

STUDENT PREFERENCES FOR CHOOSING TO STUDY AT AN UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA

Jalil¹, Hasanuddin², Kusmaladewi³, Husnaeni⁴, Makkatenni⁵, Arifin Tahir⁶

^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6}Universitas Terbuka (INDONESIA)

jalil@ecampus.ut.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to analyze student preferences in selecting Universitas Terbuka (UT), particularly for distance education programs. The factors examined include promotion, recommendations, accreditation, tuition fees, location, institutional reputation, study programs, and supporting facilities. Data were collected using a Google Forms-based questionnaire distributed to 242 students from UT Makassar. Descriptive analysis using SPSS version 25 was employed to determine the frequency distributions and average scores for each preference indicator. The results show that **promotion through social media** and **graduate testimonials** significantly influence student interest, with mean scores of 4.0372 and 4.0661, respectively. **Accreditation** was also a key factor, with a mean score of 4.1860, reflecting its importance in establishing trust in the quality of the education program. **Affordable tuition, flexibility in payment, and reduced transportation costs** were highly valued, with mean scores above 4.0. **Location flexibility** and **choice of exam locations** were identified as primary attractions of distance education. Additionally, **institutional reputation**, especially international accreditation and successful alumni, was rated as important, with a mean score of 4.0950. Students also appreciated **diverse study programs, curriculum flexibility, and industry relevance**. Supporting digital facilities such as **Learning Management Systems (LMS)** and **online libraries** were key determinants of student preferences. These findings highlight the importance of understanding student preferences to enhance university strategies and competitiveness.

Keywords: promotion, accreditation, flexibility, reputation, facilities

1 INTRODUCTION

Inequality in accessibility is one of the key challenges in the provision of higher education in Indonesia today (Tempo.co, 2024; UNESA, 2024). This issue can be attributed to several factors, such as Indonesia's geographical condition as an archipelagic country. Other factors include economic conditions and cultural aspects (Raifana, 2024). Therefore, open and distance higher education is one of the educational models that can provide broad access to all Indonesian citizens.

Open and distance education has become an essential part of modern education systems, especially with the advancement of technology that allows unrestricted learning across time and space. In this context, distance education offers flexibility to individuals who face geographical, financial, or time constraints in accessing formal education (Maphosa & Bhebher, 2020; Prayogy, 2022). The importance of open and distance education is growing in the digital era, where the need for more inclusive and flexible access to education is a priority. However, with the increasing number of universities offering distance education programs, student preferences in choosing educational institutions become crucial. Factors such as tuition fees, accreditation, program quality, supporting facilities, and institutional reputation are key determinants in students' decisions to select a university. A deep understanding of these student preferences not only helps universities design programs that better meet students' needs but also enhances competitiveness in the increasingly competitive education sector.

Distance education has experienced significant development over the past few decades, driven largely by the advances in digital technology that facilitate online learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has also been a major catalyst accelerating the adoption of this education model worldwide, forcing educational institutions to shift toward more flexible and decentralized learning formats. According to a UNESCO report (2021), more than 90% of global educational institutions implemented distance learning methods during the pandemic, making it a key element in modern education systems. However, while distance education offers greater flexibility in time and accessibility, challenges related to quality, accreditation, cost, and technical support remain important factors that influence students' preferences in choosing educational institutions. Recent studies show that factors such as institutional reputation, the quality of digital services, affordability, and program flexibility are key in prospective students' decisions to choose distance education programs.

Despite the rapid growth of distance education driven by technological advances and increasing demand for more flexible access to education, there remains a gap in understanding students' preferences in choosing universities, particularly in the context of open and distance education. Several studies have highlighted factors such as tuition fees, accreditation, and university reputation as important elements in students' decisions, yet few have explored in depth how these factors interact in the context of distance education. This gap indicates a lack of understanding regarding the priorities of prospective students, especially concerning factors such as the quality of digital services, program flexibility, and technical support offered by

universities in the distance learning model. Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify and analyze students' preferences in selecting universities that offer distance education programs, and how these factors influence their decisions, to assist educational institutions in designing more effective strategies that meet prospective students' needs.

1 METHODOLOGY

1.1 Population and sample

This study employed a quantitative method with a population consisting of students involved in distance education programs at various universities. The research population included students who participated in online study groups, both those already enrolled in distance education programs and those planning to enroll. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, where respondents were chosen based on specific criteria, namely students with experience or interest in distance education. The sample size for this study was 242 students, which is expected to provide sufficient representation of the population.

1.2 Data collection

Data were collected using a Google Forms-based questionnaire, distributed through online student discussion groups and study groups. The questionnaire link was sent to WhatsApp and Telegram groups comprised of students involved in distance education, with the aim of reaching relevant respondents who have knowledge or experience in choosing distance education institutions. The questionnaire included several items that measured students' preferences related to factors such as tuition fees, accreditation, institutional reputation, supporting facilities, and program flexibility. A 1-5 Likert scale was used to gather responses from the participants.

1.3 Data processing

The data obtained from the questionnaire were processed descriptively using SPSS version 25. Data processing included cleaning the data to remove invalid responses, followed by descriptive analysis to depict the frequency distribution and percentage of each research variable. In addition, descriptive statistical analysis was used to calculate the mean and standard deviation for each of the students' preference factors. The results of this analysis were then used to draw conclusions about the primary preferences of students in selecting a university.

2 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Respondent Identity

The respondents in this study totaled 242 students. The composition of respondents based on their district of origin and age is presented in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Composition of respondents by district of origin and age

District of Origin			Respondent Ages		
	N	%	years	N	%
Barru	30	12,39	< 20	85	35,12
Luwu Timur	84	34,71	20 -29	118	48,76
Luwu Utara	46	19,00	30 - 39	30	12,40
Kep Kelayar	67	27,68	40 - 50	8	3,31
Palopo	7	2,89	> 50	1	0,41
Maros	1	0,41			
Pinrang	6	2,48			
Parepare	1	0,41			
Sum	242	100		242	100

Based on Table 1, it can be explained that the respondents came from 8 out of 24 districts/cities within the operational area of UT Makassar. The majority of respondents were from Luwu Timur district (34.71%), while the lowest number of respondents were from Maros district and Parepare city (0.41%). The age composition of the respondents is predominantly within the 20–39 years age range.

The composition of respondents based on service type, intake, and gender is presented in Table 2.

Tabel 2. Composition of Respondents by Service Type, Intake, and Gender

Service type			intake			Gender		
	N	%		N	%		N	%
Non SCPS	25	10,33	Senior High School	219	90,50	Male	40	16,53
SCPS Non F2F	217	89,67	RPL	23	9,50	Female	202	83,47
Total	242	100		242	100		242	100

Note: SCPS = Semester Credit Package System; F2F = Face to Face; RPL = Recognition of Prior Learning

4.2 Variabel

3.2.1 Promotion and Recommendation

The results of the data analysis of 242 respondents regarding student preferences for studying at Universitas Terbuka based on promotion and recommendation are presented in Table 3. Based on the descriptive analysis results in Table 1, promotion through social media has a significant influence on student preferences in choosing Universitas Terbuka, with a mean score of 4.0372 and a standard deviation of 1.083. Additionally, recommendations from friends and alumni play an important role in students' decisions, as indicated by a mean score of 3.9959 and a relatively low standard deviation of 0.93124. Graduate testimonials also received a high mean score of 4.0661, emphasizing their importance in attracting prospective students. Promotion through webinars and education fairs was also highlighted, with a mean score of 3.9959, while promotional videos showcasing the flexibility and advantages of distance education programs had the highest mean score of 4.0785.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of promotion and recommendation variables as student preferences in choosing to study at Universitas Terbuka

Indicator	N	Mean	Median	Std. Dev	Sum
A.1. Promotion through social media influences my interest in enrolling in a distance education program.	242	4,0372	4	1,083	977
A.2 Recommendations from friends/alumni greatly influence my decision in choosing a distance education program.	242	3,9959	4	0,931	967
A.3 Recommendations from friends/alumni greatly influence my decision in choosing a distance education program.	242	3,9959	4	0,957	967
A.4. Testimonials from graduates play an important role in my choice to pursue distance education.	242	4,0661	4	0,926	984
A.5. I became more interested in distance education after seeing promotions through webinars or education fair.	242	3,9959	4	0,922	967
A.6. Promotional videos highlighting the flexibility and advantages of distance education through social media (Facebook/Instagram/TikTok) capture my interest.	242	4,0785	4	0,923	987
Sum	242	24,169	24	4,764	5849

This interpretation aligns with the literature, which indicates that social media and graduate testimonials play a significant role in prospective students' decisions, as they provide relevant and impactful information directly (Nurwahdania, Pardiman, & Millaningtyas, 2022). Recommendations from friends or alumni reinforce prospective students' trust, while promotions highlighting flexibility attract those who require more flexible educational solutions (Amanah, 2020).

3.2.2 University or study program accreditation

The results of the descriptive analysis of preferences for university or program accreditation for studying at an open university are presented in Table 4. The results of the analysis in Table 4 show that accreditation significantly influences students' decisions in choosing a university, with a mean of 4.1860 and a standard deviation of 0.880. The preference for programs with international accreditation is also strong, with a mean of 4.1157. Students believe that high

accreditation ensures program quality, as indicated by a mean of 4.1818. The importance of accreditation is further reflected in the mean score of 4.2479, demonstrating that students consider it essential for institutions to maintain their accreditation status to stay competitive.

Tabel 4. Descriptive analysis of university and program accreditation as preferences for studying at an Universitas Terbuka

Indicator	N	Mean	Med.	Std. Dev	Sum
B.1. The accreditation of a distance education program significantly influences my decision in choosing a university.	242	4,1860	4	0,880	1013
B.2. I am more inclined to choose a distance education program that has international accreditation.	242	4,1157	4	0,861	996
B.3. I believe that high accreditation ensures the quality of a distance education program.	242	4,1818	4	0,878	1012
B.4. I feel more confident in an accredited distance education program compared to one that is not accredited.	242	4,1446	4	0,854	1003
B.5. Distance education institutions must maintain their accreditation status to remain competitive.	242	4,2479	4	0,828	1028
Sum	242	20,876	21	3,714	5052

Accreditation plays a crucial role in building trust in the quality of education (Saefurahman et al., 2023; Telci & Kantur, 2014). Internationally recognized accreditation not only enhances competitiveness but also expands career opportunities for students after graduation. Maintaining accreditation helps universities remain relevant and appealing to prospective students who seek institutions with a strong academic reputation (Amanah, 2020; Harahap et al., 2020)

3.2.3 Tuition Fee

The results of the descriptive analysis of tuition fees as a preference for studying at UT are presented in Table 5. In terms of costs, students rate affordable tuition fees and payment flexibility as very important, with means of 4.1074 and 4.1777, respectively. Savings on transportation costs also play a significant role, with a mean of 4.0331. Students highly value

institutions with competitive fees that are proportional to the quality of accreditation, as reflected by a mean of 4.1818.

Tabel 5. Descriptive Analysis of tuition cost preferences for choosing to Study at Universitas Terbuka

Indikator	N	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Sum
C.1. Distance education institutions must maintain their accreditation status to remain competitive.	242	4,1818	4	0,920	1012
C.2. I choose distance education because it is more affordable compared to conventional education..	242	4,1074	4	0,891	994
C.3 I prefer distance education programs that offer flexibility in tuition payment.	242	4,1777	4	0,971	1011
C.4. Lower transportation costs are one of the reasons I choose distance education.	242	4,0331	4	0,924	976
Sum	242	17,4917	17	5,833	4233

These results underscore the importance of tuition costs as a crucial factor in selecting a distance education program (Telci & Kantur, 2024). Flexibility in payment greatly assists students in managing their educational expenses. Additionally, reduced transportation costs provide greater financial benefits for students residing in district capitals (Nurwahdania, Pardiman, & Millaningtyas, 2022).

3.2.4 Location

The results of the descriptive analysis of Location as a preference for choosing to study at UT are presented in Table 6.

*Table 6. Descriptive Analysis of Location as a preference for studying at
Universitas Terbuka*

Indicator	N	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Sum
D.1. Transparent tuition fees influence my preference for distance education.	242	4,0661	4	0,9177	984
D.2. The proximity of the tutorial center affects my decision in choosing a distance education program.	242	4,2149	4	0,8662	1020
D.3. I prefer distance education programs that offer flexible exam location options..	242	4,3471	5	0,8320	1052
D.4. I choose distance education because it can be attended from anywhere without geographical limitations.	242	4,1529	4	0,8481	1005
D.5. I am more likely to choose a distance education program that has local representatives or support centers.	242	4,1612	4	0,8563	1007
Sum	242	20,9421	21	3,75228	5068

The flexibility of location in distance education is also highly valued by students, with the highest mean score of 4.3471 for the flexibility of exam locations. Additionally, the proximity of tutorial centers and the ease of participating in programs without geographical restrictions are important factors, with mean scores of 4.2149 and 4.1529, respectively. The low standard deviations indicate a high level of agreement among students regarding these factors.

Research supports that location flexibility is one of the main advantages of distance education, allowing students to adjust their study and exam locations according to their personal needs. In the context of distance education, this geographical flexibility is highly appreciated, particularly by students in remote areas or those who are unable to relocate to larger cities for their studies (Telci & Kantur, 2024).

3.2.5 University reputation

The analysis results from 242 respondents based on university reputation preferences are presented in Table 7. The analysis shows that university reputation plays a significant role in students' decisions to choose Universitas Terbuka, with a mean score of 4.0950. The success of alumni is also an important factor, with a mean score of 3.9463. Furthermore, trust in

programs with international recognition indicates that students tend to choose institutions with a global reputation, with a mean score of 3.9380.

Tabel 7. Descriptive Analysis of University Reputation as a Preference for Studying at Universitas Terbuka

indicator	N	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Sum
E.1. The availability of adequate internet access in my area influences my decision to choose distance education.	242	4,0785	4	0,95437	987
E.2. The reputation of the university is the main factor in my decision to choose a distance education program.	242	4,0950	4	0,87571	991
E.3 The successful experiences of graduates from distance education programs influence my decision..	242	3,9463	4	0,91166	955
E.4I have more trust in distance education programs offered by institutions with an international reputation.	242	3,9380	4	0,90657	953
E.5. I am more likely to choose a university with a long-established history, even if its distance education program is relatively new	242	4,0496	4	0,93215	980
Sum	242	20,0909	20	3,91613	4862,00

Institutional reputation is a highly significant factor in shaping prospective students' trust. According to research by Kartikaningsih and Yusuf (2020), institutional reputation plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the quality of education offered. The positive experiences of successful alumni serve as a strong indicator that the institution is capable of delivering educational outcomes that meet global industry expectations (Anas, 2011; Hakim, Absah, & Maas, February 2022; Telci & Kantur, 2024).

3.2.6 Study programs offered

The results of the descriptive analysis of students' preferences for studying at Universitas Terbuka based on study programs are presented in Table 8. According to Table 8, the diversity of study programs, with a mean of 4.0661, and flexible curricula, with an average of 4.0083, are key factors in students' decisions to choose Universitas Terbuka. Work-oriented programs

are also highly valued, with an average of 4.0207, indicating that students seek education that is relevant to the needs of the job market.

The diversity of study programs and the focus on work-oriented skills are major attractions for prospective students. Research supports that curriculum flexibility and industry relevance are key elements in successful distance education, as students seek programs that can enhance their future career opportunities (Nurwahdania, Pardiman, & Millaningtyas, 2022; Hakim, Absah, & Maas, February 2022).

Tabel 8. Descriptive analysis of students' preferences for studying at Universitas Terbuka based on study programs

Item indicator	N	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Sum
F.1 Alumni recommending a distance education program increase my confidence in choosing that program.	242	4,1033	4	0,916	993
F.2 A diverse selection of study programs is very important to me when choosing a distance education program.	242	4,0661	4	0,812	984
F.3. I prefer distance education programs that offer flexible curricula.	242	4,0083	4	0,883	970
F.4. Work-oriented study programs are more appealing to me in distance education.	242	4,0207	4	0,87590	973
F.5. I choose study programs that are relevant to industry needs in distance education.	242	3,9256	4	0,88945	950
Sum	242	20,1240	20	3,88543	4870

3.2.7 University facilities

The results of the descriptive analysis of university facilities as a preference for students in choosing a university are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Descriptive analysis of university facilities as a preference for students studying at Universitas Terbuka

Indicator	N	Mean	Median	Std. Devi	Sum
G.1. I consider the accreditation of the study program more important than the accreditation of the institution when choosing distance education.	242	4,1074	4	0,899	994
G.2. The quality of the Learning Management System (LMS) is an important factor in selecting a distance education programuh.	242	4,0992	4	0,887	992
G.3 The availability of digital resources, such as an online library, greatly influences my decision in choosing distance education.	242	4,2107	4	0,855	1019
G.4. I prefer distance education programs that provide virtual learning spaces and online learning communitie.	242	4,1405	4	0,862	1002
G.5. Good technical support services are a key factor in my distance learning experience.	242	4,1694	4	0,869	1009
Sum	242	20,7273	21,0000	3,995	5016

The quality of supporting facilities, such as the Learning Management System (LMS) (mean score 4.0992) and the online library (mean score 4.2107), greatly influences students' decisions. Additionally, good technical support services, with an average score of 4.1694, play a significant role in the distance learning experience.

Previous research confirms that digital facilities, such as LMS and online libraries, are crucial in creating an effective learning experience in distance education environments. Fast and responsive technical support services also help students overcome any technical issues that may arise during the learning process, which is vital in enhancing student satisfaction (Telci & Kantur, 2024; Saefurahman, et al., 2023).

3 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that various factors influence students' preferences in choosing Universitas Terbuka, particularly in the context of distance education. Promotion through social media, graduate testimonials, and recommendations from friends and alumni play a significant role in attracting student interest. Additionally, program accreditation, affordable tuition fees, and flexibility in payment and location are key factors in their decision-making process. University reputation, especially those with international accreditation and successful alumni, is highly valued. Diverse, flexible, and work-oriented study programs, along with supporting digital facilities such as LMS, online libraries, and reliable technical support, are the primary determinants of student preferences. Understanding these factors can help universities design more effective strategies to attract prospective students.

REFERENCES

- Hakim, A. R., Absah, Y., & Maas, L. T. (February 2022). The Effect of Motivation, Work Environment, and Infrastructure on Teacher Performance in SMK Negeri 1 Kutacane. *International Journal of Research and Review Vol. 9; Issue: 2*, 229-235.
- Maphosa, C., & Bhebher, S. (2020). Interrogating the Concept "openness" in Open Distance Learning (ODL). *European Journal of Open Education and E-learning Studies*, 33-47.
- Maphosa, C., & Bhebher, S. (2020). Interrogating the Concept "openness" in Open Distance Learning (ODL). *European Journal of Open Education and E-learning Studies*, 33-47.
- Nurwahdania, Pardiman, & Millaningtyas, R. (2022). Preferensi Mahasiswa Dalam Memilih Perguruan Tinggi Swasta Di Kota Malang. *e-jurnal riset manajemen Prodi Manajemen*, 113-120.
- Prayogy, A. (2022). Perspektif Filosofis Dalam Pendidikan Terbuka dan Jarak Jauh. *Jurnal Pendidikan Terbuka dan jarak Jauh*, 23-32.
- Prayogy, A. (2022). Perspektif Filosofis Dalam Pendidikan Terbuka dan Jarak Jauh. *Jurnal Pendidikan Terbuka dan jarak Jauh*, 23-32.
- Raifana, S. (2024, April 4). *Keterbatasan Akses Pendidikan di Indonesia*. Retrieved from Kompasiana: Kompasiana.com
- Raifana, S. (2024, April 4). *Keterbatasan Akses Pendidikan di Indonesia*. Retrieved from Kompasiana: Kompasiana.com

- Saefurahman, A., Dianavera, K. T., Hermastuti, P., Sari, D. L., Prastuti, D., & Ningsih, R. R. (2023). Preferensi siswa sma dalam Memilih Perguruan Tinggi Swasta. *Jurnal Review Pendidikan dan Pengajaran, Volume 6 Nomor 4*, 902-907.
- Telci, E. E., & Kantur, D. (2024). University Reputation: Scale Development and Validation. *Boğaziçi Journal Review of Social, Economic and Administrative Studies, Vol. 28, no. 2*, 49-74.
- Tempo.co. (2024, Mei 5). *Kemendikbud Ungkap 3 Masalah di Pendidikan Tinggi*. Retrieved from Tempo.co: <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1864108>
- Tempo.co. (2024, Mei 5). *Kemendikbud Ungkap 3 Masalah di Pendidikan Tinggi*. Retrieved from Tempo.co: <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1864108>
- UNESA. (2024, Mei 4). *Dirjen Diktiristek Bicara Kesenjangan Pendidikan Tinggi dan Beri Penguatan UNESA Menuju PTNBH Berkelas Dunia*. Retrieved from Berita Unesa: <https://www.unesa.ac.id>

