

THE LEARNER SUPPORT PROGRAMS: HOW DO THEY WORK FOR INCREASING STUDENTS' RETENTION?

Hidayah^{1*}, Siti Hadianti¹, Devi Ayuni²

¹English Education, Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia

²Pariwisata, Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia

e-mail: hidayah77@ecampus.ut.ac.id

Abstract: Universitas Terbuka (UT) in Indonesia is a pioneer in distance learning that offers comprehensive learning support programs to improve student retention. Assignment workshops and exam clinics provide valuable guidance and support to help students overcome academic challenges and achieve their educational goals. Continued investment in these support services is essential for promoting student retention and fostering a positive learning environment. This paper discusses how learner support programs implemented by Universitas Terbuka enhance student retention. These programs include distance learning skill workshops, assignment workshops, and exam clinics, which provide academic assistance and guidance to support students' independent study. This study employs a qualitative research method involving questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The participants were students from the Bachelor of English Education Study Program. The results indicate that learner support programs positively impact student academic success and retention by increasing students' confidence, enhancing their technology literacy skills, and fostering their independence. It can be concluded that learner support programs employed by UT are strategically important for maintaining student satisfaction, supporting student success, and improving retention rates.

Keywords: assignment workshops; exam clinics; Universitas Terbuka; distance learning; student retention



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INTRODUCTION

Online courses offer great advantages for students, including flexibility. Open Distance Learning (ODL) programs have gained acceptability motivated by the quest of the working population to achieve higher qualifications (Pregowska et al., 2021). Universitas Terbuka (UT) has established itself as a leader in distance education by offering a range of comprehensive facilities tailored to meet the needs of its students (Belawati, 2020). As a pioneer, UT has developed various services to support students throughout their academic journey, ensuring they receive the necessary guidance and assistance to succeed.

Among these services are the assignment workshops and exam clinics, which are integral components of UT's learner support programs. These services provide crucial academic support to students, particularly those who may face difficulties in completing assignments or preparing for exams (Jalil et al., 2022). For instance, students who are denied admission to regular state colleges typically matriculate as recent high school graduates at Universitas Terbuka (UT), Indonesia (Zuhairi, 1994). The acceptance of these courses is attributed to advancement in growth in information communication and Technology (ICT), the provision of learner support services responsive to the needs of distance learners, and enhanced optimal learner interactions in distance learning (Shah and Cheng, 2019).

Assignment workshops offer academic guidance, focusing on helping students understand and complete their coursework effectively. These workshops cover topics such as academic integrity, learning tasks, and tutorial participation.

Exam clinics, on the other hand, provide students with strategies to manage exam anxiety and improve exam readiness. These services are available to both new students and those who have progressed beyond their first semester, ensuring continuous support throughout their studies. The goal of these programs is to enhance students' learning experiences, improve their academic performance, and ultimately increase their retention rates.

Assignment Workshop

Workshops are a form of academic service assistance for students in providing understanding and guidance so that they can carry out the learning process and do learning tasks properly (Daryono et al., 2024). The program is designed to instruct and equip students with the capacity to do academic assignments in a guided manner. Students who complete this program are expected to be able to perform academic tasks such as working on tutorial assignments, course assignments, final program assignments, creating practical/practicum reports, searching for various reference sources, and learning how to create scientific paper outlines.

Exam Clinic

Exam clinic is a service provided to all UT students to understand the process of assessing or evaluating learning outcomes at UT whether carried out face-to-face, online, or other modes (Daryono et al. 2024). The exam clinic aims to improve students' readiness to face the exam and provide guidance/counseling to students who face problems in the exam. After participating in the exam clinic activities, students are expected to be able to work on exam questions both in the form of face-to-face exam questions, take home exams and online exams.

The importance of learner support in online and distance education has been widely recognized in the literature. Studies have shown comprehensive support services can significantly impact student retention and success. Distance learning is frequently mediated by networked computers with individualistic interfaces that compel students to work alone for the majority of the learning process, learner support is necessary in distance education (Lee, 2000). The role of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in facilitating Open Distance Learning (ODL) and the need for responsive learner support services to enhance student interactions (Pregowska, 2021). The importance of student support services in online education, noting their positive effect on retention rates (Shah & Cheng, 2019).

A sense of community and structured support is critical for student engagement in online learning environments (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The necessity of personalized support and regular feedback to maintain student motivation (Tait, 2003). Impact of targeted learner support programs on enhancing retention in distance learning (Nurmalitasari et al., 2023). These studies collectively suggest that support services, such as those offered by UT, are essential for promoting student success and retention in distance learning contexts. In the past decade, there has been a 100% increase in student enrollment in online courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Seery et al., 2021).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to assess the effectiveness of the

Learner Support Program at Universitas Terbuka. A qualitative approach allows participants themselves to explain how, why, or what they were thinking, feeling, and experiencing at a particular time or during an event of interest. In this research, data were collected through surveys and in-depth interviews with students and instructors who participated in the Assignment Workshops and Exam Clinics (Tenny et al., 2022).

The surveys measured participants' satisfaction, the perceived usefulness of the support services, and their impact on academic outcomes. Interviews provided deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of the students and instructors regarding the program's effectiveness. Additionally, performance metrics, such as grades and retention rates, were analyzed to determine the impact of the support services on student success.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed a positive correlation between participation in the Learner Support Program and academic success. Students who attended the Assignment Workshops and Exam Clinics reported improved understanding of course materials and better performance in assessments. The support services were particularly beneficial for students facing academic challenges, as they provided tailored guidance and resources.

This result is supported by the research of Shikulo (2018) where the learner support services as administrative, academic and counseling services intends to provide motivational

Table 1. Students' Opinions on Assignment Workshops and Exam Clinics

Aspect	students' opinions	Discussion
Overall Perception	Students found the workshops and clinics highly useful and supportive.	The programs provided essential guidance, reducing anxiety and improving students' confidence in their academic abilities.
Key Materials Covered	Academic ethics, scientific writing, learning strategies, exam preparation, mental health.	These materials helped students understand the importance of academic integrity, develop effective study habits, and prepare thoroughly for assessments.
Impact on Academic Performance	Improved grades and retention rates among participants.	The support programs contributed to better understanding of course content and improved academic outcomes, thereby enhancing retention rates.
Student Confidence	Increased confidence in handling coursework and exams.	The personalized support and availability of resources empowered students to tackle academic challenges more effectively.
Weaknesses Identified	Some materials were not specific to individual needs; variability in instructor effectiveness; scheduling issues.	Tailoring content to student needs and improving instructor training could enhance the effectiveness of the programs. More flexible scheduling is also needed.

support, individual attention, and tutorial classes to students in order to improve their academic achievement.

Respondents highlighted several key aspects of the workshops and clinics that contributed to their success. The focus on academic ethics, learning strategies, and exam preparation was noted as particularly valuable.

Additionally, the programs offered emotional support and motivation, which helped students manage stress and maintain focus on their studies. The availability of experienced instructors and the opportunity to interact with peers were also significant factors in enhancing students' confidence and engagement. Student engagement plays a significant

role in promoting student learning outcomes in the higher education context (Li & Xue, 2023).

Arhin & Wang'eri's (2018) conclusion that orientation significantly influences students' behavioral changes during the academic transition to higher education is consistently consistent with the current finding. Additionally, orientation is regarded as a component of comprehensive and strategic plans for retention of students. A study by Kisimbii et al. (2020) showed that academic support services do have a major impact on learner retention, program managers must address all of these issues in order to strengthen academic support services at the institution.

However, some weaknesses were identified in this research. The material presented in the workshops was sometimes too general and did not always address the specific needs of individual students. Additionally, some respondents noted that not all instructors were equally effective in their teaching approach, with some being less communicative. The organization of the workshops also posed challenges, as schedules did not always align with students' availability.

Maijo (2018) has stated that the most vital challenges the institutions had to encounter are; deficient study materials, higher level of cognitive demand in new programs and thus a wide range of academic support needs, unclear learner support services guidelines, learners' dropout rate, and incompetent facilitators.

CONCLUSION

The Learner Support Program at Universitas Terbuka plays a crucial role in enhancing student retention and

academic success in a distance learning environment. The Assignment Workshops and Exam Clinics provide essential support to students, helping them navigate academic challenges and achieve their educational goals. The study's findings affirm the program's importance in fostering a supportive learning environment that promotes student engagement and success (Crosling et al., 2020).

For instance, in all parts of the UK, institutions' progression and completion rates are measured via two performance indicators by the Higher Education Funding Council, and institutions are penalized financially for low rates of student retention. Continued investment in these support mechanisms is essential for maintaining high student retention rates and fostering a positive academic experience. By prioritizing learner support, Universitas Terbuka can strengthen its commitment to excellence in distance education and better serve its diverse student population.

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