

## **EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES THROUGH DISTANCE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF KENDARI REGIONAL OFFICE UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA AND COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION SCIENCES (STIKOM) YOGYAKARTA**

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### **Abstract**

Distance learning was first utilized at the Indonesian Open University. The COVID-19 pandemic rise has also altered the teaching and learning process to become online education. This is an opportunity for STIKOM Yogyakarta to launch an online Bachelor's degree transfer program from a Diploma to a Bachelor's degree. The possibility of completing remote education through online learning is empowering for employees. The empowerment of employees through distance learning demonstrates that these employees have access to the necessary resources and knowledge to become educated and more productive at work when they work to their full potential. This study's objectives were to (1) describe strategies for empowering employees through distance learning programs, (2) analyze the achievement of indicators of employee empowerment after completion of the distance learning program, and (3) identify factors that support and inhibit employee empowerment through distance learning. This study employs a qualitative case study research method. Through in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions, data was collected. There were ten research participants, including five Kendari Regional Office Open University students and five STIKOM Yogyakarta transfer program students. The findings of the study indicate that (1) the empowerment strategy is implemented by creating an environment that allows the employee's potential to develop (enabling) and strengthens the employee's potential or power (empowering) through the use of special programs and guidance while participating in a distance learning program. Indicators of employee empowerment include the emergence of initiative and independence in the performance of work, the ability to make decisions and propose proposals to superiors, and expanded potential and skills for both the performance of work and career advancement. The supportive indicators for employee empowerment are the workplace institution's support and wisdom as well as universities offering distance learning, whereas the obstructing factors are the internet network's quality and time management.

Keywords: distance learning, employee empowerment, empowerment strategies, empowerment indicators

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Quality education is one of the fundamental pillars for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations (UN). The SDGs aim to ensure that every individual has equitable access to quality education and supports lifelong learning opportunities. Furthermore, the improvement of the quality of education significantly impacts the Human Development Index (HDI), a key indicator for measuring the quality of human life in a country (1).

Higher education plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of Human Resources (HR) and human capital in Indonesia. Higher education is expected to transform HR into a productive workforce capable of adapting to changing times. However, a major challenge faced is the low participation rate in higher education, especially among the college-age population (19-23 years old) in Indonesia. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2021, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for higher education in Indonesia reached only 34.58 percent, a figure significantly lower than neighboring countries like Singapore (91 percent), Thailand (51 percent), and Malaysia (43 percent) (2-3).

One of the main obstacles to increasing GER is the limited access to higher education for the population. Therefore, innovative solutions are needed to expand access to higher education. Distance learning, often referred to as online education or e-learning, has become a relevant alternative, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has transformed the landscape of global education (4-7).

Distance learning provides opportunities for employees to continue their education without sacrificing their careers. This approach can be considered an empowerment effort, as it offers individuals the chance to develop themselves and enhance their competencies without disrupting their careers and productivity. With the advancement of technology, many online universities have emerged, allowing more people to access higher education without the need to be physically present on campus (8-12)

In the context of Indonesia, Universitas Terbuka (UT) plays a significant role as a pioneer in distance education. Although there are now many other online universities emerging, UT remains a successful example of implementing distance learning. Its success has become a source of inspiration for other online universities to develop effective teaching methods in the virtual world (13-16).

This research focuses on two universities that provide online learning programs specifically for employees, namely Universitas Terbuka Daerah Kendari and Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Komunikasi Yogyakarta. The aim of this research is to examine the empowerment strategies for employees through distance learning programs, evaluate the achievement of empowerment indicators after the program, and identify the factors that influence the success or failure of empowerment efforts. Thus, this research aims to make a meaningful contribution to increasing participation in higher education through distance learning and understanding its positive impact on HR development and the improvement of the quality of life in Indonesia in line with the SDGs vision.

## **2 METODOLOGY**

The research methodology employed in this study is a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study research design. Qualitative approach was chosen because it is suitable for gaining in-depth understanding of the phenomena of distance education and employee empowerment. The case study research design was selected because the study focuses on a single case, namely, distance learning by students who are also employees (17)

The process of selecting informants for this research utilized purposive sampling technique. This technique was employed to select informants who possess relevant information pertaining to the research theme. In this study, there were 10 informants, consisting of 5 students from Universitas Terbuka Kendari and 5 students from the STIKOM Yogyakarta transfer program who are also employees. They were chosen because their experiences in participating in distance education were relevant to the research focus.

Data collection was conducted through structured interviews and online Focus Group Discussions (FGD) using the Zoom Meeting application. Structured interviews were used to obtain in-depth data from informants about employee empowerment strategies and their experiences in distance education. FGDs were used to facilitate broader and more in-depth group discussions on topics relevant to the research(18).

The collected data was then analyzed using the Pattern Matching method and Explanation Building method. Pattern Matching was employed to compare patterns that emerged in the empirical data with predicted patterns or several alternative predictions. Subsequently,

Explanation Building was utilized to create a deep understanding or explanation of the specific case under investigation, including employee empowerment strategies, the level of empowerment achieved after completing their studies, and the supporting and inhibiting factors in online distance education.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 EMPOWERMENT CONTEXT**

In the context of empowerment through distance education, Universitas Terbuka (UT) and STIKOM Yogyakarta exhibit both differences and similarities in their implementation of empowerment theories and concepts, encompassing three stages: enabling, empowering, and protecting (19-20).

*Firstly*, concerning enabling, both UT and STIKOM Yogyakarta provide broader accessibility for students to access online learning materials. They allow students to learn anytime and anywhere according to their needs. However, UT holds an advantage in terms of broader geographical reach with service centers and examination locations distributed throughout Indonesia, making it more feasible for individuals from various backgrounds and regions to access higher education.

*Secondly*, in terms of empowering, both UT and STIKOM Yogyakarta offer opportunities for employees to develop themselves through distance education. They prioritize individual empowerment to enhance competence and skills. Nevertheless, UT's approach to empowerment appears to be more focused on providing inclusive access to higher education, whereas STIKOM Yogyakarta may emphasize innovation in online learning methods and fostering active interactions between students and instructors.

*Thirdly*, regarding protecting, both UT and STIKOM Yogyakarta must ensure the integrity and quality of their education in the online environment. This involves efforts to safeguard students from unethical academic practices and maintain high educational standards. Online universities, including UT and others, need to ensure that students do not fall victim to academic fraud and ensure the security of their personal data.

*Overall*, UT and STIKOM Yogyakarta are committed to empowerment through distance education, albeit with slightly different approaches concerning inclusivity, innovation, and protection. This analysis can serve as a guide for other universities seeking to expand access to

higher education through online learning for working professionals, considering various empowerment aspects.

### **3.2 EMPOWERMENT CONTEXT**

Both Universitas Terbuka (UT) and STIKOM Yogyakarta play a role in enhancing the empowerment of individuals, especially those who are working professionals seeking further education (21-26). The level of empowerment can be observed through several indicators:

In terms of "Power to" (Awareness & Willingness to Change), UT Kendari plays a crucial role in raising awareness of the importance of higher education and motivating individuals who previously had limited access to change through education. On the other hand, STIKOM Yogyakarta also instills awareness, but competition among online universities may motivate individuals to choose educational programs that align with their goals and desires.

In "Power within" (Capacity to Enhance Access), UT Kendari possesses extensive experience in providing access to higher education across Indonesia. This allows individuals, especially those in remote areas, to enhance their capacity to access higher education. Conversely, other online universities may focus more on developing technological and online learning capacities, facilitating broader access to higher education content.

In "Power over" (Ability to Overcome Barriers), UT Kendari has an advantage in addressing geographical and time barriers due to the widespread locations of service centers and examination sites throughout Indonesia. However, constraints such as technological limitations and support may still exist. On the other hand, other online universities may adopt more innovative approaches to overcome distance education barriers, offering various technological solutions to help students overcome potential obstacles.

Lastly, in "Power with" (Capacity for Collaboration and Solidarity), UT Kendari encourages collaboration and solidarity among students from various regions of Indonesia, creating an inclusive learning community. Conversely, other online universities also strive to establish online communities that support collaboration among students, although this may vary depending on the specific approach and culture of the university. Thus, this comparison illustrates the complexity of different approaches to enhancing individual empowerment through distance education.

### 3.3 SUPPORTIVE AND HINDERING FACTORS

In terms of supportive factors, UT holds an advantage in having an extensive and distributed infrastructure across Indonesia. With service centers and examination locations scattered throughout the country, UT facilitates easier access for individuals from various regions. This provides a significant advantage for working professionals who may have constraints in terms of time and mobility. Furthermore, UT's extensive experience in delivering distance education means they have the resources and expertise to support online learning effectively (27-32)

On the other hand, STIKOM Yogyakarta may have an edge in terms of innovation in technology and online learning methods. Online universities often have the flexibility to adopt the latest technological solutions and integrate them into their educational programs. This can create a more interactive and engaging learning experience for students, especially in an increasingly digitalized environment.

However, both institutions face certain hindering factors that need to be addressed. One of these is the quality of internet connectivity, which can impact the online learning experience. Although UT has a network of examination locations, challenges related to stable internet access persist in some remote areas of Indonesia. STIKOM Yogyakarta may encounter similar issues in this regard.

Additionally, another challenge involves monitoring and enforcing academic ethics in the online learning environment. Both institutions need to ensure the integrity and authenticity of students' work while protecting them from unethical academic practices such as fraud and plagiarism.

In conclusion, UT and STIKOM Yogyakarta employ different approaches to support online learning for working professionals. UT excels in terms of its extensive infrastructure and long-standing experience in distance education, while STIKOM Yogyakarta may focus more on technological innovation and online learning methods. However, both institutions encounter similar challenges related to internet access and the monitoring of academic ethics.

A related research study explores trends and challenges in distance education, with a focus on empowerment strategies for working professionals in online universities. This research analyzes the experiences of students from two institutions, Universitas Terbuka (UT) and Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Komunikasi Yogyakarta (STIKOM Yogyakarta), to understand how

distance education can empower individuals who are working professionals. The findings of this study reveal differences and similarities in approaches, as well as supportive and hindering factors influencing the success of online learning for working professionals. This study provides valuable insights into empowerment through distance education and its relevance in supporting broader and more inclusive access to higher education.

#### **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Overall, this research reveals that both Universitas Terbuka (UT) and Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Komunikasi Yogyakarta (STIKOM Yogyakarta) play a significant role in empowering individuals who are working professionals through distance education. Both institutions offer broader accessibility to students for online learning materials and provide opportunities for competency development. UT stands out in terms of its extensive geographical reach, while STIKOM Yogyakarta may focus more on innovation in technology and online learning methods. Despite differing approaches, both institutions face similar challenges related to stable internet access and the enforcement of academic ethics. These findings provide valuable insights into the complexity of empowerment through distance education and its relevance in supporting inclusive access to higher education in the current digital era.

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