Abstract

One of the issues faced by distance education universities, similar to what happens in conventional universities, is that the number of non-completers is quite high. Triggered by the question of why some students are successful, i.e., as high achievers or completers, while others are not, the purpose of this study was to explore what are the personal, academic, psychological, social, and institutional factors that might contribute to student success. The participants in this study were former students of Universitas Terbuka (Indonesia Open University) consisting of the successful students (high achievers and completers) and the non-completers. Using a mixed method approach, data were collected from 835 students through an online survey comprising 44 closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions. The quantitative items were analyzed using Chi-square analysis and 120 comments from one open-ended question were randomly selected for thematic analysis. The results of the comparison between successful students and non-completers showed that 28 of the 44 variables were statistically significant, but only 12 were also considered as educationally significant. Therefore these were considered as the key factors related to student completion, i.e., family support, time management, confidence in completing, academic expectation, intent to withdraw, enjoyment of the study, benefit of contact with UT, f2f tutorial frequency, tutorial contact, attended online tutorial regularly, the program structure, and institutional care. In the comparison of high achievers and completers, eight of the 44 variables were statistically significant but only three were considered as educationally significant. The three variables that appeared to contribute to high achievement were family income, academic expectation, and f2f tutorial frequency. The results of the qualitative analysis were consistent with the qualitative results. The findings of this study suggest that distance education universities such as UT need to better understand their students as distance learners from a student success perspective. Two suggestions that might increase their probability of student success in a distance education system are the creation and distribution of a distance learners’ guidebook and the development of a philosophy and policy of institutional total care for its students.

Keywords: distance education; student success; completion; dropout; Indonesian Open University; Universitas Terbuka