



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Online mentoring session during COVID-19: Experiences of mentees and mentors -A phenomenology.

Khadija Farrukh<sup>1</sup>, Talea Hoor<sup>2</sup>

**Article Citation:** Farrukh K, Hoor T. Online mentoring session during COVID-19: Experiences of mentees and mentors -A phenomenology. Professional Med J 2022; 29(12):1886-1891. <https://doi.org/10.29309/TPMJ/2022.29.12.7126>

**ABSTRACT... Objective:** To explore perceptions and experiences of undergraduate medical mentees and mentors on online mentoring sessions during COVID-19. **Study Design:** Qualitative study. **Setting:** A Private Medical College in Karachi, Pakistan. **Period:** January 2021-May 2021. **Material & Methods:** A qualitative study was designed using phenomenological approach and constructivist relativist paradigms. Maximum variation purposeful sampling technique was chosen to involve variety of participants from given population. Unstructured individual interviews and four focus group discussions were done. Content analysis was done for analysis of collected data. **Results:** Most mentors supported online mentoring. However the mentees opinion was different from mentors as most of them were not in favor of online mentoring sessions. Some mentees praised blended education since it removed some of the traditional teaching barriers. Mentors have common experience that face-to-face mentoring allows them to inspire mentees and have expressive and meaningful connections with them. **Conclusion:** Face-to face mentoring provides better opportunities to connect during mentoring sessions however blended, online and on campus mentoring sessions can be provided in emergency situations as COVID-19 crisis.

**Key words:** Online Mentoring, Medical Students, (COVID-19) Pandemic.

### INTRODUCTION

An uncertain situation was caused due to coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic which disrupted medical education in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> Government of Pakistan as directed by NCOC announced converting to digital format using online teaching strategies to all medical colleges of Pakistan in March 2020. Faculty and students both were affected by this modification of the learning environment from face-to-face to online teaching and also uncertainty caused by COVID-19 situation.<sup>2</sup> Many studies were conducted reporting a high prevalence of mental health symptoms among health care workers, medical teachers and students exposed to COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Prevalence of mental stress was common among medical students, even in the absence COVID-19 especially in those with low social support.<sup>4,5</sup> Social support for students was need of the hour, since structured mentoring programs may

help resolve student issues, our institute medical and dental College offers a general mentoring program to all medical and dental students. Due to the pandemic, the mentoring program was transitioned into digital mentoring offered to first and second-year medical students only as the college environment was new for them and they were facing many challenges due to COVID-19.<sup>6,7,8</sup>

Literature research showed only few studies exploring experiences of mentors and mentees and these studies employed quantitative design using questionnaire, so qualitative research was required for in-depth exploration of experiences and perceptions of mentors and mentees during COVID-19 situation.

An online mentoring program was started at our medical college from April 2020 as per already circulated memorandum to dedicated mentors.

1. Master in Medical Education, Lecturer Medical Education, BUMDC-Karachi.  
2. M.Phil, Professor Pharmacology/ Medical Education, BUMDC-Karachi.

**Correspondence Address:**  
Dr. Khadija Farrukh  
Department of Medical Education  
BUMDC-Karachi.  
khadijafarrukh2010@hotmail.com

**Article received on:** 13/05/2022  
**Accepted for publication:** 04/07/2022

Microsoft teams was used to take online mentoring sessions which included whole class of 150 students divided in ten groups facilitated by ten mentors each session was planned for time duration of 60 min. After 1 year of program, perceptions and experiences of first and second year students and mentors were explored using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions.

## **MATERIAL & METHODS**

A qualitative design using phenomenological approach was conducted using individual semi-structured interviews of participants and focus group discussions on basis of lived experiences. Focus groups facilitate the co-construction of in-depth knowledge of multiple realities on research topic by mutual discussions among participants. Participants were selected by maximum variation purposive sampling technique, it implies choosing variety of participants from given population aligned with aim of research study. Five-high academic achievers five local residents of Karachi five residents of cities of Pakistan other than Karachi five low academic achievers, so total of twenty mentees from first and second year MBBS students who took online mentoring sessions were included. Exclusion criteria were first and second year students who were absent in online mentoring session third, fourth and final year students. Five mentors were selected using random purposive sampling. Group interactions during focus groups are often used to understand the factors which influence participants' attitudes, actions, experiences and multiple perceptions. The questions designed were open-ended and the facilitator encouraged exploration of topics through follow-up questions or probes until no new information was expressed. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts and coding were shared with participants to confirm results to follow strategy of member check. Minimal encouragement technique was used during interviews with prompt short responses by researcher to show maximum attention while listening to participant experiences. Twenty mentees and five mentors were included using maximum variation sampling technique these students and mentors then

participated in individual interviews and four focus group discussions. Individual interviews and focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed by researcher triangulation as well as member check methods were used for creating credibility of data collected.

## **RESULTS**

### **Experiences of Mentors**

#### **Technical issues and dearth of mentor and mentee connection**

Mentors have common perception that face-to-face mentoring allows them to inspire mentees and have expressive and meaningful connections with them.

“When you are taking face-to face session you can understand mentees better as mentors are observing non-verbal communication and you feel special connection”

“Once as I started mentoring session my computer stopped working it was quite distressing as it took me twenty minutes to switch to other device and half of time of session was already gone”

They also agreed that direct learning provides a good environment for mentors and mentees. However, mentees living rural areas may not have equal opportunities to access technology and may experience technical issues.

“I had one mentee from Gilgit-Baltistan who faced connectivity issues in almost all mentoring session and he was very keen to attend mentoring session though...”

Mentors agreed that face-to-face mentoring sessions provides a better chance for personal professional development through enhanced team-work. Counseling skills are best delivered during face-to-face sessions. Mentors consistently mentioned the benefits derived from participating in this online program but they also highlighted importance of on campus mentoring sessions. The benefits mentioned were creation of a supportive mentoring group, opportunity

to exchange ideas and experiences; increased relevant knowledge and skills on stress coping mechanisms.

### **Creation of a supportive group**

The satisfaction and sense of being connected to supportive mentoring group and opportunity for networking offered by the program was a noticeable theme across all focus groups.

“I felt honored when they appointed me as an online mentor although we are engaged in informal mentoring with students most of the time but during COVID-19 situation students need more structured program to cope the prevailing situation”

An opportunity to become a member of a supportive mentoring group remained a meaningful aspect of mentor's experiences. Indeed, most mentors reported that they would like to create a more permanent relationship with mentees and continue collaboration. The presence of supportive faculty mentor emerged as an important component of the mentoring session.

### **Opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences**

Mentors identified the unique problems, ideas and experiences which different mentees conveyed during online mentoring program as a significant benefit for all mentees in session. Participants recognized that the program provided a platform for sharing ideas from across a wide range of resource levels, cultures, and settings.

“Listening to different types of ideas and experiences during mentoring sessions help all participant to learn”

### **Increased knowledge and skills on stress coping mechanism**

Participants appreciated the importance of getting aware of knowledge and skills on stress copying mechanism, relevant to medical education. Self-identification of stressors by mentees during online teaching in COVID-19 situation helped then to apply specific coping strategy.

“During initial mentoring session I use to identify

mentees stressors and suggest specific coping mechanism but after few sessions' mentees started self-identification of stressor”

Beyond the benefits of the knowledge itself, participants noted reductions in stress as mentors provided them with skills to better cope with their academic as well as personal requirements.

### **Experiences of Mentees**

#### **Time management**

The difficulty of managing time constraints and balancing hectic online schedules to attend classes were noted as common challenges across the focus groups. Missing session leads to extra stress,

“Those days were certainly critical, and I couldn't make it on time for the mentoring sessions. It was difficult for me to manage. Then you would feel bad that you are late or absent. That would stress you further because you missed out. That reminds me of the session where we were supposed to discuss interactively and I slept!”

#### **Technical issues**

This includes all essential technical elements, such as internet connectivity and the use of online tools. Participants listed many technical issues which they faced during online sessions, as mentioned in the following statements:

“Slow internet connectivity during online session, was one of the issue, most of our mentors have no experience in delivering online mentoring sessions. There was wastage of time every day because of technical problems.”

“I lived in Gilgit and use to face frequent disconnections.”

“Mentors sound problem like microphone got muted and mentor is continuing discussion and sound lagging due to technical error makes whole point useless”

#### **Preferred Face-to face mentoring sessions**

Most mentees and mentors preferred face-to face mentoring session as they are more engaging

and better at non-verbal communication which is merely possible during online sessions.

“Communication with mentor is difficult without facial expressions”

“My family doesn’t understand that I need privacy during mentoring sessions, most of the time it’s difficult for me to find suitable place at home to sit and take session”

“Once during my online mentoring session, I turned and saw my sister listening to all my conversation and it was so awkward”

“I felt better after most of mentoring session it’s good to exchange experiences with fellow mentees”

“Best part of online teaching were recorded lectures but in mentoring session there were no recording so we have to attend”

“Online mentoring sessions kept on interrupting, so focus was lost!”

### **Suggestions for the future preferences**

Mentees gave mixed response on preference of online mentoring sessions in future with or without COVID-19 situation. Majority of mentees preferred on-campus mentoring sessions.

“On-campus sessions creates better connectivity with mentors”

Some students preferred online mentoring session experience, mostly those mentees who are not resident of Karachi. Its convenient for them to take online mentoring sessions from residence.

“I prefer to have few online mentoring sessions in future too, along with on-campus sessions.”

Mentees also note that the mentors became a trusted teacher and welcoming presence encouraging their sustained participation.

### **DISCUSSION**

There was significant impact of COVID-19 on all types of social and educational activities, but the most affected area was educational systems, especially medical education as it is very difficult to teach clinical education by online strategies. After closure of educational institutes as directed by government colleges, universities switch to online or blended teaching system. Mentoring program was need of the hour especially for first and second year medical students who immediately switched to online teaching after admission in medical college. So this study especially targeted first and second year medical students, an equitable number of mentees and mentors responded to participate in this study on experiences of mentees and mentors during online mentoring session. Mentees and mentors participated in this study to ensure improvement in online mentoring session after learning from past experiences. It was important to explore mentees experiences as students were adapting to COVID-19 situation and were under stress. Students adapted to online mentoring system quickly as they are more technology friendly generation as compared to faculty members, this because of fact that they are more frequently involved in online social media communications.<sup>9,10,11,12</sup> This explains their quick acceptance to online mentoring sessions and better adaptation than mentors.

Previous studies have reported that hybrid learning is becoming more accepted among academic communities because it combines “the best of both worlds”.<sup>13,14,15</sup> However, the effectiveness of hybrid learning depends on several factors, mainly adequate faculty training and institutional support. The primary challenging experience revealed by study participant was technical issues during online sessions and issues related to communication. However, mentees and mentors learned over period of time the importance of quick and concise feedback for better communication in online session. Different strategies of mentoring session delivery were used to reduce communication gap between mentors and mentees but improving technical difficulties remained main challenge. Faculty members struggled to adapt to online teaching

strategies and faced technophobia and pandemic related stress. Mentors reported that there is need to re-evaluate online mentoring system for better online mentoring sessions. Mentors need to learn the art of sense of community (SoC) refers to the cognitive or emotional connections established between physically separated mentees and mentors.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for practical guidelines on (SoC) and how to apply it during online medical education sessions. Despite these challenges, the online mentoring sessions during COVID-19 pandemic have had a positive impact on the mentees and mentors. Also, most of the study participants proposed integrating technical expertise into their future online teaching and learning strategies. However, integrating the technical skills required for online teaching into practice requires adequate faculty professional development. Most mentors supported online mentoring. However the mentees opinion was different from mentors. Some mentees praised blended education since it removed some of the traditional teaching barriers. Mentoring sessions can be scheduled and designed to match the requirements of mentees. The study has few limitations. We conducted the study during the third phase of the COVID-19 pandemic at a private institution where most students were financially secure and had resources needed for online teaching sessions. Strength of the study is that limited research has been done on experiences of mentor and mentees in online mentoring sessions during COVID-19 pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

Face-to face mentoring provides better opportunities to connect during mentoring sessions however blended, online and on campus mentoring sessions can be provided in emergency situations as COVID-19 crisis.


**Copyright© 04 July, 2022.**

## REFERENCES

1. Guse J, Heinen I, Kurre J, Mohr S, Bergelt C. **Perception of the study situation and mental burden during the COVID-19 pandemic among undergraduate medical students with and without mentoring.** *GMS J Med Educ.* 2020; 3;37(7):Doc72. doi: 10.3205/zma001365. PMID: 33364351; PMCID: PMC7740010.
2. Speer JE, Lyon M, Johnson J. **Gains and Losses in Virtual Mentorship: A Descriptive Case Study of Undergraduate Mentees and Graduate Mentors in STEM Research during the COVID-19 Pandemic.** *CBE Life Sci Educ.* 2021; 20(2):ar14. doi: 10.1187/cbe.20-06-0128. PMID: 33734867.
3. Doherty, M., Modanloo, S., Evans, E., Rowe, J., Newhook, D., Palat, G., & Archibald, D. **Exploring health professionals' experiences with a virtual learning and mentoring program (Project ECHO) on pediatric palliative care in South Asia.** *Global pediatric health,* 2021; 8, 2333794X211043061. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2333794X211043061>
4. Verma A, Verma S, Garg P, Godara R. **Online teaching during COVID-19: Perception of medical undergraduate students.** *Indian J Surg.* 2020; 27:1-2. doi: 10.1007/s12262-020-02487-2. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 32837080; PMCID: PMC7320650.
5. Sahu P. **Closure of Universities due to coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Impact on education and mental health of students and academic staff.** *Cureus.* 2020; 4; 12(4):e7541. doi: 10.7759/cureus.7541. PMID: 32377489; PMCID: PMC7198094.
6. Hameed T, Husain M, Jain SK, Singh CB, Khan S. **Online Medical Teaching in COVID-19 Era: Experience and perception of undergraduate students.** *Maedica (Bucur).* 2020; 15(4):440-444. doi: 10.26574/maedica.2020.15.4.440. PMID: 33603900; PMCID: PMC7879367.
7. Kaini S, Motie LZ. Virtual vs Online: Insight From Medical Students. **Comment on "Effectiveness of virtual medical teaching during the COVID-19 crisis: Systematic review".** *JMIR Med Educ.* 2021; 14;7(2):e27020. doi: 10.2196/27020. PMID: 33988518; PMCID: PMC8128047.
8. Dost S, Hossain A, Shehab M, Abdelwahed A, Al-Nusair L. **Perceptions of medical students towards online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic: A national cross-sectional survey of 2721 UK medical students.** *BMJ Open.* 2020; 5;10(11):e042378. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2020-042378. PMID: 33154063; PMCID: PMC7646323.

9. Khalil R, Mansour AE, Fadda WA, Almisnid K, Aldamegh M, Al-Nafeesah A, Alkhalifah A, Al-Wutayd O. **The sudden transition to synchronized online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Saudi Arabia: A qualitative study exploring medical students' perspectives.** BMC Med Educ. 2020; 28;20(1):285. doi: 10.1186/s12909-020-02208-z. PMID: 32859188; PMCID: PMC7453686.
10. Camargo CP, Tempiski PZ, Busnardo FF, Martins MA, Gemperli R. **Online learning and COVID-19: A meta-synthesis analysis.** Clinics (Sao Paulo). 2020; 6;75:e2286. doi: 10.6061/clinics/2020/e2286. PMID: 33174948; PMCID: PMC7605278.
11. Abbasi MS, Ahmed N, Sajjad B, Alshahrani A, Saeed S, Sarfaraz S, Alhamdan RS, Vohra F, Abduljabbar T. **E-Learning perception and satisfaction among health sciences students amid the COVID-19 pandemic.** Work. 2020; 67(3):549-556. doi: 10.3233/WOR-203308. PMID: 33185620.
12. De Ponti R, Marazzato J, Maresca AM, Rovera F, Carcano G, Ferrario MM. **Pre- graduation medical training including virtual reality during COVID-19 pandemic: A report on students' perception.** BMC Med Educ. 2020; 25;20(1):332. doi: 10.1186/s12909-020-02245-8. PMID: 32977781; PMCID: PMC7517753.
13. Bergelt C, Heinen I, Guse J. **Mentoring für Studierende in der Medizin: Darstellung und Evaluation eines differenzierten Mentoring programms an einer medizinischen Fakultät [Mentoring for medical students: Description and evaluation of a differentiated mentoring program at a medical school].** Bundesgesundheitsblatt Gesundheitsforschung Gesundheitsschutz. 2018; 61(2):210-217. German. doi: 10.1007/s00103-017-2674-y. PMID: 29230517.
14. Agarwal S, Kaushik JS. **Student's perception of online learning during COVID pandemic.** Indian J Pediatr. 2020; 87(7):554. doi: 10.1007/s12098-020-03327-7. Epub 2020 May 8. PMID: 32385779; PMCID: PMC7205599.
15. Mukhtar K, Javed K, Arooj M, Sethi A. **Advantages, Limitations and Recommendations for online learning during COVID-19 pandemic era.** Pak J Med Sci. 2020 May; 36(COVID19-S4):S27-S31. doi: 10.12669/pjms.36.COVID19-S4.2785. PMID: 32582310; PMCID: PMC7306967.
16. Mustafa RM, Alrabadi NN, Alshali RZ, Khader YS, Ahmad DM. **Knowledge, attitude, behavior, and stress related to COVID-19 among undergraduate health care students in Jordan.** Eur J Dent. 2020 Dec; 14(S 01):S50-S55. doi: 10.1055/s-0040-1719212. Epub 2020; 24. PMID: 33233003; PMCID: PMC7775211.

### AUTHORSHIP AND CONTRIBUTION DECLARATION

No.	Author(s) Full Name	Contribution to the paper	Author(s) Signature
1	Khadija Farrukh	Complete research, Introduction, Methods, Data collection, Discussion.	
2	Talea Hoor	Review.	