

EXPLORING CONTRIBUTION OF STUDENT SUPPORT IN ENHANCING STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: LESSON FROM UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA INDONESIA

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Abstract

The high number of non-enrolment students had decreased the retention rates in the Indonesia Open University. Prior studies revealed that student support had a pivotal role in enhancing student persistence. Therefore, this study was aimed to explore contribution of student support in increasing student persistence by employing mixed methods approach. Student persistence in this study refers to continuation of enrolment within four consecutive semesters. This study used sequential explanatory design by collecting the quantitative data from surveying 153 students and then followed by semi-structured interviews with 13 purposefully selected participants. In the quantitative phase, the results of the study revealed that student support had important contribution to student persistence. Meanwhile, the qualitative findings supported the survey results that student support had a pivotal role in influencing student persistence. Moreover, this study suggested the improvement of student support at the level of affective, cognitive, and systemic in order to enhance student persistence.

Key words: Student Support, Student Persistence, Open University

1. INTRODUCTION

Low retention is a big problem for distance education institutions. Student persistence in the distance education contexts according to various prior studies, is lower than in conventional or face-to-face programmes (Diaz & Cartnal, 2006; Simpson, 2003). Carr (2000) showed that persistence in distance education programmes has been often 10 – 20 percentage points lower than in conventional programmes and less than 50% of distance education students finish their courses. Furthermore, Simpson (2003, 2013) also demonstrated that student persistence in open and distance learning courses is typically no higher than in conventional learning and is often worse.

Universitas Terbuka (Indonesia Open University) also encounters low retention rates as a big challenge to resolve. Several prior studies have shown that Indonesia Open University has been noted for having a low rate of completion and a low level of achievement (Belawati, 1998; Kadarko, 2003; Ratnaningsih et.al., 2008). Universitas Terbuka, in 2015, enrolled about 396,955 students, spread out in different parts of the country and some overseas locations. Over 90% of these students are working adults (Universitas Terbuka, 2015). Moreover, since its foundation in 1984, Universitas Terbuka has enrolled over 1.4 million students and has produced about 700,000 alumni, working in various professional fields (Universitas Terbuka, 2012). This data indicated that the Indonesia Open University has high enrolment, but low completion rates.

The significant role of student support in increasing student persistence in Open University contexts has been acknowledged by prior empirical studies. Fozdar & Kumar (2007) identified student support related reasons as the barriers of student persistence at Indira Gandhi National Open University. These reasons include insufficient academic support from study centres; study centres too far from residence; insufficient counselling sessions; difficulty in attending laboratory session; lack of proper

intimacy regarding theory and lab counselling sessions; lack of responsiveness from study centre, regional centre and head quarter; and lack information regarding course material, assignment, and other relevant information. Moreover, Barnett (2011) insisted the importance role of faculty validation in enhancing student persistence. Faculty validation refers to interaction with students initiated by faculty and others in the campus community, that engender feelings of self-worth and a belief in the students' ability to succeed in the college community. However, student persistence is a complex issue involving changing factors as the needs and expectations of students and institutions change. In other words, student persistence is context dependent or culturally bounded (Astin, 2003; Hagedorn, 2011; Holder, 2007; Rovai, 2003).

By considering the variations in educational and organisational cultures, geography, technology, programme of study, and student characteristics, the development of student support system in one institution or country could not simply transferred to another institution or country. Therefore, it is important to explore the roles of student support in enhancing student persistence in the context of Universitas Terbuka Indonesia.

2. STUDENT SUPPORT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

In this study, the term student support refers to the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course material or learning resources that are uniform for all learners (Tait, 2000). Meanwhile, the term of student persistence relates to the behaviour of continuing learning in the course programme by continuation of enrolment within four consecutive semesters. In the Indonesia Open University, the students who are enrolled within four consecutive semesters are grouped into active students; otherwise those who do not enrol and do not register for any new course within four consecutive semesters will be classified into inactive students. A review of prior studies on student persistence in the Open University contexts revealed that student support occupied 43% of institutional factors contributing to student persistence (Fozdar & Kumar, 2007; Tait, 2004).

Tait, A. (2000) identified two main factors determining the direction of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) development, and the way how student support is delivered: the revolution of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and the marketization of education. ICT revolution has provided many options for ODL institutions in offering student support regardless time and place through virtual environments. In the meantime, the marketization of education has shifted the old perspective on how to deal with students in ODL into a new perspective as 'customer'. By admitting a customer culture in ODL inevitably lead to speeding up in delivering student support services.

Furthermore, Tait (2000) described three primary interdependent functions of student support in a ODL programmes:

1. Cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students;
2. Affective: providing an environment which support students, creates commitment, and enhance self-esteem; and
3. Systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly.

In addition, Tait (2000) also recommended to consider several core elements to develop student support system in ODL programmes, such as students characteristics; course or programme demands; geography; technology; scale; and management system. Student characteristics represent a matrix of qualities that need to be assessed when establishing which services particular cohorts of students will need. In assessing student characteristics, it is proposed to include the main feature of student identity: gender; age; employment or unemployment; disposable income; educational background; geographical situation; special needs; language; ethnic and cultural characteristics; communication technology connectedness.

Technological infrastructure, scale and geography are also important in developing student support system. To know which technologies used by students is essential in delivering student services. In making any assessment of the use of technologies by students, it is important to distinguished further between three modes: the domestic, the workplace, and social availability of technologies. Further, scale refers to the intended volume of activity, and is a significant determinant of the ways in which systems for student support should be constructed. Meanwhile, the geography represents not only as

a geographical distance, the density of population in rural and urban areas but also as a social and cultural dimensions (Tait, 2000).

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed methods research, which focused on collecting, analysing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2010). According to Creswell and Clark (2011, p.5), the definition of a mixed methods research includes the following several characteristics that the researchers should do:

- Collect and analyse persuasively and rigorously both qualitative and quantitative data (based on research questions);
- Mix (or integrate or link) the two forms of data concurrently by combining them (or merging them), sequentially by having one build on the other, or embedding one within the other;
- Give priority to one or to both forms of data (in terms of what the research emphasises);
- Use these procedures in a single study or in multiple phases of a programme of study
- Frame these procedures within philosophical worldviews and theoretical lens; and
- Combine the procedures into specific research designs that direct the plan for conducting the study.

In terms of a mixed methods design, this study used the explanatory sequential design in two distinct interactive phases (J. P. Creswell & Clark, 2011). This design started with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, which has the priority of explaining the relationship between student support and student persistence in the Indonesia Open University. In this first phase, the quantitative data were collected by using a web-survey. The population of this study was the undergraduate students of Faculty of Sosial and Political Sciences who enrolled from admission period of 2009/2010 to 2011/2012. The total number of 6,095 students were invited by email to participate in the web-survey. Out of 6,095 invited students, only 153 respondents completed the questionnaire.

In the second phase, a multiple case study was employed to collect qualitative data through individual semi-structured interviews to help explain deeper the relationship between student support and student persistence. In this qualitative phase, Purposeful sampling was employed in this case study design by drawing samples from volunteered participants through the quantitative survey. There were 69 participants who volunteered to participate in the interview by providing their email addresses and phone numbers. Considering a representation of diverse cases, a sampling strategy of maximum variation was used to represent enrolment status and gender across the cases (Creswell, 2007). However, of 69 participants who had been contacted through email and telephone, only 13 participants volunteered to participate in the interviews.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Quantitative Phase

Frequency analysis revealed that the most typical age of participants was between 25 and 29 and the majority of them were men. Moreover, their ethnicity was predominantly identified as Javanese; they were mostly graduated from Senior High School; they were employed full-time; and they were primarily married and had children under 18.

The majority of participants undertook the course programme of English for Translation, followed then by Government Science. They were predominantly registered in the regional office of Jakarta and were identified as the active students. Furthermore, the most cited reason of non-enrolment for at least one registration period or more was workloads.

The majority of participants had positive experiences pertinent to student support and learning services. However, apparently most of participants were unsure about their experiences for several issues, such as the role of regional offices in solving academic problems, feedback from tutors, and academic supervision.

Meanwhile, the logistic regression analysis revealed that the variable of student support and learning services were two of 12 variables contributing to the goodness of fit of student persistence model at the Indonesia Open University.

5.2 Qualitative Phase

All participants from active and non-active student groups (13 participants) talked about quality of student services positively and negatively. The participants' perceptions varied and most of the students were satisfied with the student support services provided by the Indonesia Open University. The student support services consisted of the quality of services including student services, modules, tutors, and registration services.

Student services. Student services in this context related to examination and student support provided by the Regional Offices. In the active students group, all participants cited that the student services provided by the Regional Offices were in general satisfactory. Meanwhile, nine out of 13 participants narrated that they had positive experiences regarding the services, such as timely response to students' complaints, accurate information, hospitality, and friendly interaction.

However, Haril and Ina reported negative experiences regarding student services provided by the Regional Offices. Haril mentioned that the service was not friendly to male students. He saw discrimination between male and female students in which female students received more priority in service than male students. As Haril said:

...when staff served female students, they were more proactive and with a warm-hearted. However, when turned to serve the male students, their services were not as good as when they served the female students, so there was favouritism in serving students (Haril).

For Ina and Wati, the registered students at the Regional Office of Malang, East Java, they found that the services at their Regional Offices were disappointing and did not ease student's needs.

...I initially had registered as a new student at the Regional Office of Malang, East Java. I found their services were complicated and uncomfortable, and then I decided to move to Surabaya city...for me, student services in the regional office did not provide complete information and I did not get information what I needed (Ina).

...I ever experienced several disappointments about services provided by the staff of the regional office. They provided less friendly services and could not provide information exactly about what I needed ...so this made me reluctant to communicate a lot with the staff except for registration purpose only (Wati).

In the non-active students group, Amri and Fahri mentioned that both were satisfied with the student services at the Regional Office. In contrast, Devi had low satisfaction regarding the registration services at the Regional Office. Devi witnessed that the registration service was not fully computerised process and some of the staff officers did not have the computer skills. This also contributed to Devi's decision to withdraw from her study.

According to me, the registration service was not a computerised process and then the staffs were looked too old ... some of them were not having computer skills and made the registration process little bit messy with many papers everywhere on the table....(Devi).

Modules. All participants from active and non-active student groups talked about the quality of modules. Eight out of ten participants from active students group were satisfied with the quality of modules in the Indonesia Open University. They were satisfied also with the easy online order and fast delivery of modules. However, Santoso mentioned that several modules needed revision promptly regarding the change of new rules. Zulki also revealed that some modules contained a lot of spelling mistakes, as he said:

...some modules had a lot of spelling mistakes and that seemed to lack of proofreading. Furthermore, some parts of modules were confusing and less communicative, and

impressed that the writing had been done in a hurry to catch the publication deadline for the modules in order to achieve the target for launching the new course programmes (Zulki).

In the non-active students group, Devi commented on the content of modules that she had read. Devi found most of the modules only containing theoretical explanation and lack of implementation of theories in the form of cases analysis. In the meantime, another inactive student, Amri, had a dissenting opinion and stated that the modules had good qualities pertinent to its content and layout.

Tutors. Nine of 13 participants discussed the quality of tutors in online tutorials. Three participants from active student group (Ina, Rama, and Wati) viewed that tutors of online tutorials had provided prompt responses, but the other six participants (Zulki, Wawan, Indra, Santoso, Danu, and Haril) indicated that such tutors were less responsive in providing feedback or comments on students' questions and assignments. For instance, Zulki stated that tutors of online tutorials must provide timely feedback. Meanwhile, Wawan reported no feedback from the tutors in the discussion forum and on assignments.

...sometimes tutors only gave a case and allowed students to discuss without any feedback at all. Then another complaint was tutors assigned assignments to the students, but did not want to show the assignment markings to the students. Therefore, the students remained to wonder about the assignment results (Wawan).

In terms of the quality of tutors in the face-to-face tutorial, four participants (Indra, Santoso, Wati, Danu) who attended the face-to-face tutorials deemed that the tutorial was helpful in understanding the modules and contributed to final score of course programme. However, Santoso had a negative experience regarding he thought of as incompetent tutors, as he said:

There were several the selected tutors in the Regional Office of Semarang who did not master the subject field of teaching. The tutors sometimes could not answer questions from the students. For example, it ever happened when I attended the course for preparing a final comprehensive assignment (Tutorial Akhir Program-TAP)...(Santoso).

Meanwhile, two of three participants from non-active student group did not mention the quality of tutors either in online or face-to-face tutorials services because they did not participate online tutorials regularly. Only Devi who attended the face-to-face tutorials several times and she believed that tutors had poor qualities and the university should recruit other more competent tutors. For Amri, less interaction with other students while studying at Indonesia Open University had contributed to his decision to suspend his study. Therefore, face-to-face tutorials perceived to have an important role to keep students motivated for persisting and completing their studies.

Registration Services. Registration services refers to services that support academic process in the Indonesia Open University, including three phases of registration. The registration system at the Indonesia Open University is an integrated system consisting of three major phases: initial registration, course registration and final registration stage. Initial registration is designed to record, manipulate and update data concerning the admission of a new student; course registration is used to maintain and update active student records; and lastly final stage registration is designed to classify and determine student eligibility to take the final examinations.

Out of 13 participants, 12 participants both from active and inactive students groups talked about the good quality of registration services in the Indonesia Open University. Since the implementation of online registration, the majority of participants agreed that the registration service was easier and helpful. For Haril, an active student, online registration had helped him to keep enrolled in the University even he had no enough money to pay tuition fees.

Since online registration was available, it was easier for me ... I was able to register despite I did not have the cost of tuition fees. Therefore, this service was quite helpful ... in addition, when we did not have enough money to pay the tuition fees, we were still allowed to enrol in advance so we would not miss the registration deadline (Haril).

Meanwhile, Devi, an inactive student, criticised the complicated registration process in which she needed to register manually by visiting the regional office. Manual registration had contributed to her decision to suspend her study. However, what Devi mentioned about the registration process was

understandable because it happened before online registration applied in the registration system in the Indonesia Open University.

6. DISCUSSION

Student support system in the Indonesia Open University includes procedures, policies and structures of the educational institution that enable or discourage student persistence. In this study, student support deals with students' perception of learning services and student services. Quantitative results reported that the majority of participants were satisfied with the learning and student support services provided by the Indonesia Open University. The logistic regression analysis indicated that "student support services" and "learning services" contributed to the goodness of fit of the student persistence model.

These quantitative findings were supported by qualitative multiple case study analysis that the quality of student support services had significant contribution on student persistence in the Indonesia Open University. However, the multiple case study found positive and negative perception regarding the quality of institutional supports. Below are two major sub-themes that emerged within the multiple case study analysis: quality of academic services and quality of registration services.

Quality of academic services. All 13 participants from both active and inactive student groups talked about the quality of academic services including student services, modules, and tutors in relation to their student persistence.

Student services. These support services included examination and academic services provided by the regional offices. The qualitative findings demonstrated that nine of 13 participants from both active and inactive groups were satisfied with the quality of student services. In contrast, the multiple case study analysis found negative perceptions from three active students (Wati, Haril, Ina) regarding the student services in the regional offices, but those perceptions did not undermine their motivation to continue their studies. Similarly, one of three inactive students (Devi) had revealed negative perception about the quality of institutional supports, which contributed to her decision for withdrawal.

The role of regional offices in the Indonesia Open University is very important in enhancing student persistence. The pivotal role of regional offices on student persistence supported another study conducted by Fozdar et al. (2006) at Indira Gandhi National Open University. Fozdar's study demonstrated that insufficient academic supports and lack responsiveness from study centres affected largely students' dropout decisions. Therefore, the regional offices must provide the proactive supports including cognitive, affective, and systemic supports (Tait, 2000). Simpson (2013) asserted that students in distance education settings most often dropout because they lack proactive support. Therefore, change are required in institutional attitudes by providing supporting environments for improvement and proactive, rather than reactive, support. In the same way, Ivankova & stick (2007) also reported that student persistence had a positive relationship with the faculty's roles pertinent to the support and encouragement, the willingness to accommodate the students' needs, and the capability to deliver personal assistance.

Modules. All participants had different views about the quality of modules. 12 participants agreed with the good quality of contents and layouts of the modules in Indonesia Open University. However, two participants (Santoso and Zulki) from the active student group suggested further improvements for certain modules, such as requiring updated administrative rules and the correction of many spelling mistakes. Meanwhile, an inactive student (Devi) provided another comment that most modules needed additional materials about the relevant empirical researches and assignments aimed to increase students' abilities to analyse real cases.

Tutors. Nine of 13 participants addressed the quality of tutors. Four of nine participants indicated that the tutors of online tutorials were less responsive in providing feedback or comments on students' questions and assignments. However, these negative perceptions had different effects on their decisions regarding student persistence. For Devi, an inactive student, the low quality of tutors along with other issues had affected her decision to withdraw (section 6.1.3). Meanwhile, for active students (Wawan, Zulki, and Santoso), the unsatisfying quality of tutors did not contribute to withdrawal decisions probably because they held personal goals as the most important reasons to stay in the

university, such as the motivation to learn new things and the expectation that the university degree lead to better career prospects.

The negative perceptions about the performance of tutors indicated that the tutors' qualities did not meet students' expectations. Lack of awareness of cognitive student support, such as tutoring, feedback, supervision, and assignment (Tait, 2000) by open university institutions will likely negatively affect student retention. A mixed method study conducted by Ivankova and Stick (2007) demonstrated that students' satisfaction toward instructors' accessibility and promptness of the feedback encouraged students to persist in their programme. Therefore, it is important to enhance the tutors' performances by following several strategies (Tait, 2004): 1) the tutors/facilitators should make proactive contact by creating a welcoming environment in the moment of initial contact between the student and the tutor. Likewise, the tutor should provide encouragement for the submission of a first assignment by giving prompt feedback on assignments. 2) It is important to develop strong relationships amongst students, tutors, and the institution in order to overcome distance, manage students' expectations and ambitions, and enable students to make effective choices in a context of open learning. Additionally, the research report indicates that successful learning derives from good relationships and from well-timed and structured interventions. 3) As an effort to enable student retention, it needs strong commitment from tutors to their own development and to student persistence.

Moreover, the qualitative findings demonstrated the negative perceptions among participants toward the quality of services provided by regional offices and the quality of tutors. However, these negative perceptions did not undermine their motivation to keep studying and be enrolled as active students. This phenomenon possibly indicated that their intrinsic or extrinsic related goals were the most important factors in retaining them as active students. Furthermore, the Indonesia Open University had been assumed by employed participants as the most suitable place to learn and to pursue a university degree due to its flexibility.

Quality of registration services. 12 participants talked about the good quality of registration services in the Indonesia Open University. They agreed that online registration service was easier and more helpful rather than the manual registration service. Only Devi, an inactive student, criticised the process of registration services. However, her perception will probably be different if the online registration services had been implemented during her study.

The quantitative and qualitative findings in this study highlighted the essential role of the institution in affecting student persistence in the Open University contexts. The students, though, might continue or withdraw as active students because of personal reasons (i.e., self-motivation), the low quality of institutional services would be the main barriers to increasing student persistence, as indicated by the quantitative findings that the second major reason of non-enrolment was lack of supports from the institution. In addition, the high quality of student support services will enormously contribute to the reduction of dropout (Tait, 2003).

7. Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated that student persistence could be enhanced by endorsing all three primary functions of student support running in a good quality level. These three functions include cognitive, affective, and systemic supports (Tait, 2000). The cognitive support encompass all learning support services through the variety of media, such as the delivery of high quality of learning materials and learning resources, and timely feedback on students' assignment. The affective support plays the pivotal role in providing the supporting environment in enhancing students' motivation, self-commitment, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Finally, the systemic support provides a friendly administrative process for students and effective and transparent information management systems.

However, these three primary functions should be supported by the transformation of institutional attitudes that involves all staff at all levels in an effort to setting retention goals and developing the strategies, motivators and rewards to achieve them. The empowering institutional change absolutely requires considerable energy and is linked to institutional learning and feedback, planning processes, resource, a willingness to challenge entrenched attitudes and rewards for individual endeavour (Johnston & Simpson, 2006).

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