

## **The Role of Learning Support in Open & Distance Learning: Learners' experiences and perspectives**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Each distance learner has a profile which may be similar to or different from that of others. Holmberg (1995) points out that there is "no evidence to indicate that distance learners should be regarded as a homogeneous group"; however as indicated by Gibson (1998:p.10) "...distance learners do share broad demographic and situational similarities that have often provided the basis for profiles of the "typical" distance learner in higher education." The fact remains that every learner is in certain respects like all other distance learners (DLs); like some other DLs or like no other DLs. Therefore, in any study of distance learners, a variety of views and responses, and a collection of different stories can be heard.

In addition, DLs may also have different prior learning experiences, and have different learning styles and preferences, and coping strategies. These differences are important and must be addressed to meet the learners' diverse needs, and to improve the educational experience of distance learning. Although these differences are sometimes treated as marginal or remedial, they are central to DE. Learners who are actively engaged in the learning process and sufficiently supported will be more likely to achieve success. Learners who are dynamically occupied in their own learning will begin to feel empowered. They will be able to take charge of their learning, and as a result, their individual achievement and self-direction will rise. They will be better DLs. On the other hand, the opposite will be true for learners who do not have the 'right' skills, mindset, and perspectives on distance learning, and whose problems may be worsened by lack of support from their respective distance teachers and institutions.

### **CHANGING EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

Today, distance education (DE) calls upon an impressive range of technologies to enable distance teachers and DLs who are separated by distance to communicate with each other in real time (synchronous) and delayed time (asynchronous). This means that DLs can access education and learning opportunities at a time, place, and pace to suit their individual lifestyles, learning preferences and personal development plans. Such separation according to Idrus & Lateh (2000) give rise to "an impressive and innovative array of media mix resulting in the application of technology in education" (p.197). Such development offers a radical new direction for DE enthusiasts, teachers and learners alike, incorporating flexible and open learning methods as well as modified and specially created learning resources.

The main task of any ODL provider is to design and offer distance educational experience that encourages learning. As such, DE providers need to understand that its educational products and services are to service the DLs and provide an encouraging educational experience for the learners. In doing so, many factors need to be considered in developing and delivering DE courses to achieve effective and efficient implementation of distance education courses and programmes. One factor that this paper focuses on, which affects DLs

success in distance education is the provision of *learning support* made available for the learners by the institution and, most importantly, by the teachers.

Learning support is particularly important in DE because many DLs, perhaps for the first time, are now "faced with a new learning environment and the expectation that they will have independent learning skills and the capacity to engage in activities that require self direction and self management of learning" (McLoughlin and Marshall,2000:1). Although it can be argued that these DLs learners should already have these attributes, this generalization does not apply to all DLs at UUM and may not be generalised to all DLs. Every learner, every institution, every curriculum is unique and each exhibit different strengths and weaknesses. Malaysian DLs who have journeyed through 12 years of primary and secondary education (mainstream education) may not have an appropriate educational concept of learning for DE. It could be very *teacher-centered*, and their learning is characterized by dependency on teachers as knowledge providers. Their transition into becoming DLs may not be an easy one (Saw et al., 1999). Their diversity in age, educational background and working experience only magnifies the fact that each learner could be similar to or vastly different from other distance learners. A learner who has left the educational setting for many years may feel incompetent and lacking in the learning skills needed to compete with other learners.

The development of educational technology and the use of a wide range of media in ODE may add on the 'complexity' of becoming a distance learner. In the present generation of ODE, DLs are required to engage in 'new' ways of learning. To some students this new way of learning is accepted and does not impede learning. But to others, distance learning is '*not just a plea for knowledge*', but a plea for continuous 'presence' of the teacher for learning to take place.

Within the Malaysian context of DE, the notion *that 'the teacher is always there, but isn't'* in distance learning is a significant reality. Findings shared in this paper for example suggest that the infrequent face to face (f2f) meetings between distance teachers and DLs, and learners' dependency on their teachers, cause frustrations and sometime impede the learning process. Some DLs are not able to cope with distance learning expectations and find the new ways of learning and the sets of expectations that go with it too great. In such circumstances, some learners expect distance teachers to play an important role in helping them come to terms with the new ways of learning.

This paper also argues that distance teachers too need to undertake some changes to engage in new ways of teaching. They need to understand what is involved in distance learning and must themselves account for this in their reassessment of teaching. Therefore, there is a need for a major project; the reassessment and reengineering of the educational process by both learners and teachers and, indeed, by the university as a whole. It is not simply to introduce new technologies of communication but to 're-understand' the process of learning at a distance.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This qualitative case study focused on the experience of a small number of students (n=12) in a distance learning programme at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) as part of a close case study of distance learning careers over a period of time. This study was an attempt to provide a 'thick' description of distance learning as experienced and perceived by the learners at the institution. Unlike most evaluation data, the DLs' descriptions of their distance experiences of study provides knowledge about students' learning that is holistic

rather than course specific. In particular, this paper focuses on the role of *learning support* in distance learning at UUM which surfaced as a major theme in the study.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research into distance learning is to generate insights and understanding into the questions of how and why, when and where distance learners at UUM tackle their studies. Specifically, the research objectives of this study are as follows:

- To characterise the nature and content of DLs' learning in some detail.
- To develop an understanding of the barriers, the challenges that DLs encounter, and the ways they cope with these problems.
- To understand the distance learning process.
- To demonstrate principles through which distance learning can be empowered and guided by the micro and macro environment surrounding the learners and their lives.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions that I had were research questions based on substantial experience and theoretical knowledge of DE and distance learning that I had acquired over the years. The questions were then refined and grounded from the discourse and discussions with different DE stakeholders at UUM. The research questions were continuously revised and improvised to function as interpretative questions. Following are the research questions developed for this study:

- How do the DLs perceive and experience the distance learning programmes and courses at UUM?
- What is the meaning of distance learning for the DLs?
- What are the contributing factors that facilitate or deter distance learning at UUM?
- How do the DLs cope with the challenges being distance learners at UUM?

## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

An instrumental qualitative case study (Stake 1995) approach was employed so as to understand the experience of individual learners as they progressed through their study careers. The research used three different research instruments: the *interview* being the primary instrument, supplemented by *students' journals* and *photographs*. All the DLs involved in this study were interviewed on a one-to-one basis during the 2002 academic year, and this was the basis of the data reported in this paper. The following interview guide in table 1 was used as a framework to conduct the f2f interviews:

**Table: 1**  
**The Interview Guide**

<b>Thematic Guideline</b>	<b>Consistent Topics</b>	<b>Additional Topic(s)</b>
<b>Experience of distance learning at Universiti Utara Malaysia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactions with Course Materials</li> <li>• Interactions with distance teachers &amp; educators</li> <li>• Interactions with other DLs</li> <li>• Attitudes towards distance learning</li> <li>• Pull &amp; push factors of DE</li> <li>• Learning style &amp; behaviour</li> <li>• Coping Mechanism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult life</li> <li>• Family life</li> <li>• Attitude</li> <li>• Future Career Plan</li> <li>• Impact of curriculum and individual learning style</li> <li>• Impact of Malaysian 12 years of primary and secondary educational experience</li> <li>• Learning Differences</li> </ul>

The interview guide helped to ensure good use of limited interview time available during the fieldwork. Most of the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, and English language was only used when necessary and possible. The interviews were then transcribed and selectively translated and profiled.

### **THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

The research informants for this study were Universiti Utara Malaysia DLs. Being subject to a management-based institution, naturally, the learners involved in this study were management and business students. Due to the heterogeneous characteristics of DLs, this study purposely engaged with DLs with various backgrounds to generate unique insights into how and why DLs of different backgrounds at UUM undertake and survive their distance learning. Specifically, DLs of different ethnic background (namely, Malays and Chinese) and of different gender were chosen to investigate the UUM DLs' learning process and experience.

#### **Participants' Background**

The 12 research participants included 8 male and 4 female learners. In terms of ethnic and cultural background, 7 Malay learners and 5 Chinese learners contributed to the findings of this research. All of the respondents had completed the 12 years mandatory education in Malaysia, and had completed form 5 (the fifth year of secondary education) and sat for the SPM (equivalent to GCSE level) examination. 50% of them had some post secondary education or had undergone some vocational training courses, and 25% or three out of the 12 participants had a teaching certificate from a teacher's college. The maturity of the students resulted in an overall average of 8.9 years of working experience. All of them had professional careers, including teaching, police, clerical, sales, technical, self-employed and secretarial work. Most of the students earned less than RM2,000 per month. It would seem that, despite quite high fees for DE courses, demand for places in such courses remains strong. Students seem willing to make considerable financial sacrifices to obtain a paper qualification. 90% of the students had an immediate family to care for. The average household size of the respondents was 4.7 people. Over 57% of the research participants came from households with 4-6 persons; 15% from households with 7 persons or more; while 25% came from households with 3 person or less.

## RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION

It is important to listen to and understand DLs' voices and perspectives on DE in Malaysia because of the complex mix of cultures, languages and urban and rural factors. Additionally, there is a need to reflect on the effectiveness of the DE programmes, teaching and services provided from time to time. In doing so, DE providers and institutions need to get a balanced picture of what is 'right' and 'wrong' in their DE programmes, courses and administration. Understanding how the DE experience discourages or frustrates DLs enables DE providers and institutions, distance teachers and other stakeholders in DE to reflect and make constructive changes to create the condition for better distance learning in the future.

A study that focuses on DLs' *point of viewing* and experiences in distance learning and their learning interactions is important for several reasons. First, there have been virtually no major studies that have sought the voices of DLs in Malaysia. For this reason, this research sought to explore and offer an understanding of DLs' perceptions of their educational experiences in distance learning, and to construct a rich and detailed account of the wide range of factors that might have influence and build the DLs' character and behaviour in distance learning at UUM.

Second, the current definitions of the term *distance learning* are vague, and vary within and across the ODE literature. Therefore, much confusion exists as to what distance learning really entails. This in turn has created expectations that define what distance learning is all about from other stakeholders' *point of view*, not that of the DLs themselves. Considering the experiences of DLs in formulating definitions can help to clarify the term, perhaps creating new approaches to addressing the needs of this population.

Third, in order for UUM to improve and sustain its DE courses and programmes in the future, I strongly believe that it is essential for the institution to gain an understanding of the DLs with whom the institution is dealing - an understanding that goes beyond attendance records, and academic achievements.

Finally, the implications of this study are pertinent to how UUM DE administrators, distance teachers and educators organise courses and programmes, and educational activities to meet with the needs of the DLs. Ultimately, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how DLs perceive and experience distance learning at UUM. Such understanding will enhance our knowledge of how to go about designing and implementing effective future DE programmes and services for DLs in the future.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This study reveals that one of the greatest problems experienced by the DLs is feelings of isolation, which makes the possibility of a trusting relationship between the learners with the teachers, and with other learners difficult:

*I was quite disappointed in the course at the end. I mean...I got something out of it. I found some of the course interesting and entertaining, but regrettably, I felt lonely most of the duration I was in DE...I understand that most or many of my DE friends are working, but you get bogged down when your questions, or cry for help from instructors get late reply, ...and you can't depend on your friends (other distance learners) as well because they too may have the same problems and be busy with whatever...*

*R 2: Interview 3*

Such evidence is parallel to Walker's (in Vrasidas & Glass, 2002) discussion of his paper entitled "Is anybody there? The Embodiment of Knowledge in Virtual Environments", a plea not just for information but also for contact, for human presence... Such isolation according to Simpson (2002) must inhibit, if not prevent "any possibility of dialogue" in learning, and interferes with the learning process.

The learners' dependencies on distance teachers, and their desperation, were constantly evident in the data. Contrary to the assumption of many ODE institutions, that "it is a mistake to assume that physical distance means loss of intimacy in interaction", 'loss of intimacy in interaction', particularly learning interaction, was strongly felt by students, as is evident in the learners' discourse:

*I am lost most of the time. I don't really know if I have participated well, or if my contribution to the course is sufficient in the eyes of my instructors. You asked about technology and the use of it in my learning and the teaching of the instructors. That is the problem; technology lacks a human or personal touch. I just don't feel the satisfaction of being in the class physically and able to have eye contact with the instructor or to raise hands, ask a question and getting prompt response. The minute you post questions through email, and don't get a reply 5 minutes, 15 minutes, an hour or more, you'll feel frustrated.*

#### **R 8: Interview 3**

They felt that they needed continuous human contact-the presence of a teacher figure to guide their learning. The meaning of such frustrations is not well understood by many UUM distance teachers, possibly due to the fact that a majority of them are "products" of a f2f institution themselves. As such:

1. They do not have any distance training and experience as far as developing distance course material is concerned.
2. They may be subject specialists, but with very little or no experience in DE
3. They have not experienced the frustration that a distance learner does.
4. They may not understand what is involved for the student in being deprived of f2f interaction with their Distance teachers.

The consequence is that the distance teachers and educators have very little sympathy with the learners. They don't understand the degree of difficulties that DLs may have in pursuing their distance course. In reality, the process of student learning at a distance as revealed in the dialogues is more complex than the conventional f2f setting, the reason being, that the obstacles that these DLs encounter may differ from one distance learner to another, with varying degrees of complexity:

*Looking at the young learners, or even looking at my children who are able to use, operate computers, software and so on...and comparing to that to myself.. who uses 2 fingers to punch on the keyboard, and having my heart beat beating 10 fold each time something goes wrong or a window appears on the screen, I am naïve about technology and too scared to venture. What I need is help, constant tutoring, a class that teaches lessons on computers, the Internet...I think such activities would be much appreciated, especially for student like me...*

#### **R7: Interview 4**

*Getting the BA in business study has always been my objective in my distance learning programme. But thinking about what I have been doing over the last five*

*semesters, learning is not the core activity that I am involved or should be involved with. I kept doing something else like my office work, helping my wife and the house chores. Partly I think as the head of the family it is my responsibility. Now I feel guilty, guilty about not learning well, learning effectively or learning adequately. Failure is the feeling I often have. I wonder if I could be helped or if other students experience the same problems.*

*R1: Interview 2*

What caused such frustrations and feelings of disappointment? Analysis of the data suggests that many of the research respondents were asking for attention. Specifically, they wanted to have more contact with the distance teachers. On this evidence, it appeared that some of the learners needed help, continuous training and to learn the new ways of learning in ODE.

How should distance teachers deal with these problems and issues? First they face a remedial problem. If they are able to identify the problems faced by their students, what can they do to improve their situation? How should they advise the displaced student, or the student who feels isolated and frustrated at not getting prompt or immediate feedback from the teacher? Can the teachers help? Can they put them back on the right learning path? Can the teachers change the learners into becoming more proactive learners who are more responsible for their learning? Interestingly, behind these questions lie other, more educationally significant questions. What can they do to prevent these problems arising in the first place? How can they reengineer the curriculum, teaching and assessment processes to ensure success without the need for massive remediation?

Based on this study, some learners still assume that teaching always takes place in classrooms. Though such ideas are not restricted to DE, the image persists. There are many people, particularly students in Malaysia, who think that learning is something that happens in a classroom where teachers are knowledge providers, feeding information f2f to the learners. Such thinking and the educational concepts of learning that underlie it are still vivid and active in DE as is evident in the students' discourse. A false expectation it may be, but it seems that some DLs at UUM are unable to learn in the new context until they unlearn the old one. Changing their thinking and mind set is evidently a challenge that requires serious attention. This is especially important in light of today's development of ODE.

Conventional ideas about education are undergoing a transformation as the concepts of distance learning and lifelong learning gain popularity. With the current expansion of ODE programmes and courses, and development in technology, some distance teachers would claim that the classroom is not necessary for learning, and that millions of learners around the world have already discovered that learning can happen at any time, in anyplace and in any setting and that it is no longer necessary to be in a classroom in front of a teacher to be in a 'place of learning'. Such development is becoming inevitable, and will have negative implications for learners who are not well equipped with distance learning skills.

## **WHAT LEARNERS SAY ABOUT LEARNING AT A DISTANCE**

In general, the learners set a high value on formal educational and learning opportunities but expressed a mixed set of emotions when asked to describe their experiences in a distance education course at UUM.

The following section of this paper presents and analyses students' discourse on three themes: *Learners' Perceptions of Teachers and Interaction*; *Getting Involved in New Ways of Learning*; and *Perceptions of Technology in Distance Learning*. The section concludes with observations in reference to the literature and discusses some implications of the findings.

### **Learners' Perceptions of Teachers and Interaction**

For 12 years prior to distance study, the learners' educational experience had been delivered in the traditional f2f manner where the issue of isolation and alienation from teachers was rare. In DE, they expressed their disappointment over not having their respective distance teachers *"there all the time", "closer to them", "there when you need them"*. *"From the beginning of the class, I hoped to get more attention from Mr. X. I had the intention of asking him questions, and getting more involved in discussions, but when you only meet f2f four times a semester and when there are 250 students in the room sometimes I feel isolated and ignored"* R4: Interview 3

Feelings of isolation and alienation were strongly evident in the dialogues. In addition, the fact that instruction is delivered, not just through occasional f2f interaction, but through other media, may not be suitable to some DLs, as evident in this study. One example in particular; some of the learners were concerned at not getting an immediate response to their questions or problems. One learner pointed out:

*When I am not able to understand certain terms in the content or not able to work on an assignment, getting immediate help from the instructor is very, very important. Unfortunately that does not happen too often.*R 2: Interview 3

Their discomfort in this was apparent. They felt as if they did not receive the *"real solution to their queries, just an 'it could be' or might be."* Such discomfort as stressed by R2, *"...sometimes it kills your motivation to progress, not knowing which direction to go next, it's worse when you know your friends can't help or have the same problems (Interview 3)"*.

In addition, many of the respondents mentioned that it took much more time to get feedback on questions at a distance, and in some circumstances, this interfered with their learning. One respondent mentioned that he sometimes *"had to rely on his own knowledge and background"*, or that he *"had to change his learning habit"*, but further stressed that *such an approach sometimes works, and at other times led nowhere (R6: Interview 3)"*

Such experience is, of course, not common in traditional educational experience. It was also noted by the respondent that in the traditional educational experience he seldom looked for materials outside the course unless the teacher asked him to do so, but in distance learning *"...that is in the package, you are required to be more responsible, the problem is what help do you get to ease your learning process? That, I think, is somewhat lacking (R6: Interview 3)"*

Contrary to some of the negative feedback about DLs' experience or interactions with their teachers and distance learning respectively, the respondents also noted some benefits to distance learning. For example:

*In my former educational experience, the teacher came in to teach, talk, provide learning materials, ask questions, perhaps answer them as well, and then the class ended and we'd see the teacher again the next day, and then in came another teacher for another course. But in distance learning especially if the teacher uses technology like online, the materials or instructions are there. I can read again and again, and again or perhaps print them. Come to think of it, the teacher is always there, but isn't, (R4: Interview 4)*

But, such a situation was seen to have its weakness, particularly in dealing with ambiguities in language and instruction as revealed in the next discourse:

*The module, materials in cd-rom or even online is great, but quite often you get frustrated if you don't understand the instructions, or if the wordings were not*

*written clearly. The worst thing is, you are alone, and the instructor is nowhere near you to answer your concern. You can email him or her, but getting back the reply is another issue leading to learning frustrations or getting the reply but not what you expected. (R4: Interview 4)*

This respondent further expressed concern about not knowing how to communicate or ask for help on specific problems. This can be an indirect consequence of the lack of intimacy on learning interactions between the learners with their respective distance teachers.

In addition, depending on how the student requested help, they might receive wrong feedback or a reply that did not answer their concerns. This phenomenon only led to more frustrations: *"Reading messages and listening or conversing with your teacher f2f are different. When receiving response through email for example, sometimes I just cannot understand from my reading of the message...and sometimes it is difficult to move from what is suggested to practice (R4: Interview 4)".* In this instance, the wrong feedback clearly acted as a learning barrier. *"Where do you go?", "What do you do?", or "should I send another question and wait for another reply?", "What if this happens again...this is one thing I felt was bad about distance learning (R4: Interview 4)."*

*'The teacher is always there but isn't...'* is a fair way to represent such frustrations. The lack of intimacy in learning interactions is a concern that affects learning. *Can distance educators eradicate or minimize the feelings of isolation that distance learners have?*—this is the fundamental question that needs attention to enable DLs learn at ease with better results.

### **Getting Involved in the New Ways of Learning**

The findings of this study suggest that the extent of ODE learning support influenced students' overall perception of their distance learning experience. It should come as no surprise that the learners recognised that participating in a distance learning course involved 'change' on a different level. Most notable were the perceptions of learning to work more independently and having to adopt more active ways of learning as a result of learning at a distance.

The DLs, through their discourse, showed a clear sense of having to adapt to a new type of learning environment or learning culture. The discussion of what they had done traditionally and what they "had" to do currently as DLs occupied many of our initial discussions of their distance learning experience. Such discourse was evident in their discussion of all areas of the course, such as interaction with the course teacher, with other DLs, as well as with technology. For example:

*In my 12 years of traditional education, I never had to do what I am doing now in my distance learning. It (distance learning) is different, so much so if I don't change my attitude, learning to be more proactive and responsible, I will sink in this course... (R5: Interview 2)*

*Distance learning is about changing one's study habits. The secret to success in DE is that you have to work harder and be more focused. (R3: Interview 1)*

*Having to realize that the instructors are not always there for you, I realize that that I had to put failure or success in DE into my hands. If you think this way, you know that something had to change to accommodate your learning. (R7: Interview 2)*

It did not take much time for the learners to notice the fundamental differences between distance learning, and f2f campus based learning. *"It is like two different world, two different experiences"* said R7. But, what needs attention is that to transform these learners

to have the educational 'change' for distance learning, distance teachers need to provide an optimal learning support system.

Technology has invaded today's educational experience. The utilization of technology was not the learners' choice, and accepting it was challenging for some. Adaptation was merely a method of survival. This is not to say that all the DLs in the study viewed having to adapt to the use of ICT and computers in a negative manner. Most of the respondents described DE as an "opportunity" but with "room for further improvement (R7: Interview3)".

Learning at a distance is different from traditional learning experiences. Malaysian learners in general have cultural orientations towards learning which make educational experience at a distance difficult to grasp. The learners are more reserved, and sometimes passive participants in classroom discussion. As a result, they sometimes feel at loss when clear instructions are not given for work, assignments, and experiments. When this happens, they are tempted to blame their distance teachers for an apparent lack of knowledge or commitment as revealed in some of the students' discourse.

This interpretation has interesting implications for the DLs at UUM. The respondents have to change their learning and study habits because at times the content may be ambiguous and distance teachers' feedback is delayed. If this is typical of Malaysian DLs, it would not be difficult to see that, in line with the claim of Saw's et al. (1999), making the transition to DE might be challenging for Malaysian DLs.

Inherent in the nature of distance learning is a sense of individual autonomy in the learner, which may be valued but which may also cut across traditional values. The learners are not always given immediate feedback, which may come with f2f interaction in a traditional course. 'Feedback' here means more interactions than just comments on learners' written work, and more reassurance from distance teachers reiterating a point or responding to a question asked by a distance learner.

DLs are sometimes unsure of the distance teachers' meaning when interpreting the lectures and materials without having this level of reassurance. This in turn may cause the DLs to experiment with many different possibilities for meaning, thereby constructing their own knowledge and making connections to situations that are more meaningful to them, but at the risk of 'being wrong'. The degree of uncertainty in this process can cause learners to lose self control, power to make decision and courage. They make mistakes, and continued errors may demotivate them from learning successfully. This in turn may lead to failure and withdrawal.

### **Learners' Perception on the Use of Educational Technology**

DLs, particularly adult learners, appear to need computer assistance and training. One clear problem revealed by DLs in this study was the feeling of inadequacy of technological skills. The respondents' perspective on learning, and in particular the use of technology showed that they needed more support and training opportunities. Technology should not be seen as "...potential silver bullet" (Twigg, 1996) to remedy learning and teaching problems but as a tool to propel learning. An understanding of DLs' behaviour with ICT and asking questions like: *Do DLs use computers on a daily basis? Do they have a computer at home, at their working place? Do they have easy access? What do they need? How could learning be improved? How could interactivity in distance learning be improved?* is imperative in order to provide effective technological resources, which will promote better learning interactions.

Almost all the research respondents experienced some adjustment to the technology used in their distance educational programmes. As iterated in some of the dialogues earlier, the change or transition was not easy. Learners demonstrated several ways of dealing with technology problems through electronic means such as e-mail. Typical e-mail messages were

to request assistance regarding assignment or internet related issues. Nevertheless, it is evident that quite often technology interferes with the learners' learning, "*I have a serious problem, the technology used in this course looks complicated...*", "*It is just unacceptable, when you want to learn and progress in your course but the attachment sent is 'unreadable' or can't be opened...what do you do? (R2: Interview3)*"

## **LEARNING SUPPORT TO FACILITATE DISTANCE LEARNING**

Distance learning requires the adoption of a new teaching and learning paradigm. As ODE is still 'young' in Malaysia, this process is incomplete. For instance, DE strategies and delivery modes were perceived by the DLs as not adapted to meet the needs of the larger intakes of learners, and the learners' diversity that are often to be found in ODE programmes. This raises the issue of learning support in distance learning.

One can argue that the generic terms *student support* and *learning support* are interchangeable. Nevertheless, this paper perceives the two as different. *Student support* as reported in many sources breaks down to two components comprising *academic support* and *non academic support* with an objective to help learners learn successfully (Gibson, 1998; Tait, 2000). *Learning support* on the other hand is more learning specific. It refers to support systems intended to enhance and improve learning. It covers a wider range of skills that transpire from the initial registration, the teaching programme of the course to the end of the course term until results are released. There are many critical issues that call for effective learning support as indicated by Simpson (2002:), among them: *decisions about starting study; feelings about becoming a student; motivations for learning; finding the time for learning; tackling course materials; planning the learning; tackling the assignments; and dealing with failures.*

The list of issues listed above shows the complexity of the nature of learning support. There are a lot of 'considerations and factors' with which DLs have to cope in distance learning; and learning the skills needed for distance learning may not be easy for all learners. Learning support is undoubtedly necessary for success in distance learning. Without it, as evident in this study, learning at a distance does not come easily; it poses a great challenge to some learners. The principal objective of learning support is to produce DLs who are able to progress through their programmes of learning successfully, able to be independent learners who have good learning skills and strategies, and are able to interact effectively with distance teachers, tutors, learning materials and other DLs at any time. Education, after all, is not simply the acquisition of facts or knowledge, but their synthesis and creative and unique ways of putting together information about the world. This calls for greater attention to the issue of learning support and its role in distance learning.

As important as this may sound, it is important not to see student learning support as the sole source of help for DLs. However good they are, support systems can never be entirely successful. The problem has to be addressed by the distance teachers. If the university is asking the learners to engage in quite new ways of learning, then it seems logical to require distance teachers to engage in new ways of teaching. If DLs are required to rethink their implicit understanding of what learning is, then distance teachers must rethink their views about what teaching is. If the practice of the student is to change, then distance teachers need to understand what is involved for students in making this change and must themselves account for this in their reassessment of teaching.

Additionally, there is little consensus, at least in the literature, pertaining to what good learning skills and advice are required in distance learning. There does not seem to be much research available that clearly provides a solution, or endorses particular learning support as being essential to distance learning or as a strategy that avoids the problem in the first place.

## DISCUSSION

Hargreaves (1996) has pointed out that teaching is a profession particularly prone to guilt. It is not possible to do all that is necessary to support students. As distance educators, we constantly confront ourselves with the questions 'Have I done enough for the students?' 'What didn't I do, or should do to help the needy ones improve their learning?' And in the midst of these questions and other concerns that we have is the question of *what learning support is, and how do you define and operationalise it to give optimal learning educational experience to learners?* Understanding the task, role and responsibility being distance teachers begins first by understanding the meaning of learning support and what it entails in distance learning, and what part you play in delivering those services. As the DLs need to 'undo' their learning practices, and expectations to cope with the new ways in learning at a distance, so too do distance teachers. They need to reassess their roles and reexamine their educational careers in DE.

This paper believes that effective learning support enhances the learning process. Donald (1997) argues this when he says that learning support should be productive rather than merely neutral. He further relates learning support to a more holistic and acceptable definition, which aligns itself more appropriately in terms of the focus of the study:

The learning support consists of the entire setting in which learning takes place...the disciplines that provide the knowledge learning support, the learners and the arrangements made for them, the teaching and learning process, and the assessment of learning, institution and programmes. (Donald, 1997: p.xi)

This would seem to imply that distance teachers too need to rethink their neutrality. Do they need to become advocates for their DLs, rather than judges of their performance?

The fact remains that learning support can predictably affect distance learning – positively if planned well but negatively if attention has not been paid to the conditions under which learning best occurs. In reality its importance has been undervalued. Many measures of educational institution effectiveness neglect the context of learning, focusing instead on the selection and performance of staff, and learners and on the technology used. Effective learning support should be designed to enable DLs to concentrate on their studies, free from distracting elements. In a distance learning institution like UUM, learning support should facilitate learning and access to knowledge. It is thus imperative that distance teachers have an in-depth understanding of the impact of learning support has on the learner and the learning process as a whole, and some understanding of the context of the courses being taught.

An important point that emerges from the study is that, if distance teachers and ODE course providers want learners to succeed, they need to be certain that the DLs are positioned in an educational environment that capitalizes on the way they learn best. This is essential for the successful design and implementation of distance educational courses and programmes. There are numerous problems with distance learning, which need to be interpreted as challenges with the necessary exploration of interventions in order for the learning support to be addressed.

In order to support the learners in an ODL environment, it is imperative that distance teachers have not only learning skills to facilitate learning, but also skills and experience to facilitate the learning process through designing and building support that encourages learning. They need to be specialists in their subjects. In ODE there is no place for the amateur teacher. *Effective communication* is important to the distance learning mode but it is communication in new forms and must be learnt by both DLs and Distance teachers. The use of flexible learning elements in ODE could promote a stimulating relationship between

**DLs and distance teachers and consequently enhance the attempts at building a better learning support to facilitate distance learning.**

**A distance teachers-learners mentor programme in distance learning is an imperative component for learning support to facilitate distance learning. A number of the respondents viewed knowledge of distance learning principles as essential to their daily function as DLs. All education processes need to be carefully guided by these principles. DLs felt they were not being assisted sufficiently by their distance teachers and UUM in this regard. The learners tend to envisage a strong relationship between different forms of support in distance education. *A safe, flexible and facilitating learning support* emerged as important. Most distance teachers saw it as their responsibility to build learning support to facilitate learning but were, however, reluctant to accept sole responsibility due to the complexity and large number of stakeholders involved in a distance education institution like UUM.**

**With regard to the *use of technology*, there were mixed views. On the one hand it was strongly supported in terms of globalization and moving into a technological future, while on the other hand there was a fear of depersonalizing the mode of delivery and instilling fear and anxiety amongst learners.**

**In general, the DLs expressed satisfaction with their learning experiences. However, based on the emerging themes of this study, it can be concluded that distance teachers at UUM have not adequately provided adequate learning support to facilitate distance learning. Although numerous efforts have been made, the teachers need to adopt a wide range of initiatives. Distance teachers very often become catalysts, and as such are crucial in enabling learners to liberate their understanding. They have a special role in providing learning support. The journey to effective learning, after all, begins with distance teachers at UUM making personal improvements in their understanding and practice. This may require changes that will be difficult to achieve. Often, perspective transformation, paradigm shifts and reassessment of personal philosophy are needed. As Walker (2002) puts it "The student does not simply 'learn' but (almost always) learns from someone. This implies for the teacher that they need to become someone from whom it is possible to learn (p.5)**

**Various conclusions can be drawn in respect to the role of the distance teachers in providing learning support to facilitate distance learning and subsequently striving towards providing a better distance learning experience.**

- 1. As evident from the findings of this study, many of the respondents agreed that a strong concern in distance learning is the aspect of the "loneliness" or "isolation" experienced by the learner. It is for this reason the learning support needs to be as *supportive and non-judgmental* as possible.**
- 2. It is also evident that there is an urgent training and development need for distance teachers at UUM practice regarding learning support and the role that it can and should fulfil.**
- 3. The learners value timely feedback from their instructors regarding course assignments, exams, projects and their inquiries. It is important then for distance teachers and educators to attend their students promptly and efficiently. Such commitment as evident in this paper will help to improve learning and ease many frustrations.**
- 4. Self directed learning can be promoted by integrating learning activities that contain flexibility and provide DLs with opportunities to experience that there may be many right answers or responses when completing assignments and projects. If the content allows, distance teachers should communicate to DLs that autonomy is strongly encouraged, and that the learning process is just as valuable as the actual product.**
- 5. If DE educators in their respective departments or units could engage in *peer evaluation* or in any form of self-evaluation, it could possibly help to determine whether their educational services reach and benefit their learners.**

6. Another conclusion that can be drawn from the findings is that *institutional policy* and the *role of management* are crucial in the establishment of an effective learning support to facilitate distance learning.

## CONCLUSION

Continued research on distance learning is essential. This study offers research potential regarding learning support in distance education. The challenge, however, is to ensure that learning support in DE is sufficiently addressed in striving towards a better distance learning experience.

UUM, like any other dual mode institution, aims to be an effective distance learning provider in Malaysia. If UUM, or for that matter any DE provider or institution, wishes to promote distance learning, issues pertaining to learning support must be addressed effectively. Apparent neglect of learning support which clearly link the learning environment, physical and social to student engagement and learning outcomes; inappropriate ways of measuring DLs' satisfaction need attention. Moreover, distance teachers should be seen not just as knowledge providers but as learning support providers. The task is to design and offer a distance educational experience that encourages learning. DE providers need to understand that its educational products and services are to service the learner and provide an encouraging educational experience. We must consciously and actively develop and maintain approaches which enable learners to have their voices heard, and for distance teachers and educators, and UUM itself to be able to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said. The learners should never be perceived as the problem, but should be perceived and integrated as part of the solution. Such an approach and attitude will benefit all stakeholders in DE.

In designing the learning support, this paper wishes to encourage the DE providers to choose appropriate combinations of methods for particular learning contexts. It is important to note that the recommendations that this research proposes for UUM are certainly not the ideal solution to learning support concerns in distance learning. Nor do they necessarily provide optimal advice pertaining to components within the learning support. They are, however, made in an earnest effort, firstly to sensitise distance teachers of the importance of their role in providing learning support in distance learning and, more importantly, to stimulate thought, dialogue, and future research in providing learning support to DE programmes and courses.

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