



Available online at globets.org/journal
International Journal of Education, Technology and Science
4(1) (2024) 1542–1556

IJETS
International Journal of
Education Technology and
Science

FORMAL ENGLISH WRITING AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN A STUDENT'S ACADEMIA

(Research article)

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Received: 22.10.2023

Revised version received: 11.01.2024

Accepted: 13.01.2024

Abstract

Communication, one of the necessities to carry out our daily activities consists of oral and written modes. While oral communication is widely acknowledged, the formal mode used in professional aspects of the written form is yet to receive the required attention and importance. Its importance in one's professional career must be highlighted in one's school curriculum, quoting its importance. Grammar is commonly stressed upon in language classes, but a deeper grasp of the language's structure is often missing. To effectively convey this idea, it is necessary to understand the student's perspective regarding their idea of formal writing. With advancement of technology, changes in the practice of writing from paper to digital sources have been observed. With specialized courses being offered on online, the perspective of learning formal writing and its impact on student's academia and career is aimed to be studied on to ensure effective teaching of formal writing.

Keywords: Formal writing; interdisciplinary aspect; socio-economic background

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1. Introduction

With effective communication being one of the current requirements in today's world to ensure clarity and structured working, its importance is yet to be highlighted. The word "communication", when referred to, is often initially associated with respect to the verbal form, but it has to be highlighted that the written form too, is necessary. This form has not been fully explored and practiced yet. The writing mode consists of informal and formal writing. Normally, an indicator of one's professional efficiency, formal writing finds its applications in multiple fields and disciplines. Formal writing, initially introduced through the concept of letter writing to students in school, transforms into drafting business proposals, research publications and various other such topics in the later stages of the life of a student. Right from writing leave letters to the principal regarding sick leaves to e-mailing professors of a university regarding further opportunities, formal writing has been an integral part of a student's life (Hundarenko, 2020; Wass Vel & Ng Victor, 2023).

Formal writing is a means to improve one's grammatical and structural hold over the language. Aiming to prepare them for their future endeavors and careers, formal writing attempts to enable them with the ability to express their knowledge with clarity. With research gaining more popularity among masses, it becomes essential for proper documentation of the findings in order to come to a logical conclusion and present it to the world (Muhammadolimovna Zarina Khasanova. 2023). Therefore, a student who wishes to enter this field must know the particular methods and formats. Often seen as only a part of the subject of English, taught in school, formal writing is not taken seriously by the students and is something that they try to finish for the sake of grades (in general). The reason for this attitude, from their perspective has to be studied (Bronowicki, 2020; Ting & Puteh, 2012).

With the advancement in technology, the typing skills rather than the writing ability of students is being given attention. With much communication occurring over electronic gadgets, informal writing, where casual communication is carried out, is being used majorly. The actual essence of formal writing is slowly fading away (Dahlström, H. 2019; Rosen et al, 2010). With the recent developments in technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) such as Chat GPT, students have lost the motivation to think, create, write and express their ideas in their own words. Instead, they use the AI available and apparently "use" their skills in tweaking the writing assignments and submitting it through paraphrasing the content. Thus, the whole purpose for which the assignment was given to the student is lost, as the student has not involved their creativity and the required skills to draft the assignment. The lack of writing practice and majorly using gadgets to express themselves has led them to commit many grammatical mistakes. The so-called use of abbreviations, which they call "short forms" while using social media as a medium to connect with their friends or family, is one more aspect that is killing the importance of formal writing among children. This lack on grip of the language, would in future go on to affect the student's life through lack of job opportunities, which

would be due to the inability to express their thoughts clearly, even though they may be technically sound (Dahlström, 2019; Carraro & Trinder, 2021).

One equipped with tools such as effective communication, finds it easier to adapt in their jobs and any task related to their professional life, as they are capable of effectively conveying the problems existing and the solutions possible and thus, reducing the ambiguity over the content displayed or conveyed by them (Grace et al, 2015; Rosen et al, 2010). With the advancement in technology, it is necessary to integrate technology with learning to make it accessible to all.

With so many applications of formal writing, a focused attempt has been made to analyze from the student and professors' perspective of formal writing and its importance in a student's life. An attempt to dwell over the possibility of one's economic or social background has also tried to be covered and hence, find possible solutions to aid students for the improvement of their future (Shaw, 1995; Shamsiyev et al, 2023).

Taking into consideration, all the points discussed above, it is vital to gather data and find out where things can be improved by suggesting effective methods to improve students' grip over written communication. This study aims to be the base for understanding the perspective of students with respect to formal written communication and their apprehensions regarding this field.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

To get a perspective of the students, a survey was conducted through the circulation of "Google forms" among students of various fields of Degree. A quantitative analysis was used so as to get an idea, in the form of percentages and charts, regarding the perspective of students with respect to certain aspects of formal writing. Quantitative data, also aids the participants who undertake the survey, as they have a finite set of options, aiding them to fill the form in a shorter period of time and in an easier way. Being anonymous, the survey aims to be an easy form filling method and be unbiased. The participants belonged to different fields such as Commerce, Arts and Engineering to name a few. The survey was aimed to contain the most effective set of questions which would enable us to understand the perspective of students regarding their thoughts towards formal writing.

To get a better understanding of this field, interviews with two professors in the form of primary data too was conducted in order to discuss their perspectives regarding the importance and the current state of formal writing. In the form of an interview, a better understanding of the professors could be obtained as through the verbal form, they could express their ideas in a more free and easy manner, adding points which they feel they would have forgotten to express if conveying the same through written form.

2.2. Participants

For the analysis, two sets of participants were involved—one set for the survey and another for the interview. While the survey included participants of different backgrounds and of different age groups, the interview included professors who were experienced and involved in teaching formal writing. For the survey, a total of 104 participants (82 male and 22 female) of the age range of 15 to around 24, undertook the survey. This included majorly students pursuing in different academic backgrounds such as Engineering, Humanities, Commerce and Medical, with some pursuing their Masters. This mixed set of participants aids in the analysis as we have different mindsets involved in the survey, thus including fresh and new perspectives. They were asked to undertake the survey which contained questions that aided in understanding formal writing through their perspective by using “Google Forms”.

For the interviews, professors who hailed from prestigious institutions with profound knowledge in this field and years of experience, were interviewed. The professor was asked a set of open-ended questions to understand from a teacher’s perspective so that the points from both sides could be taken into account, facilitating in easier analysis.

2.3. Data Collection

The “Google Form” contained a total of 26 questions, composed in English language, out of which 5 questions comprised of questions related to the basic details such as age and gender to name a few. Filled over the course of the first and second week of June, 2023, this data being anonymous, removed the fear of being judged openly by peers, regarding their opinions in this field. Also, the participants were made aware of the reason for this survey and hence, would be responsible while filling out the form. The survey form consisted of either MCQ type or scale type (from 1 to 5) questions.

The interview was conducted on the “Google Meet” platform and points were noted down.

3. Results

3.1. “Google Form”

The “Google Form” was structured into four sections (excluding the section for basic details such as age, gender, degree and medium of instruction):

- a) General Attitude towards Formal Writing
- b) Academical Aspect of Formal Writing
- c) Advent of Technology
- d) Interdisciplinary aspect

The Form was divided into sections so as to categorize and analyze the results in an organized manner. Section a) was dedicated to analyze the general attitude of the participants towards formal writing. Section b) aimed to analyze how important the participants feel formal writing is, in their academic endeavors. Section c) was dedicated to find out the extent to which technology could be used to support the cause of formal writing and how the new softwares or AI tools are influencing the current generation. This section also tries to analyze how important one's economic condition plays as a factor regarding the field of formal writing, Section d) was introduced in the survey, to understand the importance of formal writing across various disciplines and how it affects one's research endeavors and employability.

After analyzing the results obtained from the survey, it was observed that participants from different academic backgrounds have taken part for the survey such as Engineering, Medical, Commerce, Pure Science, Architecture, PG (Post Graduation) and PhD. With the majority of the participants age ranging from 18-21 (89.2%), the survey contains participants whose age ranges from as low as that of 15 to those above 24 too. This gives the survey the benefit of variety in the responses, thus aiding in a better analysis of the perspectives. Notably, all the participants have studied in an English Medium School. From this, we get an idea that all the participants would at least have some hold over the English Language, if not the best.

- a) Through the results obtained in Section a) of the “Google Form”, a certain level of understanding regarding the participants basic knowledge over formal writing is obtained. As seen in Fig 1, majority have an understanding as to what formal writing includes within itself, such as business e-mails, memos and project reports, with 77.7% opting for “all the above options”. While analyzing the results regarding the level of difficulty the participants felt regarding the essay assignments they received at school, majority of the participants felt that the essay assignments they received in school were moderate in difficulty (55.3%), while some did feel that it was a tad bit easy or difficult. Very few people felt it was very easy or very difficult (total of 5.8%, with respect to both extremes), showing that the assignments given to students at school are given keeping all the children in mind.

With 40.8% giving importance to Grammar majorly, while using the English Language in different modes of communication, the importance of content and structure are almost same. One of the encouraging results that could be seen through the analysis, is that, for the majority of the participants, support from their parents/relatives have been received at least to some extent (72.6% of the participants received moderate to a very supportive family with respect to this field). This showcases that their guardians are well aware of the importance of this

field in their ward's life and are inculcating this behavior right from the beginning. With hope that this percentage would be moving closer to 100% in future surveys, another majorly accepted fact was that books and screen assisted content, aid in improving one's content presentation skills over a period of time. From the survey, it is clear that one with a better socio-economic status in the society, can have better access to better sources and social circles, thus enhancing their hold over formal writing through the utilization of these sources. To reduce this disparity existing in the society, the ease of obtaining sources related to formal writing such as free online courses, second hand books are being implemented making it helpful for one to practice formal writing irrespective of their socio-economic status. The fact that content has to be made accessible to all should be worked on, and be implemented smoothly.

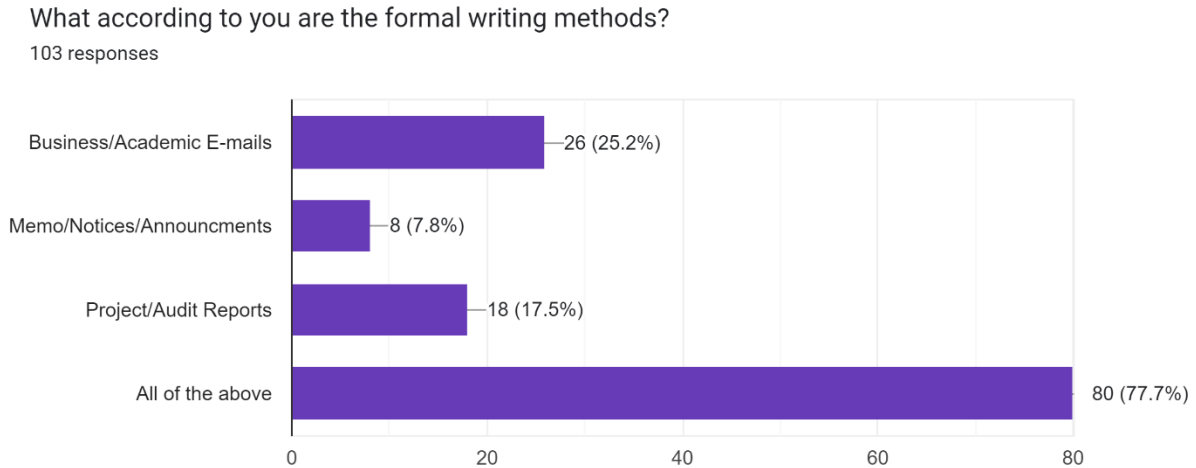


Figure 1. Formal Writing method inclusions

Table 1. Table of the response received in the survey for section a

Question Asked	Responses (in terms of scale)				
	Not very much (%)	Little helpful (%)	Moderate (%)	Helpful (%)	Very Helpful (%)
Level of English Assignments	3.9	15.5	55.3	23.3	1.9
Level of parents' encouragement	8.8	18.6	27.5	30.4	14.7
Relevance of Formal writing	7.7	25	28.8	29.8	8.7

- b) Through section b), it was seen that majority of the participants (67.3%) have or have had a course on this topic. This is a good sign, but the with 33.7% of the participants not having a course at their college, the students either tend to ignore this field or tend to search online for courses (though very few). This ambiguity can be avoided by including a technical writing course in the student's curriculum. Through the compulsory introduction of such a course, the students get aware of the importance of this topic. With majority expressing that they have not searched for online course regarding the same, it might be due to the fact that they already have similar course in their curriculum and that they don't find the need to do so; but there might be a few who haven't had a course related to this field, and haven't searched for the same online due to ignorance or lack of awareness of the importance of this field. Such kind of situations must be avoided, as this will lead to difficulties being presented to the student's life while pursuing future tasks. The factors-grammar, content and structure that are essential during the compilation of a report, are all interlinked to each other. Hence, though not equal priority preference given to these factors, one must ensure that they have a decent grip over these factors, so that they don't face difficulties while drafting the required formal writing-based format.

In an assignment, what were the main points on which you were asked to improve on, in your formal writing skills?

104 responses

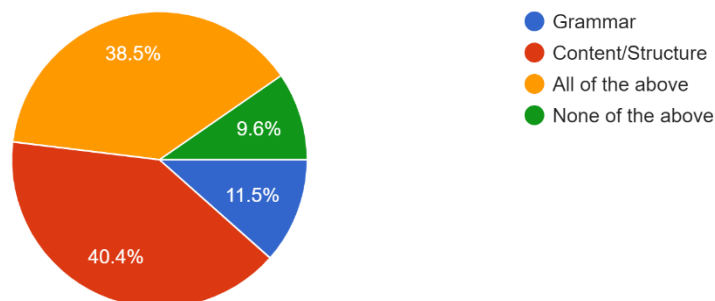


Figure 2. Improving points in Formal Writing

- c) The advent of technology has brought in a lot of changes in one's daily routine. Right from the shift of reading news from newspapers to reading news digitally through various news sharing apps, the mode of communication has had a drastic change. The same has been reflected from the survey analysis, with majority using electronic devices for communication. It may be for texting their close ones or sending professional e-mails or even for expressing their opinions through online platforms. The fact that majority prefer digital writing (67.3%) over physical writing, is a point that might not be surprising for many, as the "digitalize every daily routine" trend has changed a lot of things in our lives, including, the use of electronic devices to read books, such as "kindle". Writing, initially known to be associated with papers, has rapidly shifted to the digital platform. This shows that the electronic devices are accessible by many, through which they carry out their communication. With the recent introduction and rise of ChatGPT, many students have found it helpful as it drafts content for any given scenario, making it a one stop destination for them to submit assignments or projects. The support for ChatGPT by the participants can be seen clearly through the survey, with 68.6% agreeing with the use of it. But contrastingly, the sense of physical writing is still engrained within them as seen in the survey analysis, where 86.5% still emphasizing the importance of physical writing. Physical writing, not only improves your writing skills, but also trains one's mind to think simultaneously regarding the grammar, structure and content of the document.

Digital writing too has its own advantages, such as ease in modifying the content. The use of ChatGPT has risen due to its content matching the ideas of the user. Just typing a keyword in this platform generates a ton of content which makes life easy for the user. Since ChatGPT compiles content from various sources and its own points, it happens that the content is copied exactly from a particular source leading to plagiarism. Even in general, copy pasting exact content from the source without acknowledging it has been followed, which should be strictly discouraged. A lot of the participants (84.4%) have expressed their opinion against plagiarism. This is a good sign as plagiarism leads to killing of original and new content, thus leading to lack of freshness in one's content. It is also considered unethical to practice plagiarism, which is strictly not allowed while publishing reports or papers to journals. This shows the values ingrained among the participants who believe that they should be able to create their own content. Hopefully this too, with time increases to 100%! There are certain thoughts that ChatGPT leads to lack of creativity regarding the content among the user, as the user has to just type in the keyword related to the content. The onus should be upon the user as to what extent the user uses ChatGPT. There are quite a few online courses that have been made available that is related to this field. Through the survey, a need to improve the online courses available in certain aspects was found, as majority find it moderate, thus, leaving room for improvement. Eventually the means of technology must be a tool to promote and highlight the importance of this field of formal writing and not be a bane.

- d) The importance of formal writing across various disciplines has been highlighted through the interdisciplinary section of the form. Formal writing aids in organizing the data and content in a structured manner, and is hence important in publishing paper to journals or in submitting reports. Formal writing enables one to get a strong hold on one's grammar, content and structure, which are all need in publishing documents. This point can find support from the survey too, where 77% strongly vote that this is an important aspect for the same. The need for formal writing is slowly being highlighted and is being understood by the students, as it aids them in their future endeavors. This importance must be highlighted not only from the teachers or professors teaching in this field, but also by the core subject professors, as they too are aware of how one should be equipped with these skills to display their content in professional or research fields. But the disappointing aspect is that the core subject professors are not highlighting this importance, which tends to make the students ignore this field of study. With the survey showing that only 48% of the participants professors highlighting its importance, it is saddening, as the students are missing out on learning the importance of this field, which would help them in their latter part of the life, either in the form of employability or in publishing papers.

Table 2. Table of the response received in the survey for section d

Question Asked	Responses (in terms of scale)				
	Not very much (%)	Little helpful (%)	Moderate (%)	Helpful (%)	Very Helpful (%)
Relevance of Formal Writing in publishing documents	1.9	2.9	18.3	43.3	33.7
Necessity of formal communication methods in one’s discipline	0	5.8	20.2	52.9	21.2
Formal Writing as an opportunity to enhance one’s employability	0	1	12.5	37.5	49

Do your core subject professors too highlight the importance of writing in one’s career?

102 responses

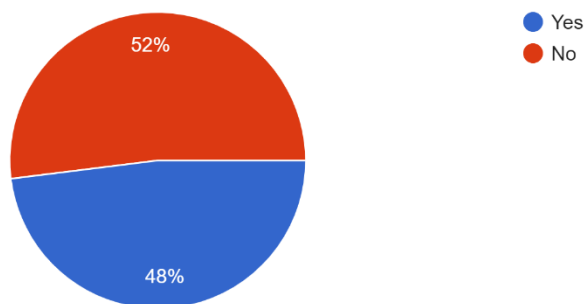


Figure 3. Subject Professors involvement in “Formal Writing”

Hence through the Google Forms we get an idea to a certain extent, about the perspective of the students regarding this field. The possible solutions can be discussed in the conclusion, after taking in mind the results obtained from the interviews of the professors who have excelled in this field and have been guiding students from a long time.

3.2. Interview(s)

As highlighted in the end of the previous subsection, the aspect of acknowledging the perspective of the teachers or professors, is important too. For the same, I have conducted interviews with two professors who teach formal writing courses in prestigious colleges. With an experience of more than 20 plus years in this field, both the professors have ample experience and knowledge regarding formal writing. For reference regarding the perspectives of both the professors, let the first professor be P1 and the second Professor be P2. Along with formal writing courses, Art and Performance-based courses were also taken by P1, while P2 used to take Linguistics, Cultural Studies, and other literary based courses.

According to both the professors, though the skill of writing in general is developed in school, it is partial, i.e., not completely due to the school academia, but it is an ever-developing process that is in future honed by the college and universities too. According to P1, practice at the school level does form the basis for good writing skills, but, due to the large-scale application of objective questions in recent times, where a limited set of options are given, honing and developing the writing skills become slightly difficult for the students. Also, the “de-valuing” attitude towards liberal arts by many, is a major factor, leading to lack of attention towards subjects such as English Language. With the economic disparity increasing all around among various sections of the society, and different people with different cultures working or studying together, the mindset each one has is different. The same has been highlighted by P1 too, where it is agreed that there is a difference in skill accumulation among people, i.e., some may acquire the same knowledge faster, while some may do the same slower. While P1 pushed for lowering this disparity and also make sure that bridge courses are made compulsory, to bring everyone to the same level, P2 stressed on being exposed to learning idiomatic expressions starting from one’s home itself so as to get a hold over the vocabulary of the language.

When asked as to how the professors personally dealt with explaining the importance of formal writing across disciplines, P1 stated “I offered my writing program to scholars across the disciplines and emphasized the following: argumentation and persuasion to be cultivated consciously, critical reading that helps writing and being attentive to the practice of writing which cannot be random and spasmodic” and P2 stated that the professor provides insights as to how this field is a requirement for one’s employability and for research purposes. According to the professors, when asked as to how to ensure the children enhance their writing skills, P1 said that the children should be encouraged from the school

level itself, where they should be appreciated for their critical thinking and argumentative skills while P2 stated that the children should be taught and be made to master their hold on the vocabulary and grammar of the English Language. P1 also stated that there was a change in trend as to the skill set showed by the students and that they were tending to be more “formulaic” in their behaviour. Adding to the same, P1 also stated that each student is different and hence, each student may need to work upon different aspects of their writing skills such as the tone or style or content to name a few.

According to P1, the student’s inability to express themselves clearly and the mental block of writing are some points that the professor has commonly noticed and that they should improve up on these aspects. P2 noticed that the writing skills of the students are going down over a period of time , and hence advices that for honing one’s writing skills, one must develop a habit of reading and adequate practice. The professor also stated that off late, most queries the professor received, were related only with marks and not as to where the student could improve in future. This shows the mindset of the students, who are just completing courses for the sake of marks, without understanding its implications.

Before concluding, P1 wanted to give the following advice to all the students regarding formal writing, “Clarity of purpose, rehearsed and refined arguments and to make a distinction between oral and written presentations”, all these must be possessed by students to excel in the field of formal writing. P2 too concluded the interview by stating the following idiom “Reading maketh a person”. Only with a good grasp over the language’s grammar and vocabulary, can one have a good command over their writing skills. Additionally, the practice of reading leads to honing one’s writing skills.

Hence, from the interviews, we understood areas where students need to develop, such as clarity in expressing themselves, through which we can find possible solutions.

4. Discussion

Through the Literature Review conducted, we get an idea as to how students think about formal writing and also highlights points on which they could possibly improve on (through the interview). The honing of formal writing skills, is very important in a student’s life regardless of whether the student is looking for employability or looking forward to complete one’s thesis. Though formal writing is been taught as a part of the English Language in schools, in the form of letter writing and memorandums, it is necessary that through this survey that people understand the importance of highlighting this field of study and dedicating

more time towards it by possibly introducing it as a subject itself, in the school level itself. If not in the school level, it has to be made compulsory in every college or university. Through this, the student hopefully understands its value. As highlighted by the professors, the students are tending to be more formula oriented, i.e., where they have to mug up information. Due to this, their originality and creativity is being lost. This situation has to be avoided, by encouraging the concept of writing. But when asked to practice writing on a given topic, it must be ensured that they don't take the help of Artificial Intelligence such as ChatGPT, as the whole idea of the assessment would be lost.

With the rise of technology, the practice of writing, even though digitally must be ensured. Also, as highlighted by one of the professors, the habit of reading books, must be developed within students as it develops inquisitiveness and reading skills, which would help them later in the field of formal writing, though not as mainstream field, but in the aspect of employability. One's socio-economic background must not hamper their ability to hone their skills in this field. This can be made sure by providing bridge courses on formal writing and make the online courses on the same, free for all. The support received from the parents that we saw through the results of the survey, is encouraging, and to explain the importance of formal writing, the best people to teach students, would be their parents, who are their "first teachers". The aspect of having a formal writing course in one's university is important; though majority did have a course, it should be made compulsory for everyone as through this method, the students learn these skills and could then use it for their career. One alarming thing analyzed in the survey was regarding the role of core professors in encouraging this field. This aspect has to be improved where the core professors of that field highlight the importance of formal writing in the student's career who are not pursuing their career in the field of writing. If the student's core teacher guides and advises them regarding its importance, the students will for sure take it seriously, and work on improving their skills in this field. Also, the ideology of the students towards this field has to be changed from the mindset of just getting "marks" and finishing this course to a course that students would love to complete for the sake of understanding.

Though many questions have been covered in the survey, many open-ended questions are still left to be asked, so as to get a detailed understanding of the student's perspective on the same. With these open-ended questions we get an idea regarding their clarity in expressing their feelings. A larger sample space across multiple countries can be conducted too, to get an overall idea of formal writing across the world. Through the analysis conducted in this report, a few suggestions have been stated as seen in this section, which if implemented would help in easing the situation existing in the field of formal writing.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank my corresponding author Dr. Binod Mishra for his support, which made this work possible. His guidance carried me throughout the various stages of this paper. I would also like to thank the Ph D research scholar in our research team, Mr. Subin T Daniel, who guided me while writing the paper. I would also like to thank the participants who undertook this survey and the professors whom I interviewed, for their support.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests and Ethics

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Appendices

a) Questionnaire-

The following questionnaire was circulated to the participants.

<https://forms.gle/eFTiavUQmwmoWgQ47>

b) Interview question sheet-

The following questionnaire was circulated to the professors who were interviewed.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/163asMysDEyAdeBOO98DjTb4QpuNNiEAUUbFxfVd0Jyg/edit?usp=sharing>