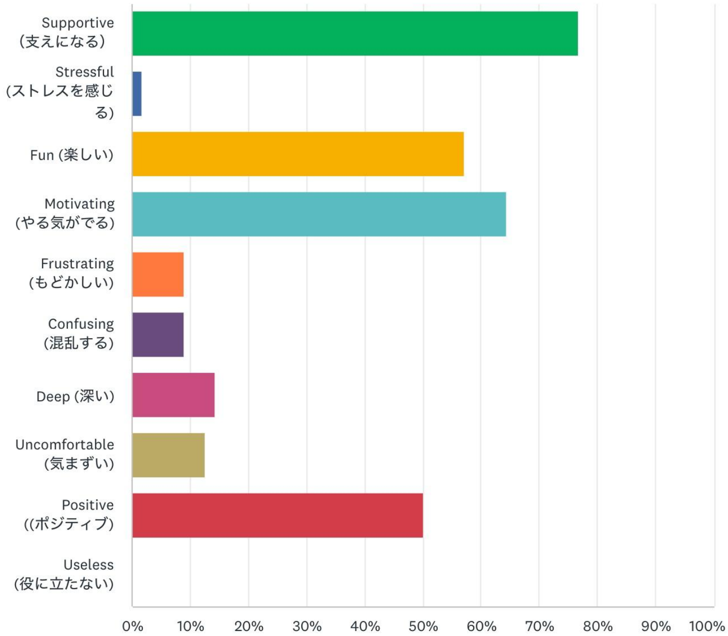
Study 1 Results

RQ1. Students' General Views on Online Advising Sessions

We can see in Figure 1 that the experience of online advising was largely positive. The 56 students who completed this question described the sessions as supportive (n=43), motivating (n=36), fun (n=32) and positive (n=28).

Figure 1

Responses to the Question: "Please tick the words you would choose to describe the advising sessions you have experienced this semester. You can choose more than one word." (n=56)



RQ2. Perceptions of Online Advising *Before*, *During*, and *After* a Session

When we explored how participants felt about online advising *before*, *during* and *after* attending a session, we found that feelings changed for the 56 participants who responded to this question. We discovered that *before* a session, 45 students felt negative emotions. For example, they felt nervous (n=19) or unsure about their language skills (n=19). *During* the session, participants tended to feel motivated, comfortable and supported and, in all, 43 students reported positive emotions. *After* a session, participants generally reported positive emotions (n=48). For example, they felt motivated to attend more sessions and to improve their English and were satisfied with the support they received from learning advisors. Negative points highlighted by students tended to be related to dissatisfaction with their language skills rather than the support they received from learning advisors or with the technology. A summary of this data is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

How Students Felt Before, During and After an Online Advising Session (n=56)

	Positive emotions	Negative emotions	Neutral or mixed	Examples of most frequent codes (- negative / + positive)
Before	7	45	4	- Nervous = 19
				- Worried about my English = 19
				+ Excited/motivated = 4
During	43	10	3	+ Motivation / enjoyment = 18
				+ Session was useful = 10
				- Nervous = 3
After	48	3	5	+ I want to come again = 9
				+ Motivated to improve English = 9
				- Difficulty expressing myself = 1

RQ3. Students' Views on Face-to-Face V. Online Advising

When comparing online advising with face-to-face advising by students who had experienced both (n=22), we found that responses were mixed as shown in Table 2. Eight students preferred face-to-face advising as they could express themselves more easily. One of these respondents reported that the time lag and the difficulty of viewing facial expressions online contributed to a preference for face-to-face advising. In addition, the unfamiliarity of the online advising mode seems to have been a factor for at least one participant. Five students preferred online advising due to convenience. One respondent noted, "I think the online advising was as good as the face-to-face session because I was able to receive URLs for useful materials and websites through the chat function." One respondent even reported feeling less nervous during online advising sessions. Five students did not perceive there to be a difference at all and appreciated feeling supported by learning advisors regardless of the mode.

Table 2

Students' Views on Online Advising and Face-to-Face Advising (n=22)

Preference	Count	Example responses
Face-to-face	8	"Compared to face to face advising, I have felt it a little bit to describe and explain my situation about language learning probably because I have not been familiar with online session."
		"It is sometimes hard to hear the other person and there was a time lag to see the facial expressions online."
Online	5	"It was easy to make a reservation since I didn't have time to commute."
		"It was easier to talk online because it was quiet around me."
No difference	5	"I don't really feel deference, because I know they are always trying to help us so much as usual."
Mixed	2	"I don't feel big difference between face to face and online, but maybe, when we have a chat on online, sometimes I feel uncomfortable because it is hard to express my emotion."
		"It was a little bit hard to know the right timing to speak up but I was less nervous talking to them rather than face to face."
Unclear	2	

Even though online advising was reported to be a positive experience, students still value face-to-face advising and, given the choice, are more likely to attend advising sessions in person even if both modes are offered, as our recent attendance statistics show. We analysed the reasons for this from the open-ended survey data and found that half of the 22 responses mentioned something positive about the face-to-face climate. For example, participants mentioned that it was more enjoyable and motivating, that it was easier to communicate, or that they could express their feelings and opinions better. The other participants mentioned uncomfortable aspects of online advising, such as difficulty in describing or explaining their situation, feeling tension or a sense of distance, or experiencing technical difficulties. As this data is quite limited, we draw on more recent data to attempt to understand the situation better.

RQ4. How Autonomy-Supportive Did the Participants Perceive the Advisors to be?

The final open-ended question asked students to comment on how they felt about their experience of advising that semester. In total, 55 participants responded to this question, and in 46 of the responses, they commented on at least one need-supportive aspect of the interaction with learning advisors. A further seven of the comments were either neutral or unclear, and two comments discussed a drawback of online advising, for example, "実際に会って話す方が楽しいです"［It's more fun to actually meet and talk.] The predominantly positive comments indicate that learning advisors were succeeding in providing a positive and autonomy-supportive climate even online. These three excerpts capture the generally positive overall experiences of the students.

> *Although, as I said, I sometimes have sometimes felt difficulties, I think my involvement with my learning adviser in online advising sessions is really positive because, even in online sessions, talking with my learning advisor has propelled me to develop and deepen my language learner further, and other than learning itself, tips and advice have helped me keep me motivated throughout this semester.*
>
> *初対面の先生に対していきなりオンライン式の対面になると少し緊張感がありましたが、それでも先生方はいつも笑顔で私の不安を解消しようとしてくださいました。先生方の変わらない優しさのおかげでオンラインでも楽しいセッションができました。*
> *I was worried about talking to someone whom I hadn't met before online. However, they always tried to remove my worries with smiles. I had a fun session thanks to their kindness.*
>
> *自分の英語に対するモチベーションを保つのに頼れるため、とても必要だと思う。*
> *They are very important, and I can rely on them to keep me motivated for learning English.*

To get a sense of how basic psychological needs were being met in online advising, we coded the open-ended data qualitatively. We discerned whether the comments related to competence or relatedness (by its very nature, the advising dialogue supports autonomy, so this was assumed to be present in all the responses). As Table 3 shows, participants felt relatedness support. 14 participants noted how they appreciated the personal connections that they established with their learning advisors. Participants commented on the caring nature of learning advisors (n=8) and on how easy it was to communicate with them (n=8). Three participants mentioned how motivating and positive the experience was. In terms of competence support, students gain valuable information about how to learn languages (n=7) and develop self-directed learning skills, including motivational strategies (n=7). Two participants also valued the opportunity to use English with their learning advisors. Based on these comments, we can say that learners perceived the online advising environment to be autonomy supportive.

Table 3

Evidence of Basic Psychological Need Support

Main basic psychological need being supported	Code	Example comments
Relatedness (30)	Personal connections (14)	“先生というよりかは、友達や先輩のような相談相手”［ Rather than being a teacher, someone to consult with like a friend or a senior]
	Caring / supportive (8)	“ラーニングアドバイザーは親身になって私の悩みを聞いてくれる” [The learning advisor is empathetic and listens to my concerns]
	Ease of communication (8)	“ラーニングアドバイザーがとても優しくて、役に立つアドバイスをして下さるので、話しやすい”［Learning advisors are very kind and give useful advice, so it's easy to talk to them]
	Positive/ motivating experience (3)	“自分の英語に対するモチベーションを保つのに頼れるため、とても必要だと思う”［I think it is very necessary because I can rely on it to keep my motivation for English]
Competence (17)	Language support (7)	“I got useful information about improving my language from my advisor”
	Support for self-directed learning (7)	“自分のモチベーションにつながり、自分の目標が明確になる”［Stay motivated and clarify your goals]
	Language practice (3)	“自分一人で英語を喋る良いチャンスだと思う”［I think it's a good chance for me to speak English by myself]

Study 2: Learning Advisor Perceptions

The initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic were stressful for both students and learning advisors. Fortunately, the learning advisor team was already well-established and was a supportive community. We continued to meet regularly, albeit online and were able to help each other to navigate many of the challenges. By the end of the semester, we felt that online advising was going reasonably well, and we were all having repeat bookings. In fact, our advising session reservation numbers had increased since the previous year (Davies et al., 2020). Nevertheless, we wanted to gather data more systematically to understand learning advisors' experiences with conducting advising sessions online so that we could offer further support and training if needed. The data would also be useful for informing our practice and services in the subsequent semester, which was also online.

Research Questions

1. What are learning advisors' perceptions of the challenges and benefits of online advising?
2. How (if at all) did attitudes to conducting online advising sessions change over the course of a semester?
3. What practical advice do learning advisors have for conducting online advising sessions?

Participants

We invited all 12 members of the advising team to participate in the research. Apart from one new learning advisor who had just started their contract, the learning advisors had between one and 15 years of advising experience and had completed our professional learning advisor training program. The participants included Japanese and non-Japanese nationals. All participants had at least a master's degree in applied linguistics (or similar).

Methods

After receiving research ethics approval and sharing the consent form and plain language statement, we asked the participants to complete an optional online anonymous questionnaire using Google Forms. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions related to their perceptions of online advising. Seven participants completed this questionnaire. Participants were free to share their perceptions and experiences (positive and negative) and their suggestions for 'good practice' when conducting online advising. We also asked them how their attitudes to online advising had changed over the course of the semester. As in Study 1, we analysed the results qualitatively, allowing for themes to emerge (Hatch, 2012).

Study 2 Results

RQ1. Challenges and Benefits of Online Advising

The learning advisors mentioned some general challenges, such as occasional audio distortion and the absence of non-verbal cues from body language and eye contact. A couple of them mentioned the challenge of not being able to make deep connections with learners or casually talk to teachers easily as everyone was working from home. One person mentioned that they felt some pressure to reach a resolution in one session when, usually, a learning-related issue may be discussed over several sessions in face-to-face advising sessions. Table 4 shows a summary of all the responses. Some learning advisors mentioned more than one issue. It is possible that the respondents did not report all the challenges they experienced, as these were often discussed in the weekly meetings and were considered common knowledge among the advising team. These were issues such as fatigue, eye strain, backache, or other conditions caused by working alone or on a computer for longer periods of time than usual.

Table 4

Challenges of Online Advising Mentioned by Learning Advisors

Challenges	Specific issue	Count
Technology-related (n=5)	Time lag	1
	Audio issue	1
	Old computer issues	1
	Internet instability	1
	Interference/noise from other devices	1
Related to building relationships (n=4)	Lack of opportunities for casual or incidental interactions with students on campus	2
	Feeling pressure to reach a resolution in one session	1
	Lack of opportunities for casual incidental interactions with teachers on campus	1
Related to the physical environment (n=2)	Lack of “hints in the physical SALC space (location of services, signage)” may have lead to confusion of the different support roles	1
	Distractions in the home	1

Everyone mentioned at least one benefit of online advising. Seven of the comments related to the physical space; for example, students were able to attend sessions from their own bedrooms at home, which made the sessions quite relaxed. One participant claimed that the quality of reflection online was deeper because “there are fewer distractions compared to being on campus. Neither of us are in a rush to be elsewhere. Both of us are in our own space, at home." In addition, a couple of learning advisors mentioned that there were no cancellations or late students for the entire semester. Four people mentioned the pedagogical affordances of the technology, such as being able to download the notes from the whiteboard after a session and the ease of making video recordings of the session for students to review later. Other responses are summarised in Table 5 and were related to efficiency and convenience, relationship building or professional growth.

Table 5

Benefits of Online Advising Mentioned by Learning Advisors

Benefits	Specific issue	Count
Related to the physical environment (n=7)	No rush; space and time to think	2
	Students more relaxed and in comfortable surroundings	2
	No cancellations / late arrivals	2
	Few distractions	1
Technology related (4)	Can easily explore online resources	1
	Sharing screens useful	1
	No paper wasted (environmentally friendly	1
	Easier for students to record a session	1
Efficiency and convenience (3)	Advisor had more time and was more relaxed or efficient due to working from home	2
	Students had more availability	1
	Students and advisors had a glimpse of each other's own home lives	1
Related to relationship building (2)	Able to get to know more students	1
	Students and advisors had a glimpse of each other's own home lives	1
Professional growth (1)	I could think about my language skills when doing bilingual advising	1

RQ2. Changes in Attitudes to Online Advising by Learning Advisors

As Table 6 shows, out of the seven respondents, five of them reported having changed their attitudes to online advising for the better, for example, becoming more confident that their advising was supporting students, like this excerpt from the data shows:

My attitude has changed because I think the advisees were able to talk about issues as if we had been really face to face. I don't think it mattered to them whether it was online or not. For some students, online advising was even better, according to them.

Two learning advisors reported being completely comfortable with the medium, even before the switch to online advising, like this example shows:

I wasn't all that fazed by the swap to an online medium. Being something of a digital native and living away from loved ones for quite some time, I was already familiar with having extended online conversations and co-viewing information, resources and activities with others.

Finally, one learning advisor reported mixed views.

I'm less anxious about whether I can actually do it well or whether advisees will make appointments. I'm also a little more comfortable in knowing how I can use certain strategies and tools or adapt my advising practices for the online environment. At the same time, I have been a little confused or frustrated that online sessions (especially with new students) tend to feel like there is pressure to come to some kind of solution, and it seems like there's a little less patience to explore a problem while developing an *advisor-advisee relationship.*

Table 6

Changes in Attitudes to Online Advising by Learning Advisors

Attitudes to online advising	Count	Example responses
Changed - more positive than expected	5	"I was quite skeptical about online advising that it won't be as good as face-to-face but now I am confident that I can provide satisfying online advising" "I have become more confident about using the medium."
As expected - positive experience	1	"I wasn't all that fazed by the swap to an online medium…. Business as usual."
Mixed experience	1	"I'm less anxious about whether I can actually do it well…[a]t the same time… [I] feel like there is pressure to come to some kind of solution…"

RQ3. Practical Advice Shared by Learning Advisors

Regarding managing an online session, learning advisors shared some practical information that we have summarised in Table 7. The learning advisors suggested many of the same practices that similarly apply to-face-to advising, such as being as friendly and welcoming as possible and keeping good notes about the session. Many suggestions either made use of the affordances of the online medium, such as being able to annotate documents and share the screen. Learning advisors also provided solutions to the challenges of advising in online mode, such as taking care to avoid overlapping speech or tips for overcoming the lack of real eye contact. Some other suggestions were related to supporting isolated students during a global pandemic, such as this example:

> *It's okay to talk about myself as an example. I don't usually do it in the SALC; however, since students have limited opportunities to learn about different learning methods from their peers, I have been positioning myself as a tool to encourage them to think of what they can do for their learning.*

Table 7

Practical Suggestions for Conducting Online Advising Sessions

Theme	Count	Example excerpts from the data
Anticipate technical issues and try to minimise the negative impact on the session	8	"leave a longer pause than usual in case of lag" "be careful not to talk over the learner"
Use technology efficiently to facilitate the session	7	"allowing enough space between me and the computer camera so that the advisee feels like we have eye contact (soft eye contact, not staring)" "we have multiple tools available (chat, annotation tools, screen share) which can help compensate for difficulties" "knowing how to demonstrate, elicit and encourage active thinking and reflection during sessions via online tools"
Pay attention to voice, language and pace in order to maximise comprehension	5	"speak clearly and slowly. Pause. Make sure advisee has understood" "speaking at an appropriate volume based on the advisee's settings not yours" "checking from time to time if the advisee understands"

Create a comfortable online environment	3	"what can be seen in the background can also be distracting for you or the advisee" "wear something bright in order to create a welcoming online environment" "be in a calm relaxed space and state of mind before starting"
Make sure learning advisors are comfortable and have support tools available	3	"having the list of advising strategies handy" "the temperature of the room influences your ability to focus, as does the comfort of your chair or laptop setup.
Establish rapport	3	"asking questions about their mental health and self-care as a part of small talk" "be as friendly as possible as students might be nervous"
Use established advising strategies	5	"asking the advisee at the end of the session what he/she can take out of the session" "keeping accurate records of the session"

Discussion

The results from the two studies show that, in general, online advising was perceived positively by both learners and learning advisors. Learners experienced positive emotions during and after advising sessions (even if many were nervous before attending sessions) which is consistent with previous research related to face-to-face advising (Shelton-Strong, 2018), indicating that the medium does not greatly affect the overall experience for students. When asked to compare face-to-face and online advising, responses were mixed, but generally, the benefits appear to outweigh the challenges. Students valued convenience and seemed to appreciate the care and attention they received from learning advisors. Overall, advising, whether conducted online or face-to-face, is supportive of students' basic psychological needs. Participants chose to meet learning advisors voluntarily, and more than 60% of the participating students attended repeat sessions, indicating that advising in this context supports the need for autonomy. Students also found that advisors and the advising sessions fulfilled their basic psychological needs of competence and relatedness. Like in a previous study relating to face-to-face advising, participants appreciated the support they received for language learning (i.e., competence support) and enjoyed the personal connections and supportive and caring attitudes of the learning advisors.

From the learning advisors' perspective, there were some challenges to conducting online advising. However, they were able to draw on their expert training and overcome challenges in order to feel they were providing supportive and effective advising sessions. Most of the advisors became more positive about the process as the semester progressed. In fact, aside from convenience-related benefits, they noted several affordances such as the medium offering different ways to build relationships with students and ease of accessing alternative pedagogical resources.

Although online advising was perceived to be effective and need supportive, the current reality is that students prefer to attend sessions in person. In a separate study conducted in August 2022 (Nguyen & Mynard, 2023), we asked students, if the services were offered both online and face-to-face the following year, which would they be most likely to choose. Almost 60% of the 355 respondents (the general university student population) stated that they would be more likely to choose face-to-face advising. 5% stated that they would use the service exclusively online, and almost 30% said that they would choose either face-to-face or online advising equally. (The remaining 5% said they would not likely use the service at all.) Reasons for this are not always easy to express or interpret. One compelling reason might be a reaction to finally being able to meet people normally after several years of restrictions in Japan. One open-ended comment in the 2022 survey (Nguyen & Mynard, 2023) summed up the reason as "対面の方が話が盛り上がるし、もっと仲良くなれる" [Face-to-face conversations are more lively and you can get along better]. We will certainly continue to monitor trends and preferences for online advising in the coming years.

Conclusions

The two studies, looking at online advising from the perspectives of learners and learning advisors, have served to document some of the challenges that many people experienced while adapting to using technology to provide support and educational services to students during the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, what we see from the data is that the medium afforded unexpected benefits. Looking at the results of the two studies, we can see that learning advisors were skilled at anticipating the challenges of the medium and also the emotional state of the learners caused by their isolation during the pandemic. There were many examples of ways in which learning advisors used the affordances of the Zoom medium to best support students, and these efforts directly benefit the students. This can be seen in the data that showed that although the majority of students were initially nervous about attending an online advising session, learning advisors succeeded in making them feel more relaxed so that they enjoyed the session, as this excerpt shows: "They understand my English level and suggested some learning methods that will suit me. It was very easy to talk to them and I was relaxed."

In addition, learning advisors learned how to use the features of the Zoom platform skilfully to help students to reflect deeply. Although in a subsequent survey (Nguyen & Mynard, 2023), most students expressed a preference for a return to in-person advising, many of the participants of the research described in this paper mentioned how helpful the online tools were when used in online advising sessions. At the time of writing, we are back on campus as normal, and students can choose to attend advising sessions online or in person. The preference now is for in-person advising sessions, and online sessions are generally only requested by students who are studying abroad or unable to come to campus due to unforeseen circumstances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we certainly increased our repertoire of advising skills and feel equipped and ready to offer advising in any medium. This has meant that we have expanded our services and can support students equally well in online and face-to-face scenarios. We recognise that each medium has some challenges and advantages, and, ideally, our students will be able to choose the medium that suits them at the time.

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