



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**NEEDS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS
AT THE INSTITUTE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION
AND LEARNING, UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

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NEEDS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS
AT
THE INSTITUTE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION
AND LEARNING,
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

by

YEOW KEK ONG

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ABBREVIATIONS

AC	- Audiocassettes
ACHS	- Air Correspondence High School
CBI	- Computer Based Instruction
CDs	- Compact Discs
DE	- Distance Education
DL	- Distance Learning
E-mail	- Electronic mail
ESD	- Embedded Support Devices
IDEAL	- Institute of Distance Education and Learning
LPS	- Learning Preference System
MS (HRD)	- Master of Science (Human Resource Development)
MOO	- Multiuser Object Oriented
N	- Population size
SD	- Standard Deviation
SPSS	- Statistical Package for the Social Services
STOU	- Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University
U.READ	- University of Regina Education at A distance
UCS	- University Community Services
UKOU	- United Kingdom Open University



UPM - Universiti Putra Malaysia

USM - Universiti Sains Malaysia

VC - Videocassette

WWW - World Wide Web



Abstract of research project submitted to the Department of
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NEEDS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS AT THE INSTITUTE OF
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By

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November 1998

Chairperson: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Aminah Ahmad
Department of Extension Education, Faculty of Educational Studies

This is a survey study on a sample of 61 postgraduate students pursuing the Master of Science (Human Resource Development) degree at the Faculty of Educational Studies. This program coordinated by the Institute of Distance Education and Learning (IDEAL) at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

The study focuses on learners' needs and support services required during the course of study at IDEAL. The area of study encompasses the personal, administrative and academic aspects of learner needs. The personal aspect is made up of learner readiness and guidance and counseling needs whereas the administrative aspect refers to the administrative and management support. The academic aspect includes learning materials and resources, course delivery, teaching and learning strategy and methodology as well as learner-facilitator interactions.



Data were collected using self-designed questionnaires. Each questionnaire is made up of 70 items using the Likert-like scale and an open-ended question with three responses

The result revealed a learner profile which can be described as mostly males, married, aged more than 26 years, majority of whom have more than 10 years of work experience, and are either very far (>200km) or very near (<50) from the learning centre.

The respondents enrolled in the M.S.(HRD) programme showed high need values in the areas of learning materials and resources, administrative and management support, learner-facilitator interactions and the teaching-learning strategy and methodology. Areas of comparatively lesser but moderate needs include course delivery, guidance and counseling, and learner readiness before enrolment for a course.

The analysis of the data revealed that the needs of these distance learners' are high with regards to:

- a. readily available and accessible learning resources and materials especially references, modules, articles, journals, and even web-based resources.

- b. administrative & management aspects which include communication like acknowledgment of mails they sent, information accessibility, reminders and making learning materials available by mail.
- c. accessibility and good learner-facilitator interactions for answering queries or doubts, providing feedback on the learning through the e-mail or face-to-face meetings.
- d. learner-centred strategies with more focus on group and cooperative learning like problem solving and discussions besides project based, resource based and experiential learning.

The aspects of learner readiness, guidance and counseling and course delivery revealed low need priorities. Yet there are high specific needs like assessing course relevance and the provision of subject learning guides, the use of internet/e-mail, mail service or telephone in the delivery of teaching and learning activities. In terms of learner readiness, the needs for skills development and training were the least important.



Abstrak kajian yang dikemukakan kepada Jabatan Pendidikan
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PENDIDIKAN DAN PEMBELAJARAN JARAK JAUH,
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November 1998

Pengerusi: Prof. Madya. Dr. Aminah Ahmad
Jabatan Pendidikan Pengembangan, Fakulti Pengajian Pendidikan

Kajian survei ini dijalankan ke atas 61 pelajar lepasan ijazah yang mengikuti program Master Sains (Pembangunan Sumber Manusia) di Fakulti Pengajian Pendidikan. Program ini diselaraskan oleh Institut Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran Jarak Jauh (IDEAL) di Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

Fokus kajian ini adalah untuk mengetahui keperluan dan sokongan yang diperlukan oleh pelajar semasa berkursus. Bidang kajian ini meliputi keperluan pelajar dalam aspek peribadi, pentadbiran dan akademik. Aspek peribadi termasuk kesediaan pelajar dan keperluan bimbingan dan kaunseling. Aspek pentadbiran melibatkan sokongan pentadbiran dan pengurusan. Aspek akademik pula merangkumi bahan dan sumber pembelajaran, penyampaian kursus, strategi dan metodologi pengajaran-pembelajaran serta interaksi fasilitator dengan pelajar.

Data dipungut melalui borang soal-selidik. Setiap soal-selidik terdiri daripada 70 item yang menggunakan skala ala Likert dan satu soalan terbuka dengan tiga ruangan jawapan. Satu senarai soalan juga disediakan untuk mendapatkan maklumat pelajar.

Hasil dapatan menunjukkan satu profil pelajar yang kebanyakannya adalah lelaki, telah berkahwin yang berumur 26 tahun ke atas dengan lebih daripada 10 tahun pengalaman bekerja dan berada sangat jauh (>200km) atau sangat dekat (<50km) dari tempat belajar.

Responden dalam program M.S.(HRD) ini menunjukkan keperluan sokongan yang tinggi dalam aspek sumber pembelajaran, sokongan pentadbiran dan pengurusan, interaksi pelajar dengan fasilitator; dan strategy serta kaedah pengajaran-pembelajaran. Aspek yang menunjukkan keperluan yang sederhana adalah seperti saluran penyampaian kursus, bimbingan dan kaunseling dan kesediaan pelajar sebelum pendaftaran.

Analisis data juga menunjukkan keperluan yang tinggi bagi pelajar jarak jauh ini seperti

- a. kedapatan dan mudah perolehan bahan dan sumber pembelajaran seperti bahan rujukan artikel, jurnal dan juga sumber dalam internet.
- b. sokongan pentadbiran dan pengurusan dalam berkomunikasi seperti menjawab surat atau kerja kursus yang dihantar, kemudahan mendapat maklumat, memperingatkan pelajar mengenai tutorial atau peperiksaan dan menghantarkan bahan melalui pos.
- c. kemudahan menghubungi fasilitator dan interaksi pelajar-fasilitator untuk menjawab kemusykilan, memberi maklumbalas kepada pembelajaran melalui e-mail atau semasa perjumpaan bersemuka.

- d. keperluan pendekatan pembelajaran yang lebih berfokus kepada pelajar dan pembelajaran kooperatif seperti perbincangan, penyelesaian masalah, pembelajaran berasaskan sumber dan pengalaman serta projek.

Adalah didapati bahawa aspek kesediaan pelajar, bimbingan dan kaunseling serta penyampaian menunjukkan nilai keperluan yang rendah. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat keperluan khusus yang tinggi dalam penilaian kesesuaian kursus, pembekalan panduan pembelajaran dan penggunaan internet/ e-mail , pos dan telefon dalam penyampaian aktiviti pengajaran-pembelajaran. Namun didapati juga keperluan untuk aspek kesediaan pelajar dan latihan dalam kemahiran yang sangat rendah .



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The research problem

The establishment of the Institute of Distance Learning and Education (IDEAL) at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in 1995 was only passed by the senate on 15th May, 1997. The establishment of IDEAL was in line with the Ministry of Education's call for institutions of higher learning to offer distance learning programmes. Thus, IDEAL took to the challenge and its first intake of students was the Bachelor of Computer Science and the Master of Science (Human Resource Development) for the December 1995/96 session.

The objectives of IDEAL was to

1. conduct and coordinate distance learning and open learning for UPM
2. provide opportunities to Malaysian citizens especially workers and professionals in the private and public sectors for continuing education at a higher level
3. help the nation in providing the human resource for national development
4. utilize the expertise of UPM in the various fields for the benefit of the people and nation.



The pioneer batch of the MS.(HRD) programme has graduated in 1997 and IDEAL will have to continue to strive hard to provide quality education to its clients. In order to achieve this, IDEAL will have to assess itself, get feedbacks and carry out studies; the outcomes of which will then be the basis for its planning and actions for a continuous development.

With regard to distance learning, University of Science Malaysia (USM) pioneered distance Education in Malaysia in 1971. It has since been a popular option for many adult learners who could not afford to study full time. There are many more learners who desire to further their education and distance education is a good option. Today, many other local universities offer distance education and twinning programmes with designated institutions. There are programmes suitable for post secondary students and working adults. A few local universities or institution are now involved in distance education. They develop and practice their own model of distance learning. A successful model of distance education ought to fulfill the needs and expectations of learners.

Dhanarajan (1996) stressed that institutions involved in open and distance learning, ought to ensure that their programmes, at whatever level they are offered, have the accessibility and flexibility to allow learners of different ages and needs to participate. In 1986, he highlighted the problems faced by USM in the off-campus programme noting that courses do not meet the needs of a working adult. For example there are strict academic regulations, the rigidity of the programme and non-

delivery on time create hardships for adult working students. He suggested a need analysis to identify academic needs and the learning styles of the Malaysian society in order to provide appropriate structured courses and courseware. He recommended a more flexible strategy to the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Off-Campus programme. The experiences of USM would be a useful guide to universities who are presently engaged in distance learning.

It cannot be denied that educational supports are necessary to cater for individual differences among learners. Teachers or instructors should try to understand learner's goals, needs and their expectations and to adapt to the varying levels of their experience (Gay, 1997). It is also necessary to identify the modes of learning (Johnson and Johnson, 1974), preferred styles, habits, and other forms of support necessary to enable learners to cope in the pursuit of their learning goals.

Effective learning requires knowledge of learner styles and curriculum decisions to suit student learning needs and preferences. (Sherry, 1996). With further and more rigorous research in these areas, which will allow for generalizations, research findings can be used for the development of local instructional theory. The application of localized theory can lead to more success in distance learning.

Statement of the problem

Most learners who enroll in distance learning programmes may be working and studying part-time. Their learning tasks thus demands personal commitment, discipline, motivation and adjustments in their lives in order to ensure continued participation in their studies. The educational and working experiences of the learner may have moulded them into individuals with distinct preferences or learning needs. These needs or learning support services have to be identified and be provided for to ensure the achievement of their learning goals.

The purpose of this study is to seek, identify and gather the distance learners background data; their preferred learning needs and support services in the course of their study at the Institute of Distance Education and Learning (IDEAL), Universiti Putra Malaysia. The identification of the learning needs and support services should provide useful information in the ongoing developmental process of distance education and learning. It is believed that through meeting learner's needs and providing suitable support services, the learning process is enhanced and the learners motivated to continue participating in the programme until completion.

The research questions in this study are:

1. What is the profile of distance learners at IDEAL?
2. What are the needs of distance learner at IDEAL?

Objectives of the study

The general objective:

The aim of this study is to execute a learning need analysis and to identify the profile of the distance learner with the intention of improving the M.S.(HRD) distance learning programme at IDEAL

The specific objectives:

1. To gather information on the background of the distance learner and build a learner profile
2. To identify the needs of distance learners

Significance of the research

The study will contribute towards the development and improvement in the management and execution of distance learning programmes. It intends to overcome some of the problems or unsatisfactoriness that are characteristic of the institution or the learners through a better understanding of the learners' needs and support services. It will be used for programme planning and making the right choice of instructional strategies to fulfill learner's needs and enhance learning based on programme needs and expectations.

Limitations.

The study will focus only on distance learners of the M.S. (HRD.) programme conducted at IDEAL under the Department of Extension Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia.

The findings of this survey are only confined to this particular group of learners and the institution offering the course. It cannot be generalized to other groups of learners. However, it may be replicated to other groups of distance learners for comparison purpose.

Definition of terms

Distance learning or Distance education: The use of print or electronic communication media to deliver instruction when teachers and learners are separated in place and/or time or a system and process that connects learners with distributed resources with the volitional control of learning by the student.

Learning needs: The nature of instructional and learning support or help like teacher-student interactions, skills required, guidance and counseling, feedback, materials or learning resources, delivery or methods, assessment etc. which will influence the learning process and affecting students' performance.

Learners: Individuals who enroll for a programme in the pursuit of their academic or professional goals.

Programmes: A learning plan consisting of various courses and approaches towards the award of a degree

Course delivery. The method, media, or strategy used in the teaching and learning process by the teacher or instructor.

Learner-facilitator interactions: The communicative process between the learner and the facilitator of a study programme.

Learning resources: The materials and media used in the instructional processes that aid the instructor in the teaching and which help to enhance student learning.

Learning support services: All physical or material forms of help, aid, backing, guidance or advice that will increase motivation and reduce barriers to the learning process.

Learner readiness: All forms of relevant skills and knowledge of a learner prior to the signing up of a learning programme that will be of use in the learning task when undertaking a programme.

Learner guidance and counseling: Any form of psychological or cognitive help, assistance or advice that enable a learner to make a wise decision in the course of making a choice of programme, approached it in the right manner and to successfully complete the course enrolled.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Distance education (DE) takes place when the teacher and student(s) are separated by physical distance; and technology together with face-to-face communication bridge the instructional gap. Evans (1989), define 'distance' as the contentious and value laden constructs such as institutional distance, psychological distance and social distance.

Martens and Dochy (1997) define DE or Open Learning system as a “flexible learning system which support a learning process in which there is a delicate balance between maximal student freedom of choices and the optimal adaptation to characteristics of the learner in order to guarantee a maximal degree of study success". The term 'distance education' (Holmberg,1981) covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation.

Distance education is a method of imparting knowledge, skills and attitudes to a great number of students at the same time wherever they live. It is an industrialised form of teaching and learning. The instructional methods in which the teaching behaviours are executed apart from the learning behaviours, focus on the need for communication between the teacher and the learner which can be facilitated by print or electronic media , mechanical devices or other devices.

Distance education programmes provide adults a second chance at higher education, to compensate for lost opportunities; and reach those disadvantaged by time, distance or disability and to update the knowledge base during employment. Effective DE should make due provisions to see to the needs of the learners (Jarvis, 1992) and remove hindrances in pursuit of their learning endeavours. This includes students' study lives and the interrelationships with costs of study; learning in gender worlds; power; age; work and leisure (Evans, 1994).

The distance learners who enrol for a programme in the pursuit of their academic or professional goals will have their own special needs and learning supports. This need can be described as "the measurable discrepancy existing between present state of affairs and a desired state of affairs as asserted either by an 'owner' of need or an 'authority' on need". The 'owner's need' is describe as motivational and the 'authority's need' as prescriptive. This motivational need is 'a deficiency relative to a specific individually defined and owned , desired end state or goal'. This is not