

# Learner Support Services: Policies and Implementation at Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper is a study of learner support services in distance teaching universities, which have been our long term professional interest as faculty members in a distance education institution. The overall purpose of this study is to explore and understand the issues related to the development and implementation of the learner support services in Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia. It explores and analyzes the actual learner support services at the university. It describes how learner support programs have been developed and implemented. This paper also investigates two major contextual factors—the university’s external and internal environments that considerably shape learner support models in the university. Existing theories in distance education are explored to provide a general picture on how the policies and practices in learner support areas and theories may inform each other. A case study approach involving interpretive qualitative paradigm was used to investigate the issues. Thematic analysis supported by MAXQDA 11 application software was employed from the data collected through semi-structured interview and documentary analysis. A number of critical and major themes suggest that the university’s policies in learner support areas can be classified into two general areas: teaching and learning provisions which refers to a wide range of blended learning pedagogy emphasizing the importance of printed learning materials, online and face-to-face tutorial; and support services covering different activities to support student success. The findings also shows that the implementation of learner support services is fashioned by local culture, the advancement of educational technology, external quality assurance agencies and government quality standards.*

*Keywords: learner support services, teaching learning provisions, support services.*

## INTRODUCTION

In spite of the strategic role of Distance Teaching Universities (DTUs) in providing access to higher education, there are several challenges that these universities face; for example, the lack of support and services such as providing tutors, academic advisors, schedulers, and technical assistance (Rena, 2007), difficulty in oversight of delivery of instruction (Rashid & Rashid, 2012), and delivery of student support services including academic and logistical elements or establishing infrastructure (Inglis, 2003; Hoosen & Butcher, 2012). According to Daniel (2012), distance education has had been burdened with an image problem; it has been regarded as poor quality and substandard (Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010; McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2001) leading to the stigma that DTUs deliver a second rate education (Stella & Gnanam, 2004). In Universitas Terbuka (UT) Indonesia, for example, recent high school graduates enrolled in UT are generally those denied access in traditional state universities (Zuhairi, 1994).

These challenges have enticed for an examination of the student services to support their success particularly regarding the need for establishing acceptable policies and practices by which student success can be facilitated. It is important to study learner support programs at the university. There is little research-based literature to guide policymakers, managers, and practitioners in applying learner support in DTUs. There remain questions about what constitutes student success and how student success should be measured in DTUs. Hence, the need to investigate problems and issues of learner support programs in DTUs. How does learner support work in DTUs? How should a learner support program be managed? What philosophical background rests with a given learner support decision? And how can findings on current learner support policies be applied to improve the culture of quality in learner support areas? This paper may help close that gap by investigating learner support policies and their implementation at Universitas Terbuka (UT) Indonesia.

Strategic reasons for investigating learner support in distance education are as follows. First, Simpson (2002) argued that “student support is a vital element in any [open and distance learning] ODL” (p. 9). In a highly competitive market, learners should become the major concern of all higher education institutions including DTUs, as attrition rates are a concern (Garland, 1993; Roberts, 1984; Simpson 2002; Thompson & Shillington, 2008). Second, in order to be able to provide a richly detailed and contextually embedded picture of each of the DTUs being investigated, the study needed to be narrowly focused. Given the importance of learner support systems, this seemed an obvious choice.

Simpson (2002) also disclosed that studying at ODL is often a very isolating experience: “students are isolated from other students, their tutors, the institution, and sometimes their own family and friends” (p. 10). The isolating experience is also recounted by Jayasundera (2007) who argued that feelings of isolation of distance learners has been regarded as one of the contributors for attrition rate in distance learning. Simpson (2002) went on to argue that there are many factors that contribute to high dropout rates in DTUs that generally could be classified into two areas: academic issues, such as students who are demoralized by a poor exam results, and non-academic factors, such as lack-of time-management skills, or poor communication skills (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

The importance of student support in DTUs can also be viewed from student satisfaction and student persistence perspectives. According to Simpson (2002), quality of student support will have considerable impact on student satisfaction, which in turn will ultimately

affect their persistence and success. Therefore, student support may be designed to support “enjoyment, excitement, [and] pleasure...during the course” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 153). Much research, according to Moore and Kearsley (2012), has shown that the three main causes of dissatisfaction and resistance to distance education are: 1) poor course design and teacher incompetence, 2) mistaken expectations on the part of students, and 3) inability to use technology. In distance education, Irons, Jung, and Keel (2002) revealed that comfort with the technology involved for learner support is a critical factor in determining satisfaction and success. Therefore, it is strategically necessary to have a solid understanding of both the theoretical and logistical elements of student support program to ensure effective implementation of student support delivery.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The overall purpose of this study is to explore and understand the issues related to the development and implementation of the learner support services in UT. The qualitative nature of the study helps to address policy and implementation of learner support areas specifically within UT as the only a single mode distance education university in Indonesia’s educational environment.

### **Research Methodology**

This study is a qualitative research adopting case study approach proposed by Stake (1995; 2000; 2005; 2006) and Merriam (1988; 1990; 1998). The interpretive qualitative orientation is adopted to understand how learner support services are interpreted and implemented in the everyday educational and social worlds where UT operates. Since the learner support services are constructed by people as they interact with the world they are interpreting, it seems very likely that learner support programs may be interpreted and implemented in different ways that increase multiple perceptions of such programs. Therefore, this theoretical perspective supports the use of qualitative research which focuses on understanding and interpretation rather than experimentation (Merriam, 1988).

Semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis were used to collect data needed. The key informants (KIs) who are involved in initiating, developing, and implementing learner support services were asked about their insights regarding the learner support policies, how they develop learner support services, and how these programs are implemented. The key informants consist of people from different clusters covering the university top management level (rector and vice rector in student affairs, head of faculty and vice dean in student affairs, faculty and administrative staff, head of student services, and people from regional office).

Thematic analysis was employed to present and discuss the findings drawn from content analysis of interview transcripts and documents. Analysis of transcribed interviews and documents were coded after the data collection. Transcribed interviews supported by official documents generated a number of emerging themes through the use of two cycles of coding methods. In the first cycle, the researcher used structural coding (Saldana, 2009). In the second cycle of coding, an axial coding method was used to strategically reassemble data for the purpose of categorisation (Saldana, 2009). Coding, categorising, and themes were arrived at through content analysis of transcribed interviews involving iterative reading, identifying initial concepts, developing codes representing evocative attribute for recurrent concepts, categorising related codes, developing and grouping conceptual constructs or themes (Saldana, 2009). In this analytical work, the list of codes

in each individual case study represented the comments and served as symbolically linking from the data to the research questions. For the purpose of this study, the identification of codes, categories, and emerging themes in each research question from each individual case study was supported by MAQXDA 11 application.

## Literature Review of the Learner Support in DTUs

The need for learner support in DTUs comes from the recognition that learning processes take place with teaching providers and students being geographically separate from each other. This learning mode requires distance students to work alone for most parts of the learning process. Therefore, distance learners have unique needs, and many practitioners in the field believe providing distance learners with appropriate support services will increase the quality of their learning (Lee, 2000; Simpson, 2002). These unique needs include: 1) information to help learners relate to the institution and understand its systems, 2) contact with tutors to help maintain motivation and overcome learning problems, 3) institutional identity to feel that they are part of the body of learners rather than studying in isolation, and 4) advice on how to study in distance education delivery mode (COL, 1999).

The term learner support, however, has been defined in different ways to classify different areas of learner support services in DTUs. According to Lee (2000), Robinson, (1995), and Sewart (1993), learner support is rather a broad concept and its definition varies. Simpson (2002) also argued that the term learner support has been used and exemplified very loosely linked with the words like 'guidance', 'advice' and 'counselling'. There are two different perspectives to approach learners support: supplementary and holistic (Robinson, 1995; Tait, 1995). The supplementary approach is more limited in that learner support is confined as an add-on to learning materials and in the latter, holistic/complementary approach, learner support services are viewed as an important factor which pervades the entire education program (Lee, 2000).

Simpson (2002) defined learner support in the broadest terms as "all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their study" (p.6). Simpson (2002) extended his definition into two major learner support services. The first category includes academic support covering all areas, such as defining course territory, explaining concepts, exploring the course, feedback, developing learning skills, chasing progress and enrichment (extending the boundaries of the course and sharing the excitement of learning). The second grouping of activities consists of advising (giving information, exploring problems and suggesting directions), assessment (providing feedback to the individual on non-academic aptitudes and skills), action (dealing with practical help to promote study), advocacy (making out a case for funding and writing a reference), agitation (promoting changes within the institution to benefit students), and organizing student support.

Recently, the learner support in DTUs has been regarded as one of the critical factors in ODL consisting of various key elements ranging from administrative support, instructional support, technical support, and tutorial/counselling support. The importance of learner support services has also been addressed in the QA guidelines of COL and AAOU. For the purpose of this study, we review learner support areas based on the COL and AAOU models.

## Learner Support Areas: COL Model

The COL model for learner support can be found in the “Quality Assurance Toolkit: distance higher education institutions and programs” (COL, 2009). The document has been attributed to the COL, Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The QA toolkit consists of several aspects including learner support areas.

The COL’s learner support model is equipped with a number of important elements needed for the application of the model including criteria standards for each respective area including learner support areas and performance indicators. According to this model, the performance indicators are developed to enable DTUs to: 1) conduct a summative self-evaluation for quality improvement, and 2) monitor the processes of continuous learning and ongoing improvement.

According to the COL (2009), learner support deals with various provisions of a range of opportunities for tutoring at a distance through the use of various forms of technology. Learner support areas include contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and the stimulation of peer support structures are employed to facilitate their holistic progression (COL, 2009). The COL (1999b) further stipulated that regardless of the form and management of these services, learner support must meet two functions—tuition and counselling. Tuition services refer to a number of activities that promote intellectual support such as explaining a concept or instruction to the learners, exploring issues with the learners, and giving feedback to the learners. Meanwhile, counselling services deal with personal and emotional support such as providing the learners with information and advice, taking action to help learners, and advocating on behalf of learners. According to the COL, the quality criteria for learner support areas that DTUs may adopt include a number of standards as follows:

- learner support is planned during programme development and is built into the design of the programme and course materials;
- learner support is provided using a range of media, with emphasis on the use of appropriate ICTs;
- tutors are selected and trained to shift their roles from being teachers to facilitators of learning;
- tutorial group size is optimum in facilitating adequate support to learners in various ways;
- tutors provide timely feedback to learners on their assignments;
- academic, administrative and technical staff facilitate learner success;
- there are mechanisms to follow up and support learners throughout the duration of their study;
- opportunities are provided for academic and social peer interaction, vertically with tutors and horizontally with peers;
- measures for feedback and monitoring of learner support services are in place; and
- institutional mechanisms to facilitate student progression from one level of education to the next higher level successfully and towards gainful employment. (Adapted from COL, 2009, p. 71-79)

These criteria standards reflect the essential elements in offering quality of learner support services in DTUs. Therefore, these criteria statements represent a distillation of good practice in the specific domain of learner support services. Further, these criteria standards were transformed into 49 performance indicators to guide DTUs to address “the requirements for quality provision and to meet the expressed needs of learners” (p. 9). These performance indicators for learner support also indicate the kinds of data to be collected while implementing each activity of learner support areas.

### **Learner Support Areas: AAOU Model**

According to AAOU (2010), learner support refers to all variables relating to tutorial and learning services to ensure that students’ learning processes are facilitated and their needs are met. Learners are supported by the provision of a range of opportunities for real two-way communication through the use of various forms of technology for tutoring at a distance; contact tutoring, assignment tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and the encouragement of peer support structures. In its current QA framework, AAOU (2010) has revised the QA criteria for learner support areas into two sub-components – tutorial and counselling.

1. Sub-component tutorial: Tutorial support for distance learners is different from teaching as demonstrated in conventional universities. Tutoring modes either include face-to-face contact or involve media for tutorial support such as radio, audio cassette, telephone, television, video, video conferencing and computer-mediated instruction. Tutorials can be seen as crucial services for helping students to develop study skills, to learn to be master concepts and to support student success.
2. Sub-component counselling: Counselling support covers the various aspects of guidance and advising. With regard to the current trends of using online services, counselling services also include several ways to improve communication and interaction skills to promote network and community building. To facilitate the application, a number of the best practices have been developed to support the application of the model.

The emergence of these models allow DTUs to improve their Quality Assurance (QA) mechanism and procedures to improve the quality of their learner support services based on both local requirements and international certifications.

### **Presentation of the Results**

This session explores some issues relating to the policy and implementation of learner support services at UT Indonesia. The first cycle of coding from the combined data, interviews and official documentary analysis and the second step of ordering codes through categorisation is not presented in this paper. The consolidated major themes from categorization are presented in the following discussion.

#### **Theme 1: QA manual in learner support areas serves as the guide for implementation**

The implementation of learner support services was guided by the university’s QA manual for learner support areas, covering teaching learning provisions and support services supplemented by diverse quality policies, and best practices. This university’s manual was a major reference for further development of different learner support services at the unit or department levels. For implementation purposes, these learner support areas were

elaborated further into different statements of best practice to guide all people and departments in implementing quality programs in learner support areas.

## **Theme 2: Institutional policies in teaching and learning provisions and student support serve as the guide to make sure that learner support services fit students' requirements**

It was disclosed that the university policies that support learner support services were developed in such a way in order to meet students' needs. The university policy that supports learner support programs could be identified from two main components within the university quality framework: 1) the learner and learner' profiles component and 2) the learner support component. The university policy learner support clearly stated:

*UT ensures quality learner support services that promote student learning facilitated in accordance with the needs of students by utilizing a variety of information and communication technologies in a variety of forms that can be accessed by students. (UT, 2012, p. 9)*

For the purpose of this study, the university's policies in learner support areas were classified into two major areas as follows:

### 1. University policies in teaching and learning provisions

- Various forms of learning support services are provided to support students' freedom to take advantage of learning services according to their abilities and conditions.
- A variety of teaching modes are designed and delivered that are easily accessible by the students through different media.
- Learning support services are designed according to the principles of open and distance higher education.
- Learning support services are organized according to standardized guidelines.
- Tutorial sessions are delivered by accredited tutors.
- Students' progress is monitored with clear and consistent mechanisms including obtaining feedback on learning outcomes in a timely manner.
- Tutor' appraisal is conducted regularly by relevant parties accompanied by the provision of feedback on their performance.

### 2. University policies in student support services

- The institution provides support services for learners who are socio-economically, physically or psychologically disadvantaged, and have special learning needs and preferences.
- Support services are provided to support student success.
- Support services are provided before and during the learning process through a variety of methods and media that are easily accessible for students.
- Support services are provided by qualified staff.
- Monitoring and evaluation of all learner support services are performed using a clear mechanism. (UT, 2012, pp. 7-9)

These policies serve as guidelines for all relevant units/departments and people involved in the implementation of learner support areas.

### **Theme 3: Institution's internal environment supports the implementation of learner support services that addresses the importance of the distributed regional offices to support students' learning**

The implementation of learner support services is bound by the organisational structure of UT as a distance teaching institution. The implementation of learner support services called for an integrated system of teaching and learning provisions involving different departments such as Faculty, Institute of Learning materials Development and Information System, Center for Learning Material Distribution, and UT's Regional Offices.

The university' regional centers have played strategic role in providing learner support for local students. Currently, UT has been equipped by 37 regional centers scattered all over the country. Under these regional offices, teaching and learning provisions including Face-to-face (F2F) tutorials and online learning services and different non-academic services such as counselling and student enquires were managed and provided to support students' success (UT-LC-09). These centers developed local partnership and networking with different external agencies such as public and private universities to run learner support programs (UT-FD-05) and to get necessary human resources. They include tutors, instructors, and teaching supervisors. Tutors and administrative staffs have been regarded as key players for these learner support areas. One KI explained that a number of roles must be performed by administrative staff in implementing QA in support services, such as serving students' complaints, inquiries, compliments, and suggestions (UT-CS-08). The university has standard quality guidelines of how to provide services to students through telephone, walk in, or online support (UT-CS-08; UT-FD-05).

Meanwhile, academic staff members are involved in different activities in learning and support services, such as delivering tutorials, developing curriculum, providing academic counselling, developing study programs, supervising and monitoring online tutorials. One respondent expressed his experience as a tutor as follows:

*I am a tutor. I have various tasks and one of them is serving F2F tutorials. You know that we have different kinds of tutorials, including F2F, online, correspondence through magazine, and radio and television broadcast. When I come to my class for F2F sessions, my task is not only to facilitate the instructional process for my students but also to provide support services, including encouragement and motivation to my students to support their learning and timely success. (UT-AS-07)*

In addition to this, academic staff should also engage in developing scripts for F2F and online learning materials. As the university adopted a new policy to equip all courses with online learning modes, online tutors should be involved in preparing two types of scripts: lesson plans for tutorial sessions and units of tutorial activities. These two types of documents were then used as guidelines for all tutors in the same subject (UT-FD-05).

### **Theme 4: The application of learner support services emphasizes the employment of blended learning pedagogy and the implementation of e-CRM**

From the interview data, supported by official documents, it was found that another emerging theme was related to the application of QA in learner support areas that emphasized the employment of blended learning pedagogy to support teaching and



learning provisions. In addition, diverse support services were also provided to support students' success.

### **The employment of blended learning to support teaching and learning provisions**

As a DTU, UT is very focused in developing numerous blended teaching deliveries to support students' independent learning. Blended teaching activities involve developing and self-explanatory printed materials supplemented by study guide. The university also developed audio-video cassettes, F2F and online tutorials, correspondence tutorials through UT magazine (*Komunika*), and broadcasting tutorials via radio and television programs. In general, however, there were three major instructional delivery methods: self-directed learning using printed learning materials, F2F tutorials, and online learning.

According to one respondent, UT has developed modules that were specifically designed for independent study (UT-LC-09). This respondent explained further, "it is expected that students can understand the teaching materials without help from others because all the information necessary to understand the teaching materials is available in their modules" (UT-LC-09). Another respondent recounted that:

*We all know that distance education modules are designed differently with textbooks commonly used at conventional universities. So the fact that UT instructional materials have been developed in such a way in accordance with the principle of self-contained so that they can be studied independently by individual students.... By reading their modules, students may fully understand the content without getting help from instructors, because modules represent their lecturers in distance education system. (UT-AS-07)*

F2F tutorial deliveries were provided based on the course requirements and students' requests. F2F tutorial services were organised by regional offices and conducted on weekends. The key respondent from regional office described these F2F tutorial services as follows:

*The major mode of learning support services that we provide are face-to-face tutorials. To ensure the quality, we start with planning that includes selecting the subjects, identifying qualified tutors and determining locations that are easily reached by participants. The implementation of F2F tutorial sessions are controlled by regional office and audited by external auditors. The results of these quality assessments are recorded and analysed for appropriate improvement. (UT-LC-09)*

Furthermore, to ensure the quality of F2F tutorial sessions in promoting students' learning, the university has developed tutorial kits since 2007. The main purpose of this tool was to standardise the understanding and organisation of F2F services (UT, 2010).

Meanwhile, online learning deliveries are now becoming a more popular mode of teaching. UT has implemented online services, including those designed for tutorials, web-based supplementary materials, self-exercise tests, and online counselling. Online learning services were used to decrease the constraints of distance and time. The number of online courses increased in response to students' demand and so did the availability of access points in different regions all over the country (UT-FD-05; UT-FD-06). When this study was conducted, it was reported that all academic staff were very busy in preparing the implementation of new policies to offer online learning services for all courses in 2013.

These preparation steps include developing online tutorial scripts and conducting online tutor trainings for internal and external academic staff.

### **Support services that address the importance of e-CRM to provide timely and effective response to students inquires and problems**

UT established an important unit, the Office of Student Service, in providing support services at UT's head office under which electronic-customer relationship management (e-CRM) services are managed to provide timely and effective response to students' inquiries and problems. It must be noted, however, support services at UT were delivered through different channels. According to one participant, "students may file their complaints by phone, email, or come straight to UT's head office or to UT's regional offices spread out all over Indonesia. We have a form of customer complaints that have been integrated into our QA system" (UT-QC-04). One of the KIs explained that:

*[The] e-CRM is an online information service system that we set up as an alternative channel of communication and interaction for students to submit their problems and concerns. By using e-CRM applications, students can ask for help on the issue at hand or ask questions, requests their academic records. (UT-CS-08)*

To use this application, students must first log into the program and write their concerns on the New Ticket Gate. The program would automatically give the students a ticket number for further use for checking responses from relevant people or units at UT (UT-CS-08).

### **Theme 5: The implementation of teaching and learning processes corresponds with Holmberg's interaction and communication theory**

The next main theme that emerged from the data refers to the implementation of teaching and learning processes at the institution. The instructional processes at the university correspond to Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory. In addition, the teaching and learning provisions employed at UT also are related to the two derivative theories in distance education, i.e. autonomy and independence and community of inquiry theory.

Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory has become a major principle in distance education institutions, which has required significant efforts to organise learner support services. Since its early operation, UT has been equipped by a learner support system in order to establish communication among all learning parties. In line with the advancement of ICT, UT has also put forward different strategies to integrate current technology for instructional purposes that support interaction and communication among teaching and learning parties. One of the KIs highlighted this as follows:

*To establish the social relationships, we provide F2F activities. UT also provides good online forums, including online forums in different courses, informal online discussions that are open to all students at the faculty and university level. It seems to me that there is no obstacle for students to interact with peers. For PGSD students, for example, they come every weekend during tutorial sessions in their study group [Pokjar]. They can talk and share with tutors and other peers. (UT-PC-01)*

The practice of learner support services at UT also resonated with Holmberg's (1995) ideas about the importance of communication. It was confirmed by another participant who was a long-time tutor; he argued that in distance education:

*Students and tutors do not always have the opportunity for face-to-face. So it is possible there are students who feel lonely and isolated, no friends to talk to. So communication between tutors and students is needed. Not all students are able to learn relying on modules or other learning resources that we prepared. Two-way communication is necessary to motivate students' learning. (UT-AS-07)*

This participant, however, addressed that not all students need to foster intensive communication with tutors. Some students were more experienced and independent. When the researcher asked about Holmberg's (2007) feeling empathy and personal relationships, this KI expressed that feeling empathy and developing good relationships, based on his experience as tutor, were beneficial for students:

*By establishing good communication, empathy, and maintaining a close relationship, tutors can help students to more openly express their problems they face. Good relationships promote student success. In every tutorial session, I always try to establish friendly communication and establish good relationships with my students so that they trust, are open and willing to express their problems during study. I can see that empathy motivates my students to study. (UT-AS-07)*

This participant expressed further:

*In developing personal relationship with students, I always say to them 'as long as you do not ask me for a grade, I will serve you'. I do not sell marks or grades. That's my principle. If they are only consulting as to why their score is low or something else, I am happy to serve them. I feel so much empathy for my students who live in remote areas. (UT-AS-07)*

According to one participant who is responsible for student affairs, good relationships with students could be facilitated by various means such as telephone calls, email, online forums, or F2F consultation (UT-FD-06). This KI argued that "for us, developing communication with our students was needed not only for motivating their learning but also to decrease feelings of distance between students and ourselves as teaching providers (UT-FD-06).

Further, it was disclosed that Instructional processes at UT have been designed in line with its nature as a higher education institution that adopted a distance learning system. Through this learning system, the delivery of its instructional processes has been developed in order to promote autonomous and independent learning, emphasising the dynamic role of students in organising their studies and reducing the role of instructors as well as those of the university. Therefore, self-managed learning or self-directed learning has become an important aspect. One of the KIs addressed this as follows:

*Self-direction or self-directed learning is important in distance education. Students have freedom to decide whether they want to learn through modules and do not want to be involved in tutorials. It's up to them. Therefore, any instructional process whether it is self-study, study groups, tutorials and others should be able to raise student self-direction and autonomy. Students' autonomy is in terms of how fast they want to finish their study. What teaching and learning*

*deliveries do they want to choose? When do they want to learn? When do they want to graduate? It is absolutely up to them. However, they must achieve the same standards of competencies. (UT-PC-01)*

This participant recounted this self-directed issue by mentioning, “In distance education, students must have a drive for self-direction. They must develop their self-directed learning by themselves. If they cannot, it is our responsibility to make sure they have self-direction for learning” (UT-PC-01). To promote students’ self-directed learning, for example, the university provides orientation sessions and study skills workshops at each regional office.

Inspired by the separation of students and instructors during the process of instruction, the university has engaged in different methods in order to provide choice for students to be involved in learning based on their own time and learning methods. As articulated by one respondent:

*Vice Rector in Academic Affairs has done a lot to make sure students have the opportunity to develop their independent learning skills. Numerous efforts have been set involving a variety of learning resources delivered online such as iTV. Learning support services have been integrated and enriched to promote better student learning. Many media are used to ensure that students can learn according to their conditions and pleasure. (UT-PC-01)*

Another participant noted that all learning materials and various instructional deliveries have been developed “in order to support student learning independence. We develop self-contained modules, audio-video cassettes, web supplements and study guides in order to promote independent learning” (UT-QC-04).

It was further disclosed that UT initiated online learning to provide different learning mode for students who have Internet access. The online learning instructions have been developed to support what Holmberg (1995) called two-way traffic communication. The increasing access to Internet along with decreasing cost in using Internet has steered new demand for intensifying interaction and two-way communication through UT online (UT, 2010). Online learning has been considered a crucial component in learner support areas, specifically for promoting communication among instructional parties and supporting the idea of a community of inquiry through online collaborative learning.

The current practice of online learning is based on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory proposed by Garrison and Archer (2007). There are evidences representing the idea of how teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence have been maintained in UT online learning deliveries. One of the KIs explained his experience:

*Before starting online tutorials, I have to develop 8 quality topics for discussions and 3 assignments that will be uploaded regularly during one semester. In this online discussion forum, I have to direct the discussion and encourage participants to participate in the discussion. (UT-AS-07)*

Another respondent recounted about the importance of the tutor in moderating online collaborative learning. The respondent noted that:

*Tutors must initiate the discussion in online tutorials presenting materials to initiate collaborative learning. Tutors must encourage students to express opinions and provide response to others' ideas. I see English course interaction is very strong because it is supported by a good tutor, active, and responsive. This leads students to be actively involved in the online discussion forum. I see that in online tutorials students depend on their tutor. (UT-FD-05)*

Concerning the role of tutor in creating social presence, one KI argued that collaborative learning through online discussion support virtual learning community. This KI noted that:

*In online learning, I post what we call materiinisiasi [triggered learning materials for initiating discussion] first to stimulate student learning initiatives and develop collaborative learning. I must also post my own opinion, responding to students' view. Students also do the same thing. To me, online learning provides opportunity to employ a learner-centered approach.... I think this approach allows for discussion and it is good to develop a sense of community. For example, when I give group assignments every member have different opinions. Through discussion, they have to be tolerant to the different perspectives. From these different perspectives, then we mix together to draw a comprehensive conclusion. (UT-AS-07)*

The respondent expressed that a virtual learning community through an online discussion forum provided a good opportunity for tutors and students to exchange knowledge and promote students' success. Students had the opportunity to take part in the discussion and expressed their ideas and respect different perspectives (UT-AS-07).

## **Theme 6: The implementation of learner support services relates to the university's external environments**

UT is the only higher education institution that fully adopts a distance learning system in the country. UT has proven itself in meeting the far-reaching goal of promoting lifelong learning in the context of Indonesia's educational environment. Indonesia is the world's largest archipelago with over 17,000 islands and demographically the fourth most populous country after China, India, and the United States of America. The country represents a mosaic of ethnic and regional cultures with over 1,000 local languages and dialects spoken among different ethnic groups. The Indonesian people use bahasa Indonesia as a national language. Operating in this educational environment, there are a number of external environments that relate to the implementation of learner support programs at UT. These external environments include local culture, educational technology, external quality agencies' standard, government, and the most important clientele of the university (students).

### **Sub-theme 6.1: The implementation of learner support services correlates to local culture particularly language and learning habits**

Language and students' learning habits were identified as crucial elements that contribute to the implementation of QA in learner support areas. One respondent addressed how these two aspects correlated to the learning support services designed by UT:

*Language factor greatly influences learning abilities. Therefore, all our modules use Indonesian language and are not written in English or any other language,*

*except for modules in English language courses. Then to help students' proficiency in online learning especially for teacher students, our curriculum is equipped by Computers and Learning Media. I tell you that online learning has not become about learning habits for many students (especially teacher students living in remote areas) and many of them lack of computer literacy. (UT-AS-07)*

Another respondent from a regional center frankly admitted that besides the use of national language, during F2F tutorial sessions, tutors and students use their own vernacular. This respondent explained that:

*Sometimes, local culture (especially local language) influences learning support services. The use of mother tongue is to harmonize services to be more easily accepted and understood by students. In my opinion the use of the national language in the teaching materials and tutorials is more appropriate to support optimal student learning. (UT-LC-09)*

The issue of learning habits was also noted by another KI who mentioned that mostly teacher students took professional development program. They preferred to attend F2F tutorials than being involved in online learning programs. This student's dependence on tutors was confirmed by one key participant, as follows:

*In fact there are many students who depend on face-to-face tutorials. The request for F2F tutorials even now tends to be increasing. Although we have already offered online tutorials, F2F mode based on students' requests seem to be increasing from different regional offices. It seems that students' dependency on tutors is still high and in our culture there is a perception that study means meeting with instructors or teachers. (UT-FD-05)*

It was reported that teacher students' participation rate in online learning programs was still low due to their computer literacy level and access point problems (UT-FD-06). In general, however, students' participation rate, including non-teacher students (non-basic education program), since 2006 up to 2009 tended to fluctuate (UT, 2010).

### **Sub-theme 6.2: The implementation of learner support services is fashioned by educational technology to support both academic and administrative programs**

UT has made IT investments to enhance management communication between UT's head office and its 37 regional offices and to support distance teaching and learning. UT's Internet network is provided through two Internet service providers (ISPs) with bandwidth capacity of 45 Mbytes Clear Channel (UT, 2010). UT's head office and regional offices have also been equipped by a virtual private network (VPN) for data transactions and video conferencing with bandwidth capacity of 100Mbytes. The bandwidth for each regional office is 1024 Kbytes (UT, 2010). The student record system (SRS) has been upgraded to allow for user-friendliness and capacity to store information on a large number of students on one database.

The university's ICT infrastructure development has been designed to provide active assistance in widening learner support services, including online learning and counselling programs. One of the KIs addressed how ICT provided a positive impact on learner support areas:

*The advancement of ICT has a major and positive impact on distance education. At UT now, we have a new policy on learning support services, especially*

*dealing with online learning. It is now compulsory to equip all existing courses with online tutorial services starting next year, 2013.... Interaction and communication among tutors, administrative staff and students have been facilitated by UToonline. (UT-FD-06)*

Addressing this new policy, one respondent confirmed that “next year all courses must be completed with online tutorial services. Besides, our internal academic staff, we hire many lecturers from other institutions to become our online tutors. Now we are preparing a lot of training for the prospective online tutors” (UT-FD-05).

Another interview subject noted that ICT has also allowed UT to provide online registration services and online examination. Examination items were uploaded and the participants took the online examination in their regional office or in a selected place under the supervision of regional office’s staff (UT, 2010; UT-PC-01).

### **Sub-theme 6.3: The implementation of learner support services aligns with two professional QA agencies’ standards**

The university has invited two external QA agencies to assess its quality achievement in learner support areas: ISO and International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE). In 2004, UT’s QA manuals were updated in line with the university target for the ISO 9001 in some UT core business activities such as course material services, academic services, regional offices’ learning services and academic administration services (UT-QC-04).

One KI clarified that the adoption of ISO was aimed to “assess management processes that we define by ourselves” (UT-QC-02). This decision to employ the ISO 9001 has been taken to improve the quality management in different areas including in learner support areas. In addition to adopting the ISO, UT has also involved the ICDE in 2005. UT invited ICDE to conduct assessment with the goal of achieving the International Certificate of Quality. One of the participants explained that the focus of the assessment was to examine “the quality of administration and practices in the field of distance education including in learner support areas. ICDE wants to see that we are doing what we said concerning various core businesses in open and distance learning” (UT-QC-02) such as course development and learner support services. This participant added that every external quality agency, including ICDE, has its own quality criteria. This KI addressed this issue as follows:

*ICDE has its own criteria that are different from quality standards requested by BAN-PT and not necessarily exactly the same as our quality assurance system.... [ICDE] gives a list of questions that we have to answer in a portfolio. From the list of questions, we will know what the ICDE concerns in assessing quality. When ICDE conducted a quality review, they also examined what actions were taken following their previous recommendations five years ago. (UT-QC-02)*

The university undertook various actions as its response to the recommendation of ICDE quality auditor, such as improving capacity building in external communication, tracking students’ study progress, and developing digital library services.

### **Sub-theme 6.4: The implementation of QA in learner support areas must correspond with government QA standards**

The influence of Government on UT’s learner support services could be classified into two dimensions. The first dimension has to do with the establishment of study programs and

the second aspect concerned the government's role in accreditation. With regard to the role of the government in controlling study programs offered by all Indonesia higher education institutions, one respondent noted that "UT and all higher education institutions were required by law to follow the guideline developed by the DGHE [Directorate General of Higher Education]. For this purpose, UT should confirm its quality of learner support services referring to the Director of DGHE's Decree Number 108/DIKTI/Kep/2001 and the Minister of National Education's Decree number 234/U/2000. Concerning the government role in accreditation, UT has long been involved in quality assessment by National Accreditation Board of Higher Education (*Badan Akreditasi Nasional - Perguruan Tinggi* or *BAN-PT*).

When this research was conducted, one of the respondents noted that the new instrument for accrediting distance higher education had been completed. This respondent expressed that "We are lucky now because BAN-PT has developed a specific instrument for distance higher education" (UT-QC-04). The respondent further explained, however, that some criteria do not correspond well to the context of UT. For example, one quality criteria suggests that students must complete their bachelor degree within four years. UT is a DTU that provides a lifelong education for the nation. Unlike students in conventional universities, it is not necessary for students at UT to take 15-20 credits per semester and to complete their study within four years (UT-QC-04).

#### **Sub-theme 6.5: Students being involved in the implementation of learner support programs through regular student survey**

The university conducts regular student survey to give their feedback and satisfaction level with regard to the teaching and learning and other support services. This student feedback for quality improvement was addressed by one participant as follows:

*Students have their space to comment and provide input for our policies in learner support services. We continue to review our policies in learning support areas and improve our SOPs based on input from students organized by UT's regional offices located in different parts of the country. (UT-QC-04)*

When the researcher asked another participant in a regional office to confirm this information, the participant explained that:

*Yes, we ask students to provide their feedback related to learning support services. Students not only assess the performance of tutors but should also provide feedback to all UT services including registration, learning materials, support services, implementation of final examinations, and administrative services. The evaluation of student satisfaction level is conducted every semester and the results will be analysed for our discussion in our management review meeting. (UT-LC-09)*

Students' influence on the quality of learning support areas was also noted by one respondent who reported that the development of UT current policy to employ Webinar was actually based on students' input (UT-QC-02).

The results of this research provide some understandings about the diversity of learner support services at UT. Some interesting themes about policies and implementation of learner support services may encourage us to explore more detail, for example, about how the QA manuals in learner support areas works as the guide for implementation, in what ways these QA manuals have been perceived and implemented by all people in different



level of UT management. It becomes commonplace for all organisations which adopts QA program to develop different quality guidelines by adopting standard operating procedures (SOPs) to carry out and standardized the implementation. No doubt the use of SOPs may generate benefits for the universities such as maintaining the consistency of the management processes. However, there is a debate addressing the practice of SOPs that may also risk the universities' rigorous quality systems in terms of teaching and learning provisions. It is argued that quality guidelines provide clear processes to be consistently implemented to ensure the achievement of expected outcomes. However, this current practice will lead universities to employ excessive measuring and monitoring of quality procedures that emphasize management processes, checking for errors, disempowering faculty and tutors in academic autonomy, and hampering the encouragement of innovative instruction. Therefore, the rigid implementation of quality guidelines in DTUs especially in learner support areas seems to be an argumentative issue.

Another issue arising from the results of this research and perhaps necessary important for our reflections. As the university being involved in adopting QA programs for learner support areas, how the university develop these programs? How to implement these programs to ensure that student-learning supports meet with students' needs. What kind of norms, values, and cultures must we develop in order to articulate quality as continuous improvement and how might they maintain and improve them? Besides, it is also very challenging to examine quality in the context of international standards and requirement perspectives. As UT invites ISO and ICDE for quality review, there are some questions left behind. How will global standards accommodate various institutional and cultural diversities? What kind of quality model will fit with numerous and varied stakeholders? Furthermore, since a local quality framework is subject to an external accreditation board under the Ministry of Education – National Accreditation Board for Higher Education that has its own QA paradigm, then it may be difficult for distance education providers to practice quality which meets with national and international standards. It seems to be a problem in accommodating all stakeholders' interests when we talk about quality in learner support areas. Therefore, further research may be important to address these issues and to contribute for the development of distance education as our field of study.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion and findings in this case study, shows clearly that to survive and prosper UT has observed its students and developed its learner support services to meet its students' requirements. The university has had a formal quality management system for learner support areas. These quality guidelines for learner support areas clearly explain quality standards for different programs in teaching learning provisions and support services.

With regard to the implementation of learner support services, it was found that the application of learner support has been supported by internal environment emphasizing the important role of the university' regional centers in managing learner support services for local students. The implementation of learner support services also correlated with external environments, including socio-culture particularly language and learning habits, educational technology, two professional quality standards (ISO and ICDE), government, and students. From interview data supported by official documents, it is also noted that the learner support services provided correspond to Holmberg's (1995) interaction and communication theory. In addition, the academic services developed at UT were also

resonated with the two derivative theories of distance education supplemented in this research, i.e., autonomy and independent theory and community of inquiry theory.

It was found that the university's policies in teaching learning provisions and support services have been used as guidance for learner support services. The policies in support services cover different policies to support educational services including providing information, counselling, and student activities. Meanwhile, the university policies in teaching and learning provisions include diverse policies to support students' learning involving their blended learning pedagogy with printed materials as their major instructional mode.

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