

STUDENTS IN OPEN & DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS: LESSONS LEARNT from RESEARCH in INDONESIA'S UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA

Durri Andriani – Research Institute
Nurmala Pangaribuan – Research Institute
Wiwin Siswantini – Department of Economics
Universitas Terbuka

“For anyone designing or teaching a distance education course, it is important to understand the characteristic of distance learners, what effects their success, how they perceive distance learning, and what they expect from a distance learning program” (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 153)

Students are the central focus in every learning situations, including in open and distance learning (ODL). Accordingly, ODL should be developed and implemented to best suit the needs of students. Consequently, indicators to ascertain the success of ODL should be placed on students' performance within the system. In order to evaluate objectively, there is a need to understand the ODL students.

Many experts in ODL have dealt with ODL students. Moore and Kearsley (1996) mention four aspects in ODL students, namely (1) students characteristics, (2) factors influencing students' success, (3) students' perceptions toward ODL, and (4) students' expectation from ODL program. Understanding these four aspects could be very helpful; in increasing students' success.

Researches on ODL students have been conducted. Guiglielmino & Guiglielmino (1992, 1995) conducted a series of research on self-directed readiness of ODL students; Frost (1999) had a research on ODL students' needs for academic counseling; Robinson (2001) dealt with ODL students' perception on web-based learning; and Visser (2002) explored instructors' role on ODL students' success. As it is, much of the researches are dealt with ODL students in western environment.

Meanwhile, condition in southern Asian region is different with those in western part of the world. These differences also reflected in ODL students, in term of their characteristics, their perceptions, as well as their needs. Hence, research conducted in western could not be automatically implemented in southern Asian region.

Universitas Terbuka (UT) as a higher education institution in Indonesia, which fully implemented ODL system, tries to bridge the gap by conducting systematic and integrated research on its students. During 2000-2004, UT has conducted seven research on ODL students which focus on eight aspects: readiness to self-directed learning, learning motivation, use of learning resources, use of learning media, learning adjustment, learning strategy, learning style, and academic counseling (detail in Table 1).

Table 1. Aspects Discussed in Researches on UT Students (2000-2004)

No	Researcher	Year	Aspects*								Total
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	Andriani, Siswantini, & Pangaribuan	2003		√							1
2	Darmayanti & Belawati	2002		√							1
3	Julaeha & Andayani	2001						√	√		2
4	Kusmawan	2001				√				√	2
5	Ngafiyati	2000	√				√				2
6	Padmo & Toha	2002			√	√					2
7	Puspitasari & Islam	2002	√							√	2
	Total		3	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	13

* 1= Readiness to self-directed learning ; 2= Learning motivation
 3= Use of learning resources ; 4= Use of learning media
 5= Learning adjustment ; 6= Learning strategy
 7= Learning style ; 8= Academic counseling

These eight aspects of UT students have relatively covered necessary characteristics of ODL students. The choice to conduct research on these aspects has allowed UT to better understand its student's characteristics in order to provide best-suited ODL system for its students. However, there is no research yet on students' perception on learning quality and learning satisfaction. Understanding these two aspects could help UT to further increase the quality of its programs offered.

The seven researches on UT students implement variety of methodology. UT students as population in each research are grouped based on department/study program, sex, age, marital status, duration at UT, and academic achievement. Meanwhile, sampling technique varied from purposive sampling, proportionate random sampling, quota sampling, and stratified random sampling. Sampling techniques used in each research are decided through responsible approach.

Questionnaires and interviews are use to collect data. These instruments consist of instruments specially developed for the research and standardized instrument widely accepted for similar research. The specially designed instruments have developed trough certain stages including trying out to make sure that the instrument have the face validity and reliability to measure designated aspects. Standardized (western) instrument went trough several steps of adjustment and modification to eliminate cultural biases. Interviews were conducted through structured and non-structured interviews.

In term of instruments used, there is continuity between the researches. For example, research on learning strategy (Darmayanti & Belawati, 2000) used non-structured interview. Results of the interview were then used as a basis for mapping learning strategy for UT students. This map is served as the basic reference in developing questionnaire for learning motivation (Andriani, Pangaribuan, and Siswantini, 2003).

Return rate of the questionnaires are varied, between 42% (readiness to self-directed learning) to 74% (learning style). Data from questionnaires and interviews were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results from research on UT students are as follows.

Readiness to self-directed learning.

Puspitasari & Islam (2003) found that UT students' readiness to self-directed style scale fall into "average" category (can success in the self-directed learning environment but not quite too happy in being responsible in deciding, planning, implementing, and evaluating their learning process). These findings similar to those found by Ngafiyati (2000) who measure self-directed learning style with different tool.

More over, Puspitasari & Islam (2003) found out that self-directed readiness has a positive correlation with age while sex has different effect depending length of time students enrolled at UT. Female students joined UT less then 2 semesters tend to have higher scores. than their male counterparts while male students joined UT for more than two semesters tend to have higher scores.

Learning motivation.

Andriani, Siswanti, & Pangaribuan (2003) found similar results with Darmayanti & Belawati (2002) concerning students motivation in joining UT, from most stated reason to less: career advancement, broaden horizon, gaining certificate, and academic purpose.

Use of learning resources.

Padmo & Toha (2002) found out that 59,4% sampled- students have access to libraries (University libraries, office libraries, or private libraries). In a contrast, only 39% of the sampled-students have access to laboratory. The same percentage (39%) has access to tutors or other resource persons.

Use of learning media.

UT students have not yet fully utilized media in their learning process (Kusmawan, 2001). Padmo & Toha (2002) further mention that only 35% of their respondents have been utilized radio, TV, and Internet kiosk.

Learning adjustment.

Ngafiyati (2000) found out that learning adjustment has a significant effect to students' academic achievement. Along with self-directed readiness, capability to adjust a learning situation contributes 10,45% of academic achievement.

Learning strategy.

Learning strategy can be divided into three variables: time and support. Most of UT students prefer to study at night, followed by early in the morning, and on Saturdays/Sundays/holidays (Darmayanti & Belawati, 2002). In term of learning support, most students chose face-to-face tutorial than written or radio tutorials (Julaeha & Andayani, 2001)

Learning style.

Julaeha & Andayani (2001) found out that most of UT students employ visual learning style (58,61%), followed by auditorial (26.72%), and kinesthetic (14,65)

Academic counseling.

Kusmawan (2001) found out that experience in relevant field has negative correlation with duration in the program.

The researches have provided valuable information of UT students, which could and already be used to improve the quality of UT programs. In addition, the closeness (in term of geographical, economic capacity, population, as well as physical & time constraints) between Indonesian and other southern Asian countries will make it possible for the countries to share these findings and make use of these findings for our institutions.

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