Gender and Distance Education:
A case on UT's female student

By
Mani Festati Broto (mani@mail.ut.ac.id)
Dewi Mutiara (dewim@mail.ut.ac.id)
Widyasari (wiwid@mail.ut.ac.id)

Distance education system allows up participation and choice for individual learning process. The system offers students to plan their learning process according to their own pace, time and money. Moreover, the system introduces a new culture of learning habit, in particular student is encouraged to plan her/his own studies. Hence, student is considered as autonomous individual.

Since its commence, Universitas Terbuka (UT) aims and holds commitment in opening a wider access of higher education for all classes, sexes and social backgrounds in the society. For this purpose, UT has established 35 regional centers throughout Indonesia as to maximize the services for the students; and eliminate prerequisites that will limit student entries. Thus, regardless of age and gender, individuals holding high-school graduate diploma can enrolled UT. The result of this policy is that each year there is an increase of student's enrolment. But is the increase also occur among the female students also?

We focus our study on female students because there are limited studies on how females pursue their education at UT. The objective of this paper is to investigate and elaborate the reasons of female students pursuing higher education through UT. The paper starts by investigating the situations and the conditions what particular barriers that female students face. The paper also recognizes what social and cultural barriers female students encounter at UT.

Key notes: gender mainstreaming, distance education

Introduction

Over the past 5 years, UT's entrance registration indicates the increase of female enrolment at UT. Although, there is still little studies on the actual increases of female enrolment at *U*T, evident shows that participation of female students in certain course increase significantly. There are a number of studies indicating the reason as to why *UT* attracts student. First, *UT*'s flexibility in time, place and space in the learning process. Second, the institution places strong emphasis on the provision of learning supports and services for student, which are designed to facilitate interaction and communication

between students and *UT*. Third, the use of internet has made possible for *UT* students to access the learning process in new and different ways. Forth, *UT* as state university offers low tuition fee compared to other state universities in Indonesia.

However, according to our findings, female students tend to take longer time to complete the courses and graduate. We conducted in-depth interview of 10 female students. All respondents are working student, most of them are married and have graduated. Among the 10 students, 5 students deliberately came to UT central office in need for academic counseling.

This paper also aims to investigate and elaborate the reasons of female students pursuing higher education through UT. There is a complex issue in the educational system which as related to the provision to the full development of human personality, to strengthening respect for human rights and put forward the concept of gender mainstreaming in education policies and program. Needless to say, *UT* has not seen this as an urgent issue, perhaps because gender discrimination upon entrance, enrollment and the process of learning at *UT* is not relevant. *UT* does not practice gender discrimination. Perhaps by emphasizing a thorough investigation and observation on the issue of female student in the learning and teaching process will raise awareness in presenting gender mainstreaming.

Human Rights in Education

The 21st millennium is seen as an era in which women engage in the production of information and knowledge. Information and knowledge have become the pillars of modern capability, both controlling both means and relations of production (WLP, 2001:7). As in Indonesia, the activities have proven to reinforce the rights of women through advocacy, awareness raising, literacy campaigns and education, to take greater participation in all spheres of life. During the last decade, especially during the introduction of reformation in Indonesian political system, women emerge in political spheres initiatives in conflict resolution and struggling for democracy. The roles of women and gender they raise are particularly obvious in following developments: the

improvements in percentage of women engaged in formal politics; the significance gender mainstreaming in designing, implementing and monitoring of policies and programs; and focusing attention on specific conditions of women and commitment to gender equality (Peterson,1993:9)

Article 31 of the 1945 Indonesian Constitutions stated that everyone is entitled to basic education'. It guarantees the rights of the basic formal education for all Indonesian citizens. Moreover, Article 31 provides a comprehensive definition of the human rights to education, in which all Indonesian children should have the accessibility of 9 years of fundamental education starting from primary to secondary schools. To achieve this goal, the Indonesian had adopted policies underlining the programs of *wajib belajar 9 tahun* or the obligation of 9 years learning (6 years for primary and 3 years for secondary school).

This policy shade light indicating that girls and boys have equal opportunity in education. Up to the present, according to the survey, the disparity of pursuing education, both in primary and secondary schools between girls and boys are small, as well as the drop out rate. Currently, the Indonesian government has committed to put 20% of the national annual budget in education. This can be perceived as a part of the Indonesian efforts to create a comprehensive system to fulfill the obligation of providing the basic human rights in education. Thus, neglecting the basic human rights in education can cause tremendous downfall on the quality of human resources development. Evidence provides that the level of the Indonesian *human development index* (HDI) reached its lowest position of 112 from 172. One of the indicators of HDI is determined by the accessibility and equality of formal basic education for both girls and boys.

However, taking into account the above-mentioned conditions, disparity of female and male in pursuing higher education is still high. Statically, entrance of female students in tertiary education is lower than male students and also the drop-out rate of female students is higher than males. This is not due to discrimination of policies or programs. Generally, cultural, social and economic considerations are the main issue in relation to tertiary education for female. Many studies on women and gender indicate that at certain

level (or age) women tend to focus on domestic activities, such as marriage, giving birth and child caring. The roles of women differ in the past decade, women also involve in earning money. This is evident at UT, 80% of female student are working student. The question leads to giving alternative means of pursuing tertiary level of education.

Understanding our female student:

As mentioned above, gender inequity is not an issue at *UT*. The percentage of male and female student enrolment in UT indicates that both sexes have the same access in the learning process at UT. However, since its first commence in 1984, the percentage of male student is higher (65%) than female students (34%). Moreover, female students tend to concentrate their interest of study in the field of education (27%). Table 1 shows the areas of study of UT's female and male students. This condition is not surprising, as this leads to certain assumptions in relation to the cultural and social reality that female students tend to be aiming at courses that relate to taking care of others and providing emotional and maintenance services (counseling or welfare supports). In contrast, male students are associated with activities of logical-analysis achievement and decision making power.). Based on our student's data (Buku Statistik, 2002), female student tend to complete faster in the field of educational study compared to other field of study such as economy and finance. Surprisingly, in 2002 statistics showed that there are more than 60% of female students graduated in the field of mathematics compared to male students.

Table 1: Total registration as student (from the registration of 1984 to 2004)

	Female	Male
Faculty of Education	53.582	49.121
Faculty of Mathematics	20.575	5.570
Faculty of Social and Political Science	49.407	115.537
Faculty of Economics	40.000	98.624
Overall	148.559	283.857

Although, female students tend to focus on specific courses that relate to the character of nurturing, and in general, small but steady increases in percentages of other courses that relate to male dominant (finance, economic and science) has marked interest by female

students over the past years. This is due to the strong emphasis on the provision of learning supports and services for student, which is designed to facilitate interaction and communication between students and *UT*. The question leads to the need of more institutional intervention in the learning and teaching process.

According to interviews we conducting from 10 female students, the main problem is managing time in studying; 80% of UT's female student are working students and married. Study conducting by Wawan Ruswanto and Ace Rachman (1998) on UT's female students in the division of labour between household chores and managing study time, concludes that most female student have problems in managing study time. This affects in the learning and teaching process at *UT* that female student tend to take longer time in completing the course. Some students need more than 10 years to complete and graduate.

Table 2: Student's Employment

	Working	Not working
Faculty of Education	53.583	2
Faculty of Mathematics	4.184	1.386
Faculty of Social and Political Science	34.716	14.690
Faculty of Economics	27.250	12.750
Overall	119.733	28.828

Sources: Registration Bureau (*BAAKrensi)*, 2004

Table 3: Student's marital status

	Married	Unmarried
Faculty of Education	35.308	18.277
Faculty of Mathematics	2.758	2.812
Faculty of Social and Political Science	18.527	30.879
Faculty of Economics	9.492	30.508
Overall	66.085	82.476

Sources: Registration Bureau (*BAAKrensi)*, 2004

Over the years, learning support such as tutorial at UT has increased and varied; face to face tutorial, correspondent tutorial, tutorial for specific need; online tutorial. Regrettably,

from research conducting by Yanis Rusli (2004) revealed that out of 352 students, female students (159) have low interest in participating in tutorial than male students. The study did not elaborate the reasons but from our interview, female students need flexibility in time and place of tutorial. Most female students complain that the distance between their home and the place of tutorial as the main problem for their low participation in tutorial. The time of tutorial should also be scheduled at the convenience of the student. For most female students, weekend is not a favorable time in conducting tutorial, especially for working students. Surprisingly, all female working students reveal that their employer (male employer) and colleagues supported their educational achievement. Thus, they suggest that *UT* should also provide tutorial, especially face-to-face tutorial during weekdays.

Although *UT* introduces the use of Internet in tutorial, less access which also includes hardware and software is still an issue. Study conducted by Women's Leadership Partnership reveals that women everywhere, but particularly in the developing countries, have less access to modern technology than do men (2001:8). It concludes that more attention is needed to bring the potential for the use of the Internet by providing more training in the use of the machines. Moreover, the study also reveals that other consideration should be taken into account such as: culture-relative and language-relevant. The role of tutorial online at UT is still considered excluded to those students in urban areas where information technology is more easily accessed. We know that information technology is expensive. Nevertheless, during the past 2 year UT plans to maximize the use of information technology in the learning process through it 35 regional centers. Since the first launch of tutorial online, both female and male students have the same equal opportunity to access, but regrettably we note that female students have lack of confidence than do men in using equipment and ICTs.

Based on our observations, we note that female student needs more institutional intervention in their learning and teaching process, such as academic counseling. The finding also shows that female students need more external support, especially peer-supports, in building their confidence in continuing their learning process. Two of the 5

graduated-students, we interviewed recall that after intensive academic counseling and participating in face-to-face tutorial, they needed only 4 semesters to complete their studies. Besides this inquiry, they also indicated that the changes in curriculum had also influenced their study pace. Again, according to the interview, they pleaded that UT should exercise generous score because this is to compensate the difficult evaluation that they have to undertake examination.

The finding reveals that working female students at *UT* have individually motivational process so that they can demonstrate persistence in the process of learning, but female students do take longer time to complete their studies. Nevertheless, it is evident that distance education system provides formal qualification as a route to better-paid jobs, job promotion, new job career and also economic independence and security. Von Plummer (2000: 1999) also concludes the same finding in relation to women's social ambition, she writes 'in the sense we can legitimately conclude that women of working class origin consciously use their distance studies as a vehicle for upward occupational and social mobility'. However, the finding also shows that female students need more external support, especially peer-supports, in building their confidence in continuing their learning process. In most gender studies, especially studies in relation with social-cultural environment, most of the findings are similar. Von Plummer reveals the similar conditions that learning environment provides opportunities and threats of studying at home. Domestic role is always the main issue of gender study. This problems also influence the learning pace and space for adult female students if this refers to studying at home because of the triple roles in the house as homemaker, mother and student.

Gender mainstreaming at *UT*: Why bother?

Gender mainstreaming is a struggle for gender-sensitive in all policies and programs, starting from planning, budgeting, monitoring and also evaluating . The term analyses the situation of women and men, girls and boys and the relationship between them. It assists the empowerment of women and to introduce the important of involving women in all spheres of life. The introduction of gender mainstreaming conducted by the Ministry of Women Empowerment which strongly recommended that course development, especially in the primary and secondary level of education, should promote and reveal gender

awareness and gender equality. Gender mainstreaming is an effort to bring women from margins into the main center of decision making power. As Karl (1995) write that gender mainstreaming makes gender a central focus of power, development and programs, for example strengthening women unit's, groups and organizations to ensure gender awareness, to act as pressure groups and to monitor the implementation of mainstreaming women (103). In an international seminar on gender mainstreaming in Indonesia, the Ministry of Women Empowerment in collaboration with the Department of Education launched a manual of gender mainstreaming for course material for primary and secondary education. The manual illustrates how course material should be designed to meet the concern of gender equality.

To understand how gender mainstreaming works, we examine the dimension of course development at UT: the formation of writers and gender mainstreaming in course materials. Course material is considered as the "gender of focal points", thus course material is the medium to introduce to the concept of gender awareness, gender equality, gender equity, gender analysis etc.

Most of UT's course materials are written by male writers. There are still missing data and information, but the percentage of male writers is 89% as opposed to female writers. Although, this is not to conclude that male writers are less sensitive of gender, assumption should be drawn on more research findings.

Table 4: Course writers

	Female	Male
Faculty of Education	177	462
Faculty of Mathematics	55	152
Faculty of Social and Political Science	76	261
Faculty of Economics	18	89
Overall	324	964

Sources: UT's Publication Center, 2004

Regrettably, the overall design of all courses at UT; the content, the illustration, and the layout have not been evaluated in relation to the concept of gender mainstreaming. Even

in courses such as political sciences, sociology, anthropology and citizenship courses which discuss issues of human rights and inequality, gender mainstreaming is still neglected and ignored. According to the Head of the Publication Center at *UT*, most of the front covers and designs of the written course material at *UT* tend to illustrated male dominant. Needless to say, the content of the course materials have not revealed case studies and illustration in relation to gender mainstreaming. In courses such as sociology, political science and anthropology, the study of gender is discussed intensively not because of the awareness of gender mainstreaming but as part of the discipline, as stated by The Head of Sociology Department at UT.

Conclusion

UT as an open and distance education institution, has become the milestone on the road to understanding the extent to which it can support successful learning for those who are excluded (adult-female working students), marginalized (of political, economic and social-cultural barriers) and isolated (physical and geography barriers). *UT* has proven to serve the need of different groups of students, especially female students. As distance education UT aims to provide the learning process within flexible places and flexible times that are convenient for the learners. Since it commence *UT* has been consistent in eliminating the entry requirement and qualification. Thus, bias-gender is not the main issue in pursuing education at *UT*. The main issue is providing more alternative learning services and facilities for female students to interact with peer students or as Von Plummer (2000:99) described the commitment to making distance education as women-friendly institution.

Besides this enquiry into gender issue, UT should socialize the women-friendly environment by (1) encouraging more female student to take higher education; (2) adding more learning support especially for female working students; (3) providing female students with flexible course programs that are relevant to the domestics social issues such as housing, poverty, unemployment, healthcare, social security and child care.

According to the recent data on education the drop-out rate for female students is much higher in tertiary level than in the elementary level. At this is level, girls tend to enter the stage of marriage age (15 to 25 years). Thus, it is not a matter of discrimination in education but due to cultural and social barriers. Family often marginalizes girl in pursuing education to the tertiary level. At the very least, UT is adding more women to existing power structures so that they can put the so-called women's issues on policy-making agendas. This objective can be achieved if more women are offered alternative ways to access the tertiary level of education.

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