



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**LEARNERS' PERCEIVED ROLES AND COMPETENCIES OF
TUTORS IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM OF A
PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA**

CHANG YEE YAR

FPP 2008 6



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TUTORS IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM OF A
PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA**

By

CHANG YEE YAR

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti
Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of
Master of Science**

January 2008



DEDICATION

Specially dedicated to my loving parents,
Chang Jiew Fatt and Lee Lie Zhen,

and my dearest sisters:
Chaim Yu, Wen Yu,
Ming Yu and
Hou Yea



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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Reaching the world through distance education is the current trend of education. However, distance education is different than the traditional mode of education as it involves physical separation between the learner and the teacher. Thus, facilitating learning in a distance required the use of different knowledge, skills and attitudes. Distance education tutor is one of the main elements to the success of distance education; therefore, it is important for tutors to equip themselves with appropriate skills and knowledge.

This study aims to explore the roles and competencies of distance education tutors from students' perspective. A comprehensive list of distance education tutor's roles and competencies focus on Berge four areas of study, namely pedagogical role, social role, managerial role and technical role was provided to students in order to rate the importance of each role and competency, to study perception of students with different background (course, demographic and general information) for the roles and competencies of tutors and to find out whether there is any gap exists between tutors' required and acquired competencies. The identification of specific



roles and competencies within a discipline serves as a useful guide in creating effective professional development.

The study used quantitative research methodology. Among the employed statistic were non-parametric statistic with means calculation; standard deviation; frequency distribution; T-Test; ANOVA and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. A total of 128 distance education students studying in eight learning centers provided by Center for External Education or Pusat Pendidikan Luar (PPL), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in Sabah and Sarawak had participated in this study.

The average means score for each role and competency were calculated and ranked according to their importance. The result showed that “Social Role” (total means = 28.16) was the most important role for a distance education tutor to perform, while “Managerial Competencies” (total means = 31.42) was the most important competencies they should possess. The findings indicated that it is important for distance education tutors to take into consideration the different needs and priorities shown by different groups of students, such as their gender, their field of study, the distance between their house and the learning center, their level of experience with Internet tools and their level of interaction with their tutors outside the tutorial session, with the roles and competencies of their distance education tutors. It has also been found that gaps existed between the required and acquired competencies among distance education tutors, with the biggest gap in “Pedagogical Competencies” and the smallest in “Social Competencies”.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**TANGAPAN PELAJAR TERHADAP PERANAN DAN KECEKAPAN
TUTOR DALAM PROGRAM PENDIDIKAN JARAK JAUH DI SEBUAH
UNIVERSITI TEMPATAN**

Oleh

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Januari 2008

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Perkembangan dalam pendidikan jarak jauh merupakan arus pendidikan terkini. Walau bagaimanapun, pendidikan jarak jauh adalah berbeza dengan cara pendidikan tradisional kerana ia melibatkan pemisahan fizikal di antara pelajar dan penunjuk-ajar. Justeru itu, penunjuk-ajar perlu menggunakan pengetahuan, kemahiran dan sikap yang berbeza semasa mereka mengajar dalam pendidikan jarak jauh. Oleh kerana tutor pendidikan jarak jauh merupakan salah satu unsur utama dalam kejayaan pendidikan jarak jauh, maka adalah penting bagi tutor untuk melengkapkan diri mereka dengan pelbagai kemahiran and pengetahuan.

Kajian ini bertujuan mengenalpasti peranan dan kecekapan tutor pendidikan jarak jauh daripada persepsi pelajar. Satu senarai mengenai peranan dan kecekapan tutor mengikut kajian Berge yang membahagikan peranan dan kecekapan kepada empat bidang, iaitu “Peranan Pedagogikal”, “Peranan Social”, “Peranan Pengurusan” and “Peranan Teknologi” diberi kepada pelajar untuk menentukan kepentingan masing-masing, mengenaipasti persepsi pelajar dari pelbagai kumpulan mengenai faktor-faktor demografi yang terpilih dengan peranan dan kecekapan tutor dan mencari



sama ada terdapat jurang di antara kecekapan yang diperlukan oleh tutor dengan tahap kecekapan mereka. Mengenalpasti peranan dan kecekapan yang khusus dalam satu bidang merupakan panduan yang berguna untuk perkembangan profesional yang berkesan.

Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan kuantitatif. Di antara statistik yang digunakan termasuk pengiraan min; sisihan piawai; pertaburan kekerapan; ujian-T; ANOVA dan Korelasi Pekali Pearson. Seramai 128 pelajar pendidikan jarak jauh yang belajar di lapan buah pusat pembelajaran Pusat Pendidikan Luar (PPL), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) di Sabah dan Sarawak terlibat dalam kajian ini.

Purata min bagi setiap peranan dan kecekapan tutor dikira dan disusun-atur mengikut kepentingan masing-masing. Hasil kajian menunjukkan “Peranan Sosial” (min keseluruhan = 28.16) merupakan peranan yang terpenting, manakala “Kecekapan Pengurusan” (min keseluruhan = 31.42) merupakan kecekapan yang terpenting. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan tutor pendidikan jarak jauh perlu mengambil-kira kepentingan keperluan tiap-tiap kumpulan pelajar, iaitu dari segi jantina mereka, program pengajian yang diikuti, jarak dari rumah ke pusat pengajian mereka, tahap pengalaman dengan perkakas Internet dan tahap interaksi mereka dengan tutor di luar kuliah dengan peranan dan kecekapan tutor mereka. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan wujudnya jurang di antara kecekapan yang diperlukan oleh tutor dengan tahap kecekapan mereka, dengan jurang yang terbesar terletak pada “Kecekapan Pedagogikal”, manakala jurang yang terkecil berada pada “Kecekapan Sosial”.



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Finally, I would like to convey my love and thanks to my family members who stood by me patiently throughout this period. Thanks for being there for me whatever I need them. I owe them a debt of gratitude and love.



I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 21 January 2008 to conduct the final examination of Chang Yee Yar on her Master of Science thesis entitled “Learners’ Perceived Roles and Competencies of Tutors in a Distance Education Program of a Public University in Malaysia” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the degree of Master of Science.

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

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Date: 12 June 2008



TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ABSTRAK	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
APPROVAL	viii
DECLARATION	x
TABLE OF CONTENTS	xi
LIST OF TABLES	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES	xv
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction	1
Statement of the Problems	6
Objectives of the Study	8
Significance of the Study	9
Limitations of the Study	10
Definition of Terms	11
II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	14
Introduction	14
Evolution of Distance Education Theories	14
Emerging Roles and Competencies of Distance Education Tutor in Each Distance Education Theory	31
The Importance of Roles and Competencies Identification	33
Role and Competency Studies	35
Strategies Used by Distance Education Tutor to Keep Distance Learners on Topic	54
Towards an Effective Distance Education	58
Conceptual Framework of the Study	64
Summary	66
III METHODOLOGY	68
Introduction	68
Research Method and Design Surveys and Questionnaires	69
Research Instrument Design	70
Pilot Study	75
Survey Population and Sampling Procedures	76
Data Collection Method	78
Rate of Return	79
Data Analysis Validity and Reliability	80 85



IV	FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	87
	Introduction	87
	Respondents' Demographic and General Information	87
	Distance Education Tutor's Roles	99
	Distance Education Tutor's Competencies	112
	To Differentiate Perception of Students with Different Background (Course, Demographic Profile and General Information) for the Roles and Competencies of Distance Education Tutors	124
	Distance Education Tutors' Required and Acquired Competencies	129
	Implications for Practice	136
	Summary	139
V	SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	140
	Introduction	140
	Summary	140
	Conclusions	150
	Recommendations	155
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	159
	APPENDICES	167
	BIODATA OF STUDENT	176



LIST OF TABLES

Table	Title	Page
Table 1	Transactional distance of education programs	30
Table 2	Outputs and competencies for distance education tutor	37
Table 3	Roles and role-specific that were considered very important	39
Table 4	General competencies assigned by panel member to all roles	40
Table 5	Competencies associated with each role	43
Table 6	Competencies for distance education tutors, nothing whether the competency will be primary importance before, during and/or after the course	47
Table 7	Competencies for distance education tutors	53
Table 8	Structure of survey questionnaire	72
Table 9	Students distribution in PPL, UPM	77
Table 10	Students distribution and actual survey population in each learning center in Sabah and Sarawak	78
Table 11	Guildford's role of thumb	80
Table 12	Level and distribution of mean for the roles and competencies of distance education tutor	82
Table 13	Level and distribution of total mean for the roles and competencies of distance education tutor	82
Table 14	Level of competencies acquired by the distance education tutors	84
Table 15	Statistics tools used in data analysis	84
Table 16	Reliability coefficient of pilot study and actual study	86
Table 17	Mean and Standard Deviation of population and sample by age	93
Table 18	Distance between respondents' house & their learning center	94



Table 19	Level of distance education tutor roles	100
Table 20	Rank order of distance education tutor pedagogical role outputs	102
Table 21	Rank order of distance education tutor social role outputs	104
Table 22	Rank order of distance education tutor managerial role outputs	105
Table 23	Rank order of distance education tutor technical role outputs	107
Table 24	Overall rank order of distance education tutor role outputs	108
Table 25	New outputs suggested by distance education students	111
Table 26	Level of distance education tutor competencies	113
Table 27	Rank order of distance education tutor pedagogical competencies	115
Table 28	Rank order of distance education tutor social competencies	116
Table 29	Rank order of distance education tutor managerial competencies	117
Table 30	Rank order of distance education tutor technical competencies	118
Table 31	Overall rank order of distance education tutor competencies	120
Table 32	Comparison of competency rankings for this study and previous studies	122
Table 33	Result of T-test analysis	127
Table 34	Rank order of distance education tutors' required and acquired competencies	133
Table 35	Level of competencies acquired by the distance education tutors	136



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Title	Page
Figure 1	A system model for distance education	4
Figure 2	Dimensions of Transaction Distance Theory	25
Figure 3	Roles involved in online teaching	42
Figure 4	The conceptual framework of the study	65
Figure 5	The respondents' gender	88
Figure 6	The respondents' age	89
Figure 7	The respondents' personal status	89
Figure 8	The respondents offered field of study	90
Figure 9	Respondents' gender and degree sought	91
Figure 10	Respondents' semester of study	91
Figure 11	Respondents' level of experience with Internet tools	95
Figure 12	Learning and supervision from the distance education tutors	96
Figure 13	Respondents' level of interaction with their tutors outside the tutorial session	97
Figure 14	Effectiveness of the distance education tutors	98
Figure 15	Distance education tutor roles	99
Figure 16	Distance education tutor competencies	112
Figure 17	Distance education tutors' required and acquired competencies	130



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair change and the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost.

– A Nation at Risk (NCEE, 1983)

Introduction

Distance education is not a recent phenomenon to Malaysia. Many individuals, especially those who are in employment but are aspire to be successful in their career development have painstakingly worked for external degrees offered by universities of repute such as the University of London, United Kingdom as early as the 1960's or earlier. According to Cheah (2004) and Syed Othman (2002), the first local university that started distance learning which is popularly known as off-campus programs was the University Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang.

Through the increasing awareness, recognition and acceptance that education might be the way to ensure sustainability of communities, nations and for individuals to develop their potential, the demand of tertiary education has never been greater than today. This is especially true for Malaysia, a country with an emerging economy. To meet this demand, there is a need to seek out innovative and non-conventional alternatives. Distance education is at the forefront of educational responses to the changes that reflects in international economic, political and related ideologies which taking place locally, regionally, nationally and internationally (David, Rotimi & Kayode, 2006; Mariani, 2001; Evans & Nation, 1993).



From **worldwide** perspective, distance education in its various methods and modes of delivery has existed for decade. As stated in Moore & Kearsley (1996), distance education has evolved through a number of different stages, or generations. In the first generation, it witnessed correspondence courses and independent study, in which the principle media of communication are printed materials, generally a study guide, with written essays or other assignments being sent by mail.

In early 1970s, the visibility of distance education programs combining print and non-print resources received a boost when the Open University of the United Kingdom was established and began to systematically develop and deliver integrated distance education programs. With this second generation of distance education, a total systems approach to the design and implementation of distance education has been applied (in Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Although the correspondence instruction is still heavily relied in open universities, the used of broadcasting and recorded media such as radio, television and audiotapes had also been applied in distance education. The applications of media and technology have brought teacher and learner closer together and further expanded the dimensions and possibilities of distance education.

In the late 1990s, significant developments and advances in telecommunication technology, particularly the Internet, has brought the distance education into a new generation where the distance education is emerging based on computer conferencing networks and computer-based multimedia workstations (Moore & Kearsley, 1996).



In **Malaysia**, distance education has had a long history through out the country. Its origins can be traced back to the British educational system and requirements of the colonial administration in the 19th century (Cheah, 2004). However, in terms of tertiary education, the use of distance education to make education more accessible to the people started becomes popular in 1990's when almost all the established local public universities jumped into the bandwagon (Mokhtar, Azizan & Alexander, 2003; Syed Othman, 2002). This kind of situation happen due to direct result of a directive issued by the Education Minister in 1995 requiring all public universities to introduce distance education programs to support the government effort in enlarge the undergraduate student intakes through the setting up of distance education programs (Cheah, 2004). From there, the number of students' enrolment and the number of providers in distance education continued to increase from the nineties until today (Daing & Abu Daud, 1997).

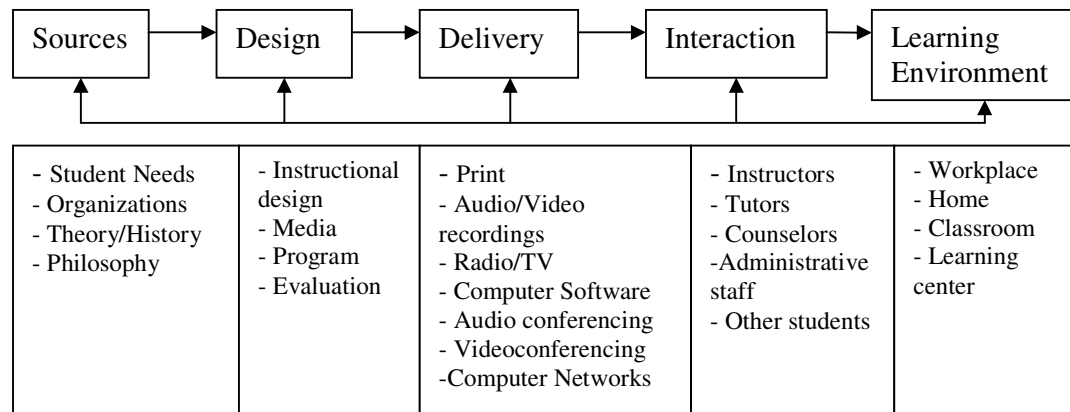
The increase enrolment at tertiary level from 100,590 in year 1990 to 321,729 in year 2000 (Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2001) showed that the demand for an educated and skilled workforce continue to increase in tandem with the country's rapid industrialization. As such, distance education provides an opportunity to those who are unable to pursue their higher education through conventional means due to their work, family commitments and the separation of demographic (Moody, 2004, Mokhtar et al., 2003).

With **the rise of distance education**, it has been an emerging field that continues to undergo tremendous changes in concept, structure and practice (Cheah, 2004; Sherry, 1996). Distance education has been changing drastically over the past few decades.



However, the fundamental concept for distance education is still the same, that is; its hallmarks are the separation of student and teacher in space and/or time (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005; Schrum & Ohler, 2005; Sadik, 2000; Sherry, 1996; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Due to separation between student and teacher, it becomes necessary for institution to introduce a communications medium, such as multimedia content on CD's and internet-based support system to provides continuous interaction between students and faculty in deliver the information and also provide a channel for interaction between them.

A systems model developed by Moore & Kearsley (1996) explained that the distance education system is not a series of separate entities, such as course content, course design and course development, but it is a system of interrelated components which is function together under the auspices of “organizational and administrative arrangement. Figure 1 shows the common components that will be found at all levels and types of distance education.



Source: Moore & Kearsley, (1996, pp. 9)

Figure 1: A system model for distance education



Successful distance education systems involve interactivity between teacher and students, between students and the learning environment, and among students themselves (Zhen & Smaldino, 2003; Roberson & Klitz, 2002; Sherry, 1996). Sherry (1996) as cited from Garrison (1990) argued that the quality and integrity of the educational process depends upon sustained two-way communication. Without connectivity, a student becomes autonomous and isolate, procrastinates and eventually drops out (Moody, 2004; Zheng & Smaldino, 2003; Sadik, 2000; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Therefore, the distance education tutor plays an important role in assuring the successes of distance education. Results from a multitude of studies by Sadik (2000) suggest that the media itself is not as important as other variables, such as learner characteristics, motivation, and instructional alternatives. Of significant is support for the distance learner. Students want and need rapid feedback from distance education tutors as well as access to library resources and other supporting materials.

Offering distance education courses is consistent with the mission of a university and is a critical endeavor for the survival of the modern educational institution. As such, quality assurance and evaluation for continuous improvement in distance education become the most important issues among distance education providers in order to survive in the global market. As institutions implement distance education programs, it is important to look at the roles and competencies of the tutor. Unfortunately, there is little information on the roles and competencies of distance education tutor that institution need to obtain, which can lead to ineffective implementation in distance education (Williams, 2003; Thach & Murphy, 1995; Thach, 1994).



The nature of teaching and the role of tutor in distance education differ from the traditional classroom education system. From the tutor's point of view, the most obvious difference is that you probably will not see how students react to what you are saying or doing (Easton, 2003; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Since students are at their most vulnerable at the beginning of the distance education course, tutors need to give them encouragement, confidence and opportunity to test the unfamiliar approach. Distance education tutors need to pay a lot of attention to the students' feelings, especially their motivation.

With the advent of the Web and the Internet, the dimension of distance education continuously changes over time. The delivery technology in distance education becomes more affordable, available, familiar and interactive. With improvements in the technology, distance educations are now more realistic, engaging, varied and inexpensive (Cavanaugh, 2002). As a result of the continuously changes in distance education, the question regarding quality of distance education will continue to rise. Educational institutions must take the lead in developing and maintaining standards. When students benefit from an education program that meets their needs; the community benefits as well (Cavanaugh, 2002). Therefore, it will be important to equip the tutor with the appropriate skills and knowledge to ensure a quality distance education is provided.

Statement of the Problems

As the educational environment in distance education is different compared to conventional classroom where there is a transactional distance occurs between the tutors and the learners, therefore, facilitating learning at a distance required the use



of different skills than what is using in a conventional classroom. In the early generation of distance education, where most of the distance education courses were conducted through correspondence study, the role play by distance education tutor is to become a contact person who provide information and coordinate the distance education program in a remote site. Later, through Industrialization model of distance education, distance education tutor become an information provider and at the some time act as a content expert in guiding the students to interact with the content (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). With the advancement of telecommunication technologies, it has shifted the role of distance education tutor towards a learning facilitator (Smith, 2005).

Hence, it is important for distance education tutor to truly understand what the learner's needs so that the most suitable learning environments can be designed to facilitate their learning. Moreover, having tutors in a distance education system will greatly improves students' completion rates and achievement (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Therefore, the roles played by the tutors and their competencies in handling the distance education program are really important as they are the one who will provide distance education students with individualized instruction in the distance education courses. Clearly, roles performed by distance education tutors and their ability to acquire new competencies are importance to the success of distance education.

Many researchers had pointed that regardless of what type of distance education programs an institution employs in higher education, distance education tutor is one of the main elements to make the distance learner to be succeeded in their learning



(Schrum & Ohler, 2005; Smith, 2005; Chen & Guo, 2005; Zheng & Smaldino, 2003; Williams, 2003; Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples & Tickner, 2001; Mariani, 2001; Sadik, 2000; Clay, 1999; DeVries & Tella, 1998; Sherry, 1996; Thach & Murphy, 1995; Berge, 1995; Willis, 1993a; O'Rourke, 1993).

Although there are many terms used to describe those who facilitate in distance education program, such as distance education teacher (Moore, 2001), distance education instructor (Mariani, 2001; Moore & Kearsley, 1996), online teacher (Smith, 2005; Goodyear et. al., 2001), online instructor (Eastan, 2003; Mc Kenzie, Mims, Bennett & Waugh, 2000) or tutor (Sadik, 2000, Moore & Kearsley, 1996), for this study, the term distance education tutor is used because it is more generally applicable. This study focus on distance education tutors who will coordinate and facilitate activities at the distant side, which is the most challenging task that distance teachers must accomplish.

As distance education is predicted to be a major growth area for education, therefore, this study aims to explore the roles and competencies of distance education tutors from students' perspective as both of these elements will bring a significant effect either to the distance education program or to the learners.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to identify what are the most importance roles and competencies of distance education tutors from students' perspective in order to facilitate and provide an effective distance education program to the learners.

More specifically, the study addresses the following objectives:



1. To identify the roles of distance education tutors.
2. To identify the competencies of distance education tutors.
3. To differentiate perception of students with different background (course, demographic and general information) for the roles and competencies of distance education tutors.
4. To identify gaps between the required and acquired competencies among distance education tutors.

Significance of the Study

As distance education involves a number of fundamental differences between conventional classroom educations, it is very essential for distance education tutor to understand the range functions performed by him/her in the distance education system (Cheah, 2004). A distance education tutor is not just a specialist in his/her discipline, he/she has to simultaneously handle different tasks, such as to be a teacher, a trainee, a trainer, a public relations person and above all an agent of change (Suresh & Parakh, 2006). They have to truly understand what their roles are and which type of competencies they must establish in order for them to facilitate distance education effectively. Therefore, to discharge his/her responsibility effectively, a distance education tutor has to respond to the changes in technology while undertaking development of self-learning materials. All these involve academic, administrative and technical activities and require such expertise. Hence, it is important for distance education tutor to be knowledgeable in order for them to facilitate the distance education effectively.

