ASSURING QUALITY LEARNING SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS’ DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM

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Abstract
Research has indicated that learning support is an important component of distance education. However, many distance education institutions provide those supports based on their own presumptions, beliefs and conditions. Too often the needs of distance learners are not taken into considerations. The learning supports given such as the module, tutorial, face-to-face session, learning centres, course information and administration may not facilitate students’ learning and may not meet their needs. This study attempts to establish empirical evidence for the needs of learner supports and their quality. The data are collected from a survey of teachers enrolled in a distance education program at the Institute for Distance Education and Learning (IDEAL), Universiti Putra Malaysia and from observations and feedbacks of those involved in administering the program. Based on the results guidelines for assuring quality in learning supports for teachers in distance learning is proposed.

Introduction
The early years of the nineties in Malaysia has witnessed a remarkable increase in the number of distance education programs offered by local institutions. The number of distance education students enrolment increased from a few thousand before 1990 to 17,756 in 1996. The number of providers also increased from two in 1990 to seven in 1996. This increase is a result of greater demand for tertiary among adult population in the country. The increase and greater demand for tertiary education in Malaysia experienced in the early nineties showed that there is a greater need among working adults to continue their education.

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The increase and greater demand for tertiary education in Malaysia experienced in the early nineties showed that there is a greater need among working adults to continue their education. However, they are not able to continue their studies using the conventional means because of their work and family commitments. Distance education provides the flexibility for them to continue their studies. Thus, when the Institute for Distance Education and Learning (IDEAL), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) offered degree programs for teachers there was a tremendous response. But because of certain limitations, IDEAL was only able to register about 1,220 teachers, enrolled in three programs i.e. Teaching Bahasa Malaysia as The First Language, Teaching English as a Second language (TESL) and counseling and guidance.

It is the interest of this study to find out who are our distance education students i.e. their demographic characteristics. By knowing their characteristics IDEAL will be more prepared to understand the needs of distance education learners. Distance learners depend on self-directed learning which gives them the flexibility to learn at their own place, time and pace. However, researches have indicated that self-directed learning requires certain supports to facilitate the student learning. Researches have found that most learning supports provided by institutions are not based on the needs of students. It is also the purpose of this research then to determine whether the learning supports provided by IDEAL meet the needs of the students.

Finally, the research attempts to establish the quality service i.e. in terms of the learning support provided. Quality is seen as meeting the satisfaction of the students when they received the learning support provided to facilitate their learning. It is hoped that from the results of the study IDEAL can find better ways of how to fulfill those needs and draw implications towards better management of those support services and providing continuous evaluation. In doing so, IDEAL will make learner support a critical and integral part of the distance education system.

**Learner Support in Distance Education**

Learner support is a very important component of distance education. It is an integral part of open and distance learning system. However, determining what are the kinds of support students need is a difficult task. It appears that support services provided by distance learning centres are still based on presumptions, belief and conditions of the provider. Priyadarshini (1994) pointed out that models of “good practice” of learner support developed in western institutions are not always appropriate for other countries and culture. Distance education providers must bear in mind that while planning a support system, people’s customs and traditions must not be violated.

In determining the learner support needed, it is useful to look at the concepts of learner support. Robinson (1995) said that the definitions of learner support very. To take just three: One describes it as the element of an open learning system capable of responding to a particular individual learner (Thorpe, 1988); another as the support incorporated within the self-learning materials, the learning system marking (Hui, 1989); and a third as the requisite student services essential to ensure the successful delivery of learning experience at a distance (Wright, 1991).

There are authors who include learner support as an integral part of a course, while others places it as a supplement. Some authors include administration and delivery
operations in their definitions of learner support while others do not. The range of services included in models of learner support also varies, some include pre-entry services, and others do not. In some cases support services are provided in partnership with other agencies, adding yet another dimension of variation. Bajaj (1996) said that student (learner) support services mean input like technologies and numerous others that contribute to the enhancement of the level of comprehension of the student. Learner support can be viewed as having various components i.e. the elements that make up the system, their configuration, and the interaction between them and the learners, which creates its dynamic. (Robinson, 1995).

The elements are:

- Personal contact between learners and support agency people acting in a variety of support roles and with a range of titles, individual or group, face-to-face or via other means;
- Peer contact
- The activity of giving feedback to individuals on their learning;
- Additional materials such handbooks, advice, notes or guides;
- Study groups and centers, actual or ‘virtual’ (electronic);
- Access to libraries, laboratories, equipment and communication networks.

There will be varying configuration of these elements depending on the requirements of course design, infrastructure of a country, distribution of learners, available resources and the value of philosophy of the distance education provider. It must be recognized that with deliberate support services and scientific instructional methodology, the limitations for distance education has been converted into a source of greater strength. The self-instructional materials, multi-channel learning packages for learners to choose, combined with varied support services for learners to avail are praiseworthy efforts. However, the facts that learners will need support from human beings – people who can help them with their learning and respond to them as individuals. Learners without support are most liable to delay their completion of a program or drop out altogether (Rowntree, 1992).

Distance learners may need help before they even begin learning, as well as during and after a learning program. The ideal distance learning program should allow Paolo Freire (1974) call a “convivial dialogue” between providers and their learners. This would enable content, objective, methods, assessment and systems to be continuously renegotiated.

As Boot and Hodgson (1988) point out, this involves: “… a commitment to engaging with the aspiration, demands and experience of those whose learning interests we are claiming to serve. This implies a continuous process, not a on-off piece of market research”. However, it can be concluded that learner support is needed in order to facilitate students’ learning. These supports can be in the forms of facilities, administrative, learning materials, reading materials and references, human interaction and advice and moral support.

In distance education where the responsibility of learning is in the “hands” of the students it is logical then that they are the best to know what are the kinds of support needed. In this kind of learning environment where it is learner-centered there is a
strong possibility that in spite of the holistic approach of the system, scientific justifications of education and best intentions of the providers, these support services are not what is required by distance learners. The students – the takers – may not want the goods delivered to them and may not find the services suitable. Probably they do not want the regular tutorial sessions, they do not appreciate the techniques adopted by the tutors, the face-to-face sessions that the instructors held with them, the support given by the study centers may not contribute to their learning and instead of facilitating their learning these support services are hindering their learning. Mishra (1996) said that as the distance education system at present lacks any such learner-based survey there is no research based confirmation regarding this matter. He believes that the adult learners who have a conceptual clarity regarding their learning objectives can propose their own views and suggestions on the ways the distance education providers could help them in facilitating their learning. They themselves are capable of defining, designing and deciding the services they require.

Quality and Quality Assurance of Learner Support

In providing learning support, the major question that is often asked – are the clients (students) satisfied with the services provided? In other words are the services meeting the standards required in providing quality in distance education? Failures of quality in distance education are easily recognizable and they can often be traced to failures in systems in some way.

Of course it is not simple to define quality and to manage the processes effectively. In distance education quality will mean different things to different people. There are the course designers, students, program managers, tutors and content providers to whom the notion of quality will differ. It is not value free and its meaning is created by the social group using the term in its cultural context.

Quality is therefore an elusive term difficult to define and even more difficult to measure, particularly as it applies to higher education. Despite the growing importance government and the public attached to matters of educational quality and efficiency, no suggestion were made as to how they would be measured. Scriven (1997) listen some indicators to provide a starting point from which to measure the quality of an institution’s distance education program. Drawing upon the findings of an national project undertaken in Australia in 991 and 1992, these indicators are for consideration and are suggestions of some benchmarks, which might be used to measure quality.

The indicators have been classified under four headings:

• Policy development and management
• Staff development
• Service provision
• Processes of distance learning

Quality assurance is a process directed towards achieving the quality or characteristics of quality. Robinson (1994) regards “quality” as a characteristic and ‘quality assurance’ as a process directed towards achieving the characteristics. It is one way of managing an enterprise in order to achieve a stated standard or quality of performance. Quality assurance is the set of activities that an organization undertakes to ensure to
ensure that standards are specified and reached consistently for a product or services. It has as its goal the avoidance of faulty products or services.

Quality assurance focuses attention on operational processes and systems. It is a simple idea with three main elements:

• Standards are set for a product or service
• Production or delivery of a product or service is organized so that the standards are consistently met.
• Consequently clients or recipients’ confidence are created because what is promised is what will happen.

Quality assurances are not so simple to implement although they may sound easy and straightforward. However quality assurance and accreditation are very important in development of any educational program especially through the distance education mode. Education has no meaning unless there is credibility in quality and its acceptance. If quality distance education is an obsession, there is hardly any place for complacency. Therefore, concerned providers and institutions have to strive hard to achieve higher quality.

Meeting the Needs and Satisfaction in Learner Support

In this area where education can be perceived as one of many business activities, students or learners as clients can influence the educational system. As stated earlier an important element of ensuring the success of teaching and learning through distance education is by knowing the learners. Information such as age, sex, work experiences, income, cultures and beliefs, occupation, etc. are very much needed in the building and preparation of learner support services. The information too will help to determine the support needed. Normally learners support services needed are in the form of advice and counseling; acquiring learning and examination skills; support from other learners; feedback regarding assessments and carrier guidance.

It is safe to say that in distance education it is the meeting of the students needs that is the concern of the provider. However in providing the services in distance education (such as learning support and advising, tutoring, responding to enquiries) there has been complaints and grievance from students. These complaints and grievances can be taken to indicate that support and services are not adequate in meeting the needs of the student. Empirical data is needed to prove the gap between the services provided and quality expected. Tait (1995) developed a model for the planning of learner support in distance education. The model illustrate that we need to know who are the learners, what are their needs and how can we fulfill their needs. The models also indicate that the support needs to be managed, needs expenses and also continuous evaluation. Model for The Planning and Managing of Learner Support Services Source: Tait (1995).

The Study of Learner Support

Based on the model, this study is designed to determine the demographic characteristics of IDEAL’s students, their needs in terms of learner support and their satisfaction regarding the services provided. From the findings inferences are made to provide a guideline for quality assurance. The study is based on data collected from a
survey, records, observation and feedbacks by students and those involved in distance education. The survey was conducted on distance education students in the Bachelor of Education program (Teaching Bahasa Malaysia as the First Language). The students were the first group enrolled and were in their second semester. There were about 472 students in this program. They were the largest group of students pursuing the Bachelor of Education program.

The study was carried out on one group only because they were using the same modules, same references, do similar assignment topics and use same support that are made available to them. The demographic profile of these students were analysed to assess the effect of the different variables had on the needs of the students and their satisfaction of the learning support provided.

The study was carried out on students from a number of learning centres all over the country. There were 17 learning centres altogether. They were in Alor Setar, Kulim Taiping, Ipoh, Lumut, Banting, Shah Alam, Cheras, UPM, Melaka, Muar, Johor Bharu, Kuantan, Kuala Terengganu, Kota Bharu, Bintulu and Kota Kinabalu. These centers were divided into four regions, northern, central, southern and eastern region. It was decided that the sample should comprise of students from centers of each of the region. The sample was then picked at random and the centers of Lumut, Cheras, Muar and Kuantan were picked representing the four regions mentioned above. All students of Teaching Bahasa Malaysia as the First Language at these centres were taken respondents. There were 31 respondents in Lumut, 12 in Kuantan, 14 in Muar and 35 in Cheras.

For the purpose of data collection a set of questionnaire was constructed. The questionnaire was made up of nine sections, with the first sections consisting of data pertaining to the background of the respondent. Data collected were on age, years of teaching experience, sex and salary. Data were also collected on support needed by respondents in carrying out self-directed learning and whether they like the self-directed learning method and were able to carry it out. The support listed were module, tutorial, face-to-face sessions; learning centres; courses information, guide to preparation of assignments and administration of the program. Data were collected on each support service provided with questions on learner satisfaction and their quality. The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents of the four learning centres while they were having their tutorial and the administration of the questionnaires was explained to them.

The researchers explained to the respondents how the respondents should be administrated and remained with them while they were responding to ensure that they answer the questions correctly. Frequency and percentage analysis were used to explain the students’ perception on the adequacy of learner support provided.

**Learners Demographic**
IDEAL distance learners are adults, majority (80%) are above 30 years old and with an average age of 35 years old; more male (62%) than female; all are working and a majority (95%) have more than 5 years of working experience and an average working experience of 11 years; a majority (84%) of them earn more than RM1,000
per month with an average earning of RM1,320 per month with a range of RM769 to RM2,315 per month (Appendix 1).

The study indicates that IDEAL’s learners are matured working adults who have commitments at office and at home. Due to these commitments, the conventional mode of full-time learning hinders them from continuing their education. Given the opportunity, they want to further their education. IDEAL’s distance education programs provide them the flexibility they need, especially in terms of flexible scheduling through self-directed learning. If they decide to follow the full-time study in campus they have to take leave from work, which in most cases they are not able to do. Even if they manage to get leave then they have to forego their seniority in service and also lose certain portion of their pay. Teachers who study full-time are only paid half of their salaries. Thus, for working teachers, distance education is one of the best options they have if they want to pursue further education.

Most of the students are very experienced teachers and this experience provides them the necessary maturity to handle self-directed learning. This requires more responsibility and discipline from students, especially to face the challenges of studying and at the same time working full-time in addition to family commitments that they have. They really have to be much disciplined in order to complete their readings and assignments. Their working experience can help them in planning and organizing well, there is a better chance that they can follow and complete their studies. Many times their studies are interrupted by work they need to attend to and solve problems related to family matters.

These kinds of problems are enough to make any average person withdraw from the program, especially when several assignments and examinations are due. It is during this time that we find many students are giving excuses to withdraw or postpone their studies. Only very matured students can handle these trying times and proceed with their studies and complete their courses. Many of the students have a reasonable income. Financially the students have to be stable because they have to pay the full fee and at the same time they have to spend monthly for books, transport and other expenses. With an average income of RM1,000, students may find it quite tough to make ends meet. Some of them have savings while others have to resort to borrowings. Studying pose additional financial burden for these students and they have to find means to support the additional financial commitments. Usually the have made certain amount of commitments such as for their homes, transport, work, children education and others. Many students make monthly deduction provided by IDEAL and by doing so spread out their expenses over a period of about 4 years. But for teachers the amount of money they spend on distance education will be less compared if they study full-time, in terms of actual cost as well as opportunity cost. This is a very important factor for institutions that try to introduce a distance education program that is self-financing. The students must be able to pay and at the same time they must have the education that is relatively cheap. Pricing of self-sustaining program is very critical, otherwise it may not be able to attract adequate and hence the program will not be viable.
Learner Support Needed
The mean score for each learner support was calculated. The study found that all the support is very important. The students need these supports as indicated by the high mean scores for each support. The scores range from 4.5 to 4.9 from a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 5, with module placed as the highest learner support needed (Appendix 2). It is quite understandable because the module is the main guide for them to study. It contains the scheduling, information about the instructors, the activities, readings, references, contents, assignments and examinations. Without the module the students will not be able to follow the course.

Other supports that the students perceived to be very important are information about courses, feedback from lecturers (mean score 4.8) and tutorials (mean of 4.7). The information about courses is incomplete and in some cases is not clear. There are also cases where additional information and changes are made and thus they need to make further inquiries about those changes. When the students are following courses, they are given assignments, tests, quizzes and midterm examinations. In almost all cases they need to know how they are doing in their assignments and examinations so that they can learn from their mistakes and improve. Also they have to make sure they pass their courses so that they can graduate and do well in their studies. Besides that they need to know about the general academic procedures and regulations. Even though these rules and regulations have been written and explained during the registration but then as they go along they face certain problems related to exemptions, withdrawals and postponement of their studies and they need to talk to somebody. Usually they would be comfortable to refer to lecturers who they think would provide them the necessary information about courses.

During the course of study, they also need interactions with peers, tutors and lecturers. They gave tutorial a mean score of 4.7 and the same for interaction with peers and instructors. The scores indicate while self-study is the main way of study, human interaction is a major support for them to solve academic problems. They depend quite a lot on their friends and tutors who are closer to them while less on the lecturers because of distance. Anyway, problems that be solved by friends and tutors will be referred to lecturers during the face-to-face sessions, through the a-mail, e-mail and telephones. But interactions with lecturers seem to be more difficult and hence they rely more on the tutors who they meet more often and are located in their own areas of residence.

Other supports are also seen to be important such as feedbacks from tutors, place to forward problems and administrative questions with mean scores of 4.7, learning centres (mean score 4.6), face-to-face sessions, flexibility in learning, guidance to preparation of assignment and academic advisor (mean scores of 4.5). These supports facilitate their learning. The learning centres provide them the facilities to meet and have discussions, study and refer to certain references reading materials and also some sense of belonging to a group. The face-to-face sessions give the change to come to campus and give them the chance to come to campus and give them the sense of belonging to a university, to see fellow students from other centres and meet the lecturers. This further will give confidence and motivation to continue their studies, especially they see that others are facing the same problems and they get some assurance from the lecturers. However, all the tutorial and face-to-face sessions are not compulsory and this gave them further flexibility of following the program.
Majority of the students do come for tutorials and face-to-face but then they do not have to come if they have other commitments during the week-ends. These help them to go ahead with work or personal commitments but if they come, they can interact with friends, tutors and lecturers.

Satisfaction with Learner Support
The students’ satisfaction towards the learning support provided by IDEAL, is measured on a scale of 1 to 5. Generally it was found that the students are satisfied with the service provided, ranging in mean scores from 3.0 to 4.4 (Appendix 3).

Generally the students are satisfied with the module saying that the content of the module meets the objectives of the course (mean score 4.0), the format is helpful to students (mean score 3.9), it is clear (mean score 4.2) encourage learners’ participation through activities (mean score 3.9) allow some interactivity (mean score 3.6), scheduled at good pace for learning (mean score 3.7), contain enough examples and illustration (mean score 3.3). Taking into account that the module is the most important support for distance learning, students’ satisfaction with module will contribute to positive learning and also certain level of quality has been based on the standards required for quality learning materials.

Learners are also satisfied with the tutors. The study indicated that the scores on their evaluation of tutors are high ranging from 3.7 to 4.3 on selected standards that have been measured. They are very satisfied with their relationship with the tutors (mean score 4.3), the tutors are good facilitators to guide discussion and encourage learning (mean score 3.8) the tutors can benefit the students through the tutorials (mean score 3.9), that the tutors have adequate experience (mean score 3.9), can guide the students in preparing the assignment (mean score 3.9), the tutors have the ability to deliver (mean score 3.7) and the tutors have a good knowledge on the subject matter (mean score 3.7).

Tutor is a critical learner support in distance education. As such the selection is done based on certain criteria. Most important among these criteria is that they have gone through the program, know the system in UPM and know the lecturers teaching the courses. Because they have gone through the program and courses they are comfortable with advising students on matters related to academic and content. Besides that tutors are given training at the beginning of the semester as well as other times to familiarise them with the modules, the contents, their jobs expectations, the contacts with relevant people and some motivation so that they understand and are committed to distance learning.

The interactions with peers and tutors are reinforced by face-to-face sessions with lecturers in the campus. This further reinforced students learning through meetings with others from all over the country as well as the lecturers. The students are satisfied with meetings that were provided giving a mean score 3.4. Students are also satisfied with the physical facilities (classrooms, seats, lighting, equipment etc.). However the collection of assignment needs further improvement (mean score 2.7).
Guidelines for Quality Assurance
To meet the challenges of producing quality distance education several steps have to be taken. They study has proven that distance learners needs support whatever support can be provided by the institutions as well as support from peers and other individuals. It is therefore crucial for IDEAL to continue providing the support to its distance education learners and in the process improve its service based on the feedback and evaluation by the learners themselves. It is hoped that all the support provided would reduce the drop out rate among learners.

It is believed that in assuring quality of distance education, standards has to be set and delivery of the product or service must be organized to meet the standards. This will lead to the creation of confidence in the learners. It is therefore suggested that as a guideline for quality assurance IDEAL has to take the following steps:

• Develop a quality policy and plan
• Ensure a specified and clearly defined standards that are communicated to all concern including partners
• Identify critical functions for achieving the standards and analyse the procedures
• Document clearly procedures to be followed and make them accessible to all concerned
• Involve all staff in the organization and take into account their ideas and suggestions in the development of the quality-assurance system. Establish a systematic monitoring mechanism to check whether standards are being met and procedures followed.
• Involve staff, learners and other clients in setting and monitoring standards
• Provide adequate training and development opportunities for staff that are linked to the achievement of standards
• Monitor the cost of implementing and maintaining quality assurance activities

Conclusion
Suggestions and guidelines given above are only means of assisting in improving the operational aspects of distance education, ad hoc practices, uncertainly, lack of coordination and inconsistency. They are nor recipes for a perfect system. There are needs for establishing continuing research, evaluation and development besides creating a culture of commitment among all parties in providing distance education.