CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDENT SERVICE CENTER TO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF STUDIES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

(Qualitative Study on Perceptions of Administrators of UT Service Centers and Study Groups)

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Abstract

One of the vulnerabilities of study for Open Distance Learning (ODL) students is stopping halfway or dropping out. This happens because most students do not have the readiness to study independently without proper assistance. In addition, students at ODL are mostly people who are already working so they often don't care about the schedule of the lecture process. This article aims to identify the variables that cause obstacles in the continuity of distance student studies and the solutions that have been carried out by student service centers and study groups. The research design is descriptive and qualitative with in-depth interviews as a data collection technique. The informants are administrators of Universitas Terbuka (UT) service centers and study groups in Purwokerto, Samarinda, Jakarta and Surakarta. Data collection was carried out from May-August 2022. The results showed that although students could study independently, assistance from individuals or institutions was still very much needed. Assistance is provided in terms of admissions, scheduling, academics, and administering exams. This article also provides recommendations that can improve the role of student service centers and study groups to help students complete their studies faster and on time.

Keywords: sustainability; contribution; distance education; student service center, study group

1 INTRODUCTION

Distance higher education in Indonesia is now a mode of education that is in great demand by the public, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all educational institutions at all levels carry out online education and are considered distance education. In this mode of education, the implementation of learning is carried out with the separation of the distance between teachers and students, and the implementation is carried out through media intermediaries such as: printed and non-printed teaching materials as well as electronic and digital (Darojat et al., 2019; Genc Kumtepe et al., 2018; Sembiring, 2022). Sembiring stated in his article that distance education is different from online learning. Distance education is a learning process designed systematically starting from the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of components related to education, including learning materials, learning assistance, and implementation of learning, test materials, and examination implementation to the judicial process. All these stages are designed in such a way that it becomes an accountable system. While online education is basically conventional education that is carried out online. The planning and evaluation are carried out for face-to-face

learning, but due to outbreak constraints, the implementation is carried out online (Gökbulut, 2020; Sariyatun et al., 2021; Sembiring, 2022). Based on this opinion, Universitas Terbuka (UT) is a university that provides distance education. As a university that implements a distance learning system, service support for students is an important thing. This service support includes infrastructure, availability, the competence of human resources, internet network availability, and service strategies in addition to providing facilities by institutions (Genc Kumtepe et al., 2018; Gil-Jaurena, 2014; Usun, 2004). The management of student services can be facilitated by the organizing institution or by partners, such as internet service providers, support from peers, and support from financial institutions (Dacanay et al., 2014; Morgan & Tam, 1999; TALAN, 2021). At UT Indonesia, student support services provided by partners are organized by study groups and UT service centers.

In distance education, students are required to have the ability to learn independently, meaning that they learn and manage their studies based on their own initiative. Most students choose UT as a place to study, are because they are already working, so they do not have enough time to attend lectures on campus. In addition, they are also constrained by distance (transportation, and costs) to come to campuses which are usually located in big cities. The obstacles faced by students are not only related to the content or lectures but include admissions, study assistance, obtaining study materials, the examination process, the judicial process until graduation, and obtaining a diploma or graduation certificate. These various obstacles allow the continuity of student studies to be somewhat hampered, due to various things, such as: forgetting admissions, forgetting schedules, tutorials, forgetting exam schedules, and not having time to take teaching materials. These various obstacles pose a challenge for UT as the organizer of ODL to help students and find solutions. One of them is by providing learning assistance services that are managed by the community, namely by giving permission to form study groups or UT Service Centers. These two institutions play an active role in helping students from admission to graduation and obtaining a bachelor's degree at UT. This article will discuss the management of UT service centers and study groups based on the perceptions and expectations of the administrators. Therefore, this article will discuss the role of student service institutions in the sustainability of student studies.

Study groups (in Indonesian called: **Pokjar**) are UT students who form groups to build commitment and mutual agreement to help each other and support smooth and successful learning at UT. Study groups can use their own facilities and or the facilities of other parties. This study group can be in the form of 1) an independent study group formed on the initiative of a student

and chaired by one of the students; 2) study groups formed and managed by the regional UT to help provide services to a group of students and coordinated by one study group administrator. This study group has obligations, such as conducting promotions, recruiting students, facilitating learning services (such as distributing teaching materials and providing tutorial rooms), and assisting the admissions process until graduation and graduation. In addition to obligations. Study groups also have rights, such as: getting the latest information on UT policies, getting services, transportation to and from UT Regional, and being allowed to use UT attributes in their activities (Universitas Terbuka, 2021).

The UT Service Center (in Indonesian called **SALUT**) is a UT administrative and academic service center which is professionally managed by UT or a designated partner bound by a cooperation agreement. Currently, there are two kinds of UT service centers which are owned by UT and UT service centers which are owned by partners. Like, study groups, UT service centers have the obligation to: conduct promotions, recruit students, assist the admissions process, organize orientation for new student introductions, and assist in organizing study assistance and examinations, until graduation (Pandiangan et al., 2021). Regarding financing, study groups, and UT service centers have differences. Study group funding is obtained from service fees sourced from UT according to the category of the number of students who are members (Universitas Terbuka, 2021). Funding for UT service centers is independent, meaning that its management comes from funds collected from each student with a minimum amount that has been determined in UT rules (Pandiangan et al., 2021).

2 METHODOLOGY

This type of research is descriptive qualitative using a survey method with interviews as a data collection technique. The population is the administrators of study groups and UT service centers in UT regional Samarinda, Purwokerto, Jakarta, and Surakarta. The sample is the administrators of study groups and UT service centers in Pontianak, Tegal, Cilacap, Cibinong, and Grobogan. The number of respondents was 4 administrators of study groups and 4 administrators of UT service centers. Data collection was carried out in May-August 2022. The interview process was carried out face-to-face, where the interviewer met directly with the informant. The interview instrument generally contains 5 open-ended questions, namely: 1) What types of assistance are needed by students; 2) What are the problems that students most often complain about; 3) How do study groups and UT service centers help provide solutions to student problems; 4) What is the graduation rate of students in the UT study groups and service centers that you lead? The data

collected was then analyzed descriptively and qualitatively. The results of the interviews were transcribed and then processed for similarities and similarities to be analyzed and presented descriptively.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research that have been carried out are presented in the following qualitative descriptive manner.

3.1 Finding

The description of the research results is presented in two parts, namely the respondent's profile, and the interview results. There were 8 informants who were interviewed.

3.1.1 Profile respondents

Table 1 Profile of Respondents

No	Aspect and Indicators	Frequency	%
1.	Gender		
	Men	3	37
	Women	5	63
2.	Incorporated in		
	a. Service centers	4	50
	b. Study groups	4	50
3.	Age		
	a. < 17 years	0	0
	b. 17 – 25 years	0	0
	c. 26 – 35 years	2	25
	d. 36 – 50 years	2	25
	e. > 50 years	4	50
4.	Occupation		
	a. government employees	5	62
	b. Teacher	2	25
	c. Private employees	1	13
	d. Self-employed	0	0
	e. Other	0	0

The data in table 1 shows that administrators of study groups and UT student service centers are dominated by women. This condition, after being observed has no effect on their performance. In general, all of these administrators have a good commitment to sustainability and their duties and functions in service to students. One thing that is interesting is the age of the board which is dominated by the fifty and above range. After further deepening, it turns out that the management who are over the age of 50 really focuses on the management after they retire from their jobs, namely as civil servants. As for work, most of the respondents are civil servants at the education

office in the local area. This is very reasonable, considering that their work supports their work in the management of study groups and UT student service centers.

3.1.2   Interview results

The results of the interviews are grouped into four main points, namely as follows.

1) What types of assistance do students need?

   The findings obtained based on the results of the interviews are presented in the following description.

   "The needs of students that we serve the most is assistance in registering. This assistance is needed by students every semester, both new students and ongoing students. This happened-because all of them were already working people, so they often forgot and did not have time to register themselves."

   "In the study group that I manage, the most important need for students is to get information on the lecture process from registration to graduation. Therefore, we always provide information through various modes, such as WhatsApp Group, SMS Blast, the study group website, and announcements on the bulletin board in our office. Whatever announcements are made by the Open University, we will immediately send them and post them to students"

   "At the UT service center that I manage, the main need for students is to be accompanied while they are studying at UT. Each semester the needs are different, some need assistance in admissions and payment matters, some need guidance in the tutorial process, and some need information regarding time and schedule. In essence, all lecture processes from registration to graduation and graduation require assistance from the management."

2) What are the problems that students complain about the most?

   Related to the problems that are most often conveyed by students, here are the results of the interviews:

   a. Results of interviews with study group administrators.

   Study group administrators have given the initials Respondents (R)1, R2, R3, and R4.

R1: "In my place, student problems that are handled the most are the registration process. In one semester there are about 300 students who come to ask for information and assistance related to the registration process. Problems faced, including forgetting to register and the schedule has been missed, forgetting the password on the http://sia.ut.ac.id application. They don't have enough money to register for courses."

R2: "The problems that students who are members of our study groups complain about the most are registration and exams, especially those which are conducted online. This is very understandable- because the students who are members are teachers of early childhood education and elementary schools. The obstacles they face are because they are technologically stumped. Therefore they need guidance to register for courses at the beginning of the semester through the http://sia.ut.ac.id application. Regarding their exams, they are constrained when taking online exams, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, all examinations are conducted online through the Home Examination (THE) application."

R3: "The problem that many students who are members of our study groups complain about is the use of various online applications. This application includes an online registration system, online exam system, online tutorial system, and online payment system. This obstacle is caused because most students do not have the ability to operate ICT well enough. Another problem that many complain about is the low value of learning outcomes obtained by students. One of the causes of non-graduates or low grades in courses is because they are late or fail to upload answers to the exams they have done."

R4: "Most of the complaints from our students are about the low-grade point average and do not meet the requirements for graduation. This makes students have to repeat the same courses but still cannot pass. Another problem that he often complains about is the final grade he gets for the course. This was complained about because their tutorial scores were quite high but when the final grades came out, it turned out that they did not pass. This information related to grades is what we must often convey to students."
UT service center administrator is given the initials Respondent (R)5, R6, R7, and R8.

R5: The problems that are most often conveyed by students are about the internet network and schedules. They have difficulty with the low internet signal to access various processes, from registration and tutorials. Therefore, many of them come to the UT service center office, just to be able to access the applications provided by UT. Regarding the schedule, most of our students complain about forgetting the schedule. Even though the schedule is clearly displayed on the UT website, the UT Regional website, the UT service center website."

R6: "The most frequent student complaints are about grades, both the value of each course, the end of the semester grades, the passing grades, and the grades that do not come out at the end of the semester."

R7: "Students who come and make complaints, mostly about the registration process and the activation of online tutorials. These two things are related because, during registration, students must choose the type of tutorial service that they will participate in".

R8: "The complaints of our students are very diverse, although the number is not too many. In one semester, no more than 10 cases are complained of. The complaints include registration, application for credit transfer for courses, tutorials, exams, judiciary, and graduations."

3) How can study groups and UT service centers help provide solutions to student problems

The solutions offered by the UT study groups and service centers to these matters are illustrated in the answers of the following respondents.

"Student cases that can be solved at the UT service center that I manage, then we will guide students to solve them themselves by guiding them step by step individually. Usually, this kind of problem is related to access to the related App."

"Students who come with their cases need to be heard and responded to. That's what we do"

"For cases that can be resolved at the UT service center, we will help solve them by guiding them to solve them themselves, while for cases that cannot be resolved at the UT service center office, we will record them and we will forward them to UT Regional or UT Pusat in Jakarta"

4) What are the results of student graduation in the study groups and UT service centers that you lead?

Regarding student graduation, all respondents said that their student graduation was very good. This is illustrated by the number of students who are members of each semester, the number is always almost the same, which is around 800 students on average. This is illustrated by the following respondents' answers.

"Every semester, our students who graduate, about 200 people and the number of new students is around that too"

"Students who are members of our place, graduation tends to be balanced between those who pass and those who enter"

"Every semester, about 200-300 students graduate. Their grades are good, even some students are graduates with the highest GPAs in their class and get the title of the best graduates"

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Type of assistance required by ODL students

Based on the results of interviews, the needs of students in distance education are a) guidance on the registration and admission process, b) obtaining information related to the lecture process, such as tutorial schedules, tutorial locations, tutorial times, and administration in tutorials; c) obtain information related to the implementation and results of the exam, such as the time and place of the exam, the mode of the exam (online exam or face-to-face exam, essay form or multiple choice); d) information on payment of tuition fees; e) information about the judiciary until graduation. These results are relevant to the opinion expressed by (Essel et al., 2018; Lohmann et al., 2021; Merritt et al., 2019) which states that the types of services that must be provided by student support services at ODL are in the form of up to date information that is submitted periodically to students, assistance in accessing the learning process, guidance in the process of administering exams and opening access to university websites and networks or the internet.

3.2.2 Complaints of ODL students regarding lectures and learning

The findings from interviews related to complaints that many ODL students convey regarding the lecture process are very diverse. The complaint covers all the processes that students have to go through while they are taking lectures at ODL, which include the registration process, lectures or tutorials or study aid services, learning materials and resources, exams, and graduation. country. These problems include a) the availability and delay of learning materials and the learning process (tutorials) (Pribadi & Hiariey, 2020); b) a weak internet network, so students have difficulty accessing online learning (Biasutti et al., 2019; Merritt et al., 2019); c) access constraints in the exam process, especially online exams. This obstacle is not related to the content of the course but rather to the accessibility of the online exam application. These constraints can cause stress and decrease student motivation (Essel et al., 2018; Zajacova et al., 2005).

3.2.3 The solutions offered by the student service center to the problems faced by students.

The solutions offered by the student service center generally include: a) listening to each student's complaints properly; b) calming students down individually in various ways, either with words or behavior; c) providing direct solutions, for example: guiding students to solve their own problems through access to related applications, d) recording and collecting student cases that cannot be resolved at UT service centers or study groups and then forwarding them to UT Regional or UT Pusat in Jakarta. This solution is in line with the basic concept of establishing a UT service center and study group at the Open University, which is to serve students from registration until they finish their studies. This service includes information, assistance and assistance individually or in groups (Pandiangan et al., 2021; UniversitasTerbuka, 2021).

3.2.4 Graduation rate of ODL students who are members of UT service centers and study groups

Based on the results of the study, it appears that the graduation rate of students who are members of the student service center (study group and UT service center) in each period shows a balanced quantity between graduation and incoming students. This shows that the services provided by the student service center play a very important role in the resilience of ODL students' studies. This means that student service centers are needed by students who choose to study at universities that implement the ODL system(Brown et al., 2013; Essel et al., 2018; Gil-Jaurena, 2014)

4   CONCLUSION

The conclusion that can be drawn from the results of this study is that student service centers called study groups and UT service centers are institutions that are needed by students. These needs include accessibility, resilience, and continuity of student studies starting from the registration process until they graduate and become undergraduates. The student service center is obliged to provide the services needed by students, although not all students who are members of it need these services continuously. The recommendation that can be submitted is that UT through its UPBJJ consistently maintains and supports the performance of study groups and UT service centers in their area so that the student lecture process runs smoothly.

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