Student Perceptions of Open University Services in the Islands Region: A Study in Selayar Islands Regency, Indonesia

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Abstract

The main issue of this research is to explore students' perceptions of the key strengths of Universitas Terbuka in implementing distance education, specifically related to flexibility, affordability, interaction, accessibility, and distance learning skills in the Selayar Islands Regency. The present study aims to delve into student perception of the key strengths of Universitas Terbuka that become the standards by which its endeavors of distance education are carried out. Adopting a descriptive quantitative method, the study gathered data using a questionnaire in which five variables were measured, i.e., flexibility, affordability, interaction, accessibility, and distance-learning skills. The 5-point scale questionnaire was created in Google Forms and was distributed to the whole student population of Universitas Terbuka in Selayar Islands Regency through Study Groups. The data from the student questionnaire was assessed using a descriptive statistical method in SPSS 20. Based on the descriptive statistic findings from a total of 48 questionnaires, the mean that stands for the student perception of the five variables is 4.37 for flexibility, 4.34 for affordability, 4.35 for interaction, 4.45 for accessibility, and 4.31 for distance-learning skills. These findings lead to a noticeable conclusion; Universitas Terbuka has mobilized education and reached out to remote learners in small islands in an effective manner. In turn, this potentially informs policy discussions as to improve the roles of Universitas Terbuka in extending educational opportunities and services for underprivileged rural communities that particularly suffer from low educational attainment.

Keywords: *Student Perceptions; Service; Open University; Archipelago Region*

Introduction

The basic objective of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) lies on the principle that every individual should have access to higher education by breaking down some barriers in conventional learning (Mehmet, 2020). The outset of ODL can be traced back in the 1960s, which came into practice with the so-called correspondence learning (prior to 1960s) and evolved into educational environment using a myriad of learning resources over the following decades, i.e., multimedia tools (1960–1985), computer and network (1985-1995), and high-bandwidth computer (1995-2007). Since 2008, today's open education has taken place in mobile, synchronous environment supported with Web 2.0 technologies (Effendi et al., 2022). The developmental stages highlight the use of media support services as a means by which educational materials are imparted from educators to students (Huda et al., 2023).

Open and Distance Learning was a new concept in Indonesia in the 1950s, beginning with correspondence learning with the use of educational radio programs (Kharis et al., 2024). Founded in 1984, Universitas Terbuka is the only university with a crowning accomplishment of

distance education for the last 30 years. The government promoted the opportunities in 2001 for which higher-education institutions integrated e-learning into educational programs (Pribadi et al., 2020). Owing to the severity of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, ODL has been gaining momentum and magnifying its global growth across almost all higher-education institutions (Susanti et al., 2018).

ODL has boosted educational landscape in numerous ways. With its high flexibility, students have learning opportunities from anywhere and at any time through a method that best fits their needs (Izham et al., 2022). Consequently, ODL is more affordable than its conventional counterpart as it cuts out commuting and relocation costs, and other associated expenses that exist when attending on-site education (Firat et al., 2020). Despite physical distance, ODL fosters the quality and quantity of interaction between students and their peers, and students and teachers through a myriad of online technologies, social media, and content-sharing software (Hafel et al., 2021). This leads to the notion of accessibility. Students are provided with access to a wide array of learning and information resources, and opportunities that may not be locally available (Jamil, 2022). Another major tenet of ODL is distance-learning skills. ODL embraces a set of personal learning skills, self-regulated principles, digital literacy, and other essential competences for lifelong learning (Riady et al., 2022).

Indonesia, with its 17,333 islands making up the primary territory, faces substantial challenges in providing access to basic education, not to mention higher education opportunities (Tas et al., 2022). The barriers to the use of technologies, among others, hold key to huge disparities in education across its island regions. Local communities of coastal and island areas are failing to pursue higher education given their poor economic climate, which hinders them from migrating to big cities for further educational opportunities as they choose to take on local jobs to provide for their family (Yusriani et al., 2024). Therefore reasonable that the government make substantial efforts to augment access to higher education in these areas. Universitas Terbuka (UT) bridges these disparities by implementing ODL system to ensure coastal residents participate in the same resources and opportunities as those in urban locations (Abimbola et al., 2015). UT diminishes transportation and relocation issues and provides them with numerous learning services that fit their individual circumstance in terms of time, cost, and learning mode (Masruroh, 2020). Selayar Islands Regency is an autonomous region in the province of South Sulawesi that is part of administrative grouping of UT-Makassar. This regency is one of highly-contributing areas within the regional unit of UT-Makassar in terms of the number of students. Therefore makes ense that the present study highlights student perception of UT as it focuses on the principles of ODL undertakings in island regions.

Method

Type of Research

This study uses a quantitative descriptive research method. The research was carried out in the Odd Semester of the 2023/2024 academic year. This study was conducted in the Regency of Selayar Islands. The sample in this study is all Open University students in Selayar Islands Regency. Meanwhile, the sample in this study is students who fill out the questionnaire.

Research variables

The study shed light on five variables, i.e., flexibility, affordability, interaction, accessibility and distance-learning skills (Okano et al., 2023). Research variables and their respective indicators are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Variables and Indicators

No	Variable	Indicators
A	Flexibility	1. Learning at UT diminishes time barriers.
		2. Learning at UT diminishes space barriers.
		3. UT does not require expiry of studies, which allows students to earn a degree without time limit under any circumstances.
B	Affordability	1. Lower tuition fees for island communities
		2. Students do not need to relocate to big cities or commute long distance.
		3. Students can cut down travel expenses.
C	Interaction	1. UT nurtures interaction and collaborative learning between student peers across different locations through social media.
		2. UT nurtures teacher-student interactions through social media.
D	Accessibility	1. Students in Selayar Islands have access to online tutoring at UT.
		2. Students in Selayar Islands have access to Virtual Reading Room (Ruang Baca Virtual-RBV) at UT.
		3. Students in Selayar Islands have access to online library at UT.
		4. Students in Selayar Islands are provided with modules (known as Buku Materi Pokok or BMP) each semester.
E	Distance-Learning Skills	1. Students in Selayar Islands foster self-regulated learning during their learning trajectories at UT.
		2. UT promotes digital-literacy skills for students in Selayar Islands.

Data collection techniques

Data collection was carried out using a likert scale questionnaire of 1 to 5, where scale one strongly disagrees and scale 5 strongly agrees. The questionnaire is created using Google Forms. Furthermore, the questionnaire was distributed to the WhatsApp group of students in the UT learning group/service center and filled out by students at random.

Data analysis

Data analysis fit in descriptive statistic to measure student perceptions in Selayar Islands Regency in percentages and responses that elicit the highest scores (Puspitasari et al., 2018). These percentages are categorized into Highly Disagree (0–20.00%), Disagree (20,1–40,00%), Hesitate (40,1–60.0%), Agree (60,1–80.0%), and Highly Agree (80,1–100%).

Results

General Description of Selayar Islands Regency

One of the 24 regencies in South Sulawesi, Selayar Islands comprises ±122 islands (excluding the unnamed islands), 11 districts and 88 villages/ urban communities (or *kelurahan*). Traveling to Selayar Islands can take bus routes that cover an area from Makassar (the capital city of South Sulawesi) with a stop at Bulukumba Regency, which takes between 4– and 6–hour trip. In Bulukumba, the travel continues in a ferry that takes around 2 hours in good weather and up to 6 hours in poor weather. The travel takes another bus trip for 1 or two hours to get to Benteng, the capital city of Selayar Islands. Traveling to Selayar Islands may take PELNI ships from Makassar Port straight to Benteng Port for ±10–12 hours in addition to bus. Transportation links between islands may offer wooden-boat services periodically.

Respondent Characteristics

The characteristics of the respondents are presented in the tables below. Table 2 presents the number of respondents in terms of study program and faculty.

Table 2. *The number of respondents according to study program and faculty in Selayar Islands*

Study Program/ Faculty	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Public Administration / Faculty of Law, Social Sciences, & Political Sciences	15	27.78
Law Science/ Faculty of Law, Social Sciences, and Political Sciences	6	11.11
Library Science/ Faculty of Law, Social Sciences, and Political Sciences	4	7.41
Sociology/ Faculty of Law, Social Sciences, and Political Sciences	2	3.70
Development Economics/ Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB)	1	1.85
Management Economics/ FEB	1	1.85
Indonesian Language Education/ Faculty of Teacher Training and Education	2	3.70
English Language Education / Faculty of Teacher Training and Education	1	1.85
Early Childhood Education/ Faculty of Teacher Training and Education	4	7.41
Elementary Teacher Education/ Faculty of Teacher Training and Education	16	29.63
Civic Education/ Faculty of Teacher Training and Education	1	1.85
Information System/ Faculty of Science and Technology	1	1.85
Total	54	100

Table 2, the majority of respondents major in Elementary Teacher Education and Public Administration, i.e., 29.63% and 27.78% respectively. The distribution of respondents in terms of age is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Distribution of Respondents by Age in Selayar Islands Regency*

Age Interval	Frequency	Percentage
15-19	4	7.41
20-24	38	70.37
25-29	8	14.81
30-34	3	5.56
35-39	1	1.85
Total	54	100

Table 3, the bulk of respondents ranges from 20 to 24 years old (70,37%), with the lowest ranging from 35 to 39 years old (1,85%). The characteristics of the respondents in terms of occupation are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *Occupational characteristics of respondents in Selayar Islands Regency*

Occupation	Total	Percentage (%)
Unemployed	27	50
Non-Permanent Civil Servant	20	37.04
Private Employee	2	3.70
Civil Servant	1	1.85
Military/ Police Officer	1	1.85
Entrepreneur	1	1.85
(Blank)	2	3.70
Total	**54**	**100**

Unemployed and non-permanent civil servant make up the majority of the respondents' occupations, i.e., 50% and 37,4% respectively, with civil servant, military or police officer, and entrepreneur accounting for the lowest percentage at 1,85% (one respondent). Data of respondents in terms of educational levels is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. *Distribution of Respondents by Educational Levels in Selayar Islands Regency*

Education	Number	Percentage (%)
Two-Year Associate Degree	1	1.85
Bachelor Degree	1	1.85
High School Degree (SMA/SLTA/ALIAH/SMK)	52	96.30
Total	**54**	**100**

Among 54 respondents, 96.3% has at least earned a high school diploma.

Analysis on Flexibility

Table 6 presents the results of analysis on flexibility based on the perceptions of 54 students in Selayar Islands Regency.

Table 6*. Means and Sums of Flexibility of Universitas Terbuka in Selayar Islands Regency*

Indicator Item	N	Mean	S.D	Sum	Percentage (%)
1. Learning at UT diminishes geographical barriers.	54	4.35	0.555	235	87.03
2. Learning at UT allows students to decide on a suitable learning mode.	54	4.31	0.639	233	86,29
3. Learning at UT diminishes time barriers.	54	4.26	0.589	230	85,18

Table 6 presents a mean ranging from 4,26 to 4,35 with a sum between 230 (85,18%) and 235 (87,03%), indicating that UT students in Selayar Islands Regency are very much in favor of the conception of flexibility in learning at UT, particularly concerning where to study, how to study, and when to study.

Affordability

The results of analysis on the variable of affordability among 54 respondents are presented in Table 7. The mean ranging from 4,35 to 4,39 with a sum between 235 (87,04%) and 237 (87,78%) indicates that student respondents in Selayar Islands are very much in favor of the notion of interactions within learning at Universitas Terbuka (75,1% - 100%).

Table 7. Results of Analysis on Affordability of Universitas Terbuka in Selayar Islands Regency

Indicators	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Sum	Percentage
1. Lower tuition fees	54	4.28	0.712	231	85.56
2. No relocation to a different city	54	4.48	0.720	242	89.63
3. No travel expenses	54	4.41	0.687	238	88.15
4. Complete freedom to decide on a learning service that fit one's financial ability	54	4.35	0.756	235	87.04

The mean ranging from 4,28 to 4,48 with a sum between 231 (85,56%) and 248 (89,63%) indicates that student respondents in Selayar Islands are very much in favor of the notion of affordability of learning at Universitas Terbuka (75,1% - 100%).

Interaction

The results of analysis on the variable of interaction from 54 respondents are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Results of Analysis on the Interaction at Universitas Terbuka in Selayar Island Regency

Indicator	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Sum	Percentage(%)
1. Interactions between students of UT and a course material run well through Learning Management System (LMS-UT)	54	4.35	0.619	235	87.04
2. Tutor-student interactions take place in various learning platforms and social media.	54	4.37	0.592	236	87.41
3. UT provides students with numerous facilities in virtual classroom (LMS), e-learning, and social media.	54	4.39	0.596	237	87.78

Accessibility

The results of analysis on the variable of accessibility from 54 respondents are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Results of Analysis on the Accessibility at Universitas Terbuka in Selayar Island Regency

Indicator	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Sum	Percentage
1. Students can access open-education services with the use of Internet	54	4.44	0.538	240	88.89
2. Students can access online tutoring.	54	4.52	0.540	244	90.37
3. Students can access SUAKA UT.	54	4.31	0.668	233	86.30
4. Students can access online library.	54	4.39	0.596	237	87.78
5. Students can access modules (Buku Materi Pokok) in virtual reading room.	54	4.63	0.487	250	92.59

The mean ranging from 4,31 to 4,52 with a sum between 233 (86,30%) and 250 (92,59%) indicates that student respondents in Selayar Islands are very much in favor of the notion of accessibility of learning at Universitas Terbuka with a minimum score of 86,3% within a range of 75,1% - 100%.

Distance-Learning Skills

The results of analysis on the variable of distance-learning skills from 54 respondents are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Results of Analysis on the Distance-Learning Skills at Universitas Terbuka in Selayar Island Regency

Indicator	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sum	Percentage
1. Students have the capacity to learn in a self-regulated manner at UT.	54	4.35	0.555	235	87.04
2. Students demonstrate digital literacy skills.	54	4.31	0.639	233	86,30
3. Students can manage learning schedules in self-paced environment.	54	4.26	0.589	230	85,18

The mean ranging from 4,26 to 4,35 with a sum between 230 (85,18%) and 250 (87.04,59%) indicates that student respondents in Selayar Islands are very much in favor of the notion of distance-learning skills at Universitas Terbuka with a minimum score of 85,18% within a range of 75,1% - 100%.

Discussion

Flexibility

The analysis of flexibility in ODL among the students in Selayar Islands Regency leads to the perceived outcomes that students no longer need to attend regular lecturers with location restrictions (87,03%) and time barriers (85,16%) at Universitas Terbuka (UT). As one of the appealing factors in ODL, flexibility can be distinguished from several traits. Flexible learning allows students to have complete control to set the learning pace, regulate the learning period, and choose from part-time or full-time commitment. In terms of place, students can complete coursework from the convenience of their homes, at work, or while traveling. In terms of learning modes, UT provides them with full liberty to make decisions about how they learn most effectively (Suryadi, 2020). The similar sense, this conception of anytime-and-anywhere learning is one the central underlying decisions of making ODL happen (Saidi et al., 2021).

Flexibility at Universitas Terbuka supports four options from which students can choose according to their learning pace. Non-Semester Package System, or simply Non-sipas, is offered to part-time students who have other responsibilities associated with family or work. The system allows students to opt for at least one course and a maximum of 24 credit units. On the contrary, full-time students may enroll in SIPAS with its three distinct programs; Non-Face-to-Face SIPAS, SIPAS-Semi, and SIPAS-Plus. The students take courses in one-semester package without on-campus tutoring in Non-Face-to-Face SIPAS. SIPAS-Semi, on the other hand, engages three courses in on-campus tutoring, with the remaining taking place in online tutoring, while SIPAS-Plus includes courses conducted completely online. These learning modes make it easier for students to shape learning pathways according to their levels of financial flexibility. The pace, place, and mode of learning, financial flexibility helps students work through online education (Syafruddin et al., 2024). The abovementioned modes charge different costs tailored to students' individual financial situations.

Affordability

Universitas Terbuka prides itself on one of its mottos "reaching beyond the attainable," which reflects its affordability in terms of school fees, among others. Among 54 respondents, 89,63% is very much in favor of the nonexistent costs associated with commuting or relocating to study (in accordance with statement item 2.3 in Table 3.2). Affordability in ODL domains is thus likely to reduce educational costs for students and institutional costs for ODL institutions. The evidence is similar in a recent study that ODL systems benefit both students and institutions in a financial term (Mehmet, 2020). Cost is of critical importance to education decisions. While tuition fees are the most essential aspect for attending college, educational costs may entail a large spectrum of other expenses for commuting, residential relocation and other expenses that exist when attending education (Hafel et al., 2021). ODL offerings can alleviate even eliminate these expenses, thereby diminishing students' financial pressures by letting them make the most of their current living circumstances.

There is substantial evidence that as education comes at a cost, enhancing affordability in education enables part-time students earn a timely graduation while working, and increases student retention and thus participation rates in higher education (Okano et al., 2023). Other evidence claims that ODL setting is more affordable than on-campus setting as additional expenses, particularly operational costs, are diminished (Masruroh, 2020).

Interaction

Common forms of interactions in ODL domains may include student-material interaction, teacher-student interaction, student-peer interaction, and student-to-technology interaction. The results in Table 3.3 indicate that the interactions with course materials, teachers (or tutors), and peers foster positive feelings among respondents. Student-material interactions take place when students encounter course resources both in print form and on digital platforms at UT. Interactions with course materials in turn are the fundamentals of academic processes (Saidi et al., 2021). The indicators for which academic processes take place are visible in the extent to which students are able to complete one course.

The tutor-student interaction takes place when tutors give direction and students follow them in its basic nature. The interaction can emerge in synchronous and asynchronous settings (Firat et al., 2020). UT provides learning platforms designed to nurture this interaction. The study supports this from a prior observation (Huda et al., 2023). Peer interactions within online-learning community are essential. Results in Table 3.3 indicate that UT students in Selayar Islands Regency stay connected in academic platforms regardless of geographical areas. These interactions may also take place in WhatsApp groups and virtual classrooms within one semester. The students understand the importance of peer communication and work closely with their tutor in WhatsApp groups, particularly those who engage in webinar tutoring and on-site tutoring.

Accessibility

ODL provides students with access to course materials from various resources. Results show that 88,9% of the student respondents in Selayar Islands Regency have a favorable attitude toward Internet-driven learning at UT. The use of Internet has allowed them to access a vast number of UT's information resources and other resources, 90,37% expresses that they can access online tutoring, designed in Moodle platform particularly for students of Non-SIPAS, Non-Face-to-Face SIPAS, and SIPAS-Semi. The important to note that online tutoring contributes to 30% of final scores. 86,3% shows favorable perceptions of the access to Virtual Reading Room (*Ruang Baca* Virtual-RBV), where students can search across large collections of BMPs (course materials) for all courses at UT. They make use of RBV to learn BMPs digitally by logging in with their individual account. This indicates that UT has promoted access to educational services using emerging technologies in a feasible manner. This current viewpoint that ODL systems can create educational services easily accessible by students from a variety of backgrounds. This allows students to learn while taking on other activities associated with work obligations and family commitment at any given time even during holidays.

Distance-Learning Skills

The students at UT-Makassar in general have demonstrated self-regulated learning, digital literacy skills, and time management skills to govern their self-regulated learning. Results ranging from 85,18% to 87% indicate that the students in Selayar Islands Regency have adapted to ODL system successfully. Given its student-centered approach, ODL enables students to navigate toward course materials and various educational resources that fit into the topic of a course. Furthermore, time management becomes critical to self-regulated learning that suits students' individual circumstances to prevent themselves from falling behind. The additional study defines that ODL students are independent and responsible for their own learning trajectories and the completion of their study (Kharis et al., 2024). This shows that the program

"Freedom to Learn" ("Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka") has been carried out long before the government of Indonesia raised the campaign in 2020.

Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion, Universitas Terbuka (UT) has successfully provided inclusive access to higher education for communities in the Selayar Islands, particularly through a flexible, affordable, and accessible distance learning approach. UT has effectively addressed geographical and financial challenges, enabling students to study independently with relevant digital skills. Across the five measured variables—flexibility, affordability, interaction, accessibility, and distance-learning skills—a highly positive perception was recorded, indicating the effectiveness of UT's programs in delivering educational services to remote island communities. This achievement contributes to increasing educational participation in remote regions, supporting equitable access to higher education in underserved areas.

The enhance its impact in remote regions, Universitas Terbuka (UT) should focus on strengthening digital infrastructure, particularly through partnerships with local governments and telecommunication providers to improve connectivity in underserved areas. Maximizing the role of UT's Service Centers, training programs can further equip students with digital and distance learning skills through the Distance Learning Success Support Services (LPKBJJ). Expanding financial aid options, such as flexible tuition, could alleviate economic challenges and increase student enrollment. Additionally, UT can enrich student engagement by providing more interactive learning opportunities, such as webinars and group discussions. Continuous student feedback will allow UT to remain responsive to evolving needs, promoting equitable access to higher education across island communities.

Acknowledgment

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