

# STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA<sup>1</sup>

Endang Nugraheni (heni@ut.ac.id)  
Aminudin Zuhairi  
Ida Malati Sajati  
Sri Yuniati PKH  
Suci M. Isman

Universitas Terbuka, Jl. Cabe Raya, Pondok Cabe, Pamulang 15418, Kota Tangerang Selatan

## ABSTRAK

Makalah ini membahas persepsi mahasiswa Universitas Terbuka (UT) terhadap sistem penjaminan mutu (QA) pendidikan jarak jauh, dengan menggunakan metode survei online yang melibatkan 306 siswa. Persepsi mahasiswa dianalisis berdasarkan profil responden, persepsi pada nilai-nilai penting dari QA, kepuasan pada kualitas program pendidikan jarak jauh. Profil responden menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar dari mereka berusia 25 sampai 30 tahun. Mereka belajar di UT sebagian besar dengan cara membaca materi cetak dan interaksi online di rumah dan di tempat lainnya pada malam hari. Permasalahan yang dihadapi mahasiswa terkait pada konflik dengan tanggung jawab pekerjaan, kurangnya waktu dan motivasi diri. Mereka membutuhkan dukungan secara psikologi, akademik, dan sosial. Persepsi mahasiswa pada nilai-nilai penting dalam QA diekspresikan dalam hal ketersediaan pedoman yang jelas untuk sistem QA yang berlaku. Dalam hal kredibilitas kelembagaan, mahasiswa menyatakan bahwa akreditasi eksternal dan staf yang berkualitas merupakan faktor kunci untuk kualitas kelembagaan. Dalam hal proses pembelajaran, mahasiswa menilai sangat pentingnya program terstruktur dan interaktifitas dalam proses belajar. Mahasiswa juga menyatakan bahwa dukungan media teknologi, fakultas, dan penilaian yang adil adalah penting dalam kualitas belajar mengajar secara jarak jauh. Dalam hal pengalaman belajar, mereka memandang bahwa perlindungan hak-hak siswa, materi matakuliah, dan infrastruktur teknologi telah difasilitasi dengan baik oleh lembaga.

Kata kunci: jaminan kualitas, pembelajaran terbuka dan jarak, persepsi mahasiswa

## ABSTRACT

*This paper addresses the Universitas Terbuka (UT) students' perception on quality assurance (QA) system of distance education, using an online survey method involving 306 students. The UT students' perception on QA system is analyzed in terms of profile of respondents, perception on important values of QA, students' satisfaction on the quality of the distance education programs and courses. The profile of the respondents shows that most of them are within the age of 25 to 30*

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years old. They study at UT mostly by means of reading printed materials and interactive online studies at home and at no particular place in the evenings. Students' difficulties in distance related to conflicts with work responsibilities, lack of time and self motivation. Students said that they needed both academic and social psychological support. Students' perception on important values in QA was expressed in terms of the availability and clear guidelines for QA system in the institution. In terms of institutional credibility, students stated that external accreditation and qualified staff are key factors to institutional quality. In terms of learning process, students valued highly the importance of well structured courses and interactivity in the learning process. Students also stated that media technology supports, faculty support, and fair assessment are important in the quality of teaching learning at a distance. In terms of learning experience, they perceived that protection of student rights, course content, and technology infrastructure were well facilitated by the institution.

*Key words: open and distance learning, quality assurance, student perception*

As a credible open and distance education provider, high quality delivery should be ensured to all stakeholders. As a matter of fact quality is a relative and evolving concept. Perception about quality between provider and learner is not always similar. Nonetheless quality should be assessed, and in order to be able to assess quality, some criteria of measurement should be developed. Criteria of measurement are part of quality assurance (QA). Most of QA criteria available are developed in response to the perspective of providers, and only a few take learners' perspective into considerations. It is crucial to balance the perspectives of both and there is a need to give greater considerations to the learners' views since the success of open and distance learning (ODL) very much depends on the motivation and other aspects of learners (Latchem & Jung, 2010).

In order to provide useful references to devise a balanced and improved QA framework for DE/e-learning in Asia, a research has been done to have a better understanding of learners' views on quality in distance and e-learning in Asia. As understood, Asia is a huge continent with a large number of populations with diverse cultures, economic capacities and technological infrastructures, and there has been an increasing trend of students participating in ODL. Further, Asia is the home of many large open and mega-universities to meet the growing demand for quality higher education. This research attempts to identify Asian learners' perspectives on the quality of distance education and e-learning. Findings of this research are expected to provide feedback to the improvement of the existing QA frameworks for DE/e-learning in Asia.

The questions addressed in this research have been derived from the IDRC-supported research project, and focus on addressing the specific context of DE/e-learning in Indonesia. The research questions are formulated as the following.

1. Which dimensions are more important than others in assuring the quality of DE/e-learning from the perspective of Indonesian learners?
2. Within each dimension, which criteria are more important than others in assuring the quality of DE/e-learning from the perspective of Indonesian learners?
3. Are Indonesian learners satisfied with the quality of their DE/e-learning?

Key areas addressed in this research include technology infrastructure, internal QA system, institutional credibility, course development, interactive task, teaching and learning, information and publicity, student support, faculty support, evaluation and assessment, and students' satisfaction.

Data was collected using online survey method to Asian distance learners. The Indonesian data on distance learners were analyzed separately for the purpose of this paper. This paper

addresses the Universitas Terbuka (UT) students' perception on quality assurance system of distance education. Respondents answered were 308, and 306 were analyzed. Analysis was done by means of descriptive statistic.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Profile of Respondents**

Profiles of respondents' showed that male were larger (71.6%) than female (28.4%). Most of the respondents were within the productive age whereas 33.2% were between 25 to 30 years old and 30.5% were between 31 to 40 years old. Detail of range of age is described in Figure 1. In line with the mission of UT to increase accessibility for higher education to wider public, the result is justified in that the range of students' age is diverse (less than 20 years old up to 60 years old).

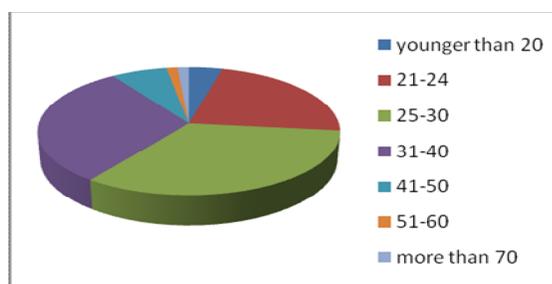


Figure 1. Range of age of the respondents

According to Gagne (1985), in traditional learning theory, age and gender considered traits that may affect the learning. Probably this is why students' demographics related issues have been addressed by a lot of researchers. Although there was no clear effects of students demographics in their online learning (Nguyen & Zhang, 2011), some research indicated to their motivation and preparedness, mature and full-time students did better in online classes (Lu et al, 2003 in Nguyen & Zhang, 2011).

Distance learning is independent and student-centered learning. Understanding the characteristics and demography of students will help to overcome the potential barriers of learning. Similar to students in other open and distance learning universities, UT students face some learning difficulties which hinder their study progress. Students' difficulties at UT are related to conflicts with work responsibilities, lack of time and self motivation, as described in Figure 2.

Motivation has a great influence on the success of learning. According to Galusha (1997) motivation has affected on attrition and completion rates, regardless of institutional setting. Learner behavior is influenced by learner's needs, learner's situation and personal characteristics. Motivations in distance learners are often different from those of conventional students. Understanding what motivate students is important in supporting learning. Furthermore, Galusha (1997) stated that problems and barriers encountered by the student includes costs and motivators, feedback and teacher contact, student support and services, alienation and isolation, lack of experience, and training. In addition, distance learner also have insecurities in learning due to disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers.

Learning behavior is important to ensure the success of study and can be used as predictor to learning behavior. This learning behavior is described in Figures 3 to 5. UT students learn mostly

by means of printed materials (52.1%) and interactive online studies (21.3%) such as in online tutorial program (Figure 3). The most convenient time of study is during the evening on weekdays (Figure 4). While for the favored place of study is at home (68.7%) as described in Figure 5.

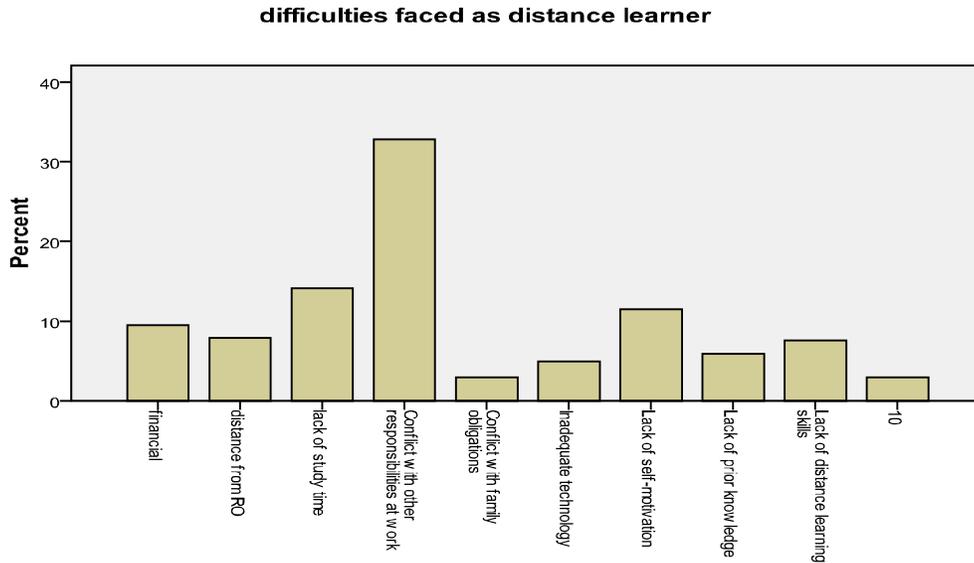


Figure 2. Difficulties faced by UT's students

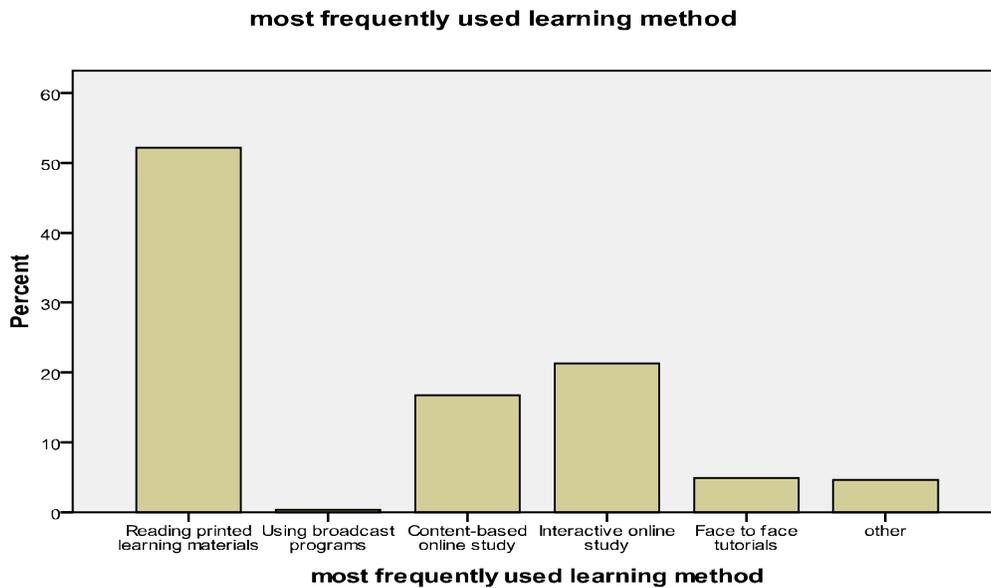


Figure 3. Most frequently used learning method of UT's students

Learning styles and preferences are widely diverse among students. This should be taken into consideration in order to ensure the effectiveness of the delivery method, especially in distance education. One simply could not afford to accommodate all possible preferences, such as often done

in face to face setting. Unfortunately, there is not over abundance research on learning style of distance education students. One finding that was stated by Diaz and Cartnal (1999) according to research by Dille and Mezack (1991, in Diaz &Cartnal, 1999) is that because in distance learning courses which used to relay on independent learning, people with less need of concrete experience in learning will tend to adapt more than people with high need of concrete experience learning. Successful distance learners preferred to look for abstract concept to help them explained the concrete experiences associated with their learning. This might explained the learning method used by UT's students, since abstract concepts will be delivered well by means of printed materials.

On the other hand, while various media have been used in delivering courses in distance education, print-based course materials will continue to be the dominant course delivery media. "Print is still the cheapest technology, and, even if the costs of using high-tech dissemination tools fall below those of print, it will be some time before many countries have adequate infrastructures" (Potashnik & Capper,1998).

In relation with time and places of study, distance education students are usually time-bound due to work or travel schedules or location-bound due to geographic or family responsibilities. Thus, they enroll and studying in courses according to their convenience (Galusha, 1997). Apparently, this was applied in the case of UT's students.

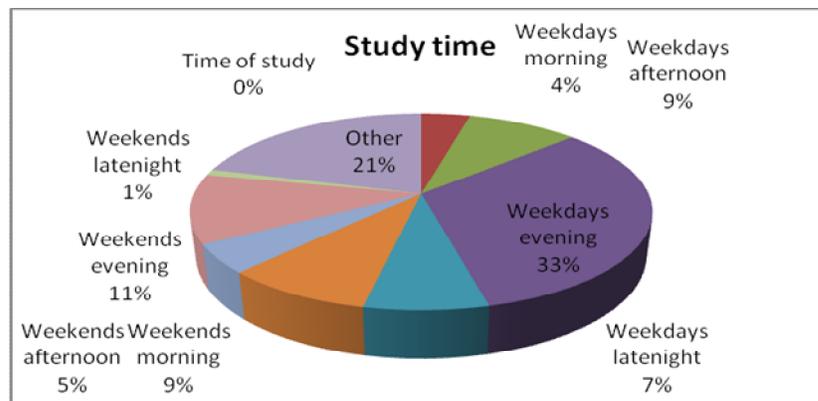


Figure 4. Study time of UT's students

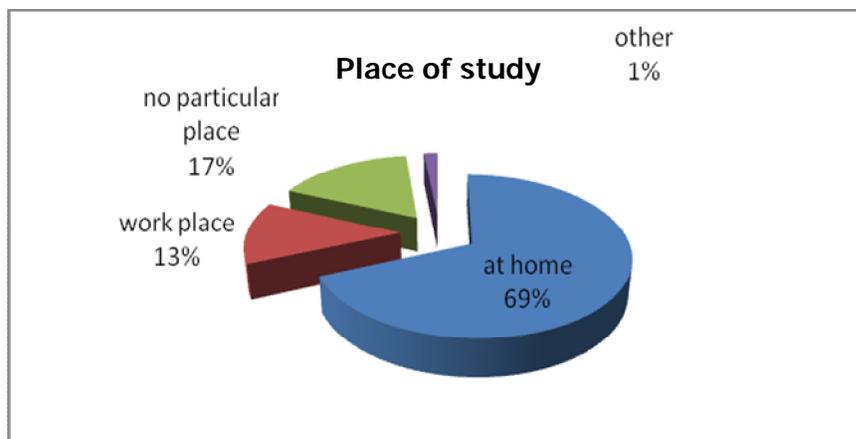


Figure 5. Place of study

### Students' Value in DE Institution

Students' perception on important values in DE institution was expressed in terms of their assessment in the infrastructure, internal QA system, institutional credibility, course development, interactive task, teaching and learning, information and publicity, student support, faculty support, evaluation and assessment.

### Infrastructure

The most important goal of distance education institution is to reach participants across geographically dispersed locations. Infrastructures are considered in deciding the most effective means of communication. It is a fact that the type and availability of infrastructure are diverse across Indonesia. Due to the very large number of student body, most of the management processes at UT rely on technology support, including student record system, students' assessment, and some of the students learning support.

Most of UT's students viewed that DE infrastructure is important to support the learning process at a distance (Figure 6). Those DE infrastructures are mainly the security of student data, reliable technology infrastructure, reliable learning management system, and media production technology. In terms of physical classroom, most of students feel that it was not as important as other DE infrastructures. These findings tell us that DE students seem more valued infrastructure for DE which could facilitate learning at a distance rather than for learning on face to face basis. This is in line with the trends of technology infrastructure used in the country. According to Internet World Stats, the internet usage in Indonesia has increase from 1% in the year of 2000 to 12,3% of its 242,968,342 population in 2010 (Internet World Stats, 2010).

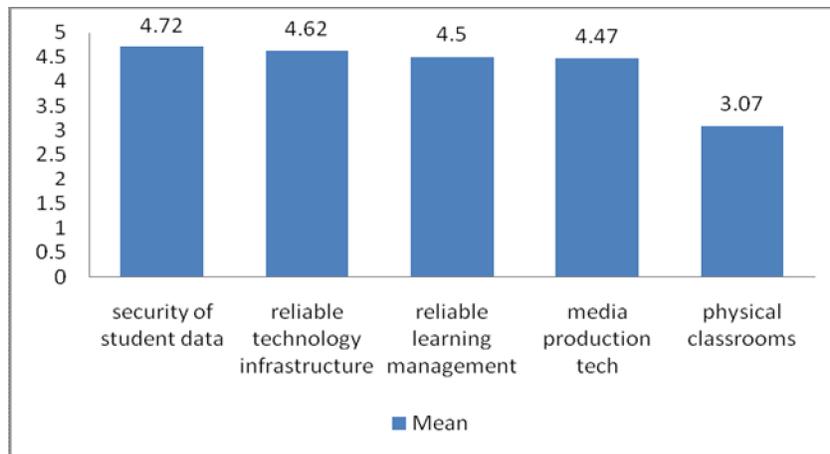


Figure 6. Students' value on DE infrastructure

### Internal QA System

In term of QA system, most students pointed out that the clarity of QA guidelines and the existence of quality standards are more important than periodic internal and external evaluation. These findings showed us that students view that QA system as an important and useful tool or instrument that could be used by DE institution to improve the quality of learning at a distance. The internal and external evaluation of DE program is viewed by students as much more focusing on management concern rather than academic concern (Figure 7).

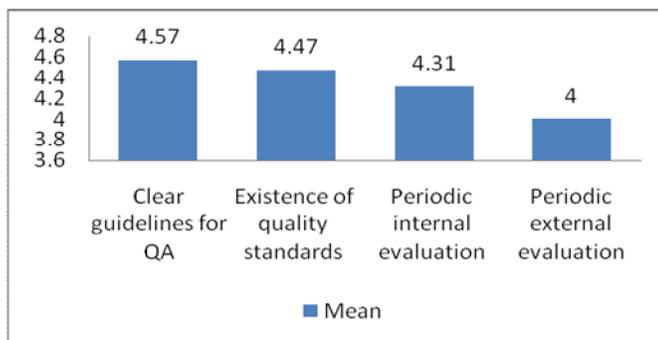


Figure 7. Students' perception on internal quality assurance system

QA is become more and more important in ensuring the credibility of educational institution, including open and distance education institution. "Institutions are thrust into being confronted with a rapidly changing social as well as economic scenario; and if they are to survive, they must evolve" (Tucker & Hodge, 2004). Therefore, students' views on QA as one of the stakeholder should be taking into account.

QA for distance higher education is one of the main concerns in the UT management. UT has implemented a quality management system by means of adopting and contextualizing the draft of the Asian Association of Open Universities (AAOU) QA Framework. This has taken a great deal of commitment and participation of all staff involved. QA at the UT required systematic and step-by-step processes, including development of the QA framework and job manuals, raising awareness and commitment amongst all staff involved, internal assessment, and integration of QA programs into the university's annual action plans, external assessment and benchmarking (Belawati & Zuhairi, 2007).

### Institutional Credibility

Most students argued that external accreditation, qualified staff, and the international accreditation are more important in term of institutional credibility than the strong leadership and the clarity lines of authority. They thought that qualified staff and accreditation, both external and international, could stimulate the academic development and improvement of the DE institution; while the strong leadership and the clarity lines of authority might function in improving the management of the DE institution (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Students' value on institutional credibility

Distance education has been proliferated for more than two hundred years with tremendous growth and diversity. There are various providers, types of student, technology and media used around the globe. On the other hand, concern about its credibility and effectiveness are always increasing. In many countries, distance education programs still lack of credibility. Graduates often experiences difficulties in obtaining recognition. Even for the highly esteemed British Open University had this difficulty, until their courses were actually compared with courses offered by conventional higher education in the United Kingdom. Programs in 6 of the university's 11 subject areas were awarded "excellent" ratings. However more and more studies show that distance education is as effective as conventional education (Potashnik & Capper, 1998).

### Course Development

Distance education student demand high quality courses requires universities to ensure its quality by means of standardize its course development process. In the case of UT, well structure course, guidelines for course development, the adaptability to student's needs and multimedia components in courses viewed by students as the most important part of course development in DE. They believe that they could learn well and independently as long as they are facilitated by well-structured course materials which guided them step by step on how to study the content/substances of the course. In the students' point of view this kind of course materials could only be developed by the experienced course writers (Figure 9). The experienced course writers generally would have the ability to develop best DE course materials as long as they have enough knowledge about the substance would be written, the characteristics of DE students, the typical of learning at a distance; and clear guidelines for course development and media selection. In addition, the students also assume that the well structured course materials could only be learned easily if it is developed by considering adaptability to student's needs. On the other hand, students viewed video-recorded lectures as the less important part of course development. In this case, likely students "prefer" learn from written course materials rather than from video program.

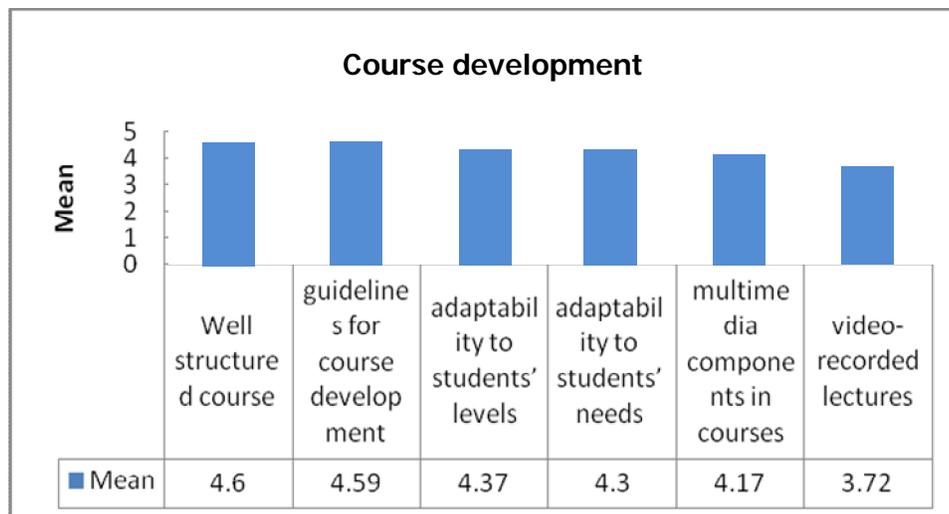


Figure 9. Students' value on course development

Course development is essential in distance education. Since instructors and students typically have minimal face-to-face interaction, course development should be based on well plan

instructional design approach. Instructional development provides a process and framework for planning, developing, and adapting instruction based on learner needs and content requirements. So far UT has been developing its courses according to a adapted model of instructional design Dick and Carey (2009). The findings on students' views on course development have confirmed the importance of using such instructional design approach.

### Interactive Task

Almost all of interactive task in DE such as problem/case-based learning, individualized learning, and collaborative learning viewed by students as important activities or tasks that could facilitate them in learning at a distance. In this case, it seems that students are conscious about their limitation on face to face interaction among each other's and with tutors. That is why they valued very high interactive tasks in distance education, because according to them they could be conducted independently (Figure 10).

Distance learning theory and research stated that interaction is an essential for successful learning. Therefore, observable and measurable interactive characters and models of interactivity are very important in order to ensure the effective transfer of theory into practice (Dick & Carey, 2009). Information on students' perception on interactivity including what kind of interactive tasks they need would be useful in distance education course design.

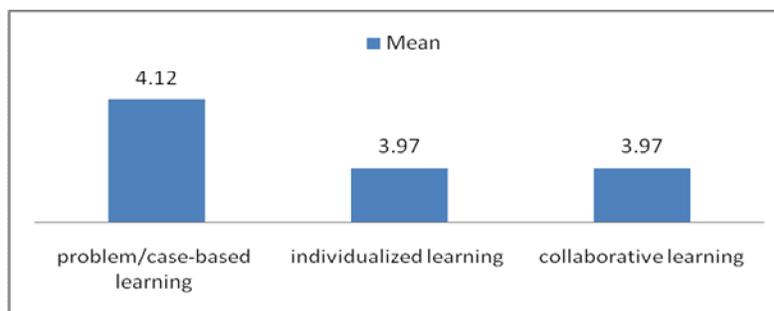


Figure 10. Students' value in interactive task in learning

### Teaching and Learning

Most students viewed that access to online library, online tutorials, and interaction with instructors, flexibility in learning methods, asynchronous online interactions, and flexibility in learning pace as the most important facilities and support in teaching and learning at a distance. It seems that everything that could facilitate students' learning at a distance and support students' independence learning is viewed as meaningful and helpful by students. Other facilities such as interaction with other students, access to physical library, synchronous interaction, face to face tutorials, and informal meeting with tutors and students are viewed as less important by students (Figure 11).

The conditions indicate that students feel more comfortable with independent learning using any kind of DE facilities and support rather than learning on face to face instruction. The students' reasons for this conditions might be because they are aware that it is difficult for them who live spread out around the country to interact on face to face basis with tutors, other fellow students, access to physical library, face-to-face tutorials, and even in synchronous interaction.

According to research meta analysis done by Gunawardena and Zittle (1995), to ensure the successful teaching and learning process in distance education is the necessity to change instructors'

and faculty roles contextually. This change is needed to adapt to the technologies that support communication process in distance education. Aspects of teaching and learning process that require role changes are designing students-centered instruction and creating social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1995).

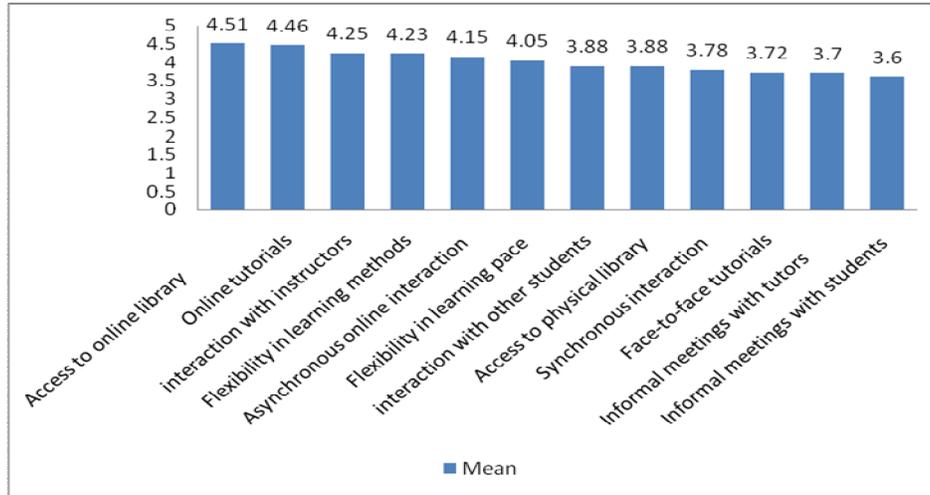


Figure 11. Students' value on teaching and learning

### Information About Courses

It seems that students are concerned with the function of information about courses in DE. All of information concerning course information, clear requirements for assignments, and program/course administration are viewed by students as an important part of DE services to the community (Figure 12). Information about courses is one of important aspect in delivering instruction, especially for distance learners, so that some degree of isolation could be remedied (Dick & Carey, 2009).

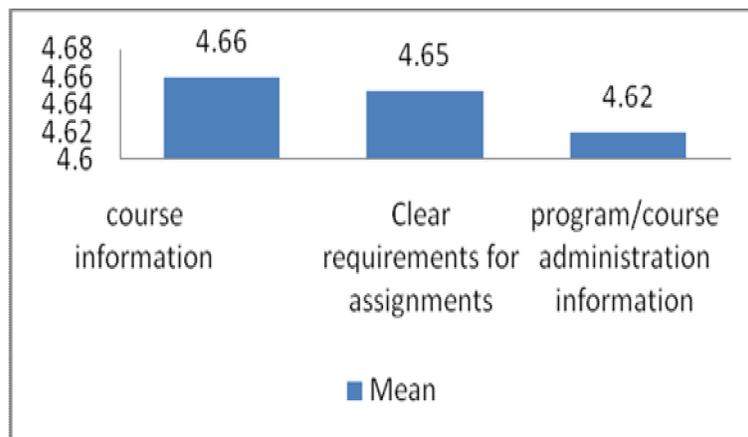


Figure 12. Students value on information and publicity

### Students support

Students support is also important to ensure the success of study. UT students stated that they needed both academic and social psychological supports as described in Figure 13. Students perceived that the most important support came from academic staffs (45.5%) and also from the family member (30.3%) as described in Figure 14.

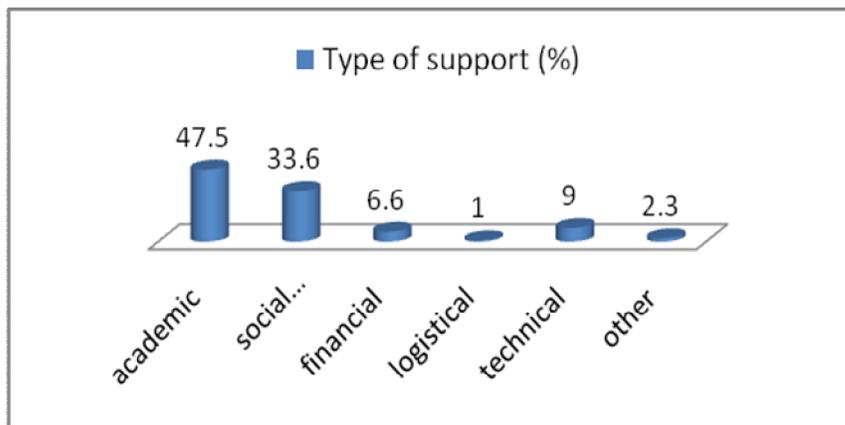


Figure 13. Type of support needed for UT's students

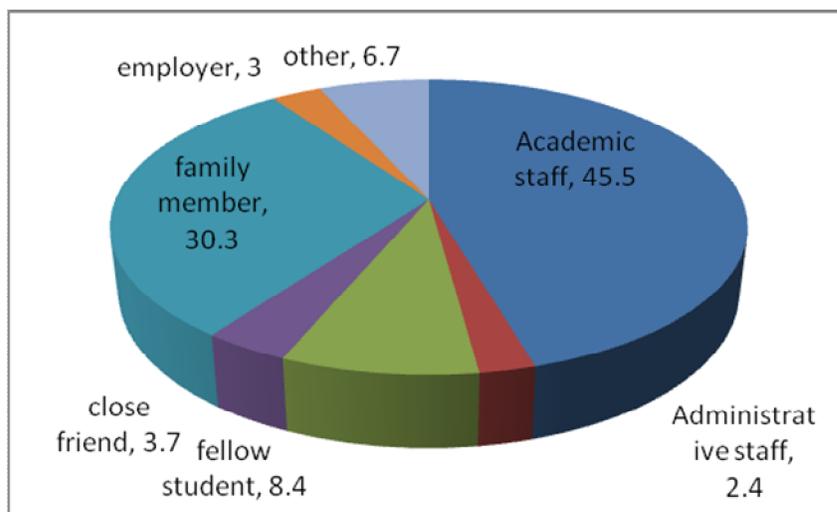


Figure 14. The most important support for UT's students

Almost all of students support facilities in DE, such as media/technology support, administrative support, distance learning skills training, flexible payment method, social support, learner welfare, guidelines for funding, and psychological support, were viewed as important and useful by students. Only one kind of students' support that was viewed less important than other namely established appeal mechanism. In this case, students might be argued that appeal mechanism was not important yet for them because it does not rely on directly to their learning needs (Figure 15).

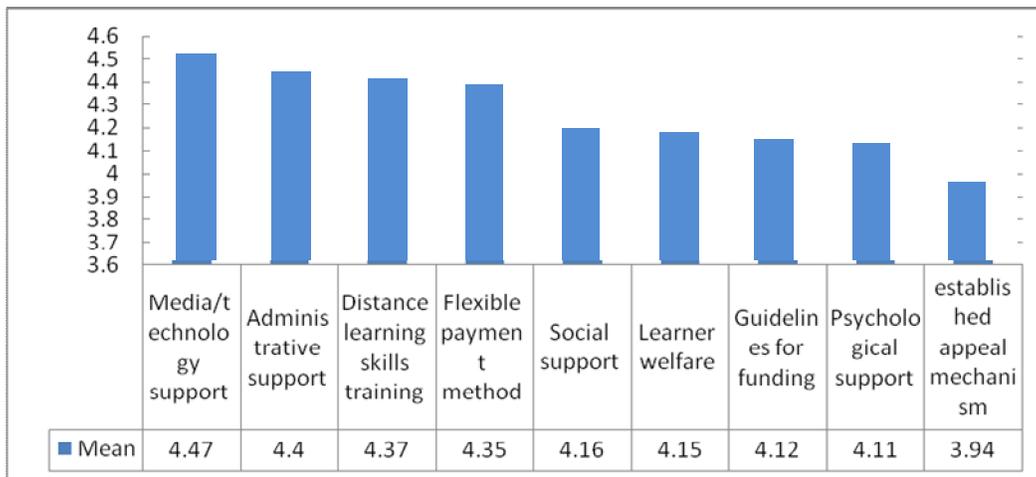


Figure 15. Students' value on students support

### Faculty support

Almost all faculty support DE, such as policy and procedures for staff selection, continuous assistance for tutors, training for staff, and faculty/tutor/staff welfare were viewed as important and useful for managing DE by students. From the students' point of view, policy and procedures for staff selection would help institution select the appropriate candidate for certain jobs. Continuous assistance for tutors would improve the quality of academic services for DE students. Training for staff would improve the knowledge and skills of staff in certain working area, and this would indirectly improve the DE institutional capacity. Faculty/tutor/staff welfare would make the institutional environment healthy (Figure 16).

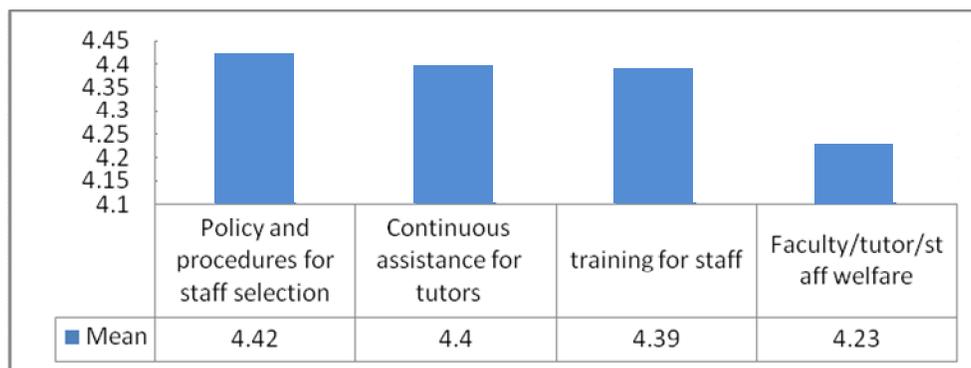


Figure 16. Students' value on Faculty support

This result shows that students' perception on students support is varied. Students need support from family as well as from academic staffs. They need support in terms of academic as well as social support. They also need technology support, faculty support, and many other type of support. Tait (2000) suggest a framework of developing students' support system. Some aspects that should be considered in developing students support includes students characteristics, technological infrastructure, course or program demand, scalability, geography, and management system (Tait, 2000). This framework along with students' perceptions should be considered by the institution in increasing the students support services.

### **Evaluation and assessment**

In term of evaluation and assessment, most students commented that feedback to student assignments, fair rubrics for assessment, periodic student evaluation, periodic institutional review of lecturers, and feedback from graduates were important for them in order to know their learning achievement in DE situation. It seems the students believe that feedback on assignment would give them the information about which part of their assignment is right and which part is wrong. Fair rubrics for assessment would guide them on how to do the assignment. Periodic students' evaluation would give them a chance to do self-assessment and evaluation and doing continuous improvement. Periodic institutional review of lecturers would make lecturers more competence in facilitating students learning. Feedback from graduates would give a useful information about the quality of study program, the quality of graduates, the quality of students support services, etc (Figure 17).

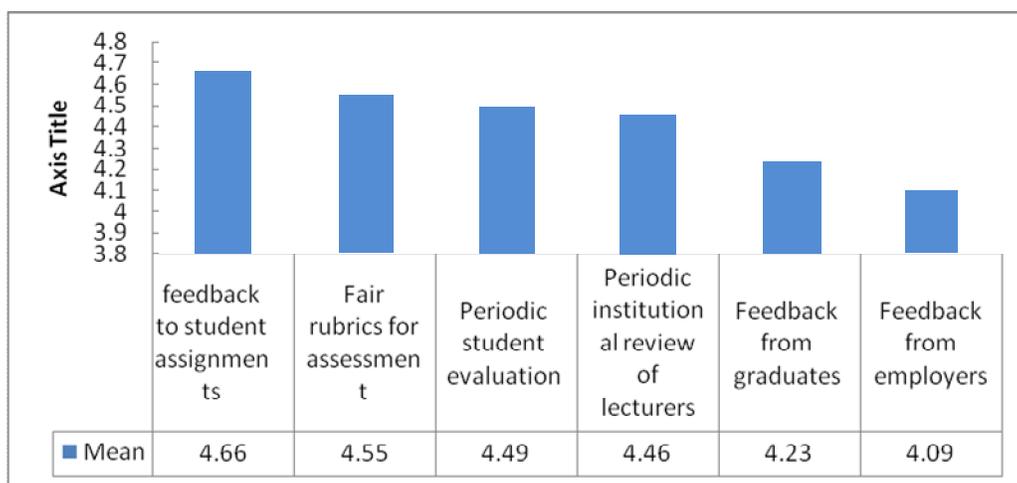


Figure 17. Students' value on evaluation and assessment

There are a lot of study concerning students' evaluation and students learning assessment in the traditional face-to-face setting. However, as more and more institutions of higher education are transcending the traditional boundaries into distance education, the issue of learning assessment has spawned vigorous debates. Thus, the study to identify assessment strategies that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of distance education courses within a degree program become more and more essential (Tucker & Hodge, 2004). Thus, information on students' view on what is important on evaluation and assessment will be useful for the institution in order to design the valid assessment strategy.

### **Students' satisfaction**

Students' satisfaction on the quality of their program and courses were surveyed. Some criteria such as course content, learning activities, technology infrastructure, human right issue, etc. were asked. The result showed that human right issues, course content, and technology infrastructure were well facilitated by the institution. Three of those criteria were rated 3.60 and above (Figure 18). A human right issue was the highest which probably mean that students' right to pursue their study was guaranteed by UT. As already mentioned most of UT's students are fulltime worker who have difficulties to continue their study through conventional face to face mode of learning.

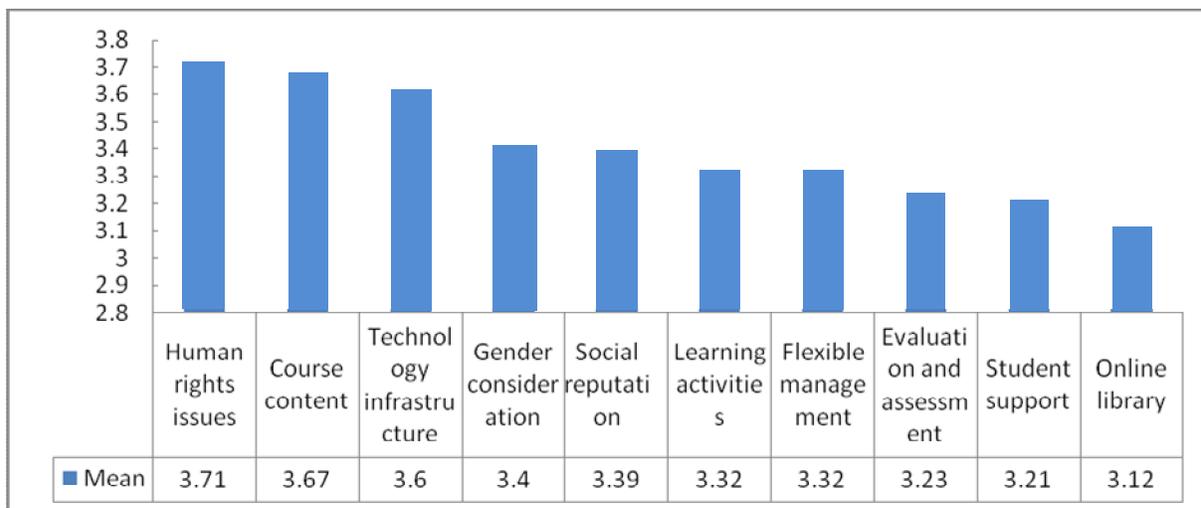


Figure 18. Students' satisfaction of UT services

Overall, students satisfaction concerning that they had learned sufficient knowledge from a distance education courses is very important. According to research, when students satisfied with their recent learning outcome, they tend to take more distance learning courses in the future. (Nguyen & Zhang, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

The information gathered from the analysis will benefit UT in evaluating and improving the general services for UT's students, as well as QA system. But it must be taken into consideration that UT's respondents in this research are only a small part of the whole UT students who have online access. More information should also be gathered among UT's non online students. From the profile it showed that UT's students fall into category of traditional distance learners for they still use more of printed materials rather than online resources, although online learning has gained increasing attention too. Students also relied on conventional support such as academic support from academic staffs, which were similar to those at conventional universities.

Concerning key areas addressed in the research, in term of infrastructure students viewed that reliable technology was more important than physical infrastructure. In terms of QA system, students valued QA as a means to improve the quality of learning. According to UT students, institutional credibility will be proven by external accreditation, international accreditation, and by qualified staffs. In the area of learning, well structured courses, problem-based learning, and online support such as online library and online tutorials were considered very important. In the area of student's assessment, feedback to assignments was considered the most important. Those aspects valued by UT's students will be most useful in improving criteria for UT's QA system.

Furthermore, students' satisfaction of UT's services was relatively high especially for the human right issues. Apparently, the right to learn and engage in formal study for a wide range of age, geography, and other condition is assured at UT.

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