"THE TEACHER IS ALWAYS THERE, BUT ISN'T...". DISTANCE LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES ON DISTANCE LEARNING AT UNIVERSITI UTARA MALAYSIA

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With love and affection to my dearest wife, **Azilah Kassim** and my three lovely children, **Nur Amelia Hanah**, **Afiq Danial** and **Arif Hakeem** who have always been supportive and loving towards me. I would also like to specially dedicate this thesis to my mother-in-law and sister-in-law who passed away within a year last year and were not able to witness the completion of my study here in the UK

Go to the people
Live among them
Learn from them
Love them
Start with what they know
Build with what they have

But with the best leaders (read: teachers)
When their task is accomplished
Their work is done
The people all remark
We have done it ourselves

Adapted from Rogers, 2002:p.282

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the learning experience of distance learners (DLs) at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) through a detailed study of a small group of students as they progress through a course in Business Studies. The study aims to generate insights into how DLs at UUM study in particular ways. This knowledge, derived from the students, is *individual*, *detailed* and *contextual*. Finding out about the circumstances under which UUM DLs study, the practicalities of studying and getting into the mind frame of learners, all raise important methodological issues. This research is based on the following three epistemological perspectives adapted from Segall (1998):1) *Metaphysical*: What is the story? – exploring how DLs understand causality, intention, existence and truth in relation to their distance learning; 2) *Historical* - understanding of learning barriers and challenges. Who or what causes the learning barriers that DLs face in their pursue of distance education?; 3) *Pedagogical* – How can this study help UUM to improve the educational experience of distance learning at UUM?; How can the institution make changes to existing ·distance learning courses and programmes, and assist learners in their endeavours on the basis of the knowledge generated from this study? *Learning support* and *interactions* are two primary themes that surfaced in the research findings. The two are central to the success of any distance learning programme. Often overlooked, insufficient student support services and low interactions between the DLs with distance teachers, with other learners, and with content can directly impact on prospective and current DLs at Universiti Utara Malaysia. This study shows that it is important that learning support for distance learning be student-centred, and it is critical that current learning support for UUM distance learning programmes be reviewed with the distance learners in mind. It may be helpful to work through the steps that DLs must take to re-learn the learning skills at a distance, enrol for, participate in and successfully complete a distance learning course.

ABBREVIATIONS

BET	Best Estimates of Trustworthiness
DE	Distance Education
DLs	Distance Learners
DTs	Distance Teachers
f2f	Face to face
HE	Higher Education
JPA	Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam (Public Service Department)
ICT	Information Communication Technology
KBSR	Kurrikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah (Primary School New Curriculum)
KBSM	Kurrikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah (Secondary School New Curriculum)
LCE	Lower Certificate of Examination
MCE	Malaysian Certificate of Education
MSC	Multimedia Super Corridor
NEP	National Education Philosophy
NITA	The National IT Agenda
UiTM	Universiti Institut Teknologi Malaysia
UK	United Kingdom
UKOU	United Kingdom Open University
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia
UUM	Universiti Utara Malaysia
PACE	Centre for Professional and Continuing Education
PJJ	Pengajian Jarak Jauh (Distance Learning)
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
WHO	World Health Organisation

CHAPTER 1
STUDY INTRODUCTION

WHY STUDY DISTANCE LEARNING?

It has become increasingly difficult to read any commentary or report, or attend a conference on Open Distance Learning (ODL) without some reference being made to the enormous changes that DE providers and institutions all over the world are facing. At the *2ⁿᵈ Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning Conference* in Durban, South Africa (2002), the *10th Cambridge International Conference on ODL*(2003), and most recently the *21ˢᵗ ICDL conference* in Hong Kong (2004) a common theme was the future of open and distance learning and the intensity of the changes taking place within ODL institutions all over the world.

Most of these changes are based on the increasing availability and sophistication of ICTs and the way in which these technologies are impacting upon the delivery of distance educational programmes (Lockwood & Gooley, 2001; Murphy et al. 2001; Simpson, 2002). It is argued that, the distinctions between DE and campus based teaching are blurring (King, 2003) with "the potential to remove any claim to distinctive delivery by open and DE practitioners" (King, 2001: p.47). In the near future, many commentators predict, 'distance delivery' will become integral with on campus teaching.

Associated with convergence is what can best be described as the *commodification* of higher education (Kenworthy, 2001), as a *tradable commodity* (Dearing Report, 1997), or as Tait (2000) puts it, *the marketisation of education*. Programmes and courses are increasingly becoming a commodity and are organised, packed and sold to prospective learners. The learners are now commonly referred to as *clients* or *customers*. This precisely describes many Malaysian DE institutions' view of their DE component and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) is no exception. Since it is a

management based institution, and an institution accredited with the ISO certification, the learners are of importance value to the institution. They are seen not so much as 'students' but as the most valued customers of the institution!

DE has the potential to provide access to higher education for all prospective students in Malaysia, promoting equality in educational teaching and learning regardless of geographical barriers and so improving educational standards. Today, there is a proliferation of distance education courses and programmes at the university level in Malaysia. Higher Education institutions (public and private institutions) are continuing to pour human and monetary resources into the further development of distance education. As more and more students enrol in distance education courses, institutions, like UUM, find that learners with different backgrounds begin to take advantage of new learning opportunities. The consequent diversity of DLs requires serious attention. More understanding is needed of distance learning, and those DLs who pursue an educational experience that differs from the conventional mode of learning. Such understanding is generally lacking in the distance education (DE) literature and particularly lacking in the Malaysian context of educational research. For UUM, which is a dual mode institution, there is a significant need for more research-based information as the university faces the need for change.

As DE has become a popular global instructional delivery mode, many researchers have turned to investigate distance instructional design and delivery. This was emphasis, perhaps, a response to the need to plan, design and deliver distance courses. The emphasis in much of the research has been on instructional considerations (Bates, 1995; Berge & Mrozowski, 2001; Entwistle and Marton, 1984; Hara and Kling, 1999; Harasim et.al, 1995; Hawkridge, 1995; Lauzon, 2000; Marland, 1989; Mena et al. 2004). Entwistle and Marton, (1984: p.223) for example, have identified the substantial gap between the situations investigated by researchers and those faced by teachers and students. The field of DE, they acknowledge, is one in which this gap is quite wide, despite the impressive record of Open University (OU) researchers whose work with DLs is corroborative of much that has been

reported about the learning of tertiary students in conventional educational settings. As Baath (1982: p.13) pointed out, '...on the whole there is severe lack of scientifically validated knowledge, and someone would perform a very great service to carry out a research study on the learning strategies of distance students.'

In short, the emphasis on structure and delivery has not been matched by an emphasis on learning. The students' experience is under represented. Berge & Mrozowski, (2001) examined ten years (1990-1999) of dissertations and journal articles from four distance education journals. They reported that of 1,419 publications, 890 described research studies. They classified the research articles into ten different content themes. 31% of the articles addressed content themes regarding learners. Of these, 17% of the articles addressed learner characteristics, 8% redefining the roles of key participants, and 6% learner support. The authors did not specify whether these articles incorporated the perspective of the students, although the labels of the content themes would suggest otherwise. The knowledge base on students' experience in distance learning is limited at best and what we do not know about distance learning exceeds what we do know about it.

THE FORGOTTEN STAKEHOLDERS IN DE RESEARCH

After reading widely in the research literature on DE, I feel that there is a serious lack of attention to the students' voices. This is true of DE research in many countries in the world, but particularly so in Malaysia; where I feel that the DLs have not gained respect as vital stakeholders in DE. DLs should be acknowledged and respected not only because they make choices, but also because they have the capacity to contribute to the future improvement of DE courses and programmes. For instance Nieto (1994:p.396) claims that "...research that focuses on the student voice is relatively recent and scarce," and further points out that students' perspectives are for the most part missing in discussions concerning strategies for confronting educational problems. This view is echoed by Suzanne Soo Hoo (1993:p.392) who says,

"Traditionally, students have been overlooked as valuable resources..." Although Hoo makes this claim in the context of schools, it is also relevant to DE in Malaysia. DLs do not seem to be considered as individuals who can play a role, have their own values, ideas and beliefs who can form productive relationships with other significant stakeholders in DE, and ultimately contribute to DE improvement.

The parallels between the neglect of students' voices in schools and students' voices in DE can be extended. For example, Schostak's (1991:p.9) assertion that the conception of educational problems: 'is defined through adult expectations about how children should behave' is pertinent to the field of DE. It has always been the course instructor, course designers, DE administrators who make the decisions; not the students. Schostak's assertion is substantiated by Rudduck et al. (1996:p.4) when they say that 'students are the ultimate beneficiaries, but they do not feature or play any part in constructing, improving or determining a strategy to monitor its appropriateness.'

If DE is about educating students; and if courses and programmes are developed for them, why do we not ask DLs about their learning, their experiences and take account of their perspectives in DE, and why aren't they (the DLs) asked to help improve the DE courses and programmes? It seems irrational that DLs, who are at the heart of the DE process, are not much consulted about the *pull* and *push factors* in their distance learning experiences. As Morrow and Richards (1996:p.91) suggest, '...there has been a growing recognition that children (insert Distance Learners) views and perspectives can and should be elicited on a range of issues that affect them'.

In this thesis, I make the assumption that DLs possess knowledge of the educational experience that cannot be fully known to DE administrators, distance teachers, course designers, or policy makers, as they play very different roles within the system.

Increased access to educational opportunities is not sufficient if the students' experiences are not meaningful (Willis, 1993). Some educators mistakenly assume

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either that student needs are self evident, that adult learners are self-motivated, or that decisions can be made without a clear understanding of the needs and constraints faced by the DLs. Many of those who administer and devise distance programmes have not themselves been DLs.

In a distance setting, the process of learning may be even more complex than in conventional 'face to face' (f2f) classes. Opening the classroom door to include DLs invites into the class a wider range of interaction, motivations, learning strategies, and educational histories, and often this complexity is only partially visible to the instructors. One account that Rob Walker shared with me on an email:

> ...once, one of the Deakin students wrote to me and said she had done her whole degree sitting in the car down a deserted road. Her husband was a farmer and thought she shouldn't study as any money she had should go into the farm. She had done her whole course in secret and hadn't told anyone...This is an extreme case but it made me realise how easy it is to make assumptions about students that may not apply.

ARE DLS AND CONVENTIONAL STUDENTS SIMILAR?

The development of any educational system according to Powell et al. (in Tait and Mills, 1999: p.89) presupposes some conception of the type of students to be served and their educational needs, which they call the 'student archetype.' Every learner is unique, and there may be similarities or differences among them. Nonetheless, in the Malaysian context of educational system, the two groups of learners: *the conventional-campus based learners* and *distance learners* are commonly viewed as different. Table 1 adapted from Powell et al. (in Tait and Mills, 1999: p.90) provides a good description of the differences between conventional students and distance students.

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Table 1: Differences between Conventional and Distance Learners

Characteristic	Conventional	Distance Learners
Age	17 years to 24	24 years and older
Professional Career Development	Little experience	Mostly working and often in professional life.
Life roles	Full time student	Being a student is one of several competing life roles.
Prior learning	Primary to secondary education only	A variety of formal, non formal and experiental learning and training
Need for credentials	Important as paper qualification is highly valued in the Malaysian educational system	May be required, but not important
Time and Place for study	Full time on campus	Constrained by locations, competing job, family and community obligations
Financial Support	Largely public	Largely private, own savings, or loans from financial institutions

Adapted from Powell et. al (in Tait and Mills, 1999: p.90)

Every distance learner brings with him or her a different profile, which may be similar or different from other DLs. Holmberg (1995) says that there is "no evidence to indicate that DLs should be regarded as a homogeneous group. Nevertheless Gibson (1998:p.10) points out "…distance students do share broad demographic and situational similarities that have often provided the basis for profiles of the "typical" distance learner in higher education." Every distance learner is in certain respects like all other DLs; like some other DLs or like no other DLs. The default position is to treat them as similar when perhaps we should consider them as heterogeneous. The various 'baggage' that these learners bring, their perceptions of the learning experience, and the coping and adaptive processes they develop must be addressed to gain an understanding of how better to meet their diverse needs.

The provision of DE requires considerable planning, effective student and administrative support systems (Bates, 2004; Gibson, 1998; Gourley, 2004;

Lockwood, 1995). In summary, there are many different distance learning issues and questions that need research attention:

1. What should distance education providers know about the distance learner populations for whom they design programmes and courses?

2. What assumptions have distance learning providers made about DLs on which they have based the teaching? How strong are these assumptions? What would be the consequences of changing them?

3. Do the DE teachers, educators, administrators, course designers, technicians, and others know enough about the DLs to provide better and effective opportunities for distance learning?

4. What information about DLs do DE academics need in order to be effective course designers and instructors of distance materials? How can they obtain such information?

Often, it seems, distance course designers begin with the curriculum, neglecting the needs of the DLs except when a remedial effort is needed. Nevertheless, it is imperative that distance learning institutions/providers and instructors continuously reflect on their contribution as DE providers even though it is likely to be true that having a better understanding of the students will make the tasks of course design and teaching more difficult rather than easier.

RESEARCH & PRACTICE IN DISTANCE LEARNING

While there are significant questions in DE that remain un-researched, it seems that educational research in general, is not highly valued by educational practitioners. Despite the important educational role played by DE envisaged by the Malaysian government, research has been relatively neglected. Similarly, in Western countries for example, research on DE did not start until the end of the Second World War and published research monographs are a phenomenon of the 1960s (Holmberg, 1987). In 1960, the first monograph (Holmberg, 1960) and the first bibliography (Childs, 1960) of DE came into existence. As noted by Holmberg (1990):

Like most educational research, studies of distance education were from the beginning based on inquisitiveness generally and on practical requirements implying, among other things, a desire to know as a result of feelings of social and educational responsibility among practitioners. During the 1970s and 1980s, when distance education research seems to have come of age, it is from the distance teaching organisations that most research studies emanate..."
(p.18)

A large part of the problem can be attributed to the fact that researchers, academics and those administrators, teachers and others involved in the DE educational enterprise were too busy establishing programmes to have time for research. Tanner (1998) however, reminds us that educational research should be focused on the mission of enhancing educational opportunities and outcomes:

...much that is taken for social research serves no social purpose other than to embellish reputations in the citadels of academe and sometimes to even undermine the democratic public interest...Early in this century, John Dewey warned that educational practices must be the source of the ultimate problems to be investigated if we are to build a science of education. We may draw from the behavioural sciences, but the behavioural sciences do not define the educational problems. The faculties of the professional schools draw on the basic sciences, but their mandate is mission-oriented, not disciplined centred
(pp.348-349)

The lack of research in DE, especially in Malaysia, might be explained by various factors - limited funding for DE research in Malaysia, and possible difficulties in pursuing research for distance teachers and educators due to time constraints, the low status of DE research, lack of opportunities for publishing and the lack of a research infrastructure dedicated to DE. As Perraton (1997: p.13) writes, most open and distance learning institutions are too busy running programmes to have time for research, and many faculties of education are too busy researching conventional education to be able to undertake research on open and DE.

Research in DE institutions is not just important for practical reasons but a necessary element of what it means to be a university. Teaching in universities should have a basis in research, and in DE universities, this research base should include DE research as a key element.

Research and development (R&D) is extremely important for DE institutions like UUM, in improving the educational experience it offers, as well as improving the institution's reputation. According to Koul (1993) the single most important reason to emphasise research and development in DE is that distance education institutions look up to conventional universities as standards for acceptable norms, credibility and role models. If conventional universities have long neglected systematic R & D activities, why is it obligatory for DE institutions? Having come from conventional institutions like UUM, the staff of DE: academic, non-academic and technical, remain predisposed not to raise this question. Contrary to this attitude, Koul (1993:p.8) says, "It needs to be emphasised that the question has to be raised, and answered." In addition, Koul points out that institutions' performance is adjudged or measured by the quantity and quality of their teaching, research and research training. DE institutions and providers need to take the issue of research seriously if they wish to be at the forefront of higher education nationally and internationally, and if they wish to be seen as universities.

A normal starting point for research is a vigorous theoretical and methodological literature and there is an unfortunate dearth of theoretical and methodological literature on DE research. This is a common criticism of DE publishing (Perraton, 1988: Berge & Mrozowski, 2001). Garrison (2000) explains:

> Theoretical inquiry is central to the vitality and development of a field of practice. The theoretical foundations of a field describe and inform the practice and provide the primary means to guide future developments. The power of ideas, as represented in our theories, influences practice directly by focusing perspective, revealing knowledge, and suggesting alternatives. Since ideas and ideals shape distance education practice, attention and effort must be devoted to the development of coherent, rigorous and valid theory (p.3).

Therefore, it is an urgent task for DE institutions all over the world, and particularly for UUM and other DE institutions in Malaysia, to establish and develop a DE research culture in all areas and aspects of DE. In developing a DE literature, it is important to incorporate *ALL* stakeholders in DE. No one should be left out! This thesis advocates that understanding DLs, their experiences of distance courses, the learning obstacles that they face, and their coping strategies will lead to future

improvement to distance educational administration, and educational experience for students and teachers alike and will give the DE literature a distinctive character and issues. The challenge is to develop forms of research that incorporate the interests and voices of all.

As well as engaging DLs, DE providers need to make more effort to understand the distance learning process. They have to continuously reflect, and evaluate what has been delivered to the learners; the existing learner support systems; and all relevant components and issues of distance learning. In short, DE providers and institutions have to gather a wide range of information from their main *clients* (the distance learners). Although it has been almost a norm to determine *success* and *failure* of mainstream education in Malaysia by looking at success rate and achievement scores (passes and failures) in national examinations, these are not sufficient in providing information about the DLs. We know that academic achievement is associated with many social and cultural factors and DLs represent a different segment of the student population with very different learning circumstances as compared to the full-time, campus-based learners. 'Success' is important to all, but for DE students, it may have meanings that are very different from those of younger students.

In many respects DLs know best about distance learning, the processes involved, the learning activities and learning factors that enhance and deter learning, and can provide ways and suggestions to improve the DE educational experiences in the future. To understand DLs, their perspective and experiences on distance learning is a big task but the value of such knowledge has educational consequences. This study assumes that all DE providers need to establish the following knowledge and information in order to understand their clients better and improve the distance learning experiences:

1. Knowledge of DLs' attitudes to undertaking study, to various study approaches, to their work, and to career development.

2. Knowledge of educational backgrounds of DLs in relation to their previous study experiences, literacy, etc.

3. Knowledge of what motivates them- reasons for learning, work-study links, benefits of learning.

4. Knowledge of learning factors-skills, styles conceptions of learning, experiences of distance learning.

5. Knowledge of what interests them at work and at leisure.

6. Knowledge of subject background-prior learning and experiences in the subject area and attitudes towards the subject.

7. Knowledge of resource factors-contexts for study, time for study, and means of access to resources and to support and other relevant knowledge.

8. Knowledge of progress and potential: of how students might develop, mature and progress.

Finally, such evaluation or assessment is important to provide information relevant to the adjustment of the roles and DE operation, and in order to secure their optimal contribution and development. The success of any DE institution, "...dual or single mode is highly dependent on the efficiency and effectiveness of the monitoring and evaluation system, without which it may be impossible for DE administrators to be aware of problems in the system..." UNESCO (2002: p.28). As a researcher, I believe that only when DE providers understand the learners better will these institutions have better insights and strategies as to how to improve and sustain viable and effective DE courses and programmes. Only when changes are made incorporating contributions from all DE stakeholders including the DLs will they (the DE institutions) be successful as DE providers. Lacking such understanding will only impede future improvement. The motivation and commitment to help UUM understand the DLs and distance learning at the institution, and to negotiate for future changes and improvement to DE courses and programmes by extending the learners' voice was the *primary motivation* for this study.

PERSONAL RESEARCH DISCOURSE

Developing a clear sense of the purposes (i.e. motives, desires and goals) for this research was a vital step. Without it "...you are apt to lose your way or to spend your time and effort doing things that won't contribute to your goals in conducting the research (Maxwell, 1996: p.14)". Some goals can be set in advance; others emerge as the research progresses. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) suggest that researchers should examine and articulate their own perspectives, logic and assumptions through self-reflection.

Being clear about purposes has two important roles. First, it guides different research design decisions and ensures that the research runs smoothly; and second, being clear about the purpose helps to justify the study.

Having said that, there are two research purposes for pursuing this study. One is embedded in a *personal* discourse and the other in a *research* discourse. Semantically, the word *personal* here refers to the reasons that *motivate me* to pursue this study; and the *research discourse* on the other hand refers to the public act of understanding DLs – to gain a 'thick' understanding into what goes on and the activities that enhance or deter distance learning at UUM. Understanding these two purposes is important. Maxwell (1996:p15) claims that "...your personal motives as a researcher have important consequences for the validity of your conclusions. If your design decisions and data analyses are based on personal desires without a careful assessment of the implications of these for your methods and conclusions, you are in danger of creating a flawed study." In addition, Marshall & Rossman (1995) say that recognising your personal ties to the study you want to conduct can provide you with a valuable source of insight, theory and data about the phenomenon you are studying. Therefore, recognising the personal purpose for this study was a very important step, and *Why pursue this research? and for what purpose?* received my greatest attention at the first stage of this study.

Personal Involvement

My curiosity about distance education goes back to 1996, when distance programmes were aggressively developed in Malaysia, and particularly during the period between 1996 to 1999 when distance education programmes and courses were introduced and implemented at UUM. Various factors made me seriously interested in DE. One in particular was with my own curiosity about how distance learning takes place in the Malaysian context. Given that a *teacher-centred paradigm* is the predominant educational experience for many of the DLs during 12 years of Malaysian mainstream education, how do they cope with distance learning, given that the nature and practice of DE is very different? *Being a heterogeneous, group of adults with many other responsibilities, how do they do it? Can they cope with the expectations and challenges of DE given the very different nature of their previous educational experience? Can they be independent and self directed?*

As time progressed, my curiosity about distance learning and the students gained more momentum. Partly this was due to the complaints that my colleagues and other distance teachers made about the performance of DLs at UUM. They clearly saw DLs as generally inferior students and their complaints were about students' motivation; students' interest in the subjects they registered for; students' commitment and attitudes towards learning. The magnitude of this concern built up over time. This led me to think about how DLs at UUM survived their learning. *How do they learn? What are the challenges of distance learning?, How do they cope with these challenges? How do they cope with the transitional process? – the change from the traditional method of education (face to face meeting) to a distance learning mode? or the transition of coming back to pursuing education after being away from an educational setting or environment for many years?*

These questions were those I had when I first started thinking about my PhD research. The issues were more complex than it might seem at first. There were many

'points of viewing'[1] as to what constituted distance learning (DL) and what the process involved. My meetings with different DE stakeholders at UUM when I first returned to Malaysia in October 2001 seemed to suggest that there are many different of points of viewing on distance learning issues and problems. These issues seemed at first only practical, but quickly became theoretical. Different points of viewing of DLs and their learning endeavours may or may not hold any truth, until validated by research. The complaints and observations that my colleagues and other distance teachers had were based on their experience. Such *knowledge* needs attention and validation. Segall (1998: 6-7) writes that *knowledge* is formed from "... deconstructions, reconstructions, and co-constructions that emerge as a result of the interaction between what is already known and what is yet to be known again in new form."

Comparisons

In May semester 1999, the complaints that I had heard over and over again during the previous one and the half years found their way into discussions with my wife, who was then involved in teaching a first year marketing course to DLs. *"What is it with the DLs? Why don't they complete their assignments on time?, Some of them did the assignments half way, Are they not competent enough?...".*

For a lecturer, it seems natural to compare DLs with traditional face to face learners especially as UUM is a dual mode provider and fairly new DE provider. The lack of DE training, i.e. methodological, pedagogical, etc. and understanding of DLs, have led many distance teachers to compare DLs with the campus based learners.

I believe such comparison is wrong and misplaced. I have always looked at distance learning as a 'a different ball game', a game so different that one needs to know the

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[1] *Points of viewing* a term Segall (1998) describes as "focus on the multitude of points from which we view both the world around us and the world within us. The notion of point of viewing encompasses where we are located in time and space, as well as how our combination of gender identities, classes, races, and cultures situates our understanding of what we see and what we validate." (pg.3-4)

rules, the requirements and the skills needed to survive and complete the distance learning task. Distance learning is about being independent, able to self direct one's own learning, able to search for information and learn through discovery and inquiry learning, and working collaboratively with fellow learners, tutors, and instructors. It is about the learning process and activities. It is this assumption that this study seeks to test. Therefore, the immediate task that this research had was to make meanings out of the DLs' experiences and perspectives on distance learning and try to

> ...make sense of what we know. The investigator dismantles and reassembles conventional and common sense meanings, altering the balance between what seems strange and what is familiar, striving to find new ways of looking at the world. (Walker, 1998:p.224)

According to Stake, (1995:p.77) "...each researcher needs, through experience, and reflection, to find the forms of analysis that work for him." Ultimately, searching for the truth on the challenges and experience of what DLs at UUM encountered and their ways of adapting to and coping with the barriers they have in distance learning is vital to improving distance courses and programmes at UUM in the future.

In summary, my personal project is to pursue my belief in and passion for DE and to negotiate changes to improve UUM DE programmes based on the learners' perspectives and experiences. Specifically, I want to understand the DLs and the learning processes they go through in DE and together, and to bring changes that will improve DE at UUM in the coming years.

REVISITING THE QUESTION OF: WHY STUDY THE VIEWS OF DISTANCE LEARNERS?

As concern for accountability in higher education in Malaysia continues to increase, institutions across the nation are increasingly under pressure to document the outcomes of the educational programme they offer. Although the goals, strategies, and ideals of Malaysian DE educational system are positive, and the focus on DE at the highest levels of HE is supportive, there are still many DE issues that need

addressing. Nationally for example, large numbers of DLs enrolled in Malaysian DE institutions are not able to cope with the expectations of distance learning and drop out, and we have been unable to solve this perplexing problem. In an interview with Rozhan Mohamed Idrus, Chief Editor of *Malaysian Journal of Distance Education*, he says that DLs failure to cope with the expectations of distance learning:

> *...is a serious problem. It is a common problem in many DE institutions in Malaysia, even at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) which historically is the oldest ODL institution. We have to make the learners better understand the concept of distance learning and its expectation, and our expectation towards them as learners. At USM, to educate or better prepare the learners we make it compulsory for them to enrol in an introductory course on ODL. That I think helps, but more is needed to better prepare and change the learners, and I think your research is pertinent, needed and different, and maybe understanding the problem from the learners' point of view or perspective can help us to improve their educational experience...*

(RMI/Oct 2001/USM)

There have been few attempts to understand DLs' experiences 'in their own terms' and taking students' own words at face value; although students are the primary source of knowledge about their experiences, their voices have rarely been heard and their opinions rarely sought out.

This study attempts to contribute to the discussion of distance learning from learning by exploring the dynamics of interactions between the learners, their DE courses and programmes through their own voices. This study was not an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the UUM DE courses and programmes, but rather focused on understanding the DLs' views and experiences in the context of the UUM DE environment. The ultimate hope was that the information gained would help to create a greater understanding of the meaning of 'distance learning' at UUM and so improve distance educational experiences for the DLs population, whose numbers are increasing and growing larger every year.

Knowledge of DLs educational experiences is limited due to many different factors. One possible factor is the lack of interaction between distance teachers and the learners, and between the learners themselves. The DLs rarely discuss their

educational experiences with their respective teachers. The distance teachers quite often would not know of any DLs who were having learning difficulties, unless the learner approached the teacher and asked for help. In summary, the distance learning experience is often one of isolation, lack of contact with peers, with the student body as a whole, and with the university itself.

I believe that if the distance teachers and educators knew a lot more about their students and were aware of their circumstances, they might act more empathetically towards any possible problems encountered by their students.

BRINGING TOGETHER PERSONAL & RESEARCH AGENDAS

I have explained how my own experiences of DE led me to see the need for a better-developed research agenda. My personal concerns are, however, not just a motivating factor but have implications for methodology. The questions I had about the quality of the distance learning experience are not questions that can be readily answered with a survey. They are questions that call for a qualitative approach since they require an understanding and interpretation of the distance learning experience that goes beyond that captured by responses to questionnaire items. Survey data, where it is available, provides a context but it cannot in itself answer the questions I have raised in this chapter.

Redefining the Project

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 study sought to explore and offer an understanding of DLs' perceptions of their educational experiences in distance learning. This study tried to construct a

rich and detailed account of the wide range of factors that might 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 DE 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 viewing, not from 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 necessary and essential for the institution to gain an understanding of the DLs with which we are dealing - an understanding that goes beyond attendance records, and academic achievements (see Farrel, Peuguero, Lindley, & White, 1988).

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 perceives and experience distance learning at UUM. Such understanding will enhance our knowledge of how to go about designing and implementing effective future DE programme and services for DLs in the future.

CONSIDERATIONS IN PLANNING THE RESEARCH

Merriam (1998) seems to be only partly joking when she says "Planning a research project can be compared to planning a vacation trip..."(p.4). There are many research aspects that need to be looked at before one can start on a research. Even in a practical project like this, there are fundamental issues to be considered. *What do I*

believe about the nature of reality? About knowledge and about the production of knowledge? "Research is, after all, producing knowledge about the world" (Merriam, 1998:p.4). Describing, thinking and reflecting on these questions were initial tasks that I had to consider. This was certainly not an easy task. Basically, I had to consider all factors and continuously reflect on all the research components and decisions made in my research proposal.

A good research design according to Maxwell (1996: p.2) "... is one in which the components work harmoniously together, promotes efficient and successful functioning; a flawed design leads to poor operation and failure". Therefore, understanding of the logic (different components of this research) and coherence for this study (referring to the ways in which these components relates to one another) was important before developing a full research proposal-one that communicates and justifies the research design. The two tasks were equally important and had to be supportive of each other.

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. This study seeks an understanding or conceptual framework for understanding the distance learning from the learners' perspective; DLs' development as learners; the content of learning or learning outcomes; and DLs' experiences of course design and assessment. Specifically, the research objectives of this study are as follows:

1. to characterise the nature and content of DLs' learning in some detail. Specifically, this study is an effort to understand the *meaning* for the DLs at UUM of the events, situations and actions they are involved with and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences. The operational definition of the word 'meaning' used in this study primarily refers to DLs' perspectives on events and actions they undergo as DLs. In addition, the word

'meaning' also includes thinking (cognition), intentions and anything that is related to the DLs. In this study, understanding how the DLs make sense of their leaning process and how their understandings influence their behaviour is imperative. This focus on meaning according to Bredo & Fienberg (1982), is a vital element in what is known as the "interpretative" approach to social science.

2. to develop an understanding of the barriers, the challenges that DLs encounter, and the ways they cope with these problems. This study seeks to understand the particular context within which the DLs act, and the influence that this context has on their actions. Given the fact that this study is a case study of DLs at UUM focusing on a relatively small number of DLs informants, this study is able to preserve the individuality of the DLs. Therefore, the DLs involved in this study would be able to understand how events, actions and meanings are shaped by the unique circumstances in which they occur. The heterogeneous nature of DLs calls for such an understanding, and the research approach of this study gives a better understanding of the barriers and challenges they face, and coping approaches that DLs at UUM employed in order to survive the DL process.

3. to understand the distance learning process. Understanding the process by which distance learning events and actions take place is equally important. The interest according to Merriam (1988) is in the process rather than outcomes. Getting at the processes that DLs undergo in distance learning is important to understand the DLs, the learning barriers, challenges, and the approaches they employ to survive the learning process.

4. to demonstrate principles through which distance learning can be empowered and guided by micro and macro environment surrounding them and their lives. This study intends to make suggestions and improvements for the DE programme at UUM based on DLs input and perspective on their distance

learning experiences. The DLs are, after all, important and valid stakeholders in the DE programme at UUM. They are 'agents of change' for future improvement of DE at the institution. DLs are the most practical agents to forward and suggest changes and ideas to improve DE at UUM.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Miles & Huberman (1994) have noted that research questions are intended to explain the study that one is engaging with. Specifically, the research questions in this study played two important functions: *1.* to help focus on the study, and *2.* to provide some guidance on how to conduct the study. 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 during my scoping process (the first phase of my fieldwork, which occurred in October 2001). These questions were particularly important because they framed this research in an important way. The research questions, for example, had an impact and influenced my decisions about the methodology and approaches to be undertaken. The questions further helped me to focus and develop more specific questions to generate a meaningful interpretative understanding of distance learning.

The research questions were continuously revised and improvised to function as interpretative type of questions which according to Maxwell (1996:pp.59-60) "...ask about the meaning of these for the people involved: their thoughts, feelings..." The process of thinking and reflecting on the research questions was certainly not an easy task for this study, as pointed by Light et al. (1990:p.19): "Do not expect to sit down for an hour and produce an elaborate list of specific questions. ...Expect to iterate. A good set of research questions will evolve, over time, after you have considered and reconsidered your broad research theme.... Be wary of the desire to push forward before going through this process."

Following are the research questions developed for this study:

1. How do the DLs perceive and experience the distance learning programmes and courses at UUM?

2. What is the meaning of distance learning for the DLs?

3. What are the contributing factors that facilitate or deter distance learning at UUM?

4. How do the DLs cope with the challenges being a distance learner at UUM?

Generating the research questions was challenging. I had to continuously reflect on my thoughts and refine them from time to time, and this process is illustrated in Diagram 1:

Diagram 1:   *Generating the Research Questions*

	RESEARCH EVENTS AND REACTIONS:	MY THOUGHTS
RESEARCH INTEREST	Over the years I have become increasingly concerned about the DLs 'well being' (attitudes, performances, barriers, etc.) in distance learning at UUM.	Such feelings are constantly being substantiated through conversations with other distance teachers and other DE stakeholders at UUM. Perhaps, there is a substance here. This was my initial motivation to investigate the 'reality ' of distance learning at UUM
MODIFIED & REFINED BY:	a. Different stakeholders in DE at UUM (Administrators, distance teachers, technicians). b. Literature: There seems to be general lacking of research on learners' perspective on distance learning.	Can DLs views be a source of information? Is there factors or reasons for the underlying perception towards the DLs? I need to focus on the learners to capture the understanding of their perspectives and experience on distance learning at UUM.
THE 'CASE'	Putting these sources together, it seems only natural that I commit myself to researching distance learning at UUM.	I needed to have DLs who are able to participate and be 'open' in talking about their distance learning experience and perspectives.
TO UNDERSTAND THE DLS THIS STUDY NEED:	Distance Learners: a. to establish valid data on students' views and perceptions /beliefs & experiences on distance learning. b. to understand the 'meaning' of distance learning for the DLs c. to understand the pull & push factors of distance learning at UUM d. to understand the DLs coping mechanism and learning strategies.	Sufficient data would enable me to understand the DLs perspectives and experiences in distance learning at UUM. As an DE provider, such data would in turn help the institution understand their client better and make possible changes to provide a better distance educational experiences to future DLs.
REFINED RESEARCH QUESTIONS	Research Questions: a. How do the UUM DLs perceive and experience distance Learning? b. What is the meaning of distance learning for the DLs? c. What are the contributing factors that facilitate or deter distance learning at UUM? d. How do they cope with the challenges being a distance learner at UUM?	

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Attending a distance learning programme means different things to different DLs. Some learners excel and are successful in DE, while others may find distance learning more difficult and challenging. However, unlike students in the primary or secondary schools or full time campus based learners, it is often difficult for distance teachers and educators to receive feedback on the course from the DLs unless they make an attempt to do so. It is equally difficult for distance teachers and educators to identify the learners who are having difficulties unless they come to them for help.

The research informants for this study were twelve registered *DLs* at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Being subject to a management-based institution, naturally, the learners involved in this study are 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*. The decision to engage with DLs of different ethnic and cultural background was intended to provide not only thick descriptions of distance learning at UUM, but also potentially an understanding of how culture might influence learning. This study seeks to gather as much information and knowledge from UUM DLs as possible. The selection procedures and criteria for choosing the research informants are discussed in detail in the methodology chapter of this thesis.

Participants' Background

Of the 12 research participants, 8 male and 4 female learners are involved in this study. In terms of ethnic and culture background, 7 were Malay learners and 5 Chinese learners. 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 examination. 50% of them had some post secondary education or had undergone some vocational training, and 25% or three out of the 12 participants had a teaching certificate from teacher's college. The students had an average of 8 to 9 years working experience. All of them had professional careers, and these included being a teacher, police officer, clerks, sales agent, technician, 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. More than half 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 SITE

I chose to conduct this study at Universiti Utara Malaysia where I have been on the faculty or a teaching staff at the School of Languages and Scientific Thinking since 1992. The institution is a management-based institution. DE at UUM is fairly young, with the first batch of DE graduates graduating in September 2002. In its seven years of existence, there are four different distance learning sites administered by the UUM UPJJ. However, due to the time and budgetary constraints, this study could not cover other DLs located at other learning sites of the UUM distance programmes. This study engaged only with the research informants living and working around the northern region.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The research methodology used in this study drew heavily on qualitative methods, developed as a reflection on students' learning (Stenhouse, 1975; Kemmis, 1981;

Elliot, 1985, 1991). There were many factors contributing to my decision to use a qualitative methodology, and the choice of research methodology is elaborated in a later chapter.

In addition, this study employs *case study* as its research approach. The heterogeneous characteristics of UUM DLs and other educational dimensions that have shaped the Malaysian distance learners' learning experience makes comparison with UK, Australian, Canadian and other DE research focusing on learning difficult. The national educational approach, cultural and political setting in Malaysia necessitate the employment of a case study approach which would best serve the purpose of this study.

A limitation of employing a case study is that the research findings may not be generalisable and transferable to other situations. This study promotes in-depth understanding and meaning of distance learning at UUM, and it is understanding of the case that I sought. There are many examples of educational research intended to reveal meaning in a context regarded in many respects as unique. A limitation concerning transfer or generalisability of findings is that meanings cannot be universally shared; though they may be widely shared. As Rogoff (1982) warns:

> No aspect of an event is neutral with regard to meaning. The meaning and purpose of the event cannot be produced through the summation of features of the person and features of the context…Meaning is what binds the person and context in the particular event (p.146).

It is on the ground of *relatability* (a concept further elaborated in chapter 12) that knowledge or research findings may be shared with other interested person or persons. Should this study and its components (research circumstances, the research questions, issues and problems) be pertinent and related to another DE institutions and circumstances, then the findings of this research must be contextualised so as to slow the impetus to generalisation.

A key assumption in this study is that the individual and the environment must be studied together (Rogoff, 1982). This does not rule out shared meanings, because not all events in distance learning are unique in meaning. Many events are routine and meanings are agreed through force of habit, such as the meanings of a distance teacher's statements and signals to start and end a face to face meeting, or meanings generated from DLs learning group work activities. There may be personally unique meanings for distance learners, but there are also meanings shared and understood by other distance learners, teachers, and tutors. The outcomes of a case study can resonate with broadly similar experiences affirming claims for significance.

A holistic and qualitative approach was thought to be effective as a means of researching because such research can cope with widely differing perceptions of the same context and events of distance learning. Quantitative approaches to study distance would have required large samples of DLs, a design exploring repeatable behaviour, to some extend excluding the DLs' emotions and sense of meaning, and findings reported largely in terms of means, aggregations and variation. The nature of the research context is complex in that it involves not only the DLs (as the main focus of the research), but also their families, their employers, distance teachers, and other DE stakeholders at UUM. Since the desired outcome was information that would help in identifying and implementing specific changes, then case data seemed the most promising.

This does not restrict the applicability of the study to the specific case. A reasonable assumption is that, while distance learners would share some understanding of their learning experiences and activities, there would also be shared issues or problems in their understanding. For example, they might misapprehend some aspects of the teaching and learning intentions and misunderstand some aspects of the content of tasks and explanations. The nature and extent of this would vary from individual to individual, but there would be some common ground between the DLs. The students need to be considered as being the best judge of what they found problematic (Cobb, Wood and Yackel, (1991).

This study employed a qualitative methodology with an emphasis on an *interpretivist* approach because "...education is considered to be a process, and school is a lived experience (Merriam, 1998: p.4)." Understanding the distance learning process or experience requires one to first understand the process involved. A control group was not a useful design option. Multiple data collection techniques (multi modal) particularly the use of interviews, and *students' journals* supplemented by personal observations and photographs were employed. Multiple methods of data collection planned for the research design provided a wide range of data and information on distance learning at UUM. Furthermore, it allowed for triangulation between data sources and provided a basis for cross checking multiple perspectives. Maxwell (1996: p.75-76) says of triangulation that it "...reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific method, and it allows you to gain a better assessment of the validity and generality of the explanations that you develop."

The descriptor, *naturalistic inquiry* is pertinent to this study. A research method that is grounded in the learning behaviours or process in a social setting revealing meaning coincides with Vygotsky's theory of learning through action. Wertsch (1985: 207), for example, is keen to emphasise that it is through actions or activities that meanings are constructed and therefore provide an analytic unit. In this study, it is the DLs' actions, learning activities and their learning behaviours that provide meanings to their distance learning experience. The primacy of setting or context not only resonates with methodology as proposed by Elliot (1991), Reason (1988) and other researchers, but also with Wertsch (1985:) when he says:

> An activity or activity setting is grounded in a set of assumptions about appropriate roles, goals and means used by the participants in that setting. In terms of the levels of analysis in the theory of activity, one could say an activity setting guides the selection of actions and the operational compositions of actions, and it determines the functional significance of those actions (p.212).

Pollard (1990) has commented further on the importance of the relationship between socio-cultural factors and learning as they affect individuals (Pollard, 1990a). He makes the point that the subjective values of students in a social setting are too often taken for granted. Developmental research derived from naturalistic inquiry takes some account of this in that it explores the nature of distance learning as socially and culturally organised environments. For example, there are strategies or specific learning behaviours and styles adopted by DLs that explain *how* DLs study, *what* they study, *when* they study, and *where* they study. The research participants are already part of the context and culture and this research makes use of their knowledge and understanding of the context in which they work.

PERSONALISING THE WRITING OF THIS THESIS

Research begins with researchers. It is they and their peers who construct the research questions, determine the methods most suitable for exploring it, collect the data, conduct the analysis, interpret the data, and decide what conclusions can be drawn. The researcher is present at every stage of the research – integral to and inseparable from the study. Therefore, in writing this thesis and considering the methodology employed in this study, I feel that presenting myself as the 'self' rather than as a depersonalised automaton with reified knowledge of *how it is done* is a better writing strategy. My inclination to present myself using 'the first person' as 'I' rather than 'the author' stems not just from stylistic preference, but from a recognition of the fact that the pragmatic nature of this study necessarily involves me as a person, and to tell the DLs' stories of distance learning at UUM as if I had not been involved directly would only tell part of the story. This point of viewing is supported by Schostack (2002:p. 166) when he says that the voice – first, second, third person through which the story is presented is a powerful rhetorical device framing the process of writing and of interpreting a text. The use of 'I', 'you' and 'us' has the feel of conversation between people who draw upon a set of understandings and experiences that assumes a value, a knowledge common to all, and thus beyond dispute, or sufficiently non

threatening to bring about critical reflection upon personal experiences shared by many. This viewpoint is not unproblematic and could be seen by some as an additional source of bias. However, in a relatively undeveloped field, I think it can be justified as an effective means of communication of both the method and the context of the study.

ARRANGEMENT OF THE CHAPTERS

In chapter 1, I have provided a rationale for the study, given account of the motivations that bring about the realisation of the study, and introduced some of my initial decisions about methodology.

Chapter 2 describes the context within which the study was carried out, providing background information about distance education (DE) in Malaysia. It begins with an introduction to the country and its educational system. This chapter then moves to examine developments in Malaysia which propel changes in educational planning and development, due to rising demands for education that have led the expansion of distance education in the country. This chapter then focuses on DE, its history and development in the country.

Chapter 3 identifies key concepts in DE and looks at DLs at the key players in DE. This chapter looks at what *distance education* and *distance learning* mean.

Chapter 4 presents the thesis methodology. The characterisation of a research methodology implies a discussion of basic concepts and identification of underlying themes in obtaining knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation as well as discussing ways of measuring and gathering data. Considering that this is a qualitative research within interpretivism as epistemological/methodological paradigm, it is essential to describe comprehensively the research process in order for the findings to be validated and better understood.

Chapter 5 extends the discussion of methodology, focusing on the research justification for employing a case study approach to allow the existence of multiple realities of distance learning at UUM, and validate experiences as a function of interaction and perception. This study has no predetermined hypotheses. What this study does is to generate, gather, observe, intuit and sense what is happening in the natural setting and circumstances of distance learning at UUM. The objective of case study, as argued by this chapter, is to discover meanings and experiences and to understand how all the research parts work together. The second part of this chapter introduces the case that this research focuses on.

Chapter 6 examines the specific context within which the study took place, and discusses the methodological framework, strategies and application of qualitative research methods.

Chapter 7 focuses on the *field work* and *analysis* of the data and is intended to set a context by informing the negotiating process, and gaining access to the research site. The second half of this chapter introduces the tenets of grounded theory, and describes the systematic procedures used for data analysis.

The following chapters form the central focus on the study. The case study of distance learning experience at Universiti Utara Malaysia is examined and analysed.

Chapter 8 discusses the 'reality' of distance learning. It offers an account of what distance learning is all about from the learners' perspectives. This chapter not only reveals the learners' motivation to enrol in distance learning programme, but also discusses both the *pull* and the *push* factors towards distance learning. What seems apparent is the mismatch between what is expected of learners in distance study mode and the learners' own expectation of what distance learning is.

Chapter 9 reiterates the findings discussed in chapter 8. Within the Malaysian context of DE, the notion *that 'the teacher is always there, but isn't'* in distance learning is a

reality. Findings shared in this study, for example, suggest that the infrequent f2f meetings between distance teachers (DTs) and DLs, and learners' dependence on their teachers have caused frustrations and sometime impede the learning process, which contributes to the miss match problem between what is expected versus the reality of distance learning as experienced by the learners. Based on the evidence gathered, this chapter argues that in order to improve the learners' educational experience in distance learning, DTs too need to undertake some changes in order to engage in distance teaching, which is different from the traditional f2f teaching. They need to understand what is involved in distance teaching and learning and must themselves account for this in their reassessment of their teaching.

Chapter 10 focuses on the question whether culture can be an attributive factor towards learners' learning experience & approach in distance learning. This chapter discusses the similarities and differences on the cultural 'makeup' of the diverse learners involved in this study and examine ways in which the needs of these learners can be taken into considerations in the design of distance instruction and learner support. Three factors that have a major impact on learning of the culturally diverse groups are described: a. the different learning strategies employed by the learners, b. activities for planning and self-regulation, and c. the student's goals and motivation. Learning style profiles of the Chinese and Malay distance learners will then be discussed as a case example, showing how the understanding of the Malaysian distance learners as described can be applied to the design of distance instruction and the learner support system.

Chapter 11 focuses on the pedagogical perspective of this study, and is intended to extend the learners' perspective of distance learning at UUM to negotiate changes and improvements to UUM distance learning programmes and courses on the basis of the knowledge generated from this study.

Finally, chapter 12 is my reflection on the methodology used in the study.

CHAPTER 2
DISTANCE EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

COUNTRY PROFILE

Covering an area of 336,700 sq. km, Malaysia consists of two regions: *West Malaysia* (with 11 states) extending south-south-east from the border of Thailand and the states of *East Malaysia* (which consists of Sabah and Sarawak) located on the north-western coastal region of the island of Borneo. Situated in the heart of South East Asia, Malaysia is a tropical country situated 1° North to 7° North Latitude and 100° East to 120° East longitude. The natural vegetation of Malaysia is tropical rain forest which, on the plains, has been replaced by 4 million acres of rubber plantations, palm oil, paddy fields and, of course, modern cities. In the highlands there is considerable variation in flora.

A Map of Malaysia
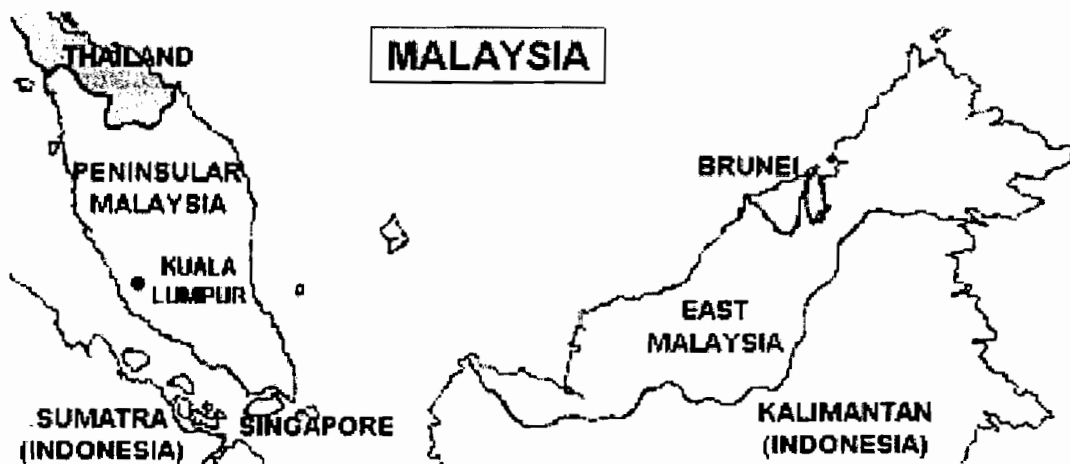
Malaysia received independence in 1957. It has a constitutional monarchy and an elected parliament. It is a pluralist society with diversities in its cultural, social, political, religious, and economic and language aspects. It has an estimated 27 million populations who are multiracial and multicultural. In Peninsular Malaysia, *Malays, Chinese,* and *Indians* predominate, while in Sabah and Sarawak there are numerous indigenous groups including from *Ibans, Kadazans, Bidayuh, Muruts* and *Bajaus.*

The mix of population is not uniformly distributed, and this reflects historical, geographical and economic factors that particularly account for development of certain areas and under development of others. Islam is the dominant religion, but the freedom to worship other religions is allowed by the constitution. Bahasa Malaysia is the national and sole official language. English is a second language in Malaysia. As a young country, Malaysia's aspirations are to achieve a united nation within a pluralist society, a democratic society, a just society of equal opportunities, a liberal society of diverse cultural traditions, and a progressive society oriented towards knowledge, science and technology.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN THE COUNTRY

In order to achieve such objectives, the country realises the significant role of education and its impact on development. Education is important in achieving stability and continuous sustainable progress.

In the annual government budget over the last 20 years, *education* has been a major item of public expenditure and this allocation is steadily increasing. In 1991 for example, education was allocated RM6642.1 million amounting to 17.3% of the national budget allocation. The following year, the allocation was increased to RM8239.2 million, constituting about 18.1% of the national budget allocation. In 1993, the amount allocated for education was RM8923.5 million, constituting about 20.2% of total allocation. Ever since then, allocation for education has been sustained at between 17 to 20% of the country's budget (Malaysia,1998). In the recent 2002 budget announcement by the Prime Minister who is also the Minister of Finance, 20.52% was allocated for education planning and development in the country. The continuous and sustained allocation of a significant percentage of the country's wealth on education is evidence of Malaysia's commitment and aspiration to fulfil the country's obligation to provide better and accessible education for all her citizens.

Today, Malaysia has more schools than before. Teachers are better trained. The establishment of higher learning institutions has flourished. More public and private universities and colleges are built to meet the demand for professional qualifications and a trained workforce. New programmes and courses are continuously being introduced. Consequently, *distance education (DE)* which was first introduced and implemented by Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1971 has become an increasingly important mode of education to meet the rising demand for education. DE functions as an economically viable medium to provide continuous knowledge and skills to its learners. This, and many other advantages of DE as an educational alternative, has resulted in the birth of many DE programmes and courses throughout the country.

In view of today's development in the world economy, and globalization, Malaysia recognises that 'knowledge' is the passport to prosperity and social stability. With a market economy, Malaysia has a good communication infrastructure for distance education in terms of printing, radio and television broadcasts, telephone, postal services and telecommunication. The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), which is the brainchild of the Prime Minister, could play a major role for the future development of distance education in Malaysia (Saleh, 1998: 46).

To survive and flourish as part of the 'global village', the government believes that Malaysia has to become a 'learning society'. As Brown & Lauder (1977: p.179) say, "…it is the knowledge, skills and insights of the population that is the key to future prosperity." This is a concept that needs to be inculcated into Malaysians' life, educational system, and society at large. Acknowledging the monumental importance of realising such a concept, many DE institutions have promoted lifelong learning as a key objective for a DE provider.

Malaysia is a fast developing nation. The country is transforming itself and moving aggressively towards building an effective and successful 'K' Economy. Our society according to Tan (2000: p.59) "… is information and knowledge hungry. We need greater speed, more efficiency and effectiveness in all our endeavours. For this, we

need all the knowledge and information that we can get from all sources, and from around the world."

In the last 15 years, a market sensitive education system has evolved in Malaysia. Schools and higher institutions in the country are taking up the challenge of globalisation by changing not only the content of curriculum and programmes but also more importantly their delivery systems. IT-enhanced *teaching* and *learning* are already making computers, video conferencing and the use of the Internet a commonplace in Malaysia educational settings. The Malaysia Ministry of Education sees the need to bring about a significant transformation of the Malaysian educational infrastructure in order to meet the 21st century as a technologically competent and scientifically adept society in line with the aspiration laid down in Vision 2020 by Dr.Mahathir Mohamed in 1990.

Today, *Vision 2020* is not new to Malaysians. It is not Dr.Mahathir Mohamed's view of the future but a carefully planned response by the government and the Malaysian people to global change and development. Malaysia's own development has reached a critical juncture. Having Singapore as a close neighbour, and being located in a region of rapid development adds to the pressure to innovate. The structural transformations of its economy place the citizens of Malaysia at the threshold of a fundamental shift; first into an information-based society and then beyond to a knowledge based one.

In the government view, Education must build a pool of well-educated, highly skilled and strongly motivated professionals. The nation's human capital is its most important economic and development resource. Today, the nation is embarking on an educational journey that will deliver on the promises made to establish Malaysia as a fully industrialised country in this new century.

The Malaysian government is facilitating change and seeking innovative approaches to expand the education base. Strategies for growth and development of education in

the 7th Malaysian Plan are a significant departure from the government-propelled initiatives of previous years. A Malaysia approach in education is making it possible for both the public and private sector to meet the needs for tertiary education by offering degree, diploma and certificate level courses either by the traditional method or distance.

In the last 10 years, many developments have occurred in the Malaysian educational system; the stage for a major revolutionary change has been set (please see Appendix A). Since 1995, the Malaysia Ministry of Education has effectively passed six phases of legislation to position Malaysia as a regional education hub. The *Education Act 1996*; *The National Council on Higher Education Institutions Act 1996*; the *Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996*; *National Accreditation Board Act 1996*, the *Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Act 1996*, the *National Higher Education Fund Board Act 1997* and *National Higher Education Fund Board Act (Amendment) 2000* has facilitated a more market centred education system (Gan & Azahari, 1998).

With the legal and policy framework almost complete, the education system is set for a quantum leap which will bring sweeping changes to Malaysian institutes of learning, enabling them to offer a wider range of courses, different options and approaches to learning, better management, new teaching methods and an overall increase in productivity and standards.

The development of the education system in Malaysia reflects the multi-faceted role it assumes in the creation of a united, democratic, just, liberal, and progressive society. The overriding national objectives of education are national unity and human resource development. Education is regarded as a vehicle for the workforce needs of the country. Educational policies are aimed at providing greater opportunities for those in the lower income groups and the deprived regions in the country.

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES IN MALAYSIA

In the Malaysian context, the aims of education are manifested in the *Falsafah Pendidikan Negara* (National Education Philosophy, NEP). The philosophy envisages education as an on going effort towards developing the potentials of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner. Education aims to produce individuals who are:

> "...intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the betterment of the society and the nation at la
>
> (MOEM,1998:p.2)

The New Economic Policy (NEP) is an ambitious act of social engineering that has concentrated on a two pronged development strategy of eradicating poverty and restructuring Malaysia's multi ethnic society. The NEP attempts to resolve two significant and enduring issues – to ensure that Malaysia takes a key role in the economic development of the region, and does so without threatening social stability in a country which contains a high degree of diversity. Economic development implies openness to western values, which in turn may threaten some of the traditional aspects of the society, which ensure social stability. In the NEP, higher education was placed in a critical position as the principal avenue to quickly and effectively redress ethnic and economic inequalities. The policy is to educate students to have a well-rounded personality with strong religious and moral values, an aim that makes the new school curriculum differ markedly from the former curriculum. All these are characteristics of the new 'Malaysian learners' who are not only skilled, but also those with excellent academic qualities. This is essential because the achievement of socio-economic objectives is dependent upon the availability of an educated skilled and trained labour force. To this effect, greater access to education is needed to cater for the large number of eligible learners at all levels of study.

The Malaysian education philosophy is well documented and disseminated through the system. The main purpose is to ensure that every individual in the system (*comprising different stakeholders in education from policy makers and planners to classroom teachers, and students alike*) understands and internalises the ultimate goals and the spirit of the National Education Philosophy (NEP). Therefore, in ensuring the quality of education, the NEP is used as a set of guiding principles in all matters pertaining to education planning and implementation. This includes the introduction and planning of DE in Malaysia. In most mission statements of DE providers, objectives are built around the four aims of the NEP: to achieve national unity; to produce quality manpower for national development; to achieve democratisation of education and to inculcate positive values.

EDUCATION ORGANIZATION AND SYSTEM

Political, economic and social factors in Malaysia have resulted in the evolution of a highly centralised system of education. Although Malaysia is a regionalised society, within this centralised system, matters pertaining to education rest wholly with the central government. Through the enactment of the *Education Act 1961*, the Ministry of Education is empowered to make decisions on all policies related to education. Its administrative machinery for the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of educational programmes operate at four levels of hierarchy, as shown in the following diagram:

Diagram 2: Four levels of hierarchy of Malaysian Educational Structure

Federal

↓

State

↓

District

↓

Schools
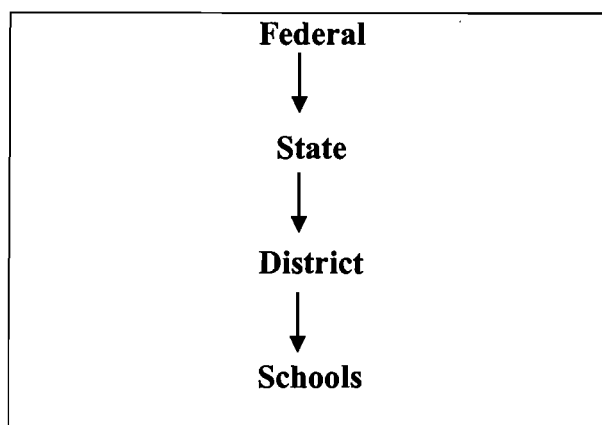
The Ministry of Education is responsible for translating education policy into plans, programmes, projects and activities. It also co-ordinates implementation and changes.

Malaysia has a *6-3-2-2 educational system* of primary, secondary (lower and upper) and post secondary education providing 11 years of free schooling, comprising 6 years at primary level and 5 years at secondary level. Primary schools are classified as *national*[2] or *national type*[3](Please refer Appendix B). The system is summarised in table 1.

Table 2: Malaysia Educational Provision

EDUCATIONAL TYPE:	PROGRAMMEMES:
PRIMARY LEVEL	**National Schools** • Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. • English is a compulsory subject. • Mandarin, Tamil and Indigenous languages are made available. **National-Type Schools** • Mandarin or Tamil as medium of instruction. • Bahasa Malaysia and English are compulsory subjects. **Curriculum Guidelines focus on:** • Mastery of the 3Rs • Value across the curriculum • Thinking skills

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[2] Using Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction.
[3] Using Chinese or Tamil as the medium of instruction.

	• Pre-vocational skills • Basic science concepts • Art and recreation • Co-curricular activities •
SECONDARY LEVEL	**Academic Schools:** • Offer general education and courses in the arts and science streams. • Vocational and technical subjects are incorporated into the curriculum. **Technical Schools:** • Offer general education and technical and vocational based subjects. • Prepare students for entry into technological, vocational and science related courses at the diploma and degree levels. **Vocational School:** • Offer general education and basic vocational skills. • Courses are in two streams: vocational education and skills training. **National Religious Schools:** • Offer general education and academic subjects. • Compulsory courses in: Arabic language; Islamic Tasawwur; AL-QURAN, and Islamic Law Education
POST SECONDARY LEVEL	**Matriculation Programmemes:** • One to two year programmeme. • Meets requirements for entry to local universities. • Conducted by colleges and some public universities. **Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan (STPM) A Levels:** • Two year programmeme • Offer academic, technical and religious subjects. • Conducted in selected public schools and colleges. **Certificate Programmeme:** • One to two year programmeme • Training for a vocation. • Offered by polytechnics and colleges. **Diploma Programmemes:** • Two to four year programmeme. • Training for a vocation or further study. • Offered by polytechnics and colleges.

Adopted from *Education in Malaysia 2002.*

Primary and secondary education have a highly structured curriculum to enable the acquisition of fundamental knowledge and skills. Over the 11 years of the primary and secondary education, there are many different national examinations. First, there

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is a national examination at the end of the primary school, but this does not affect promotion to the secondary schools. However, for outstanding primary students, fully residential secondary science schools have been set up to produce more science students and to inculcate interest in science and technology. Highly technical schools are also established for upper secondary to provide technical skills and training and instil interest in vocational education and training among Malaysian learners.

Students from the national and national type primary schools merge at the lower secondary school for another three years of uninterrupted schooling. In the secondary schools, all instruction is in Bahasa Malaysia. Students from the national-type schools have to spend an extra year in remove classes to enable them to acquire sufficient proficiency in the national language before joining the mainstream the following year. Parents are free to choose the type of schools for their children. All schools use the same syllabus, which is in line with the national policy. The Ministry gives textbooks to pupils on a free loan basis.

The national examination known as *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (Lower Secondary Assessment) formerly known as Lower Certificate of Examination (LCE) is administered at the end of the lower secondary level and serves as a selection device to determine whether students continue for a further two years of upper secondary academic or vocational education, or leave school. Those who are able to continue will then sit another important national examination known as Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) formerly known as the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE), which is an equivalent of the 0-Level. The results of this examination will then determine whether the student will pursue another two years of higher academic education, enrol into various universities, polytechnics, or private colleges in the country or abroad, or leave school to seek employment. A two-year sixth form programme prepares students for entry into local and foreign universities. However, students can opt for the matriculation programmes offered by some public and private colleges, and universities or they may select from a range of certificate and diploma courses offered by various polytechnics and vocational colleges.

In addition to the above, many of today's public higher institute of learning and many of the private ones offer courses at a distance offering a whole range of programmes and courses.

HIGHER EDUCATION (HE) IN MALAYSIA

In line with the changing economic structure, measures are being taken to create a technological society that not only can comprehend and absorb technology but also create and develop new technology. In this respect, institutions of higher education play a crucial role in producing a competent workforce equipped with skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour to meet the demands of a technological information era.

Developments in HE focus on expanding the capacity of universities through increased intake of students. Each university's overall enrolment is to be increased to 20,000 compared to the present enrolment of between 12,000 to 15,000 (*Universiti Utara Malaysia 2001 Annual Report*). The last two decades have witnessed the establishment of several public, private and distance institutions to cater for the growing demand for tertiary education. There are currently about 415 private higher educational institutions throughout the country offering pre-university courses and twinning programmes as well as professional and semi-professional qualifications (*Education in Malaysia*, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2002).

This expansion in HE has stimulated demand for postgraduate courses and in order to increase Research and Development (R&D) activities and to meet the need for highly qualified teaching staff, the capacity and enrolment for post graduate and postdoctoral courses are also being expanded.

Another new development in the provision of tertiary education is the corporatisation of universities, which is provided for under the *Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Act 1996*. With corporatisation, universities will continue to remain as statutory bodies, conforming to Government policy direction and objectives; however they will have more autonomy in managing and operating their institutions in a dynamic and proactive manner. These institutions will have greater flexibility in seeking their own revenue sources, increased capacity for consultancy services and commercialisation of research findings, as well as in the recruitment and remuneration of teaching staff.

ESTABLISHING STANDARDS

Establishing standards in education, and educational quality is an important priority in educational planning especially during periods of rapid expansion. Today, any young person entering the workforce will be judged not so much on the knowledge and skills they possess but on the incapacity for lateral thinking, creativity potential, and integrated approach to learning. The higher learning institutions are expected to make a fundamental shift from an *information based society* to a *knowledge based* one. Malaysia is therefore investing in 'hardware' and 'software' to equip students to take advantage of the opportunities offered by an increasingly interconnected world. The government is committed to developing universities not as "ivory tower" edifices but institutions that are able to meet the challenges of globalisation.

The emphasis is firmly set on science and technology to create a wide base of knowledge workers competent and adept to function in an economy that is moving into the new and emerging areas; advanced manufacturing, automated manufacturing, electronics, biotechnology and information technology.

Informal initiatives that seek to co-ordinate efforts between the government, the private sector and society are already seeing an expansion of the educational

infrastructure in the country. A concept of *borderless universities* is now evident where students have greater flexibility in terms of admissions and placements to help optimise educational resources within the country.

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

Institutions in South East Asia have pioneered mass DE programmes. Not just in Malaysia, but in India, Indonesia, Thailand, the vision is that greater number of students will learn in their homes. Costs will be greatly reduced if the need to attend campus and sit in lecture halls, library, study areas and classes can be reduced.

In Malaysia, education is highly valued. Notwithstanding economic crises, Malaysia like other countries wants its education programmes to be maintained and sustained; and the government wants new programmes to be created and instituted. For the government and for many families and individuals, access to higher education is especially critical. Therefore, in efforts to meet the new and changing demands for education and training in the country,

> ...open and distance learning may be seen as an approach that is at least complementary and under certain circumstances an appropriate substitute for the face-to-face methods that still dominate most educational systems...distance learning methods also have their own pedagogical merit, leading to different ways of conceiving knowledge generation and acquisition.
> (UNESCO,2002:p.20)

DE is one of the most cost-effective ways of democratising education and giving access to life long learning. Distance education is a relatively new phenomenon in Malaysia compared to the UK, Australia, Canada, and other western countries. As in most parts of the world, distance learning in Malaysia started off with correspondence schools to cater for students sitting for public examinations but unable to gain entry into government funded schools. Institutions like Stanford College, Raffles College, Malaysian Correspondence College, Adabi College and Federal College, to name a few offered correspondence courses, and some continue to do so to this day. For

degree programmes, the University of London in the United Kingdom is the most well known in Malaysia, producing graduates in various fields; the most popular course being the LLB degree in law. Historically, in its basic form DE was introduced in 1971 when Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) established its Centre for Off–Campus Studies. In 1994, the Centre for Off–Campus studies at the university was renamed the Centre for Distance Education. The Centre for Distance Education was upgraded in 1998 to School of Distance Education. From 1971 to 1989, USM was the only local university to offer courses through distance learning. As such it developed a strong reputation among DE networks internationally. In 1990, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) introduced distance education to cater for the overwhelming demand for tertiary education. With branch campuses throughout the country, UiTM introduced a DE model somewhat similar to the UKOU.

In the period of 1993 – 2000, there was a significant increase in the number of institutions offering DE in Malaysia as shown in the following figure. This came about as a result of the new policy of the Ministry of Education to encourage the introduction of distance education in Malaysian universities. The corporate sector has been invited to establish private universities. Today, the national petroleum, telephone and energy companies have already set up their own universities (Universiti Tenaga National; Universiti Petronas; and Universiti Telekom) offering a wide range of courses in science, technology and management. At the same time, foreign universities are also being encouraged to set up offshore branches in Malaysia. To date, Curtin University of Technology, Australia; Monash University, Australia; FTMS-De Monfort University, UK; and the University of Nottingham, UK all have its branches operating in Malaysia. In addition, there are about 100 foreign universities that have been licensed by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to participate in twinning programmes with corresponding public and private institutions (Education in Malaysia, 2002).

***Table 3 : The Development of Distance Education at the Public Higher
Learning Institutions***

Public Higher Learning Institutions	Year Offering	Programmes Offered
Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)	1971	BA (Hon)
		B.Soc.Sc. (Hon)
	1973	B.Sc.(Hon)
	1978	Foundation Science
	1988	Continuing Education
	1994	B.Eng. (Hon)
	1995	B.Ed. (Hon)
	1997	B.Mgmt. (Hon)
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	1993	M.Farm.Med.
	1996	B.Sc.(Maths)
		B.Sc. (Math.Ed.)
		BA (Business Admin.)
		BA (Comm./Psyco.)
		Dipl.Ed.
	1998	B.Sc. (Biology)
Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	1995	MS (HRD)
		B.Comp.Sc. (Hon)
	1996	B.Business Management (Hon)
		BSc.Human Resource
		B.Ed. (Hon)
		B.TESL
		B.Literature (Hon.)
		B. Communication (Hon.)
Universiti Malaya (UM)	1997	B.Eng. (Hon)
	1998	BA (Hon)
Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)	1998	B.B.A (Hon)
	1999	B.P.A. (Hon)
Universiti Institut Technologi Malaysia (UiTM)	1990	Dipl.Public Admin.
		Diploma Banking
		Diploma BA
	1998	B.B.A. (Hon)
Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR)	1998	B.Information Technology
		B.Information System
		B.Business Administration
		MSc. IT Management
Universiti Multimedia Malaysia (MMU)	1999	B.Eng. (Hon) UTM
		B.Management (Hon.)
		B.Accounting (Hon.)
		B.Economics (Hon.)

As shown in Table 3, USM was the only public higher learning institution from 1971
until 1992 offering courses at tertiary level through distance learning mode.
Universiti Sains Malaysia is a pioneer provider of DE in Malaysia. In 1995, the
Minister of Education advised other local public universities to offer courses through

DE. This coincided with the move by the Ministry of Education to corporatise all the public universities, to make the universities less dependent on subsidies from the government, and to increase the efficiency of the management systems.

Therefore, the newer (since 1995) public universities involved in distance education business had a different approach compared to the USM. Their programmes are based on cost recovery and self-sufficiency. USM, meanwhile, is still an alternative mode for adult learners and highly subsidised by the government (up to about 80%).

The move to increase private funding has increased in this sector. In August of 1999, the Minister of Education made an offer to *Meteor Distance Learning Sdn Bhd* to set up the Open University of Malaysia, which is based on a consortium of all the 11 public higher learning institutions in Malaysia which co-ordinates the management of the distance learning programmes. This consortium operates under the private university mechanism. A year later, on 10th August 2000, the first Open University Malaysia (OUM) was officially established. With the establishment of OUM, DE in Malaysia is set to grow at an even faster pace. OUM's vision is to be a world class centre of excellence in providing educational experience and quality in DE for the country and the region.

With the exception of OUM, most of the institutions mentioned above are dual-mode Institutions. These Institutions offer both full–time campus based (face to face) study and distance education. OUM is the only institution that focuses only on open and distance learning mode-teaching and learning at a distance.

Within this expansion and development, distance learning has emerged as a key feature of HE throughout Malaysia. DE is being used more and more extensively in Malaysia to meet increasing demands for education. Although DE suits the needs of people in full-time employment and helps to overcome geographical isolation, it is clear that the primary policy motive is financial rather than educational. DE provides a cost-effective way of solving economic and educational crises. With growing

pressure to provide learning opportunities, many institutions of HE Malaysia see DE as a viable solution to rapidly increasing demands on education. The modern development of technology and media, its potential and the very characteristics of learning at a distance have made DE more attractive and feasible to many. Additionally, due to high demand and the effects of globalisation, DE providers in the country are also starting to attract foreign students from nearby countries and the Government has a policy aim to become a net exporter of HE by 2010.

Globalisation carries with it the possibility to revolutionalise education and create new learning environments, involving a variety of multi-media technology routes to learning. As Tan explained:

> Learners...would be taught to be creative, imaginative and innovative. They would be taught problem solving skills. Students can plunge directly into goal directed learning." (2000:p.60)

Although status hierarchies persist in the HE, in the past decade, distance education has increasingly become a more accepted mode of education in Malaysia. The rapid pace of development and progress in Malaysia during the same period has similarly seen the acceptance of distance education as an important strategy in the development of Malaysia's human resource. The Malaysian government effort in promoting distance education is seen in the policy to encourage the growth of Information Technology and the development of the *Multimedia Super Corridor*, both of which are vital to the delivery systems of distance education.

TECHNOLOGY AND DISTANCE LEARNING

The development of a range of technologies has accelerated exponentially over the last 50 years, and this is mainly due to the invention of digital electronics (UNESCO,2002). The ability to create, distribute and exploit knowledge and information is often regarded as the single most important factor underlying economic growth and improvements in the quality of life. Recognising that technology, in particular ICT is an important enabling tool towards achieving this

objective, the Malaysian government undertook various initiatives during the Seventh Plan to facilitate the greater adoption and diffusion of ICT to improve capacities in every field. These included the provision of incentives for computerisation and automation, creation of venture capital funds, enhancement of education and training programmes, and the provision of an enabling legal environment to facilitate the development of ICT as indicated in Table 4:

Table 4: Selected ICT Indicators, 1995 and 2000

Indicators	1995	2000
Newspaper Circulation Per 1,000 Population	162	159
Personal Computers Per 1,000 Population	29.5	95.7
Telephone Lines Per 1,000 Population	161.07	204.76
Telex Subscribers	6,578	3,105
Personal Computers (units installed)	610,000	2,200,000
Telephone Subscribers	3,332,447	4,650,410
Mobile Phones	700,000	2,265,000
Number of Internet Subscribers	13,064	1,157,384
Number of Internet Users	30,000	4,000,000

Sources: Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia, PIKOM, World Development Report, 1999/2000 and World Competitiveness Yearbook, 2000.

At its most basic form or level, DE takes place when the DTs and DLs are separated by physical distance, and technology, that is , voice, video, data and print is used to bridge the instructional gap. The danger, in this conception of DE, is that it emphasises a 'delivery model' that can easily be assumed to be teacher-centred, transmission based and highly didactic. Barry Willis (1994) for example cautions that even though it is technology that is opening the doors to so many new distance learning models, the use of technology in DE should remain transparent and user friendly, allowing the distance teachers and DLs to concentrate on the processes of teaching and learning. Otherwise as he puts it, the tail (technology) is wagging the 'dog' (teaching and learning).

Distance learning is a different concept that attempts to turn around the assumption of teacher-centredness and to focus on the learner. According to Esmond (1995), 'distance learning' is the use of print or electronic communications media to receive instruction when teachers and learners are separated in place and/or time. It is synonymous with the application of technology of electronic media to education in all areas: Higher Education, Lifelong Education, Corporate Training, and Military and Government Training. The trend is accelerating for distance learning programmes to use a broad mix of techniques, methodologies, and media. Some of the major challenges of the new generation of distance learning programmes that need to be addressed include:

- How should DE providers and institutions in Malaysia design effective learning systems, given the complex set of media at their disposal?
- How should DE providers and institutions in Malaysia structure information and provide access to meet the curricula demands of information age learners, given the additional power and flexibility of the new technologies?
- What is a good balance of independent study and interaction with other DLs?
- How do we balance the costs of the new media with the benefits they provide?

However, as stressed by Sreiner (1999), distance learning may not necessarily involve the use of technology as long as it offers instructional delivery that does not constrain the student to be physically present in the same location as the instructor. Meanwhile, Bates (1995) defines distance learning as the separation of teacher and learner during at least a majority of each instructional process. In Bates' view, educational media are used to connect teacher and learner as well as to carry course content, since there is the provision of two-way communication between teacher and learner.

Undeniably, distance learning requires some form of technology in order to work. The technology may be primitive (via prepared modules and other learning materials for students to study on their own) or sophisticated. In some of the earlier programmes, learning was made available through mail order courses. As technology progressed, mailed paper documents were augmented first by audiotapes and later by

videotapes. In the more recent past, one-way video and two-way audio have been used to enhance the interactivity of the educational environment. Though these methods have their successes, there are also limitations in their use and their effectiveness may not equal that of the classroom experience.

Today, we have at our hands a more viable technology available at reasonable costs. New production, methods and the advancement of technology and media have made possible a conception of DE which is much more than studying by correspondence. The introduction of personal computers, the Internet, the Web and others can change distance learning in much the same way the introduction of the blackboard changed classrooms in the 1860's. Computers allow the geographic distribution of the teachers and the students, support active communication and interactivity among DLs and teachers in the learning process, provide a media-rich environment for presentation and viewing of class material, accommodate each individual learner's pace of learning, and eliminate the unnecessary note-taking often allied with the old classroom model (Dede, 1996).

As stressed by Kerka (1996), microcomputers, the Internet, and the World Wide Web (WWW) are shaping the current generation of distance learning. With the possibility of virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and knowledge systems in the future, the development of distance learning will be greater and more challenging. The Internet especially, has revolutionised the way distance learning is conducted in ways unimaginable before.

Indeed, technological advances are providing the capabilities to support wider interaction between course instructors and the DLs, and achieve greater access to information and tools. The questions is, are the students (or potential students) technology literate? Are they capable of making full use of the technology at hand to enhance their learning? These are among the crucial questions that need attention. The interaction in educational experiences today is generally based on one of the three dyads: the interaction between the distance teachers and the DLs, the interaction

between and among DLs; and the interaction between a distance learner and instructional resources such as books, films, reference materials, research data, and experts. These interactions serve as the foundation of instructional strategies and practices. Thus, all desired outcomes may be said to be achievable by a combination of any of the interactions. And the array of communicating and computing technologies now available are powerful enablers of these interactions.

The readiness of the market in terms of technology would dictate the level and type of technology that institutions can offer to its distance learning programme's learners. But there is much more involved than this. The technology does not just substitute for conventional interaction – it makes new kinds of interaction, and new kinds of learning possible. Bates (1996) has highlighted some of the common technologically related skills required in distance learning programme. According to this author, those skills include the ability to search for material on-line, the ability to capture off-line (i.e. using scanners & cameras), the ability to create/store/integrate media editors, authoring system, database or hypermedia, the ability to gather information /consult with experts using collaborative tools such as teleconferencing, e-mail, and electronic talk. Most academic and professional fields are themselves changing as more and more information comes available on the web and as the skills required by workers are transformed.

THE IMPACT OF MULTIMEDIA SUPER CORRIDOR (MSC) ON DE

The necessary infrastructure and environment for the development of information and communication technology (ICT) was in place during the Seventh Plan period to enable Malaysia to move rapidly into the Information Age. The National IT Agenda (NITA), formulated in 1996, provided the framework for the orderly development of the country into an information and knowledge based society by 2020. As ICT

presented the best opportunities to increase productivity and improve competitiveness, several programmes and projects were implemented to encourage a wider diffusion of ICT in the economy. A key initiative was the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), which was designated as a world test-bed for ICT development, as iterated by the recently retired Malaysian Prime Minister:

> The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is a test bed for research and development activities and facilities. It is a watershed in the country in the development of science and technology. It is Malaysia's gift to the world.
> ***Tun Datuk Seri Dr.Mahathir Mohamad(in Tan,2000, p.106)***

The concept of MSC brings together economic development, national progress and education. Like Silicon Valley in the United States, MSC is seen as providing an IT led process of social change. The implementation of the "smart Schools" concept is one of many different products of MSC. There are approximately 7,000 primary schools and 1,500 secondary schools in Malaysia, and the government envisages converting all these schools into 'Smart Schools" by the year 2010. The first phase of implementation started in January 1999 with 90 schools. From January 2000, there will be broad-based implementation by phases. Multimedia technologies will create the infrastructure for new teaching-learning and management processes and introduce an educational network to link all smart schools, and inevitably, the entire educational system (from primary to tertiary institutions) will incorporate the use of modern technologies and facilities.

In HE, the *Multimedia University of Malaysia* operates as the first virtual university in the country, and is largely web-based. This is an addition to the many public universities and private institutions that have introduced DE to the public. In short, the development of the MSC has helped to boost the development of industrialising education at its best opening more rooms for education to the public. DE has now become an alternative to many Malaysians who fail to meet the requirements of the traditional face to face (f2f) education. And so, many higher institutions in Malaysia have become dual providers: the *traditional face to face* and *DE*. The expansion of educational mode to distance learning undertaken by many higher institutions

occurred within a short span of time. Many of these institutions jumped on the bandwagon to establish distance learning programmes at their respective institutions. The same holds true for *Universiti Utara Malaysia*.

DE CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Due to the common association between DE and the needs of adult learning, Moore (1987) predicted that the distinctions between DE and other closely related terms such as *adult education, continuing education,* and *higher education* will become fuzzy and draw away. DE will press forward the notion of universal lifelong learning.

Distance learning provides an effective and cost-effective means of extending educational opportunities for adult distance learners (DLs). Through distance learning, adults have access to an extensive and equal education. In addition, DLs can avoid having to stay away from work to attend classes. They can now work and learn, and improve themselves. At the very least, DE enables learners to achieve objectives and desires which would have been impossible or difficult in the past.

Ljosa (1993) like many other DE researchers and scholars have listed several roles of DE in a modern educational system. First, DE according to Ljosa will balance inequalities of education among age groups. DE will decrease the education gap between the generations. For example, the older generation with less formal schooling can continue their education through DE. Therefore, the educational level or educational gap between the different age groups can be balanced. DE provides opportunities for people who did not finish secondary school or pursue higher education to upgrade their educational levels (Ljosa,1993).

In Malaysia, the objectives of DE programmes and courses have been expanded to cater for the country current needs. Following are the primary objectives of expanding DE potentials in the country as described by Idrus (1996:p25):

1   to help adults who had missed the opportunity for a higher education to qualify for a degree;

2   to narrow the gap of educational opportunities amongst the various ethnic groups in the country;

3   to take education to the economically deprived and geographically isolated areas;

4   to increase the availability of skilled manpower;

5   to improve the performance of those already in employment by updating their knowledge and skills.

Additionally, DE can be tailored not only for formal education but also for training purposes. According to Ljosa (1993), DE can be effective means of organising information campaigns and short educational programmes, sometimes also referred to as 'crash' or short courses, when there is a need to educate large audiences with the help of mass media. Many organisations and companies in today's competitive world use DE methods so that they can provide training sessions not only to the key target group, but also to neglected groups[4] as stated by the PROTON human resource manager:

> *The development of DE in Malaysia is timely. Never before we could send out employees for training and education with less cost...but today with the help of DE, we are able to better train our employees without creating any bottlenecks like losing staffs for study leave. They can now work and continue working. Further more, we can now reach almost everybody for training.*
> *RS/7.10.01/PROTONHQ*

This neglected group of learners is usually left out due to the company's concern for the cost of training. In some ways DE has been used to train employees at a cheaper cost. DE has been able to help organisations (big and small) to upgrade their workforce from time to time, or whenever there is a need for it.

Since DE institutions are much more flexible and are able to enrol large number of learners within a short time, DE often serves an extra capacity to overcome

bottlenecks in regular education (Ljosa,1993). DE also extends geographical access to education. DLs no longer need to move closer to where the education is offered or interrupt their work and family lives in order to continue their education. In addition, DLs can take classes and resume their education or training whenever they are ready.

DE can overcome the consequences of 'political-unrest' for education and the shortage of qualified teachers in a particular subject; it can achieve parallelism of educational standards among the various groups; and it is able to provide the highest standards of educational material at a relatively low cost.

DE also offers the development of multiple competencies. In other words, competence or training in a second or third area of vocation interest can be added after the initial education for the first career. People in a modern society tend to develop competence in more than one field and also to change their occupation several times during their life span. DE adds flexibility to the educational system by allowing people to meet new challenges in their personal careers. One important aspect of DE is that it is visible to others. The UKOU, for example, set new standards in UK HE, because anyone could buy the books and study or watch the TV for course progression.

DE has added a new dimension towards collaboration or partnership in education. Today DE provider and institutions can offer programmes to any potential DLs throughout the world. DE providers can go international and market their DE courses and programmes to students overseas. This spreads high development and investment costs (in production, copyright, dedicated support staff) across a larger market share. In doing so, distance partnership and networking can be at work. For example, an institution in one country serves as a local resource and support centre for students who are studying with distance teaching institutions in other countries. There are several examples of international networks offering DE and training services based

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[4] Refers to the group of people who were not able to continue their educational training due to various constraint such as career, financial resources, family, employer's denying opportunities, etc.

on computer mediated communications, such as *EuroPace*, *Eurostep* and *Channel E* (Ljosa,1993). Moore (1987) predicted that DE would enable trans-national education in the future. This prediction by Moore has already been realised; there are already universities offering DE courses from Canada, United States and United Kingdom. According to the ***Oryx Guide to Distance Learning*** (Burgess,1994), there were more than twenty universities offering DE programmes and courses worldwide in 1994. In 2004, ten years later, this number could be double or triple. In short, DE potential and its impact on education opportunities are evident in today's context of learners' life and circumstances. The potential is limitless, and DE will only expand and move forward in the future.

MALAYSIA'S DISTANCE LEARNERS' PROFILE

DLs today and in the future will mostly come from the adult working population. These are the people who undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values and skills (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982; Verma, 2004). They want to pursue HE for self-development, self-enrichment, upgrading of skills and numerous other reasons.

Lifelong learning and continuous pursuit of knowledge is a vital element in developing a learning organisation and a learning society. In Malaysia, the demand for HE from eligible adult learners has increased steadily, outpacing the availability of places in local higher institutions of learning. Consequently, DE becomes a popular alternative, and today, it is accepted that public and private institutions must make adequate provision to meet the educational needs of adults who have left formal schooling.

Student Autonomy

Most of the DLs in Malaysian institutes of learning remain in employment and pace themselves through courses according to their individual capabilities. Hence, they have autonomy to regulate times and space and start at the right level and adjust their studies according to their prior knowledge. In the selection of courses, they can choose the learning packages they like best. In terms of duration of study, they can plan and complete their studies in from 3 to 10 years, depending on regulations administered by the DE providers and institutions.

The DLs are given the autonomy to plan their educational desires, as there are different problems and distractions along the way. Problems may include illness, job changes, family concerns. Among the distractions that DLs may experience are: anxiety, lack of confidence, procrastination, passivity, lack of motivation and feeling of isolation. As in other parts of the world, distance learning problems in Malaysia may not only be physical but also psychological.

Learning Styles

Throughout their pre-tertiary education, the Malaysian DLs are *teacher dependent*. When enrolling into a distance learning programmes and courses, they almost immediately have to become *self-directed* learners. Such a revolutionary change in learning styles can have varying effects on the learners (Verma, 2004). Malaysian DLs can find the concept of 'self-directed learning' sometimes difficult and frustrating simply because they are the ones who have to take the initiative to learn. Since distance learning is a new approach, DLs may vary in how they approach, create, and use the many opportunities available to them.

Distance Learners Motivation to Learn

In DE, the success of the DLs to a large extent relies almost entirely on having a strong sense of purpose for pursuing distance courses. Self-esteem, family commitment, better job and promotional prospects fuel strong motivation and commitment. In general, the learners discipline and self control, and how they form a framework to guide their own actions throughout the duration of their study, basically determine whether they will persevere and continue or be overwhelmed by the curriculum and abandon their intentions. Distance learning does not suit all learners. Additionally, in the era and expansion of technology use in education, the technology itself can serve two functions. It can boost and enhance teaching and learning and produce a satisfying educational experience, but unfortunately it can also deter and discourage learning and teaching.

The principles of learning, individual differences, motivation and learning styles have clear implications for adult learning and particularly so for adult distance learning. Before discussing these, however, is worth establishing what 'adult education, 'and' adult learning within the Malaysian context of DE means.

ADULT LEARNERS' EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

It should be pointed out that adult education in Malaysia is relatively underdeveloped. According to Mohamed Idrus (1996):

> ...there is no professional association of adult educators, no degree courses in adult education and no organised activities such as classes, study groups, lecture series, guided discussions on correspondence courses that the Malaysian adult can readily engage in (p.30).

The adult education programmes that are available are generally based on nationally identified 'need', on the assumption that the population or individuals concerned need to change their attitude, behaviour and knowledge in ways which lead to the achievement of national development goals. Examples of such programmes are in teacher training, health, farming techniques, nutrition and others. Targeted learners

take these programmes as a social responsibility involving the mass of the population, rather than a voluntary individual option and presented in a collective manner.

FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS

The literature concerning adult learning contains much information about the nature of adult learners, how they differ from children and teenagers as learners and the implications of this in practice.

Rogers (2002), for example, describes four critical key characteristics of adult learners which are all relevant to Malaysian distance adult learners:

1. They have different orientation to education and learning.

2. They have an 'accumulation of experience'.

3. They display 'special development trends'.

4. They are 'anxious and ambivalent' about learning.

Orientation to education and learning

Today modern living seems more complex than ever, as adults cope with the demands of multiple roles, the stresses of a fluid workplace, and the pressures of child and elderly people. A long list of causes for these increased demands is easily found (Daly, 2000; Niles et al. 2001): technological advances; the changing nature of work, workplaces, and working relationships; international economic competition; the changing demographics of workers, families, and communities; and longer life spans, among others. Adults have always had roles and responsibilities as workers, family members, citizens, consumers and community members. However, role expectations have changed. For example, workers now have increased responsibility for decision making, teamwork, and their own career development. Single parenthood, blended families, longer-lived elders, and more women in the work force complicate family responsibility.

These subjects comprise what Kegan (2000) calls "the hidden curriculum of adult life"(p.45).; in this curriculum adult roles-parenting, partnering, working, and living in an increasingly diverse society are "courses" in which they are enrolled.

Most Malaysian adult learners have multiple tasks, responsibilities and opportunities. They are free to choose to participate in education and bring with them a special orientation to learning that arises out of their perception of time as finite. Kidd (1973) describes their condition in this way:

> Adults have more stable interests and a different perception of time. They are able to internalise long-range goals and work toward them over a period of time. On the other hand, many adults, as well as youth, live in the here and now and will seldom work toward distant goals unless they themselves have a commitment to these goals. To the old, what time is left may appear very short, and to be valued rather than spent...(p.48)

For an adult learner, the investment of time in an activity may be as important a decision as the investment of money or effort.

According to Kidd (1973: p.49), the perception of life as an 'ever increasing past, a fleeting, pressured present, and a finite future' may drive adult learners towards or away from education. It exerts pressure for resolving conflicts and solving problems but it also 'involves conflicting concerns, needs and desires which can become essential content in the learning process'.

Accumulation of Experience

Adult distance learners approach education with experience unavailable to the child. Furthermore, much of the experience is qualitatively different from that of children. It is derived from a wide range of roles and responsibilities. The accumulated experience usually includes many events of impact and stress.

Despite the many similarities in adult roles and responsibilities, the sum of each person's experiences leads to differences in values and beliefs and in ways of reacting to new information. Knox (1977) observes that representative samples of adults in their fifties are more varied in learning ability than representative samples of those in their twenties. Although the members of the groups appear to be quite similar, they are actually more heterogeneous than a group of children. Adult learners are in many ways unique and these differences affect preferences for modes of learning and learning environments, which form the learning style that the learners adopt.

The significant role of past experience in the learning process of adult DLs is clear to see. Ausubel (1968) maintains that it is what the learner already knows that is the most important factor which influences learning. Brudage and MacKeracher summarise what happens in the adult learning process:

> Past experience...determines what information will be selected for further attention and how it will be interpreted,; and determines what meanings, values, strategies, and skills, will be employed first. If these are found to be suitable, new learning will proceed efficiently and productively. If these are found to be unsuitable, the adult will first search back through all previous experience for some suitable material, which can be applied indirectly. If nothing can be found, the adult is faced with a considerable challenge: to acknowledge the inadequacy of meanings, values, and strategies (1980: pp.32-33).

If this challenge is too difficult for the learner to confront, then the learner may well reject the 'validity, value and necessity of learning anything (ibid.). Past experience, therefore, whilst it can be the base for new learning, can also be an obstacle which discourages learning. This often involves the requirement of 'unlearning', that is the need to examine established meanings, values, skills and strengths, and to proceed to a new awareness and to new insight about themselves as learners.

Special Development Trends

Here, the term 'development' refers to changes in personal characteristics and attitudes. Studies in adult development have revealed that adults pass through

developmental phases that are different from those experienced by pre-adults. During periods of transition following major life changes, for example, adult learners can appear receptive to education and learning related to reassessing in personal goals, reasserting themselves as valued members of society, and reconfirming self esteem. The periods of transition trigger learning in two ways:

1. A change in life circumstances, which occurs unexpectedly, may require learning in order to adapt to the new situation.

2. Slower transitions may allow more comfortable accommodation to change by stimulating learning as the transition occurs.

Anxiety and Ambivalence about Learning

Adults typically confront educational opportunity and participate in learning with mixed feelings and even with fear. Life changes produce stress, which can be harmful in excess. Learning itself is an active process, and there may be some discomfort, even pain, in giving up which has become comfortable. Learning can demand a 'temporary surrender of security' (Sheehy, 1976). Even when the decision to engage in learning is voluntary, changes in thoughts, attitudes and values can induce anxiety, which may be exaggerated by doubts about learning potential, and ability. Know (1977) notes that the capacities tend to be underestimated and underused.

During a period of crisis when the ego is already under stress, fear and anxiety may be the highest. A major effect of anxiety is distraction from the learning tasks, because our faculties are put to work mobilising personal defences. When stress is high, adult learners can find it difficult to communicate in learning situations, some displaying 'high oral communication apprehension' and they may try to avoid oral communication altogether.

An area of ambivalence which affects education and learning concerns autonomy. Adult learners have deep-seated needs to move toward autonomy and self-direction. Normal adult learners' development involves a gradual increase in personal

willingness to take responsibility for guiding one's life based on values and ideas chosen by one (Rogers, 2002). As adults strive for independence, however, there is also a need for approval and support of others. In general, if adult learners have too little autonomy, their dignity can be affronted, their motivation inhibited and their pleasure in learning stifled. But learners suddenly confronted with more responsibility for their own learning than they expected, or are used to, usually respond with anxiety, and sometimes withdrawal.

Learners, therefore, require a learning environment that minimises anxiety and fosters confidence. While some tension is normal, even desirable for seeking out learning potential and stimulating personal challenges, there is also a need to avoid extreme stress, which can produce negative effects.

PROFESSIONALS AS ADULT DISTANCE LEARNERS

It is clear that adult learners learn in different ways to other learners, but they also learn in different ways to each other, depending on the amount and nature of their experience.

Professional learners are likely to have relatively high incomes, access to resources, and a variety of lifestyles. They are also most likely to continue their education; they are better established in their communities; and they are more mobile; and more confident in their abilities (including the ability to learn) than a cross section of the general population. These types of learners often feel heavily pressed for time, as their careers absorb a great deal of time and energy. Former educational experience may have left some of these learners ill equipped, as a result of its emphasis on teacher centred or authoritative presentation of information, and encouragement of dependency relationships with teachers.

While few of these DLs doubt their own learning ability, their participation and learning are affected by the need to avoid revealing professional incompetence in the

public. With regard to the role of experience in learning, these learners possesses technical vocabularies and specialised frames of reference for relating new information to old information. That same experience base can be a handicap in learning for other than job related purposes.

In addition, adult learners can be expected to have adequate levels of cognitive development for most learning endeavours, but when it comes to involving the adult learners who are professionals in planning and evaluative processes, obstacles may arise. These learners are usually capable of meaningful involvement, but they may feel that time pressures and the need for precise, problem centred information make it necessary for authorities to diagnose needs, set the objectives, and determine the learning activities for continuing education programmes.

Understanding DLs seems simple enough when we consider how we are able to understand our face-to-face (f2f) traditional full time learners. Nevertheless, DLs are not easy to talk to. They are frequently not around to talk to, and will not stick around if the DE programme does not work for them. On the other hand, the DLs themselves have been seen to make little use of the consultation time arranged by the distance teachers. This sometimes make the teachers wonder about the well being of their DLs.

When thinking about raising real awareness and sensitivity to distance learners, it is important to understand the assumptions and inclinations distance teachers already have on DLs and their capabilities as learners. Like many DE providers and institutions, there is a spectrum of learning issues and concerns that distance teachers and administrators at DE institutions are particularly concerned. Since DE was introduced only in 1971, DE providers and institutions in Malaysia are still fairly new in operationalising the DE programme, and naturally in the process of wanting to improve the DE programmes, and all professionals involved have to face DE issues and problems such as:

Changing the Mind Set of the Learners

When discussing *changing the mind set* of the DLs, it is imperative that one ask the following questions first: What knowledge do the prospective DLs students have? What skills do the DLs actually have to help them survive the learning process? What experiences are the DLs likely to bring to the DE programme? What cultural backgrounds do the DLs have? What are the DLs goals and motivations in pursuing DE?, What learning styles and approaches are most successful for the DLs? A whole list of questions to ponder on. The questions above suggest that each learner is a unique and complex entity. Engaging in DE is like learning a new game. It is not the same as traditional face to face education. It requires learning new skills and approaches, and most important of all, ability to be an independent learner in the search for knowledge is crucial. This is where the need to change the mind set comes into play.

Education in Malaysia has a long tradition of teacher centred approaches in its primary, secondary and perhaps tertiary education as well. Learners are sometimes too dependent on their teachers for knowledge and information. Spoon-feeding of information has been overwhelmingly practised, so much so it has become a learning culture among many Malaysian students. How do you change that learning culture, and how do you change it with students who are at a distance? Surely this is not an easy task.

Changing the Learning Tradition

In addition to its 'teacher centred' pedagogy, the Malaysian education system has a long tradition of being 'examination oriented'. Paper qualification(s) have been seen as the intrinsic motivator and objective in the pursuit of education. Such an orientation has consequences for the learning and teaching process. Teachers for example teach to ensure that their students perform well in the examinations. The percentages of passes and failures are crucial to all schools. The 'quality' of teachers

and teaching is often evaluated by 'numbers and percentages' of examination results. Students learn in order to pass exams successfully. Rote learning, surface learning, and memorisation are among the most popular ways of learning employed by the learners.

Such an orientation seems to be common among DLs at many DE institutions in the country. At the end of the programme, DLs want to receive their degrees successfully, and this is what matters most to them. Can such an orientation be changed? How can DE providers and institutions bring about change on the learning and teaching process? Can DLs cope with changes in learning styles and tradition?

Language Mastery

In addition to the learning tradition, language imposes another barrier to DLs. Distance teachers are given the flexibility to use the national language or English or both as the language of instruction in face to face instruction and consultation. Although most DE courses provide modules which are mostly written in Bahasa Malaysia, language remains a learning issue primarily because the text books adopted are mostly still in English. Although it is the official second language in the country, mastering English is not easy for all learners. The Chinese learners for example, have to cope with learning and mastering not only Bahasa Malaysia which is their second language, but also English which is a third language to them. This can pose a learning barrier to some learners. There are claims that English standards are declining among the population (Ali, 2000) in Malaysia as elsewhere (e.g. Hong Kong). The English texts could provide a 'shock' to the students whose English is poor. In the end, textbooks often remain on the library shelves, and students continue to be dependent on lectures, which are normally in Bahasa Malaysia, and lecture notes. Being at a distance, complicates the language issue. How do DLs cope with the language problems? How do they digest the information? How do they learn?

Time Dictatorship/Flexibility

Like many other DE providers in Asia, DE programmes and courses are governed by time. Malaysian DLs in general have little say as to when they can begin and end their DE programmes or courses. There is an official start date, and an official end date for all the courses offered via distance. DLs write their examinations and tests on specified dates, and attend tutorials and classes according to the schedule outlined for them. One possible impact of such inflexible practice is it can prolong the DLs' period of study, or it could increase deferment and dropout rates from a single DE course or programme.

Technology Accessibility

Technology has been seen by many as an agent of change, an agent of improvement that will help learners and faculty members perform better. Malaysian DE institutions have in the last 5 years improved their computer and technology services to reduce the ratio of 1:200 (one computer to 200 users or students) to a ratio of 1:20. In addition, the institutions have embarked on a campaign, 'ONE computer for One student', encouraging students to purchase computers. Many institutions provide interest-free loans for students wanting to buy computers. In the latest effort to increase computer literacy among its students, some institutions have produced their own computer brand.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that there are many computer labs on campus, and massive computer developmental programmes, the issue of technology accessibility to DLs is still a concern. For DLs, it is often difficult to make use of resources on campus. DLs may own a PC or a MAC, but they do not always have access to the Internet or the local network, and many are not able to buy a computer. What about those courses that require DLs to complete assignments electronically? How can DLs overcome the technology accessibility issue successfully?

DE ISSUES IN MALAYSIA: REVISITED

In recent years, many innovative changes have been introduced in primary education, secondary education, vocational education, and tertiary education in pursuit of educational improvement and the government commitment to extend education to all Malaysians. *Information* and *communication technology* play an important role in gearing the education system for the future, in terms of both improvement and extending education opportunity to more people as compared to the past.

30 to 40 years ago, the number of Malaysians who entered higher institutions was small, and the opportunity was limited to those who were able to support themselves financially. There was an educational *scandal of wasted potential*, a term I borrowed from Gordon Brown which he uses to describe the past, when only a fraction of the population in UK entered HE. Such a description is also true for many countries, including Malaysia. Today, there are many learners in developing countries for whom tertiary education is still not within their reach.

The present higher education is vastly different from the HE attended by our parents. Bridges (2000:p.40) claims that "...students' experience of 'university life' and the kind of learning which takes place ...is very different from the kind of experience available in a traditional university setting". The UUM vice-chancellor states that:

> *Like many HE in Malaysia and all over the world, higher institutions are making progresses everyday to realign itself with new wave of thinking, skills, media, technology, pedagogy , etc. As a result, we are different but better than higher institutions in the past. What we need are changes in people, administrative, lecturers and students to absorb, utilise and function effectively in the new university environment of today.*
>
> *FawziUUMNC/12.10.01/Canselory*

The development of educational media, expansion of ICT, different modes of teaching and learning: *correspondence education, direct learning, adult education, long life education, distributed learning, distance education*, perhaps later digitalised education, all contribute to the complexity of today's education. Thus the educational quality and experiences that today's students embrace is very different from and more

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complicated than those students from ten, fifteen years ago. An educational counsellor at UUM, Hamzah Samat, comments:

> *I have been an educational counsellor, a lecturer, and an educational consultant for almost twenty years. Over the years I have constantly reflected and thought about the educational system, the progress of educational technology, and all the media available...something that I and many other students of my generation did not get to use. Today's students are more fortunate...but bear in mind that with such magnitude of progress in educational technology, media, tools...all of which give rise to the phenomenon of too much information, students get confused, and bogged down having too much information out of which, quite often they do not know which is more valuable than others. At the other extreme, you have students who do not know how to go about studying effectively in this new era of learning, or those who gets agitated with the fast moving educational tools around them. Understanding or trying to understand the students and how they learn is something that we lack information on and needs attention, especially for the benefit of tomorrow and the future. I sympathise with such students...*
>
> *HS/EduCounselor18.01.01/UUMHEP*

Over the last ten years learners of all ages have flooded various Malaysian educational institutions (public and private) in pursuit of education. In meeting this great demand, tertiary institutions have invested money, energy, time, and valuable resources.

Distance education (DE) has a long-standing tradition of practice in HE but has become a growing phenomenon, empowered by the development of today's information and communication technologies. DE is attractive to policy makers because it provides flexible and easily accessible learning materials. Furthermore, it is often adopted in the belief that DE generally costs less than the traditional method of education. DE has been turned from an educational method into an educational alternative and is being marketed aggressively. So much so, that learning institutions have increasingly become an industry delivering educational goods to a market.

However, while the supply side seems ready and able to jump into the bandwagon, the markets' readiness for distance education is questionable and less obvious (Kasim

et.al 2001) The 'rush to market' metaphor disguises the many learning issues that need attention. The 'non-completion' cases of DLs for example in many DE institutions is a growing concern as noted by Garrison (1987) and by Eisenberg and Dowsett:

> For many years the question of drop out has figured highly in the distance education research. Drop out is an important factor to address not only for reasons of high rates occurring in a particular year or for a particular course, but also for the underlying long-term issues of better resource use and course quality. (1990:p.231)

It has been acknowledged in the literature that dropout among DLs is a result of many variables. Being a 'heterogeneous' group of learners, this can be expected. DLs dropout rates vary from one institution to another, and it is difficult to make comparisons between institutions within a country or between countries (Garrison, 1987). Even within the same institution, the rate of dropout between one programme and another varies. Unless an effort is made to understand the distance learning process, it is difficult to understand the dropout rate and its causes. There could be many micro and macro attributing factors (i.e. psychological; educational background; motivational; attitudes; education self-concept; technology literacy; the variability of DL support system; distance learning courses; environment etc.) that may cause a distance learner to pause, extend, or to drop their educational odyssey all together. DE providers need to understand the learners' population in order to provide a better DE courses and programmes in the future. After all, only so much can be gained from statistical findings. If causes and learning issues are to be understood and changes made or negotiated, then understanding the DLs and their learning experience of the programmes is essential. Thus, the effective and practical way to understand DLs is to 'walk in their shoes'.

Over the last 50 years there have been many studies looking at different aspects of DE. Nevertheless, as Hawkridge (1995) puts it "... many challenges remain to be answered". Evaluation in DE for example, according to Hawkridge, has a patchy past. Although undeniably there have been many improvements made in DE, these

improvements have mostly been made without any formal evaluation of distance learning.

Research in distance learning generates insights into how and why DLs tackle their studies. Although the social and domestic context is different from conventional educational settings, the crucial issues of approach to study and the influence on learning outcomes are of equal importance. Extending understanding of course design and approach to study also seem to be important research areas.

Researching distance learning allows DE providers to understand and to improve distance learning. Nevertheless, the distance education literature as described by Marland (1989) contains little discussion on researching learning at a distance. In addition, Kumar (1996: p.168) states that "Dearth of researches in the area of distance education …and inadequacy of existing research evidence to predict the satisfaction and success of distance learners has served as motivating factors for undertaking research to fill in the important research gap." The lack of understanding of DLs, the distance learning process and the limited literature on it are three strong motivating factors to pursue research in this area. The demographic characteristics of DLs are never homogeneous. There may be similarities and differences between and within institutions, cultures and countries. A basic demographic characteristic of the population of Hong Kong, for example, according to Kember et al. is that

> … it comprises a very crowded community. With nearly six million persons living in an area of only 1,000 square kilometres, Hong Kong is radically different from countries like Australia, Canada and the UK. This not only makes for crowded living conditions, but also means that students are not geographically isolated. Obviously this has implications for the organisation of courses, especially regarding tutorials, and for conceptions of the word 'distance', as implied in distance education.   (1992:p.25)

DE may exhibit different issues and problems in different countries. In Malaysia, a nation rich with its cultural plurality, DLs come from culturally diverse backgrounds. When these DLs enrol into DE programmes, they may according to Lauzon (2000) experience pressure to adhere to a story that is not their story, to subscribe to a

knowledge that is not their knowledge, to adopt values that are not their values, while their stories, knowledge, or values are viewed as irrelevant, are denigrated, or worse yet, are considered "wrong" (p.65). In light of the cultural differences, distance learning may pose different barriers and challenges to different cultures. The lack of information and literature on culture and DE may serve as another motivating factor to pursue research into distance learning.

If learning and providing education is the ultimate goal of DE programmes, then knowledge and information about how DLs learn should be a central ingredient in DE courses and programmes. Morrison (1989) observed that removing barriers to effective learning and improving the quality of learning outcomes begins with the question: What and how are people learning and what affects that process?

The connotation of the word 'distance' is that the success of distance learning requires learners to be independent - a requirement not fully fulfilled based on my observation of DLs at Universiti Utara Malaysia. The success of DLs is dependent on their ability to survive the distance learning process. To survive the distance learning process requires the DLs to be able to self-direct their own learning and to have the 'know-how' to learn effectively. Some commentators go so far as to claim that becoming independent, is itself a paramount educational aim, as Paul (1990) claims, "...producing independent learners is ultimately a more important criterion for institutional success.". The concept of an independent learner is not absolute. To start with, DLs should be 'self-sufficient' learners and have the 'right' mind-frame at the point of entry of a particular DE course or programme.

What does it mean to be an *independent learner*? How easily can one change from being dependent learner to an independent learner? These are two important questions that need to be addressed. Being independent involves learners changing their personal values such as openness to new ideas, attitudes (self-motivation), to attain and develop new skills (such as time management, study skills, problem conceptualisation, research and library skills), etc., a quest that is certainly not an

easy task to fulfil. Nevertheless, it is a process central to the concepts of distance learning and lifelong education. And, these are important weapons that DLs need to have in order to survive DE successfully.

Traditionally, full time learning on campus has been characterised by high interaction and dependency on course instructors. At the other end of the spectrum, DE provides minimal interactions between the learners and distance teachers. This is where autonomous skills and the ability to carry out self directed learning are most crucial. The lack of these and the feeling of isolation have been the main factors contributing to attrition and delay in DLs' completion of their studies. In Malaysia, the main weakness of the present education system is that it contributes very little towards nurturing self-directedness. It is a concept foreign to many education providers. It requires a redefinition of the teacher's role from a transmitter and controller of instruction to that of facilitation and resource provider to self-directed and autonomous learners. Generally, institutions around the world have adopted on this new concept, to varying degrees. Although many institutions of higher learning in Malaysia have tried, through the initiative of individual faculty members, to introduce teaching approaches for the development of autonomy there is still a great need to increase DLs autonomy in the conventional institutions. The lack of autonomous skills and ability to carry out self-directed learning is evident in our DLs. The number of DLs' enrolment has increased significantly, and consequently the number of DE providers and institutions have also expanded enormously. However, even with the significant increase and interest in DE, DLs still finds problems in coping as self-directed learners. They need a lot of support from the distance teachers and educators.

Changing or adapting from being one type of learner to another is not an easy task, certainly not for any educational system that has historically institutionalised a 'teacher-centred' educational orientation throughout its primary, secondary and higher education. Although the Malaysian Ministry of Education has for the last 20 years implemented **Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah** (KBSR) *New curriculum for Primary School* and **Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah** (KBSM) *New curriculum*

for Secondary School in part to impose a learner centred paradigm, change is slow coming. The 'teacher-centred' pedagogy has a long tradition in Malaysia, and its impact has been evident among many generations of students, who have become dependent on teachers, lecturers and lecture notes.

Progress towards producing 'independent learners' is on-going but slow. In part this may be for cultural reasons. Malaysian students in general are shy, and love to distance themselves from their respective teachers. The acronym **PJJ** which stands for **Pengajian Jarak Jauh** (literally it means *Distance Education*), is often jokingly explained as either: *Pelajar Jarang Jumpa* (*DE instructors seldom meet DLs*) or **Pensyarah Jarang Jumpa** (*Students seldom meet DE instructors*). Despite the lack of interaction between DLs and DE instructors, they (DLs) are very dependent on their teachers for their learning. They (the learners) would expect to be spoon-fed with as much information as possible. Lectures and lecture notes are vital for their success.

In distance education, dependence on the learner's part can be seen as a handicap to the distance learning process. 'Spoon feeding',which in many instances is a by-product of a teacher-centred education orientation, cannot be expected to be practised and delivered in a distance teaching and learning process. Nevertheless, 'spoon feeding' of a different kind can be adopted in DE, and there are some DE programmes of just this kind, i.e. where modules and lecture notes are prescribed for the learners. A dependent learner is not in control of the learning process. Rather, a dependent learner is more likely to prefer to be controlled by the instructor, or even by other learners. Quite often, the dependent learner's motivation is to complete the task or assignment required for a course. They are not motivated to do anything extra, i.e. to challenge its usefulness or to apply what has been learned more broadly or personally. They just do not see the need to extend their learning process to its fullest capacity. This view is still quite common among Malaysian tertiary learners. Quite frequently, they view knowledge as a *commodity* that they need to 'have', instead of

looking at knowledge as a learning process. This point has been underlined by Thorpe (1979):

> We should begin from the assumption that course materials are not the course: rather that the course is ... a process of interaction between students, the materials and the tutors and that, in this sense, tutors and students 'produce' courses as well as course teams (p.13).

In short, those who achieve success in distance learning programmes have been independent DLs who have the essential tools and do well in coping with the barriers they face in their education endeavours. Thus, it is imperative that DE institutions improve their capacity to develop independent learners. Understanding and getting to know the DLs and the process they go through can help distance institutions produce better, self-sufficient DLs in the future. In addition understanding the DLs can contribute to most components of distance education(i.e. the course design, teaching, training of distance instructors, improving the infrastructure of DE, improving learner support systems, etc.)

Undeniably, meeting the learning and instructional needs of the DLs is the basis of distance education success. As more students enrol in distance education programmes, distance education providers and institutions all over the world will witness learners coming with different backgrounds taking advantage of the learning opportunities they offer. Thus, getting to know the learners, their learning experience, and the coping and adapting processes the learners develop must be addressed to gain an understanding of how better to meet and facilitate the diverse needs of the DLs. Such an undertaking will provide a better understanding of learners' needs in distance education, and ultimately may provide better distance education courses.

CHAPTER 3
CONCEPTS & THEORIES IN DISTANCE LEARNING

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT

The definition of DE continues to evolve and this is a continuing source of discussion and dispute among scholars, policy makers and practitioners. This is not simply a consequence of changing technologies. *Distance teaching* and *distance learning* have always been perceived as different from the conventional education in terms of its delivery method, but quite where the difference lies is seen differently by different commentators.

Michael Moore (1973), perhaps the leading scholar in DE in the United States, has defined DE as separating teaching and learning behaviours. That is, the student and teacher are separated from one another by both *time* and *distance*. The idea that DLs and teachers are separated in both time and place has also been made by Holmberg (1977) and by Garrison and Shale (1987). *Distance teaching* as explained by Keegan (1996) is a process in which DE providers and institutions plan and prepare distance learning materials. Distance learning, on the other hand, is seen as a distinct and separate learning process. Separate not just in time and location but separate as an educational process. Despite these attempts at definition, the terms *distance learning* and *distance education* are mostly used synonymously and interchangeably, and with about equal frequency in the literature. DE is identified with education "…beyond the special spaces (campuses) traditionally set aside for such learning (Cantelon, 1995: p.3). It is described as providing a learning environment in which there is a geographic and temporal separation between the teacher and student (Perraton, 1988). It is also described as a discontinuous interaction between student and teacher (Garrison and Shale, 1987; Keegan, 1986) as well as a situation in which the student has control over learning, rather than the teacher.

For some, the focus in distance education is on the word *distance*; others emphasise the word *education* and make links with theories of adult learning. 'Distance' entails how the learning, teaching, and the relationship between the distance teachers and DLs are conducted.

In this thesis I am assuming that the basic characteristic of DE is the separation between the distance teachers and the DLs in space and/or time (Perraton, 1988), the volitional control of learning by the learner rather than the distance teachers and non-contiguous communication between the DLs and teachers mediated by print or some form of technology (Keegan, 1986; Garrison and Shale, 1987). This distinguishes DE from traditional or conventional education, even though much conventional education takes place away from the lecture hall or the classroom and is, in fact, located at a distance from the interaction between students and teachers. Keegan (1996: p.50) claims that DE can be defined as a mode of education that exhibits:

1. the quasi permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process;
2. the influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services;
3. the use of technical media – print, audio, video or computer – to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course;
4. the provision of two way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue; and
5. the quasi permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals rather than in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings, either face to face or by electronic means, for both didactic and socialisation purposes.

Keegan (1996: p.50)

In discussion of DE, one source of confusion arises from the conflation of DE with 'Open Education', not least because many DE institutions describe themselves sometimes as 'Open Universities' (OU) or 'Open Distance Learning' (ODL). 'Open' education itself has multiple definitions, implying at various times: learner autonomy, open access, a pedagogical approach and theories of adult learning. From this perspective, it can be characterised as an independent and individual form of education. Others, though, argue that DE is not a distinct field (Garrison 1989; Garrison and Shale 1990). Mackenzie, Christensen and Rigby (in Stewart, Keegan and Holmberg 1983) stress that DE 'shares the same goals and the same educational philosophy as many different methods of instruction. It differs from them primarily in the means, in the method itself.'

While many DE practitioners argue that DE is a distinctive form of education, Garrison and Shale (1990: 4) maintain that *distance* is a constraint, not an attribute. They argue that the word *distance* does not transform the fundamental nature of the educational transaction. Therefore, process issues should be the basis on which DE is conceptualised. They stress that the keyword in DE is *education*, not distance. Education is concerned with 'purposeful organised learning supported by a teacher in communication with the student' (Garrison 1989: Preface). Thus, DE is primarily an educational transaction in which the interdependent relationship between teacher and student is the chief characteristic. When distance teachers and DLs are in a non-contiguous relationship, technological media are necessary to mediate the educational transaction.

Currently many of these long running debates are resurfacing around the concept of 'e-learning. The 'new' media used to support DE simulate the conventional educational exchange between distance teachers and DLs so closely that many differences are falling away. Indeed some would argue that the new media enhance interaction and presentation. 'Distance' is no longer a constraint but a positive educational advantage, providing content 'just in time' (JIT) at the point of need and free from the noise and distractions of the conventional classroom. As a result, DE

and traditional education are converging (King, 2004; Walker, 2002). Otto Peters, for example, states that there is growing convergence between conventional education and DE and that, rather than being marginal to the university, DE is increasingly an integral of the mainstream. Peters further argues that as 'universities become instruments of mass education, as higher education consequently becomes politicised, and as information technologies increasingly transform curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment, mixes and hybrids of ODE and conventional teaching, in the form of "flexible delivery," become dominant and ubiquitous' (Walker, R., in Vrasidas & Glass (2002: p.111).

In terms of this thesis, the key distinction that should be made is between *distance education* and *distance learning*. As mentioned earlier, the two terms are frequently used synonymously but since the thesis is primarily concerned with learning strategies among DLs it is conceptually important to keep the perspectives of students apart from educational theories and organisational practices. I will also use the term *distance teaching* to refer to all those communications that emanate from the distance teacher. DE then becomes an overall term referring to the entire process.

DEFINING LEARNING IN DE

It is apparent from the literature concerned with the nature of learning that there is very little agreement about what *learning* actually is. The American Heritage Dictionary defines learning as follows: 'To gain knowledge, comprehension of mastery through experience or study.' The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines learning simply as 'knowledge acquired by study.' Such definitions are problematic and may sometimes be unacceptable because of the nebulous terms they contain, such as *knowledge, comprehension,* and *mastery*. It is difficult to define with great precision what learning is, and possible only to describe its effects and how people go about it. After years of trying to synthesise learning theory, Kidd (1973:p.23) goes as

far as to suggest that 'there is no answer to the question "what is learning?", any more than there is, to the question "what is water, gas, electricity?"

In common parlance, the word 'learning' carries at least two meanings. There is a general meaning of learning involving change, often in knowledge but also in behaviour. For example, Kimble (1961: p.6) defines learning as 'a relatively permanent change in behavioural potentiality that occurs as a result of reinforced practice'. This behavioural definition, however, is not accepted universally and many argue that learning has to do with very complex processes that involve the whole self. It is possible that learning defies precise definition because it is used to describe a product, a process or a function. When learning is used to describe a product, the emphasis is on the outcome of experience. When it is used to describe a process, an attempt is made to account for what happens when a learning experience takes place. When learning is used to describe a function, the emphasis is on aspects (such as motivation) which are believed to help 'produce' learning.

Many writers argue that learning is a cultural phenomenon Merriam and Cafarella (1999:pp.399-403) for instance claim that learning springs from the interaction between the individual, the learning processes and the socio-cultural context within which the learning is set. Yet, the learning theory that is currently most often invoked in these context of DE, constructivism, makes claims to universality in learning in terms of process if not in terms of content. Other theorists argue for a multi-faceted approach, Weinrich, for example, lists four main processes: reinforcement through reward and punishment; imitation of role models; identification, a 'process which is more powerful than imitation, through which the (learner) incorporates and internalises the roles and values of the...significant (other)'; and structuring, in which the learners 'actively seek to structure the world, to make sense and order of the environment (in Henriques,1984:19).

ADULT LEARNING IN DE

DLs are normally adult learners whose education is more likely to be on part-time basis than full time. They may include:

- Full time employees who may be seeking advanced degrees or receiving corporate/job training.

- Rural students who may be at a distance from educational institutions.

- Physically challenged and homebound students who may find attending educational institutions difficult or impossible.

- Learners who are more interested in learning than in receiving a qualification

- Those who may find transportation to the university inconvenient.

- Economically disadvantaged learners who may desire access to good educational centres, but who are not able to relocate due to economic considerations.

- Incarcerated individuals who may not be allowed direct access to conventional educational facilities.

- Traditional learners who are physically attending classrooms, but who, given the DE choice, may opt to switch.

- Lifetime learners who wish to continue their education throughout their lives.

Until very recently, DE has attracted DLs who mostly comprise adult learners (Courtney, 1992; Hardy & Olcott, 1995; Holmberg, 1995; and Garrison & Shale, 1990). Exceptions include the 'School of the Air' in Australia and some specialist provision for children in hospitals. DLs are therefore a distinct group. In comparing DLs with conventional students, Leverenz (1981:p.554) writes that "Because of the vast differences in age, sex, college classification, marital status and enrolment status, it would be wrong to treat both populations in similar ways." Additionally, the cultural differences (e.g. ethnic background, culture perceptions towards education and its importance, different learning styles and learning orientations) all add complexity to the picture of a distance learner. Theories and principles of learning, individual differences and learning styles have clear implications for adult learning and particularly for adult distance learning. Before discussing these, however, is

worth establishing what is meant by *'adult learning'* within the context of this research.

The term 'adult learning' is generally used in two ways. Firstly, it is used to describe a process through which people continue to learn after formal schooling ceases and which may take various forms. The second refers to the organised activities that institutions like UUM provide for the adult learner population.

Other terms such as *'continuing education'* and *'lifelong learning'* are often used instead of *'adult learning'* which carry negative connotations of remedial activity in, for example, literacy and numeracy. Throughout this research, however, 'adult learning' refers to positive educational activities, which prepare professionals for career development. The term 'adult', in itself is a broad one and refers here to anyone who has assumed the general responsibilities associated with adulthood, such as working or parenting, or who is simply responsible for his or her own life. This usually means anyone over the age of twenty.

INTERACTIONS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

"The goal of education is growth. And the goal of growth is more growth...Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself" (Dewey, 1991).

'Interaction' is important in DE, not just because it keeps students actively engaged in the course but because 'interaction' lies at the heart of learning. An idea most developed by Dewey.

Dewey based his philosophy of education on the experiences of the learner, that is, the combination of thought and social interaction. Dewey also believed that an effective educational experience requires two key processes-*interaction* and the

continuity of interaction. He believed that such interaction is unique to individual learners, that each learning experience builds on a student's own previous experience. As to the role of the learner in the educational experience, Dewey (1938) was steadfast in his belief in the need for active participation by the learners:

> There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active co-operation of the pupil in the construction of the purposes involved in his studying (p.87).

Interaction lies at the centre of any learning experience and it has been identified as one of the major concepts in DE (Moore, 1989; Wagner,1994; Muirhead, 2000) Dewey's statement goes beyond the requirement that the learner actively participate in his or her own learning, to specify that the learner needs to be an active participant in the 'formation of the purposes' of the learning. Dewey further argued that education is based on interaction of an individual's external and internal condition. Interaction and the situation within which one experiences the world cannot be separated because the context of interaction is provided by the situation. He postulated that "an experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment..."(p.43). The idea of transaction suggests intersubjectivity between the individual himself or herself, other people, and his or her surrounding environment.

The need for learners to be 'active learners' and to participate in the formation of goals for their learning remains a key educational principle. Learners must act on the available information in some way, since learning is not a process of soaking up information and giving it back in a test or examination of a course or subject (as evident in the 12 years of mandatory education in the Malaysian educational system). Learning is not meant solely for the purpose of passing an examination or getting a piece of qualification, but is a constructive process. The process of learning involves building knowledge structures, making connections and creating new information, differentiation of similar ideas, and becoming aware of patterns and relationships.

Collaboration as manifested in group activities, e.g. academic discussions, is also important to learning, as the very process of collaboration requires acting on and working with knowledge. That action facilitates the development of knowledge structures. A key question for DE is how to engineer this process of interaction in contexts marked by 'the tyranny of distance'.

Technologically, many of the problems of achieving distance appear to be solved. DE systems now have the potential to involve a high degree of interactivity between the distance teachers and DLs, even in rural and isolated communities separated by perhaps thousands of miles. Successful DE systems involve interactivity between teachers and DLs, between DLs and the learning environment, and among the DLs themselves, as well as active learning in the classroom.

Nevertheless, interaction seems to be treated as a quantitative measure rather than as an educational quality. As an educational concept, 'interaction' is still vague, and detailed research is needed to discover what meaning interaction has for students and instructors. Past studies in DE, for example, do not normally explore the distance learner's perspectives on learning, particularly not in-depth and thick descriptions of how interactions enhance or frustrate learning. Research on the effect of DE has been focused on student outcomes, but not on the affective aspects of DE.

Within the Education literature, the words: *interaction*, *interactive* and *interactivity* have been used constantly but with little regard to what these words mean when applied to learning. Wagner (1994) identifies a basic conclusion:

> General discussions of interaction do not distinguish between the two categories of interaction found in contemporary instructional practice: interactions that are the property of learning events and delivery system interactions, which are the property of media... (p.6)

The theoretical basis on which interaction models are based affects not only the ways in which information is communicated to the distance learner, but also the ways in which the learners makes sense and construct new knowledge from the information which is presented.

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The contemporary view has been the traditional, information processing, transmission approach, based on the concept of technology performing formal operations on symbols (Seamans, 1990). The key concept is that the distance teacher can transmit a fixed body of information to DLs via an external representation. The teacher represents an abstract idea as a concrete image and then presents the image to the DLs via a medium. The distance learner, in turn, perceives, decodes, and stores it. Horton (1994) modifies this approach by adding two additional factors: the student's context (environment, current situation and other sensory input) and mind (memories, associations, emotions, inference and reasoning, curiosity and interest) to the representation. The distance learner then develops his or her own image and uses it to construct new knowledge, in context, based on his or her own prior knowledge and abilities.

The alternative approach in thinking about learning is based on constructivist principles, in which a learner actively constructs an internal representation of knowledge by interacting with the material to be learned (Laurillard, 2000). This is the basis for both situated cognition (Streibel, 1991) and problem based learning (Savery & Duffy, 1995). According to this viewpoint, both social and physical interaction enter into both the definition of a problem and the construction of its solution.

Though these two alternatives are totally different in nature, distance teachers and course designers usually start with empirical knowledge: objects, events, and practices, which mirror the everyday environment of their DLs. Then, they develop a presentation, which enables the DLs to construct appropriate new knowledge by interacting with the instruction. In relation to this model, Simon (1994: p.74) comments, "Human beings are at their best when they interact with the real world and draw lessons from the bumps and bruises they get".

In relation to the media, a key issue is whether the technology is seen as offering new ways of thinking about teaching and learning, or whether their use is limited to offering conventional modes 'at a distance'. Schlosser and Aderson (1994), for example, see the need to artificially recreate the teaching-learning interaction and reintegrate it back into the instructional process. This, they believe, will offer DLs an experience much like traditional, f2f instruction, via intact classrooms and live, two-way audiovisual interaction.

Perraton (1988) argues that with the most effective choice of media, the instructor becomes the facilitator of learning, rather than a communicator of a fixed body of information. The learning process proceeds as knowledge building among distance teachers and learners.

DIMENSIONS OF INTERACTION

Interaction at a distance takes many forms; it is not limited to audio and video, or solely to instructor-learner interactions. It is important also to consider the sense of connection that DLs feel with the distance teacher, aides, facilitators and their peers. Garrison (1990) argues that the quality and integrity of the educational process depends upon sustained, two-way communication. Without connectivity, distance learning degenerates into a transmission model like the correspondence course model of independent study. The learner becomes autonomous and isolated, and many procrastinate, and eventually drop out. While this model might work well for a few, for most students, effective DE should not be an independent and isolated form of learning; it should approach Keegan's ideal of an authentic experience.

The implication is that education is a collaborative experience, `a matter of bringing together the teacher and student through the process of communication' (Garrison and Shale 1990: p. 29). The emphasis is on interactive communication as a two-way transactional process between what I call the *distance interactive learning triangle*, in which all play an active role.

Diagram 3: The interactive learning triangle of Distance Learning
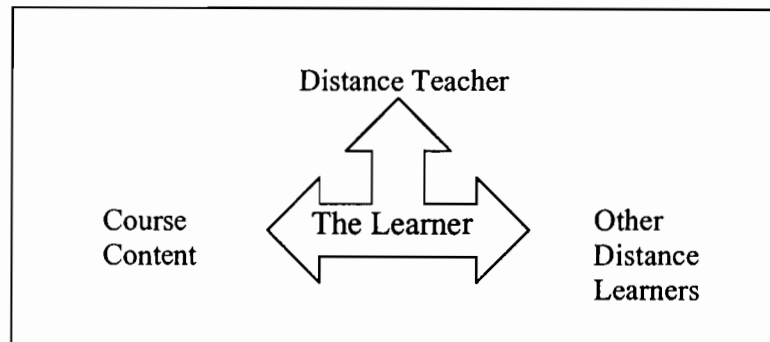
In the educational context, a `transaction' allows the meaning of the topic under discussion to be negotiated; that is, there is the prospect of mutual learning taking place. 'Active learning' means that the learners must respond in some way to the learning material. Reading or observing is not enough; learners have to do something with the learning material. They may need to demonstrate that they have understood the material, reprocess new material to incorporate it with existing knowledge, or apply the new knowledge they have acquired to new situations.

Feedback

The provision of feedback is essential to making communication an interactive process in education, especially in DE. Feedback in DE involves more than informing the learners of how they are progressing in their courses. It provides the means to motivate students and give them a sense of belonging to the course. There have been many studies that indicate that the lack of immediate feedback has contributed to the feeling of isolation among DLs (Vrasidas, 2002; Vrasidas & Chamberlain, 2002; Hara and Kling, 1999). Stevenson, Sander, and Nayor (1996) found that one of the most important elements promoting learner satisfaction in a course was timely and encouraging feedback. Several other researchers (Roman, 1997; Wagner & McCombs, 1995, Gourley, 2004) supported the importance of feedback in DE.

Feedback provides DLs with knowledge of results (e g that they have learned correctly), or an indication of how well the material has been learned. Feedback alone does not guarantee a transactional process. Two-way communication can be as manipulative as one-way transmission if the student is not given the opportunity to consider alternatives and express his or her views. A student whose feedback consists of confirming the delivery of information or uncritically agreeing with the DE instructors' view is not participating in the educational transaction. Nor is a DE teacher one who merely confirms that the student is right or wrong. In an educational situation, some sort of explanation or discussion is required. Holmberg (1989) argues that his concept of guided didactic conversation overcomes the one-way traffic of learning matter in distance courses and simulates a face-to-face conversation between distance teachers and DLs:

> The conversation that can be simulated in a pre-produced course is primarily felt to be one between the course developers and the individual students. The former build up an image of the students expected to study their courses and endeavour to address them as individuals. This leads to a simulated `conversation', which tends to encourage individual text elaboration (p.22).

The point that Holmberg makes is that, ultimately, the simulated dialogue creates an internal dialogue in which students discuss the content with themselves. Even though there are fewer opportunities for f2f encounters, the DE teachers' ability to bring about the interaction between DLs and learning materials is important as it promotes thinking and individual interpretation.

The extent to which an internal dialogue can be created in the mind of the student depends to a large extent on the nature of the learning materials. The varieties of media available to distance teachers today provide numerous ways to encourage interaction. A well- written book or a stimulating lecture, for instance, may encourage a high level of interaction in the DLs without any apparent overt actions. On the other hand, DLs who appear to be actively responding to a computer programme may not be thinking about the alternatives offered by the machine, but merely taking random guesses until the correct answer is found (Bates 1990: p. 6).

Bates suggests that one way of evaluating the quality of interactivity is to ask what kinds of thinking it is likely to simulate. Does the activity merely encourage and reward correct responses (rote learning), or does it encourage the higher levels of thinking suggested, originally, by Bloom (1956) of synthesis, analysis and evaluation? Similarly, feedback can merely provide correct answers, or it can suggest a variety of alternative responses, and ways to evaluate between them.

Because media differ considerably in the ways in which they encourage interaction and promote learning, the distance educator needs to select a multi-media package carefully so that the different media complement one another. As most distance universities like UUM, still use print as the main teaching medium, the emphasis should be on how integration of multi-media with the printed materials makes a contribution to communication and education.

Diagram 4 portrays distance learning within an ICT environment. It introduces another dimension or interaction component into the interactive learning triangle, which is viewed as a medium, which may shift the patterns and content of messages.

Diagram 4: The Distance Learning Interactive Framework within ICT Environment
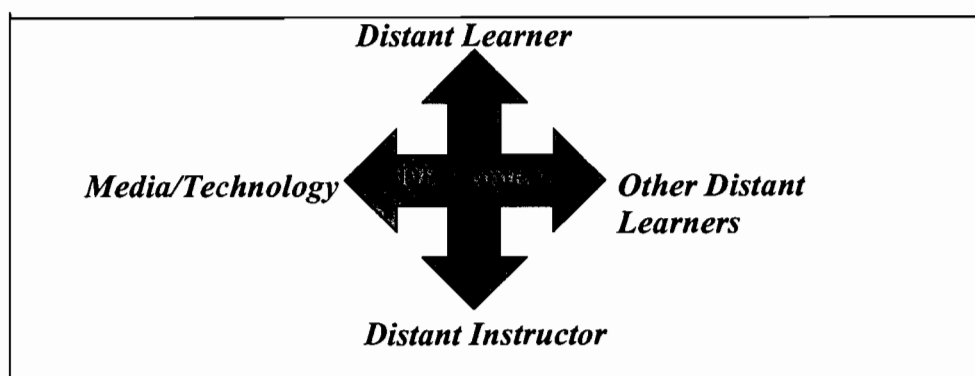
Many commentators argue that DE is expanding at an extremely rapid rate. Too often, DE instructors, tutors, instructional designers and curriculum developers have become captivated with the latest educational technologies and media without dealing

with the underlying issues of learner characteristics and needs, equity of access to interactive delivery systems, the influence of media and technology on the teaching and learning process, and the learners in the distance learning process. On technology for example, much of what has been published is description of technology implementation in courses but not a great deal has been written on distance learners' frustrations and learning setbacks using technology. For example, despite the potential of online interaction, as described by Harasim et al. (1995) and Bates (1995) in (Murphy et al. 2001) in promoting reflective thinking, offering flexibility of time and improve social aspects of learning, researchers like Hara and Kling (1999) have pointed to the lack of research on students' frustrations using technology and have called for more research on this area.

To summarise, it is necessary to think about interaction, not as a universal category but in its context of use. Table 5 summarises the main components of interaction in relation to distance learning and their educational purposes.

Table 5: Four Different Components of Interactions

learner-content interaction	Refers to student involvement with course materials as they construct their own knowledge by accommodating new information into their existing cognitive structures.
learner-learner interaction,	Refers to one to one interchanges between learners, as well as communication within groups of learners for collaboration, clarification, feedback and support.
learner-instructor interaction	Refers to communication between learners and instructors for the purpose of generating and maintaining interest: presenting, clarifying or elaborating information, supporting learning; or providing feedback, evaluation, and encouragement.
Interaction with technologies	Refers to technology supported learning environments through the online databases, journals, and learning activities such as independent inquiry, research, writing and browsing can facilitate interactions. *One to one* interactions that occur between an instructor and a learner, or two learners, can be accommodated through email or one-one online chats. *One to many* communications can be supported through *list-serves, bulletin boards, and online chats*. Video-conferencing offers additional opportunities for one-to-one and one-to-many interchanges.

The different types of interaction shown in Table 5 identify the relationships that can occur between different components of interactions in today's DE environment. To what extent are these interactions similar? How does the fourth component support or deter other interactions? If the ultimate objective is to facilitate learner-content interaction, clearly there must be an equation that leads to the ultimate objective, an equation that is still not much understood.

The new media that have come into existence through developments in technology have both educational and communication advantages. According to Bates (1984: p.223), the new media promise a wider range of teaching functions and a higher quality of learning, lower costs and more interaction and feedback. Computer-assisted learning, for example, allows students to try out answers and obtain immediate feedback on their performance. But, in a country like Malaysia where DE is still fairly new and expanding rapidly, the use of information technologies and media in delivering courses needs continuous reflection and improvement.

CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: A *'POINT OF VIEWING'*

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON METHODOLOGY

The decision to adopt a research methodology depends on a range of factors, including the nature of the problem to be investigated, the circumstances of the study, the resources available and the predispositions of the researcher. The choice of a particular research methodology depends critically on the relationship between methodology and research objectives. Nunan (1992) writes that "...research is a process of formulating questions, problems, or hypotheses; collecting data or evidence to these questions/problems/hypotheses; and analysing or interpreting these data (p.3)." These are the fundamentals of any research, and underlying decisions about methodology is the constant question as to whether the information collected provides the evidence that answers the question being posed.

Many decisions about methodology can only be made once the study is underway and the shape of the study begins to emerge, but it is also true that the delineation of a research methodology requires *a priori* definition. This depends on the kind of research being pursued, its purpose and objectives; and based on which research 'tradition' and 'paradigm'.

At the most general level, there are four key or important words relating to decisions about methodology that need some attention and explaining. They are: *tradition, paradigm, assumption*, and *world view*. There have been many definitions given to explain these words but one in particular that I find useful in defining the word *tradition* comes from Hamilton (1994:p.61). *Tradition*, according to Hamilton refers to "... a set of general assumptions about entities and processes in a domain of study, and about the appropriate methods to be used for investigating the problems...in that domain." What is emphasised in this definition is the fact that social science methods do not come as packaged solutions, but carry with them an associated set of ideas,

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values and practices that are of a more general kind. To apply the method requires some understanding of their origins, history and associations.

In relation to the term *paradigm*, an extensive and diffuse literature has grown up following the first use of the term in social science by Thomas Kuhn in his influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first published in 1966. What Kuhn meant by a 'research paradigm' was the collection of common, but mostly unacknowledged beliefs that are held by a particular scientific community at a given point of time. Just as in mathematics, a paradigm defines the envelope within which particular conditions apply, so, Kuhn argued, research is carried out by particular groups of scientists who share the same view of the world at a level of fundamental principles. In this thesis, I borrow Guba and Lincoln's definition (1994:p.106) of a paradigm as a "…basic belief system or world view that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways."

The words *assumption* and *world-view* take us beyond what is commonly understood as methodology and indicate a philosophical orientation behind the research that reflects the researcher as a 'being'. The choice of paradigm, therefore, does not simply reflect the researcher's attitudes towards the investigation process but represents the investigator's theoretical orientation. A paradigm or a tradition, therefore, is related to: 1.) forms of thinking about the essence of the social phenomena to be investigated (ontology); 2.) the nature of knowledge to be generated and the relationship between the knower (researcher) and the known (object of study) (epistemology) and 3.) the ways used to obtain knowledge in the social world (methodology and methods of inquiry).

Different terms have been proposed or adopted by social science philosophers to label those paradigms that have been used to interpret and explain the social world, including positivist, interpretivist, feminist, critical theorist, and the range of 'posts' – post-modern, post-structural, post-colonial and post-positivist (LeCompte and

Preissle, 1993). It is not always clear which is the dominant paradigm and which are 'alternative paradigms.' Some authors use the term 'phenomenological' approach as an umbrella concept to include any research paradigm opposed to positivism. (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Others assume that the label 'qualitative paradigm' is associated with interpretative, contextual and naturalistic inquiries; alternatively the term 'naturalistic inquiry' is used by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in referring to a qualitative research study in which the researcher experiences the world of his or her respondents.

In the research study I describe in this thesis, the nature of the study requires a paradigm that takes seriously the understandings of their worlds that participants in the study are able to provide. Positivist, and other related alternatives were not compatible with the intent and purpose of my research. In this study it cannot be assumed that social facts can be directly observed and described by an outside researcher. Nor can a methodology be adopted that ignores the need for some degree of interpretation by the observer. The values, moral judgements and ideology of the observer cannot be ignored.

In conducting the study I needed to be able to assume that human behaviour is basically different from the world investigated by the *physical sciences* research in the sense that behaviours include in themselves the meanings which we attach to our actions. Any research that attempted to ignore these intrinsic meanings cannot provide adequate account of human behaviour. As noted by Parkin (1992:p.19): "Social facts are...partially created by the reasons people give for their own behaviour." The implication is that it was most feasible, practical and pragmatic (and indeed necessary) for this study to be conducted within an interpretative paradigm. Only in this way, I believed was it possible to gain a better understanding of the DLs and their learning experiences and behaviours as they pursued their educational experience at UUM. To restrict the study to considering only the objective social facts about DLs at UUM would have been to omit from the account any sense of their

meanings, interpretations and beliefs, and this I believed to be critical in understanding their experience.

This research study draws on the approach of *grounded theory,* which was pioneered by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory is one of many methodologies within the qualitative paradigm that has its own unique language and rules (see Charmaz, 2000 and Strauss & Crobin, 1998). It is considered by some to be the most comprehensive qualitative research methodology available (see: Annells, 1997a). Unlike the hypothetical-deductive approach that characterises most of science, grounded theory seeks to discover theory from the data and to provide detailed processes by which this could be done. Strauss and Corbin (1990:p.23) later suggest that grounded theory is "…one thing that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents…it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and the analysis of data pertaining to the phenomenon." This approach does not place theory ahead of data collection but assumes that the data collection and analyses stages are interwoven in a dynamic way throughout the whole research process.

The various epistemological, methodological and ontological paradigms considered treat differently subjective versus *objective* as well as *quantitative* versus *qualitative* approaches. They can also consider as different in the way that they see the role of individuals and structures in shaping social reality. Some advocate structural approaches, assuming that it is the structure (social, cultural, economic) exclusively, that determines the events, and in doing so they often neglect the role of human agents. On the contrary, action approaches or interpretivism defend the notion that it is the action of an individual or group which brings about the focus on the issue, sometimes to the point of neglecting the force of social structures and cultural differences in shaping the lives of individuals (Grint, 1997).

An important tradition within interpretative theory is that of hermeneutics, generally referred to in terms of the need for interpretation in elucidating meaning in human

action, or of a text or an art object. Drawing on German philosophy (including Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger and other contemporary thinkers) Giddens connects 'understanding' to 'language', emphasising the need to enter into a dialogue with the subjects of research in order to understand how they act (Giddens, 1993). Giddens also assumes that all understanding is situated in history and emphasises the need for "understanding from within a particular frame of reference, tradition and culture" (1993:p.63). Such an approach requires: 1.) the need to establish a dialogue between investigators and their subjects, and 2.) assumes that reality is shaped by social, cultural, ethical and genders factors.

To summarise, the interpretivist approach adopted in this study makes a set of assumptions that can be grouped as belonging to an interpretivist paradigm, as in Table 6

Table 6: Interpretivism Research Paradigm

	Interpretivism
Ontological Assumptions	Reality is: Socially constructed Holistic Contextual Multiple
Epistemological Assumptions	Knowledge Generated is: Context dependent Value Laden Time bounded
Methodological Approach	Case studies and Research Aim: Understanding Research Posture: Interpreter
Research Methods	Qualitative Based: Interviews Personal Observations Students journal Case Study
Evaluation **Validity** **Generalisation**	Thick Description Reflective Use of triangulation Naturalistic Generalisation extension to understanding

What was needed for this study was an approach that could explore and describe the world of distance learning and place the experience of distance learners themselves centre stage. The paradigm that best serves that purpose is one derived from

qualitative research because it acknowledges that reality is subjective and multiple. The social researcher has, in this case, to see life through the eyes of those whom he or she is studying, and that is my task in this research.

METHODOLOGICAL DECISIONS

Considering that focus of this research is the world of distance learners as they experience and perceive it led me to conclude that:

1. As the phenomenon is heavily contextualised, developing an understanding of the macro and micro-contexts of the world of the distance student needs to be a central feature of the study.

2. The research must be 'naturalistic' in the sense that I should experience the reality of those involved in the study and, further, that I should attempt to convey this understanding to the reader.

As a DE researcher, I believe the individual distance learners' perceptions, as well as their actions, play an important part in the expression of their reality, and that this perceptual knowledge must be integral part of the research. Accordingly, this research study needs to harmonise an interpretative paradigm and a subjective-qualitative inquiry with value mediated results. The methods of gathering data should match those assumptions.

Multiple qualitative research methods situated in naturalistic inquiry and interpretive methodology were used on the advice of Denzin and Lincoln (1994:p.2), who state that "the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure in depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured." *Interviewing* was the primary method, and this was supplemented by other research methods, including *student journals, personal observation* and *photographs*.

Student journals were used to document the students' journey and to capture DLs' questions, comments, and their own reflections as they examined their own learning in light of their developing understanding of the course content and of themselves as

students. The use of photographs was a speculative technique used to capture aspects of the student experience not necessarily amenable to description in words.

There is a final point to be made in relation to methodology that relates to the issue of 'research tradition', since my decision to undertake a qualitative approach in this study was intended to contribute to the popularisation of qualitative research in Malaysia. Qualitative studies in educational research are very limited in Malaysia, and to date, there has been very little work done using this form of educational inquiry, and none that I could find in the context of distance education. The dominant tradition has followed the positivist paradigm. A qualitative study offers a different approach from educational research in distance learning and generates a range of information of a different quality from that obtained in traditional approaches. Qualitative studies have been well developed and practised in developed countries, but the situation is not the same in developing countries like Malaysia. This research will, I hope, contribute to the growing field of qualitative educational research as the first study to use a qualitative methodology to study distance education at UUM and in the country.

ENTERING AN UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY

Many writers on qualitative methods call on the need for the researcher, as well as the participants in the study, to give a subjective as well as an objective account of themselves. Locke, Spirduso and Silverman (1993:p.107) suggest that "...every graduate student who is tempted to employ a qualitative design should confront one question, 'Why do I want to do a qualitative study?' and then answer it honestly." In addition the same authors emphasise that a qualitative research will not necessarily be any easier than a quantitative approach. Seeking to avoid statistics or numerical and complicated analyses is not a sufficient answer and has little relationship to having the personal interests and skills that qualitative inquiry requires.

How does one practise and employ qualitative research? How do *naturalistic inquiry, interpretative research, field study, participant observation, inductive research, case study*, and *ethnography* differ from qualitative research, or are all of them the same? A whole range of questions preoccupied my early thinking in this project. In the first stage I devoted myself to finding out more about qualitative method. It was a challenge for me because the research culture that I belong to was strong and I was an avid user of quantitative methods, following my experiences in my MA.

The very first book that Rob Walker, my advisor, gave me to read was entitled: *Points of Viewing: Children Thinking. A Digital Enthnographer's Journey* by Ricki Goldman Segall (1998) and this book helped to build my initial interest in qualitative research. Segall's approach was very humanistic. She was able to develop rapport with students, and with their teachers, and build trust and openness with them, even though she was using a very intrusive methodology (video recording). What I liked about her approach was the space that Segall provided to the students in her book. To an extent, the students themselves became *producers* and *directors*. Segal's direct participation made her part of the group and it seemed that the students were empowered by the space given to them.

I did not think that a quantitative approach would be able to duplicate or produce an account like this and I realised that this must be one of many advantages of a qualitative approach - getting a deeper understanding of a situation or issues at hand. Although I recognised that many research studies dealing with education in general use questionnaire surveys as a key technique for gathering data, I did not believe that this approach would be able to provide me with detailed information for a better understanding of the situation I planned to investigate. Segall's work, and other subsequent reading showed me that getting and building rapport with the distance learners was the most important thing that I had to do during my field work. This, in turn, would build the trust needed to attain the data and information needed for a deeper understanding of the distance learning experience at UUM.

Last but not least, although qualitative and quantitative research are different in many respects, the two methods are not simply different ways of doing the same thing. Both methodologies have different strengths and logics and are often best used to address different questions and purposes (Robson, 1993). Nevertheless, the assumptions and rationale for using qualitative research methodology in this study can be explained by looking at the distinctions between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms.

A key issue in the paradigm debate centres on the unity of the sciences: Are the natural and social sciences basically the same, or are the subject matters inherently different? In the discussion of phenomenology, Bernstein (1976) poses the distinction in terms of how theorists account for *'man-in-the-world'* either through a *'scientific image'* or through *'manifest image.'*

'The scientific image' perceive human beings as complex physical systems differing from the rest of nature. Therefore, scientific explanations of human experience and difficulties in this respect appear as temporary setbacks rather than as failures. The 'man-in-the-world' perspective argues that 'scientific points of view... are always naïve and at the same time dishonest' and that failure in science indicates 'deep conceptual or categorical confusions (see Bernstein, 1976:p.121).

Based on epistemology conceptions, the friction between these two has motivated debates and discussions over the years. Wilhelm Dithey posited that *knowledge* is derived from the *humanities* and the *natural sciences* (see Carr and Kemmis, 1983). The former aims at *understanding*, and the latter at *explaining*. Research methods have variously been classified as *objective* versus *subjective* (see Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The discussions and general concern has always been between discovery of general laws (nomothetic) versus being concerned with the uniqueness of each particular situation (idiographic); as aimed at prediction and control versus aimed at understanding; as taking an outsider's (etic) versus taking an insider's (emic) view (see: Merriam, 1998).

Although not all quantitative research is necessarily positivist, positivist studies that use a quantitative approach quite often use experimental methods and quantitative measures to test hypothetical generalisations. Qualitative research represents a fundamentally different inquiry paradigm. Qualitative research, broadly defined, means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantifications" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:p.17). Where quantitative researchers seek causal determination, prediction, and generalisation of findings, qualitative researchers seek instead illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar situations. Qualitative analysis results in a different type of knowledge from quantitative inquiry. Cronbach (1975:p.124) claims that statistical research is not able to take full account of the many interaction effects that take place in social settings. He gives examples of several empirical "laws" that do not hold true in actual settings to illustrate this point. This is not to deny the value of quantitative research for some kinds of inquiry; but to recognise its limitations.

Qualitative inquiry accepts the complex and dynamic quality of the social world. Johnson (1995:p.4)) notes that qualitative methodologies are powerful for enhancing our understanding of teaching and learning, and that they have "gained increasing acceptance in recent years." The intent of qualitative research is to understand a particular social situation event, role, group, or interaction (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 1987). It is largely an investigative process, in which the researcher gradually makes sense of a social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, replicating cataloguing and classifying the object of the study (see: Miles & Huberman, 1984). Marshall and Rossman (1989) suggest that this entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for the study; the researcher enters the informants' world and through ongoing interaction seeks the informants' perspective and meaning.

The ability of qualitative research to describe distance learning better was an important consideration for this study, not only from my own perspective as the researcher, but from the readers' perspective, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) claim: "If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them

information in the form in which they usually experience it (p.120)." Qualitative research reports are typically rich with detail and insights into informants' experience of the world which according to Stake (1978:p.5) "may be epistemologically in harmony with the readers' experience" and thus, more meaningful. Qualitative research uses the natural settings as a source of data. In this study, as the researcher, I observe, describe and interpret settings as they are; maintaining what Patton (1990:p.55) calls empathic *neutrality*. Patton points out that empathy "is a stance towards the people one encounters, while neutrality is a stance towards the findings (p.58). Qualitative research is based on assumptions that are very different from the quantitative research. Theories or hypotheses are not established *a priori* and in a qualitative research study, the researcher like myself is the primary instrument in the data collection, rather than some impersonal mechanism (see: Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). The researcher basically acts as the human instrument of data collection. Qualitative reports are descriptive, incorporating expressive language and the "presence of voice in the data" (Eisner, 1991:p.36). That is, data are reported in words, rather in numbers.

The focus of qualitative research is on the informants' perceptions and experiences, and the way they make sense of their lives (Locke et al. 1987; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Merriam, 1988). The attempt is therefore to understand not one, but multiple realities (see: Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Qualitative research focuses on the process that is occurring as well as the product or outcomes. Researchers are particularly interested in understanding how things occur (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990; Merriam, 1988).

Furthermore, qualitative research is an emergent (as opposed to predetermined) design, and the researcher focuses on the emerging process as well as the outcomes or product of the research. The research relies on tacit knowledge, and consequently, the data are not quantifiable in the traditional sense of the word as argued by Kaplan and Maxwell (1994); indeed, the goal of understanding a phenomenon from the point of viewing of the informants will largely be lost when textual data are quantified.

Last but not least, objectivity and truthfulness are critical to both research traditions. In qualitative research, the researcher seeks believability based on coherent insights and instrumental utility (Eisner, 1991) and truthworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) through a process of verification rather than through validity measures, as in quantitative research.

Patton (1990:p.59) points out that these are not "absolute characteristics of qualitative inquiry, but strategic ideals that provide a direction and a framework for developing designs and concrete data collection tactics," and they are considered to be "interconnected" (p.40), and "mutually reinforcing" (see: Lincoln & Guba, 1985:p.39).

This study was context bound and involved the use of inductive logic through which issues, categories and themes emerged from the DLs involved in the study. A qualitative methodological paradigm was the most suitable choice for this study and would facilitate the understanding of distance learning at UUM. The strengths of qualitative research employed in this study, derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on DLs learning process, and the research emphasis on words rather than numbers. Qualitative methodology works better for this study primarily because of two reasons: 1. As a researcher, I did not know a priori what I would find, and 2. because I wanted to generate data rich in detail and embedded in context because I felt that the experiences of DLs were inadequately understood.

Last but not least, I began from the assumption that our world is interpreted through language as means of communication and understanding. This provided me with another strong justification for using a naturalistic inquiry. The use of language, according to Heron (1981, in Seidman (1997) "...contains within it the paradigm of co-operative inquiry; and since language is the primary tool whose use enables human construing and intending to occur, it is difficult to see how there can be any more fundamental mode of inquiry for human beings into the human

condition"(p.26). Qualitative naturalistic inquiry based on research methods such as interviews, personal observation, students' journals and photographs as the basic modes of inquiry was thought to work well for this study.

Writing narratives of experience is becoming a common way of describing how people make sense of their experience. At the root of the naturalistic inquiry in this study is an interest in understanding the experience of DLs and the meanings they make of the distance learning experience at UUM. This study was designed as a single case focusing on DLs of different background at UUM. Research like this calls for a method that can provide deeper understanding to its enquiry and one that provides validity to its results later. Case study, which is one of the terms loosely connected to qualitative approaches to evaluation, was believed to be appropriate to provide understanding of the diversity of views and experiences of the DLs in the case under study, as supported by MacDonald and Walker:

> "Many of the quite legitimate questions that are put to evaluators, especially by teachers, cannot be answered by the experimental methods and numerical analyses that constitute the instrumental repertoire of conventional educational research. Such questions are directed at the experience of the participants, and at the nature and variety of transactions which characterise the learning milieu of the program. There seems to be a need to find ways of portraying this experience and this milieu so that prospective users of new programs can relate them to their own experience, circumstances, concerns and preferences." (1975:p.1)

In summary, qualitative methodology was chosen, because of the above compelling assumptions and rationale, but also because of its capability of allowing a naturalistic inquiry into the understanding of DLs at UUM. This was an important aspect, apart from the above rationale, and one of the most influential aspects in my decision making to employ a qualitative methodology.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In considering any methodology, ethical considerations are important, but perhaps especially so in qualitative studies, as the research itself is both more invasive and threatens a greater degree of exposure to the participant. Ethics means a 'set of moral principles and rules of conduct. Ethics according to Sieber (1993:p.14) relates to 'the application of a system of moral principle to prevent harming others, to promote the good, to be respectful, and to be fair'. Simons (1989) and Burgess (1985) have elaborately covered ethical issues in case study research in education.

Research ethics has become a major concern, particularly in health research but also, increasingly, in education. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) at its Annual General Meeting on the 28th August, 1992 expressed the view that all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for persons, respect for knowledge, respect for democratic values, and respect for the quality of educational research. BERA outlines a set of ethical guidelines for carrying out research that includes the researcher's responsibility to the research profession, to their research collaborators, the public, the funding agency, the intellectual ownership and their relationship with the host institution.

The Centre of Applied Research in Education (CARE), University of East Anglia has also outlined a set of procedures for conducting this kind of inquiry. The implementation of these guidelines realises the democratic mode of naturalistic enquiry, and at the same time protects the researcher. These basic characteristics are summarised by Simons (1987). First, interviews should be conducted on the principle of confidentiality. Second, the data should be used only with participants' consent. Third, providers would have control over how far they allowed the study and its findings to be made accessible to the public. Fourth, the report would aspire to reflect the research collaborators' judgements and perception of reality. And finally, the report would be progressively negotiated for clearance, first with individuals, and second with those involved in the study, i.e. primary stakeholders.

Plummer (1983: p.141) has identified two positions in discussions of social research ethics: the *ethical absolutists* (EA), and *the situational relativists* (SR). The EA sees ethical guidelines as essential for the protection of both the community and the researcher. The SR on the other hand, sees the ethical dilemmas of the social scientist as not special but 'coterminous' with everyday life, and argues that there can be no absolute guidelines: ethics have to be produced creatively in the concrete situation at hand, and any attempt to legislate this morality could simply degenerate into mindlessness. Aspects of both views seemed relevant to my study and so I opted for a middle path between the two positions.

In this study, the ethical issues were centred on two key areas of concern: informed consent, and the protection of participants. Informed consent refers to a process in which a competent research participant 'voluntarily agrees to participate in the research project based on a full disclosure of pertinent information' (Tymchuk,1992:p.128). Throughout this study, the respectful treatment of the DLs who agreed to being involved as research participants has been a prime concern. The process began by asking the DLs for their voluntary participation in the study and offering them several opportunities to decline without any penalty. If the learners were not interested in taking part, they could decline passively by choosing not to return the required informed consent form, or they could state overtly that they were not interested. The interviews involved in this study were aimed to be respectful and empowering. They were interactive and provided opportunities for the learners to question the process. The discussions we had were sufficiently open-ended to allow the DLs to disclose as much or as little as they wished.

Every effort was made to protect the confidentiality of the data. Before the interviews began, confidentiality and anonymity were agreed between the DLs and myself. All measures were taken to conceal the DLs' names and identities. None of the names used in this study are the actual names of the learners involved. Some are pseudonyms chosen by the learners themselves. Following the interviews,

negotiations of accounts with the DLs were undertaken to ensure that their views were accurately reported and fairly represented.

Consent from the DLs was acquired differently from one distance learner to another. For some, to be involved and able to work towards the completion of this research was deemed as exciting and this was enough for them to give consent. Familiarisation with research was another contributing factor towards gaining consent from the DLs. This was particularly the case with many of the learners involved in this study. Opportunities for familiarisation were few and scarce, and rested on a wider disparity of status that places other stakeholders like distance teachers, educators, course designers, and others in positions of perceived authority over the learners. The focus of this study on distance learners caused some distance teachers and educators at the institution to be somewhat sceptical and perhaps to feel threatened by the study. The number of such distance teachers was, nevertheless, small in number.

CONCLUSION

This study was intended to provide a 'thick' description and understanding of distance learning, including the context, situation, and actions that confronted DLs in pursuit of DE at UUM, that is, a study in the interpretivist tradition. Although qualitative research and in particular qualitative research with an interpretative approach have much been criticised, though often "...for not being something it never intended to be, and is not given credit for its strength" (see Borman, LeCompte & Groetz, 1986:p.42), I believed that qualitative methodology and its interpretative approach provide much promise if given a chance to work. This is particularly so in the Malaysian educational research. This study was intended to test this belief.

CHAPTER 5
THE CASE & ITS IMPLEMENTATION AS A
RESEARCH DESIGN

THE CHOICE OF A CASE STUDY DESIGN

I remember quite well asking again and again 'what really is case study?' At all times, this question is one that is easy to ask but difficult to answer. It seems to resist precise definitions despite the many attempts made (Bassey, 1999). These include 'the examination of an instance in action…to capture and portray those elements of a situation that give it meaning' (Walker, 1974,p.76) and 'the study of particularity and complexity of a single case' (Stake, 1995,p.xi). As a young qualitative researcher, I came to understand that 'case studies are as different from each other as their authors, so it is hard to pin down precisely what they are, or should be' (CARE, 1994,p.83). Case study has been used across a number of disciplines (Simons, 1980, Norris, 1990). As a consequence, it has come to mean different things to different people (Stake, 1995). The explanation given so far in this chapter is not intended to be comprehensive (interested readers can refer, for instance to MacDonald and Walker, 1974; Simon, 1980; Merriam, 1988; Norris, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995; and Bassey, 1999 for a selection of essays discussing case study research).

To understand what is meant by case study, Stake and Easley (1978) examined a collection of eleven case studies in science education that had been conducted by experienced case study researchers. These presented unique insights, since each researcher brings his or her own values to bear on the studies and reports by adopting a different focus or different mode of validation (Elliot, 1990). This does not mean that case studies have nothing in common, but it seems more helpful to look at features they share to get an idea of what they are. Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) point out:

...the case study evolves around the in-depth study of a single case, event or a series of linked cases or events over a period of time, the aim being to try and locate the 'story' of a certain aspect of social behaviour in a particular location and the factors influencing this situation so the themes, topic or key variables may be isolated and discussed (p.214).

As a summary, case studies are attempts to grasp and talk about the world of human experiences in a way that can be commonly understood; a naturalistic process of truth seeking (Kemmis, 1980:p.101). They claim to be 'strong in reality' (Adelman et al., 1980:p.59) and are focused, holistic studies which go for depth rather than breadth. They portray people and actions with sufficient context so that one has the possibility of understanding them better.

WHY EMPLOY A CASE STUDY?

Why employ a case study? Yin (1994:p.1) asserts that while the case study 'is one of several ways of doing social science research... (they) are the preferred strategy when "how" and "why" questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context'.

Case study is particularly suitable according to Yin (1994), not only in research that asks *how* and *why* questions, but also where the boundaries of phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. In this study I was particularly interested in avoiding over-categorising distance students in terms of their obvious and measurable characteristics and instead wanted to investigate the boundaries between their personal and domestic contexts, work and study, education and culture. In particular, I was interested in understanding the values that they (the learners) place as important in pursuit of their education, and values inevitably cross conventional categories, being elements of both phenomena and their contexts.

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Once research moves from observable and objective measures to considering subjective experience, generalisation becomes difficult. Distance learners experience distance learning in a variety of ways, and their realities may be quite different from those of other DLs at other DE institutions.

As is typical in case study research design, this study takes a focus on the 'particularistic' and the study itself is heuristic in that it illuminates understanding of distance learning at UUM. Employing a case study design made it possible in this study to learn more about the social world of the distance learners under investigation by means of involvement and participation in that world through listening to what the learners say and understanding their behaviour. With this intention, this study made use of a case study design that incorporates open dialogue with the DLs.

Another strong commitment I had in doing this research was to do research that would be useful and make a difference. In relation to this commitment, case study has a further advantage in that it can communicate with people who are not experts. As Adelman et al. (1980), write:

> Case study data is "strong" in "reality"...because case studies are down to earth and attention holding...recognize the complexity and "embeddedness" of social truths...present research in a more public accessible form of presentation than other kinds of research reports...The language and the form of presentation are hopefully less esoteric and less dependent as specialized interpretation than conventional research reports...(It) is capable of serving multiple audiences. It reduces the dependence of the reader upon unstated implicit assumptions and makes the research process itself accessible (pp.59-60).

I began this case study with no predetermined hypotheses. What I did do, in line with the tenets of Grounded Theory, was attempt to generate, gather, observe, intuit and sense what is happening in the natural setting and circumstances of distance learning at UUM (see: Merriam,1988). The objective was to allow for the existence of multiple realities by validating student experiences as a function of interaction and perception, and so discover the meanings they attach to their experiences in order to

understand how all the parts work together. Patton (1985) explains the approach precisely:

> It is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and interaction ... This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting-what it means for the informants to be in that setting, what their lives are like...what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting- and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting...The analysis strives for depth of understanding (p.1).

Research that attempts to understand the particular has precedents in history, psychology and elsewhere, but in Education this approach is sometimes difficult to explain. Stake emphasises that case studies are useful in Education because the audience who reads them (educators, parents or students) already know a lot about Education. This means that case studies can be "...undertaken to make the case understandable...Single cases are not as strong a base for generalizing to a population of cases as other research designs. But people can learn much from single cases. They do that partly because they are familiar with other cases and they add this one in, thus making a slightly new group which to generalize, a new opportunity to modify an old generalization" (Stake, 1995:p.85).

Case studies, Adelman et al. claim, are 'down to earth' and other writers make a similar point. The research task according to Daphne Johnson (1984) in Bell (1999: p.21) is "...to get where the action is, to get access, one way or the other, to the group and the activities they want to explore." Case study offers an opportunity for explanation and the questioning of taken for granted assumptions.

In this research, the most important task was to provide an accurate, relevant and truthful account of the learning experience that DLs at UUM undergo in their pursuit of education. It was not an objective of this research to generalize findings to other DLs at other distance learning institutions. Each distance learning organization may have its contributing factors towards learning success or failures, and issues. As Stake (1995:p.85) has pointed out, "Case study is not sampling research. We do not study a

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case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one case." Stake (1993:p.1) further posited that "Case study is not a methodology choice but choice of object to be studied...As a form of research, case study defines by interest in individual cases, not by the method of inquiry used." And, in this study, understanding the DLs at UUM was the objective of this endeavour. As Stake (1995) says, "We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily so as to how it is different from others but what it is, and what it does. There is an emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself (p.8)".

Stake (1993) calls the way that we are able to generalize from case studies 'naturalistic'. Gathering a true, honest picture of the DLs experience is certainly not an easy task. But, from the experience of the UUM DLs that naturalistic generalizations can be built. "Naturalistic generalizations develop with a person as a result of experience. They form the tacit knowledge of how things are, why they are, how people feel about them and how these things are likely to be later or in other places with which the person is familiar," (cited in CARE,1994,p.79).

A case study approach, particularly as it has been used in action research, places great importance on the perspectives of the DLs as participants rather than as theoretically derived categories in the perspectives of observers as they reach for definitions of the phenomenon. Case study offers many formal and informal opportunities for the DLs to participate in the study, to provide substantive input into the study, shaping its conduct and content. This is significant because only the experience of the DLs themselves will reveal the truth about the distance learning that they undergo. While this study did not fully engage the students in an action research project, the involvement of DLs as research participants, by co-operation and direct participation in the study was at the core of this research endeavour.

Stake believes that the case study is not just a text but that also the reader of the case study necessarily participates in the study:

> People learn by receiving generalization, explicated generalizations, from others, regularly from authors, teachers, and authorities. People also form generalizations from their experience...naturalistic generalizations...as different from explicated (prepositional) generalization...Naturalistic generalizations are conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life's affairs or by vicarious experiences so well constructed that persons feel as it happened to themselves...We have the choices to make in terms of how much we should organize our analyses and interpretations to produce the researcher's prepositional generalization (or assertions) or to provide input into the reader's naturalistic generalizations.
>
> (Stake, 1995,pp. 85-86)

The strength of a successful case study is that it should be authentic, contextual, and, if it is to meet Stake's requirements for naturalistic generalisation, needs to provide the reader a sense of being there. To gain the sense of being there was a concern that forced me to carefully build strong trust with the research participants in this study.

Stake's conception of case studies has a strong emphasis on place – on giving the readers a good sense of what it is like to be in a classroom, a school or a meeting. In chapter 3, I pointed out that DE is often characterized by not being at a location or in a place but is disposed or distributed to where ever the student is. This presents a particular methodological challenge for this study. There are many good reasons for adopting case study methods, but how will they work when the case itself has no fixed location?

This study employs several research methods, including student journals; photographs and observations, which complemented the interview, which was the primary method of this study. The use of multiple methods meant that data could be 'triangulated'.

Through a process of *negotiation,* the DLs checked the fairness, relevance and accuracy of my account and interpretations (see: Fensham et al. 1986). In this study, I negotiated the release of the data and findings with the DLs by asking them to check the accuracy of their contributions, and any comments given. I did this because I

realized the complexity and the embeddedness of social truth in distance learning at UUM.

Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmins (1980:p.101) suggest that case study allows for generalisations while attending to the subtlety and complexity of the case in its own right, and that it also recognises the 'embeddedness' of social truths. The successful case study report will be understood by a wide readership, and have three dimensional reality that allows the audience to respond to the report better. This understanding may also be seen as a step to action, though this cannot be guaranteed.

Case Boundary

In this study, the DLs partly contributed to the setting of boundaries, as what they said influenced me in deciding what else needed to be known in order to understand their actions and behaviours. In practical terms, the process of defining the boundaries is often dictated by the available resources (CARE, 1994:p.85). Kemmis (1980) does not reject the idea of multiple interpretations of a case study, but he contends that it is seldom possible to deviate much from the interpretation and conclusion given in the study.

In this study, I began with the broad questions of 'How is distance learning at UUM experienced by the learners? and 'What is the meaning of distance learning for learners?' The boundaries as I then imagined them were clear-cut - *the learning experiences*. As I began to understand the case better and started to focus my attention on several emerging issues in what Parlett and Hamilton (1976,p.93) refer to as 'progressive focusing', the boundaries extended outward to the learners' life as distance learners, as professionals, and as family men or women. At the end, when the whole case had been laid out, it contained data that extended from the learners, to their lecturers, other DE stakeholders at UUM; and from pedagogy to andragogy, and professional and educational policies.

Methodological Challenge in Conducting Case Study Research

Case studies attract methodological challenges. There are consequences for the research, the researcher and the reader, since they '...may penetrate the secrecy and so threaten the carefully constructed claims which form the basis of authority (MacDonald & Walker, 1977, p.187). They take the researcher in '...a complex set of politically sensitive relationships' (MacDonald & Walker, 1977,p.185) and can invade privacy and be highly intrusive into the lives of the people under study (Stake, 1977,p.106). Walker writes in the context of doing school case studies that:

> ...to interview someone, to observe someone teaching, to talk with teachers about the head, or with the pupils about teaching, are each potentially undermining of the facades which individuals and institutions construct in order to make the management of schooling possible (1983: p.157).

Therefore ethical considerations pertaining to participants (anonymity, informed consent) and to data (access, control, confidentiality, clearance, interpretation, publication) need to be given serious attention.

The Choice of a Case Study Design: Revisited

Taking into account what a case study involves I was in no doubt that this would be the most appropriate approach for the aims and the context of this research for the following reasons:

1. Firstly, it was among the aims of the study to understand more about the DLs voice and experiences of distance learning at UUM. Adopting a case study approach would enable me to provide a close up account, a comprehensive description of an instance within its realistic context. I did not choose an experimental design or approach, because I thought that it would not afford me the chance to explore the experiences of the participants and the nature of the programme more deeply. As MacDonald and Walker (1975) claim:

there seems to be a need to find ways of portraying this experience and this milieu so that prospective users of new programmes can relate them to their own experience, circumstances, concerns and preferences (p.1).

In that respect, the case study approach seemed to be the best way of portraying the experiences that MacDonald and Walker refer to. In addition, Yin asserted (1994):

> the case study is but one of several ways of doing science research…In general, it is the preferred strategy when "how" and "why" question are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real life context (p.13).

2. Secondly, and related to the previous reason, case study also gathers a wide variety of information, as long as it is legitimate and pertinent to the research questions. The issues that arise from this research can only be understood if viewed in totality. It may then be possible to clarify how the various phenomena interrelate with one another. A case study would allow insight into the full range of phenomena and perspectives, and therefore would 'get inside' the problem.

3. Thirdly, as I progressed into my research, I also discovered that case studies, particularly within the qualitative paradigm in Malaysia are very limited. Some of the case studies conducted in Malaysia were those done by Malaysian post graduates studying at CARE, UEA: Syed Zin (1990); Hannah (1995); Lebar (1995); Ratnavadivel, (1995), Lim (1997); Puteh (1998); Chow (1999), Tan (1999); Ali (2000), Kamal (2001) and Hassan (2003). Much other research in Malaysia, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was conducted using the quantitative approach. Although it is possible to conduct quantitative research without using a case study approach, I thought that a case study approach would be appropriate to researching distance learning experience, and this would generate a range of information of different quality from that obtained in positivist approaches.

4. Last but not least, I was also under the tutelage of the Centre of Applied Research in Education (CARE), which is one of the pioneers and leaders of naturalistic

inquiry in the UK. I had a good and caring supervisor who was an experienced caseworker himself (Walker, 1974;) and I had also been in touch with other experienced caseworkers (MacDonald, Elliot, Norris, Schostak, Maclure, Phillips, Robinson & Goodson). I was fascinated by this successful legacy and was indeed influenced by its tradition. Furthermore, I felt that working here provided me with the opportunity to familiarise myself with case study approaches. As a researcher this also meant an opportunity to apply the methodology in understanding distance learning at UUM.

WHY CHOOSE A SINGLE CASE?

It is quite common for one who know little about case study, or qualitative research, or for beginners in qualitative case study, to think that two cases or more are always better than one. This is a misunderstanding. Cases are chosen for a particular reason, not for quantity. In other words, double 'depth' in a case is generally more valuable than study of two cases, both of moderate depth. Yin (1984:pp.47-50) insists that multiple case study should limit itself to replication rather than sampling logic. In order words, the use of multiple cases is not to calculate tendency or frequency, but rather to compare and contrast instances and experiences. Due to this emphasis on comparing and contrasting cases, multiple case study is usually less ethnographic. In this study I needed depth of reality to understand distance learning at UUM and so I decided to focus on a small number of cases in one programme in one institution.

INTRODUCING THE CASE:
DISTANCE LEARNING AT UNIVERSITI UTARA MALAYSIA

Universiti Utara Malaysia was established in 1984 as a centre of excellence for Management Education in the country, and UUM seeks to reflect this in the design of its academic curricula. Located in Sintok, along the Malaysian Thai border and set on

1,061 hectares of forestland, Universiti Utara Malaysia is a popular venue for conferences and sports events. While Malaysia has a rapidly growing economy, development to date has been greater in the south than in the north of the country and UUM was established as a catalyst for the growth of the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia. The infrastructure and the services of the university provide the spin-off for other related socio-economic activities in the country. Besides teaching and research, the university also contributes to the social, economic and intellectual growth of the region. The University also plays a development role by being involved in various community projects either singly or jointly with other government or private agencies. The infrastructure facilities and human skills available in the institution are a valuable resource in helping the growth and development of those programmes and activities which are an essential ingredient in realising the nation's vision. This is in line with the university's mission as a centre of 'academic excellence', which is aimed at producing human resources that are able and committed to the development of both the region and the country. While mainstream students who enrol directly out of school continue to form the majority of the annual intake, the university is fully committed to enhancing study opportunities for those from less conventional educational backgrounds.

The university's special focus is management and it offers undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral programs in selected key areas which include management, business, education, accountancy, economics, social development, languages and scientific thinking, marketing, entrepreneurship and science management. In future, UUM will continue to develop diversified academic activities, which are competitive and at par with other universities in the region. This development provides opportunities to the society to increase knowledge in various management areas in order to create 'a knowledgeable society' in the country.

It is this political and economic drive that creates the basis for rigorous progress and expansion, and it was in this context that the Distance Learning Unit (*Unit Pendidikan Jarak Jauh* UPJJ UUM) was established in UUM.

DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM AT UUM

UUM Distance Education Unit (UPJJ UUM) was first established on 1st April, 1996 and is administered by The Centre for Professional and Continuing Education (PACE) of the University. The unit is specifically responsible for planning and providing distance programs and courses of various schools at the institution, which cater for current need of the market.

CENTRE FOR PROFESSIONAL AND CONTINUING EDUCATION (PACE)

PACE was established on 1st April 1999 to provide opportunities for non-mainstream students to obtain higher education qualifications. PACE is composed of three units: The *Distance Learning Unit*, the *Franchise and Twinning Unit*, and the *Extension Studies Unit*. PACE co-ordinates the offering of degree programmes via distance learning, franchise and twinning modes. In addition, PACE also offers professional and short courses to the general public in line with a philosophy of life long education. Future plans include working closely with reputable public and private agencies to offer professional and in-house programmes and courses. PACE's vision is to be a centre of excellence for providing professional and continuing education in Asia.

The main objectives of the UPJJ are:

- To provide opportunities to the Malaysian public to improve their level of education
- To provide opportunities to adult learners to pursue their highest level of education
- To promote higher education in the rural areas
- To improve the productivity and education of professional staff.

Since 1996, the Centre has continuously developed its DE programmes and courses. When it first started, UUM only had one distance learning study centre, and used its main campus at Sintok for f2f meetings, examinations and registrations purposes. Today, UPJJ has four DE centres or learning sites as shown in the following table:

Table 7: UUM Distance Learning Centres

	Name of UUM Distance Learning Centres
1.	*Universiti Utara Malaysia* (UUM)
2.	*Academy TV3*, Wangsa Maju, Kuala Lumpur
3.	*Yayasan Tregggganu* (YT) East Malaysia
4.	*New Horizons*, Sunway Metro, Petaling Jaya.

From its establishment, UUM UPJJ was required to be more than a traditional university providing degree level opportunities to those unable to secure places in the traditional universities of Malaysia, or those who were not able to attend a university degree programme full time. Current enrolment figures are given in Table 8.

Table 8: Statistics on DLs Enrolment at Universiti Utara Malaysia

Semester Program	BBA (Hon.)	BPM (Hon)	MSc IT
April 1998/1999	302	338	-
October 1998/1999	439	308	-
April 1999/2000	229	327	-
October 1999/2000	217	403	-
April 2000/2001	487	478	-
October 2001/2002	502	485	-
April 2002/2003	570	510	177
October 2003/2004	585	550	210

Source: DLs latest enrolment, UUM Registrar,Nov.2003

PJJ Programme Development

In its infancy, UUM UPJJ established a number of collaborative efforts within the schools in UUM to develop DE courses and programmes and PJJ academic staff were recruited to develop materials. Initially, two degree programmes were offered. The programmes were Business Administration (BBA, Hon.) and Public Administration (BPM, Hon.). Consequently, a third

programme: Masters of Science in Information Technology (MSc.IT) was introduced as a distance programme in 2002.

Course Development

The strategy of course development in UUM DE programmes is derived from that of the UKOU. All the course have written material as the principal medium. The courses are developed by course teams under a central project management based in PACE. The authors of the course teams are recruited from the different faculty at the institution. The development of a course is a one-two year project. The whole process starts by setting up a course plan that identifies the concept of the course. The academics involved as the 'authors' then write, discuss, and re-write their texts through several revisions. With the input of an instructional designer, the texts are then transformed for self-study. The most common instructional model for developing self-study courses used at UUM and many other DE providers in the country is the learning unit model. In this model, the course package is built up of learning units. The learning text is interweaved with didactical elements as learning objectives, key terms, study indications and self-evaluations. The function of these elements is to help the student with his/her learning activities by structuring the content, fixing the intention and elucidating the subject matter.

Entrance Requirement

All the Institutions of higher learning in Malaysia impose entry criteria such as A–level, Diploma or equivalent qualifications. Most institutions also provide credit transfer for holders of recognized and related diploma qualifications. At UUM, however, the entrance requirement is slightly altered to encourage participation. Apart from academic qualifications, UUM also considers working experience as an entry requirement. Among the various

possible ways in which a student can gain access to tertiary education at UUM through its distance education programme are:

2 credits in any subjects at SPM (O Level) Diploma

2 credits in any subjects at SPM (O Level)

plus 3 years minimum working experience

At other DE institutions, the entrance requirement is slightly different. At Open University Malaysia for example, it is designed to meet the institution's desire to democratise education. Apart from academic qualifications, OUM also practices the concept of recognition of prior learning, training and a minimum of 5 years' work experience.

Learning Materials/Course Materials

Teaching materials are made up of a combination of one or more of the following:

a) Printed Modules,

b) CD-ROM,

c) Web based materials,

d) Audio and Video tapes.

Instead of outsourcing content development, UUM decided to establish its own content development centre. This was done in order to ensure quality, prompt delivery and better control of the learning materials. Nevertheless, a small percentage of the content development is outsourced to outside parties as and when it is appropriate.

Course Assessment

The assessment mechanism comprises of both summative and formative components. The formative is made up of tests, assignments, laboratory reports and projects while the summative is made up of the final exam.

Typical distributions of summative/formative assessments are in the range of 60:40 ratio as shown in the following table:

Table 9: Types of Distance Learning Assessment at UUM

Types of Assessment	Percentage (%)
Formative	60
Summative	40

UPJJ Student Population

The UUM PJJ programme began with 640 students. Today (as of January, 2004) there are 7,117 number of students enrolled into the programmes. The establishment of UPJJ at UUM was driven by the perceived development needs of the country. UUM DLs show a wide variety of characteristics. The PJJ programmes and courses were set up primarily to serve learners who were currently excluded from the traditional education system and those who, for one reason or another had dropped out of traditional education. Particularly targeted are DLs from the rural areas, working adults (men and women) who had to work to support their families and those who needed retraining, professional upgrading and personal development. This description of the average DLs implies that DE programmes such as this seems to be an answer for adult learners with professional and family responsibilities. The flexible organisation of DE offered by UUM gives them the opportunity to obtain qualifications with prospects for a better job. DE programmes make earning a first degree more attainable. The professionally orientated course content is a response to the need for recurrent education. This implies that the original goal of the first OU in the United Kingdom, to supply a second chance for higher education, has broadened out to the goal of upgrading and updating in the sense of recurrent schooling.

Length of Study

The length of study for DE programmes at UUM varies between 3 to 10 years in length. DLs can complete their DE programme within three years if they receive credit transfers from their past educational endeavours, i.e. from diploma programs, and other certification. DLs can ultimately complete their degree programme if they follow the DE study plan structured by UPJJ. However, if DLs choose to plan and structure their DE according to their needs and constraints, they have 10 years to complete their degree. In any circumstances, learners at UUM need to register for a minimum of 2 courses (5 credit hours) and a maximum of 4 courses or 15 credit hours, in order to be acknowledged as having active DLs status at UUM .

PJJ Fee

The DE fee changes from one semester to the next according to the total number of credit hours taken by the DLs. Since the beginning, the DE fee has been constantly charged at RM120.00 per credit hour. In addition, DLs also have to pay RM300.00 for DE registration. This is a one time payment until the completion of study. In addition to all the above, DLs also have to pay RM30.00 as a library fee every semester.

Delivery System

UPJJ is currently using a variety of technologies in delivering its DE programmes. These include: printed modules – text in the form of print, video & audio – cassettes, online learning and discussion, in house television broadcasting, and direct human contact through four f2f meetings every semester. For online learning and discussion, UUM uses the WebCT delivery platform. When it comes to learning materials and delivery mechanisms,

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UUM believes in the concept of "multi–mode". Decisions about learning materials and teaching approaches are made by faculty members, and over the last three years, there have been many UPJJ instructors who have incorporated the use of information technology i.e. computers into their teaching, and requiring DLs to complete assignments using internet facilities.

Unlike the Malaysia Open University, Malaysia Multimedia University and other Malaysian distance programmes, DE at UUM does not adopt a single, centrally determined educational strategy or employ a single system of web-based or online learning. Instead, UUM distance instructors have the autonomy to decide when, and for what course, on-line learning should or should not be implemented. This means that the curriculum and instructional systems at UUM remain relatively uncentralised and unstandardised, and individual instructors are able to exercise a degree of judgment on how best to teach their courses. Learning modules remain as the primary learning tool or package received by all distance learners. Nevertheless, the use of ICT is central to the process of teaching and learning due to higher education policy adopted towards ICT by Malaysia Ministry of Education.

Programme Sustainability

As in most DE providers and institutions, the initial setting up of the DE programmes and courses at UUM was expensive. It is true that the cost of introducing and maintaining DE offerings through the use of technologies for instructional purposes is high, but for most technologies, costs have been dropping and are continuing to do so; and costs also go down as expenses are distributed among more users, thereby arguing for achieving efficiencies through greater institutional collaboration.

UUM UPJJ costs are driven by three considerations: *student support* – driven by the number of students and decisions regarding the nature and quality of

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services offered; *materials development and production costs* (i.e. for every completed modules, writers (mostly the PJJ instructors) are paid RM10,000.00 excluding the cost for module production) driven by the size of the academic programme; the media chosen, the media mix in any one course, and the overhead costs of the infrastructure, driven by the university and UPJJ management decisions.

Eventually, it is hoped that each UPJJ programme should be able to cover the cost of student support and the annual cost of developing new and replacement courses, and make a contribution to overhead costs and the costs of renewing the infrastructure, i.e. equipment, building, and software based system. In due course, it is hoped that UUM UPJJ will be financially self – sufficient. The UPJJ current cost projections suggest that sufficient number of potential DLs will be recruited to enable UPJJ to recover most of its operating costs and make a contribution to overheads, at fees that DLs will be able to afford.

THE UUM PJJ DISTANCE LEARNERS

The majority of DLs at UUM are adults beyond the traditional age of undergraduate UUM learners. They enrol into distance education programmes for various reasons, i.e. to improve their standard of living, to qualify for promotion, to prepare for a new job, to re-train, or even because this is something that they now want to finish. Many returning learners are *goal oriented* more than *task oriented*. At the end of their respective DE programme, they want to receive a degree or a professional paper qualification and this is often their main driver or motivation in pursuing HE.

DLs at UUM usually have busy lives, and their decision to enrol in DE programmes and courses must compete with their jobs, childcare (if they have

a family) household responsibilities, and other tasks which might pose learning barriers. They face a big challenge in providing undivided attention to their pursuit of education.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSITY OF UUM DLs

Holmberg (1995) points out that there "is no evidence to indicate that distance students should be regarded as a homogeneous group". Mindful of this warning, we can begin by looking at the demographic characteristics of DLs at UUM:

Ethnic Background

As stated earlier on, Malaysia is a culturally rich nation with a population of diverse ethnicity i.e. Malay, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, Portuguese, etc. Education in Malaysia is available to all Malaysians, and DE is an alternative mode of teaching and learning introduced to extend education to the fullest capacity. In doing so, DE providers and institutions including UUM have a culturally diverse population comprising every segment of the population and ethnic background.

Age

DLs at UUM are older than undergraduate learners. The age of DLs at UUM varies, some are young, middle aged, and there are also those who are quite elderly. The majority of the DLs at UUM are people who left education in pursuit of professional careers, etc. They return for different reasons, and this is reflected in their ages.

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Gender

UUM like at other tertiary institutions in Malaysia is has many more female than male students. The ratio on average in Malaysia is 1 male: 3 females. The ratio at UUM is 1:2. In part this reflects of Malaysia's overall population. There are more women than men nationwide, but this difference among students is far greater than the population figures alone would suggest.

The dominance of female learners at UUM PJJ programmes as in other DE institutions in Malaysia is partly influenced by the flexibility that DE provides. Older female DLs, like their male counterparts, also have many responsibilities ranging as professionals holding different positions in the public and private sectors, to being mother, wife and provider. Thus, to many female DLs, attending university full time is just 'unthinkable'. DE overcomes some of the barriers to realising this aspiration.

Location

DE attracts DLs whose geographic distance from a higher institution discourages or prevents enrolment in on-campus classes. This is true with the PJJ programme at UUM. DLs enrolled at UUM PJJ programmes come from all over Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Case study was chosen in this research study because it allowed the deployment of a variety of research strategies to capture the experiences of distance learning at UUM. It was an ideal research approach when holistic, in depth description were needed. The primary aim of a case study in this research was portrayal. The benefit of case study, that is evident in this study was that it could penetrate aspects of distance learning at UUM that may not readily be accessible by other research methods.

CHAPTER 6
THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK, STRATEGIES AND MECHANICS

Due to the nature of the research problem(s) presented in this study, I needed to be able to gather data rich with information. However, it was difficult during the fieldwork to identify what was useful, relevant or important versus what was not. This question was related to others:

What research framework, strategy and application should I employ?

How was the study going to be executed?

What were the research barriers and limitations?

Attending to all these questions were vital to the study. It is one thing to decide a methodology while you are in the university, but another to put it into practice in the field. Given the fact that various methods were employed in this study, I had predicted that data attained would be extensive and various. Thus, knowing how to manage the data, analyse them, and use them well was one of the many challenges that I faced. As Stake (1995) states, almost certainly there will many more data collected than can be analysed, and it is always important to identify the best and set the rest aside.

So I should not have been surprised to find myself, by the end of April 2002, with a massive data collection. At one point, there was so much to deal with that I began to wonder where to begin. It was truly a challenge. However, assuming that: a) distance learning was bounded by a micro and macro-context that needs to be explored, b) that this boundary between phenomena and context I knew to be problematic, and c) that the research inquiry must be 'naturalistic' in such a way that I should experience the reality of those learners and interact as much as I could with them, I pursued the research with determination and patience. The individual distance learners' thinking and actions were an important aspect of the reality I was investigating, and that

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knowledge had to be experienced and constructed by this study if I was to achieve the aims I had set for myself.

I believed that it was important to adopt a 'holistic' approach, considering different perspectives, experiences and perceptions of different learners if I was to understand the distance learning process. In addition, this study employed a research design that had no fixed starting point. There was no determinate sequence of procedures. Rather, it was 'flexible' and *participant-centred* in nature. The DLs, for example, played key roles in determining the direction of this research in that what they said formed the starting point for identifying key issues, concepts and interpretations. What was important was that this research recognised the importance of interconnection and interaction among its research design components as suggested by Geertz (1976: p.235): "Design in qualitative research is an iterative process that involves "tacking" back and forth between the different components of the design, assessing the implications of purposes, theory, research questions, methods, and validity threats for one another."

Because this research was focused on the experience of DLs learning in a distance mode of education, and what meaning they make out of that experience, this study could be considered as concerned with 'subjective understanding'. Schutz (1967) believes that qualitative naturalistic inquiry may be the best avenue of inquiry when this is the case. To have a holistic and deeper understanding of the DLs learning process, a qualitative approach was a better option. Although, as stated earlier on, this study did not discredit quantitative approach as a mean of collecting data, it was thought not to be the 'right' methodology to generate the desired data for this study. As Saljo (1988:p.35, in Morgan (1991) writes:

> "...there is no necessary conflict between qualitative and quantitative approaches for generating and analysing data. Indeed, it is highly questionable whether it is meaningful at all to argue about method without simultaneously considering the research problem one is facing and the knowledge interest being pursued. Given the conception of learning outlined-it is evident that the family of methods conventionally referred to as qualitative is of primary importance. A thorough understanding of what learning means in concrete

terms in various settings presupposes a detailed analysis of how students deal with the tasks they are presented...In saying this we are trying to establish another fundamental assumption behind the research into everyday human learning...Access to the learner's perspective on the activities of teaching and learning is essential for understanding educational phenomena...and for improving education (Morgan,1991:p.12).

PLANNING THE RESEARCH

This section elaborates the procedures involved at each stage of the study.

Selection of Research Participants

Purposeful selection or sampling was used to identify distance learners who were willing to participate and likely to provide extensive data. I purposefully tried to include DLs who had different perspectives and opinions of DE and the distance learning that they had experienced at UUM.

Prior to my first visit for the scoping process, five months before the field work began at the end of January, I asked the UUM Distance Education Department (PJJ) to place an advertisement calling for volunteers for the study (see Appendix C). This was posted on the campus (particularly at the PJJ department notice board), and distributed verbally by PJJ instructors, and a mailing-list. The advertisement called for interested DLs to collect a one page application form from the PJJ main office. ·The forms provided basic demographic data on the applicants, as well as providing a contact number and address. Upon filling the form, the form had to be returned to the PJJ office. In addition to the advertisement calling for volunteers, PJJ instructors were also asked to refer potential DLs to me for consideration.

The next step was the selection process, which took place in the first week I was back in Malaysia (end of January). The preliminary selection was based on one to one interviews during which I asked the potential participants questions that would give me more details about themselves, and provide them information on the demands that

my study would make of them. These potential participants were also informed that the fieldwork would run over a 12-month period, and multiple methods of inquiry would be used to gain an understanding of their distance learning experience.

The research contract (see Appendix D), which explained the purpose of the study, the role of the participants, the different research techniques employed for this study, the research ethical guidelines, and the DLs' right to withdraw at anytime of the duration of the study, was also described to the potential participants. Only when the potential respondent was satisfied with the criteria(s) outlined for DLs selection, and only when s/he understood the study and felt comfortable to join the group of participants was the final selection made.

Understanding that DLs at UUM are heterogeneous, I had to be cautious and selective in choosing the DLs participants for this study. Selecting and securing good participants was a challenge. Nevertheless, I tried to secure participants who:

1. Came from different ethnic backgrounds (i.e. Malay, Chinese, etc.),
2. Were known to be outspokenly critical of the DE at UUM,
3. Represented a variety of career choices,
4. Included both people whom I knew and some whom I barely knew,
5. Were referred to me by other DLs or PJJ instructor(s) as feeling different about the class, teacher or the DE programme.

In essence, I tried to seek out DLs who were willing to share their experience and views of distance learning and were able to share their experiences.

METHOD(S) OF INQUIRY & RELATED ISSUES

Merriam (1998) warns researchers, particularly qualitative researchers:

> "…the qualitative researcher must have an enormous tolerance for ambiguity. Throughout the research process-from designing the study, to data collection, to data analysis-there are no set procedures or protocols that can be followed step by step. The guidelines and the experiences of others can help, but the

researcher must be able to recognise that the best way to proceed will not always be obvious (p.20).

It was not knowing of how DLs survived their learning and the learning and coping strategies they adopted, and many other unanswered questions relating to distance learning, that made this research an appealing and a worthwhile endeavour for me. It was also appealing because "…it allows the researcher to adapt to unforeseen events, and change direction in pursuit of meaning (Merriam,1998:p.20). To me it was like being a medical officer- everything was important, everything was a possibility, everything needed investigation, validation and testing. As Merriam posited, "It takes time and patience to search for clues; to follow up leads, to find the missing pieces…(21.)".

Due to the complex nature of the subject of inquiry, this study employed multi-modal methods in its pursuit for the truth of distance learning experience narrated by DLs at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Following are descriptions of the research instruments used and discussion of some of the relevant issues pertaining to the instruments.

INTERVIEWING

Interviewing is a research technique well adapted to, and often used in, interpretative research. In this study, interviewing was the principal method used. The main aim was to allow me to collect data in the learners' own voices. This would enable me to develop insights into how the learners interpret and make meaning of their world as distance learners at UUM.

Interviews were justified for several reasons. First, it was simply impossible to observe and study distance learning over an extended time due to the time constraints this study had and also the essentially dispersed and private nature of distance study. Secondly, interviews are able to provide a better understanding of the interactive process essential for a qualitative research inquiry based on construction of

knowledge expressed through language. Kvale posits that (1996:p.7) "…an interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose". Adopting a metaphoric comparison, Kvale regards the interviewer as a 'traveller' on a journey that leads to a tale. In his approach, the interview was considered an opportunity to construct knowledge. In addition, interviews, according to Merriam (1998:p.72), are a better instrument when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate. And last but not least, interviewing was chosen because of its adaptability. It was this leverage that made the interview superior to other research instruments. As Bell (1999) says:

> A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do. The way in which response is made…can provide information that a written response would conceal. Questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, but a response in an interview can be developed and clarified (p.135).

In addition, Rubin and Rubin (1995) state that qualitative interviewing is a way of uncovering and exploring the meaning that underpins people's life, routines, behaviours, feelings, etc. In that sense, my purpose in interviewing was to find out what was in the learners' mind and to access their perspectives, to find out from them about the things that could not be easily or directly observed.

The multiple interviews that I had with the participants proved to be enriching and meaningful. Quite often consecutive interviews were conducted by first reflecting on things, events, and statements from former discussions that were unclear or needed some more clarification. As a researcher, every interview I had was a learning experience, and brought me closer to understanding DLs' learning experience in DE.

As a summary, the interview method was chosen because I believed that it was a sound research instrument for qualitative research that evolves around human interactions. As Kvale (1996) states:

> "With the object of the interview understood as existing in a linguistically constituted and interpersonally negotiated social world, the qualitative research interview as a linguistic, interpersonal and interpreting method becomes a more objective method in the social sciences than the methods of

the natural sciences which were developed in a non human domain" (pp.65-66).

However, having decided that interviews would be the main method to be used, deciding what kind of interviews I should use in this study was another consideration that I needed to think and reflect on.

Interviews are generally differentiated in relation to the degree of the structure imposed on their formats. The *standardised* or *structured interview* aims to standardise the stimulus and fixes questions to be sequentially followed. In the *semi-standardized* or *in depth interview* the researcher has more flexibility in relation to the sequence of open-ended questions and the interviewer can add or probe for more information and adapt this instrument to the level of understanding of the respondent. The *non-standardised* or *unstructured interview* is basically a 'guided conversation', using a list of topics to be freely covered in any order or way (Fielding, 1993: p.136). The unstructured interview is widely used for exploratory purposes, whereas semi-structured interviews aim to obtain more detailed information, understanding motivations and behaviours.

After careful consideration, I began the field work by employing an unstructured interview technique first and then moving towards a more semi-structured interview. Eventually semi structured interviews formed one of the main modes for data collection. May (1993: p. 93) says of semi structured interviews that they are the "...type of interviews that allow people to answer more on their own terms...but still provide a greater structure for comparability over the focused interview." In addition, Guba and Lincoln (1981) believe that the non standardised interview best supports the purpose of naturalistic research like this one. They say that semi structured interviews are most appropriate when:

> ...the issue is complex, the relevant dimensions are unknown, or the interest of the research lies in the description of a phenomenon, the exploration of a process, or the individual's formulation of an issue (Guba & Lincoln, 1981: pp.177-178).

Interviews that are completely informal, with very little structure, allow the learners to voice their opinions more openly and in their own terms. They provide for more individual freedom, and may supply information that would not be acquired in a structured setting, so offering a means of getting the nub of the information for understanding problems (MacDonald, 1981).

The research questions listed earlier in this chapter were used as a framework or a guide to conduct the unstructured interviews as shown in the following table:

Table 10: The Interview Guide

Thematic Guideline	Consistent Topics	Additional Topic(s)
Experience of distance learning at Universiti Utara Malaysia	• Interactions with course materials • Interactions with distance teachers & educators • Interactions with other DLs • Attitudes towards distance learning • Pull & push factors of DE • Learning style & behaviour • Coping Mechanism	• Adult life • Family life • Attitude • Future Career Plan • Impact of curriculum and individual learning style • Impact of Malaysian 12 years of primary and secondary educational experience • Learning Differences

The interview guide, also known as the 'interview protocol' (McCracken, 1988) helped me to ensure good use of limited interview time I had and made interviewing the 12 DLs more systematic and comprehensive. The guide also helped to keep the interactions and discussions more focused. They were not rigid in any way, and in most instances the participants were empowered by the time and freedom given to them to share whatever came to their mind pertaining to their distance learning experience and perspectives. The interview guide also helps minimise bias through the pre-specification of non directive questions and probes, and ensuring adequate reporting within the frames of the reference of the study (Brenner, 1985: p.151). Such a pre-condition reduces the tendency to resort to unplanned, non neutral probes whilst in the field (McCracken, 1988). And, in keeping with the flexible nature of the

qualitative research design, the interview guide could be modified over time to focus attention on areas of particular importance, or to exclude questions the researcher found to be unproductive for the goals of the research (see; Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

This study employed a *participant-centred* approach, which allowed the DLs to converse about issues and engage in discussions that they felt like sharing. The unstructured interviews were first used to elicit as much information as possible about the participants' experience and perspectives on distance learning. A lot of information and knowledge were generated from the unstructured approach. But moving from one interview to the next and working with what had been shared, a semi-structured interview technique became useful and essential to probe and to get more clarification and elaboration on their experiences.

ISSUES AND STRATEGIES IN EMPLOYING INTERVIEWS

May (1993: p.97) states that there are three necessary conditions for a successful interview: *accessibility, cognition* and *motivation* as shown in Table 11:

Table 11: May's (1993) Three Conditions for Successful Interview

The Three Conditions:	Description:
Accessibility	refers to the question on whether the interviewee has access to the information the interviewer wants. Namely, this refers primarily to the distance learners, and other relevant stakeholder in UUM DE programmes.
Cognition	refers to the question of whether the interviewee (DLs) understands what is required of him/her. Thus, explaining the study, its purpose, the objectives, their role as a research collaborator are important research activities.
Motivation	refers to the task of ensuring the interviewees (DLs) feel that their contribution and participation are valued and appreciated. This is important because their co-operation is vital for the conduct of this research.

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At the beginning of each interview, the research participants were thanked for their participation in the study and reminded of its purpose. I assured them whenever necessary, that nothing would be attributed to them by name, and that the learners would not be individually identified. This introduction was a vital stage in the interview process, which according to McCracken (1988):

> ...what ever is actually said in the opening few minutes of the interview, it must be demonstrated that the interviewer is a benign, accepting, curious individual who is prepared to listen...(p.38).

There are a number of issues and concerns that one needs to consider in employing interviewing as a data collection technique. Quite frequently, in any interview sessions, interviewees are 'accustomed' to the use of power and control, which can influence the interview situation and consequently the findings. The primary goal in using an interview is to get a much deeper understanding, thus, ensuring informality was one precondition that I had to include in my interview sessions. This was important particularly in trying to make the research participants feel relaxed and at ease in the situation.

Ensuring Informality

Ensuring an environment in which the DLs felt comfortable and relaxed was a condition I took seriously in conducting my interviews. My former position as a member of teaching staff at UUM before pursuing my study in UK had an impact in the initial stage of the fieldwork. The participants were very respectful of me, and at first the students talked to me as they would to an instructor. Realising that such a relationship inhibited them, I purposely made more attempts to get closer to them by dropping a phone call every now and then, sending out emails, dropping by their homes, and to the extent of accepting invitations to play badminton with some of them during week-ends. This approach worked and it helped to build the relationships that I needed for the study. Soon, I was able to get them to address me as just Hisham or Sham, and not En.Hisham or Mr. Hisham, and I attribute this success to my

continuous effort to be friendly towards the participants. By the second month, I was like a friend to them, and as a friend more than a researcher I was able to ask critical questions that I believed would not have been possible in a formal researcher-respondent relationship. They were able to share their thoughts and reflections on their distance experience without worrying about being penalised in one way or another. As far as possible, I tried to make the participants feel in control of the discussions. They were able to manoeuvre the discussions from one issue to the next. I aimed to be more of a discussion partner, a facilitator and an empathic listener.

Building Trust

Once the research participants felt relaxed and comfortable with me, building trust was next on my agenda. As a researcher I wanted the research participants to trust me, and be able to freely question me with any concern they had. The interviews conducted were communicative, interactive and I tried to provide them with the opportunity to question the process at anytime. The interviewing style was very open and very accepting of any thoughts, views, comments and reflections that they had on distance learning. In addition, they were encouraged to speak about their experiences and perspectives in their own words. This was where I felt the trust and good relationship that I had with the participants helped me to generate an in-depth understanding of distance learning at UUM. Hirsch (1995) argues the importance of allowing the participants to express themselves on their own terms and providing with the opportunity to add to and enrich answers. In part, this was a result of ensuring informality in the interviews. But most important of all, it was the task of familiarising the participants of this study with the study's intention and objectives, their roles and contributions to the end product of this research. However, building trust I believe was the core ingredient.

Being Sensitive and Respectful

Presenting the more sensitive topics in a positive way is recommended not only to improve access but also to get better quality information (Hertz and Imber, 1995). As a researcher, I had to be sensitive and respectful to my different participants. The participants might be sensitive and reactive to particular topics and I had to be aware of those and try to develop strategies to deal with the situation. Getting to understand the fundamentals of learning in different culture was a challenge. Being a Malay researcher and wanting to learn, for example, the Chinese participants' experience and perspective on distance learning was not an easy task, due to the cultural context, and for economic and political reasons.

Ostrander (1993) notes that more than getting access, establishing rapport consists of gaining trust and respect that could lead to the acquisition of useful and reliable information. My participants, particularly the Chinese participants, were very watchful. I think that I was continuously being observed and assessed by them before they realised that I could not harm them in any way through their involvement in the study. It was then, that the Chinese participants became more relaxed and open in the discussions. Eventually, more in depth understanding of their learning behaviour and perspectives came to light.

Establishing Harmony

Other aspects pointed out by Richards (1996) are related to the interview situation itself. Those are: the need to establish a harmony between interviewee and interviewer; to be careful about the use of the time, making sure the topics are covered; giving opportunity for proper discussions and room for additional comments. Fielding (1993) stresses that interviewer behaviour could influence responses. Certainly, establishing harmony was not easy to achieve, but my efforts to provide informality in the interview sessions and ability to play the role of a discourse partner, a friend and a facilitator led to harmony. At the end of most interview

sessions, everybody said that they felt that they had had a good learning session. And, I am pleased to say that most of the time; we ended the sessions with joy and a smile.

Providing Interview Questions or Topics

Whether or not to provide such information before the actual interviews to the interviewees was a concern that I had during my early days of the fieldwork. My reading suggested that there are mixed views about this. Some support it, others object to it.

Moving from unstructured to semi structured interviews, I did not have specified or structured questions to ask. I had research questions, but those functioned as a guide to my interviews. After much thought, I think the decision to reject or use this technique depends on the objective of the interviews and agreements between the participants and the researchers. There were cases where a previously provided list of questions led to participants' preparation and that could interfere with the findings or naturality of the responses. Another aspect presented by some commentators is the option of sending or showing the transcription or interpretation to be reviewed by the participants. This, to me was more pragmatic in this study, and was implemented.

Recording the Interviews

An interview can be tape recorded or notes taken (or both). My approach was to tape record all the interviews conducted during the fieldwork. It was necessary to have the research participants' approval of and their understanding of the ethics involved. The ethical considerations and issues pertaining to the instruments were discussed, and subsequently, the participants had the final say as to which method or methods they felt comfortable with. I encouraged them to participate using all the research methods. Nevertheless, I tried to convince them that the interviews were my primary research instruments and that the rest were secondary methods. They understood, and almost all of them agreed to be interviewed and tape-recorded. The interviews were

taped with the learners' permission and most of the learners seemed happy to be taped and gave their permission. The advantage with audio taped interviews is that they help to preserve the integrity of the data. I transcribed each interview shortly after the interview session. Notes were taken to reflect the emotions and attitude of the learners, to complement the transcripts and as a back up in case of any technical malfunction. Key pieces of information were then summarised for each informant and any area that was unclear or needed additional clarification was noted for follow up at the next interview.

However, there were many reservations to the use of other research methods, particularly the video camera and photographs and the journal entry as research instruments which are discussed later in this chapter. As a result I had 100 percent success in employing interview as a research method, but not in employing other methods with all research participants. Some agreed to extend their participation by using student journals, and others agreed to photographs, but only two agreed to be video taped.

Interviews: Personal Reflections

The reliability of interview data can always be questioned. Some common arguments are related to interviewee trustworthiness (*is elaborated in commentary on methodology in chapter 12*) , failures in one's memory, as well as misleading and falsified information. I think one important question that needed my reflection prior to the fieldwork was: *How do I know that my participants will tell me the absolute truth?* Not an easy question, and as a researcher, I was not certain during the fieldwork, not today, not ever. What was important to me was that I provide an inviting, non-threatening platform for the research participants to speak and share their distance learning experience and perspectives. Within such an environment, I hoped that the truth would be revealed. In addition, anonymity was also assured. I also tried to minimise power issues of any kind between the participants and myself.

Not being a current PJJ instructor, I could not manipulate power against them in any way. Their grades would not be decided by me or by the interviews. Thus, I tried to convince my participants to have a 'no fear' approach towards interacting with me.

Success in the interview depended to a large degree on the researcher. As a novice qualitative researcher interviewing was not an easy method to perform. It requires a lot of thinking and reflection on what to do, what has been done, and how to do it well. Nevertheless, continuous practice and reflections helped my preparation. My first visit to Malaysia in October 2001 was valuable, not only to scope out issues in distance learning, but it allowed me to practise my interviewing skills.

Undoubtedly, interviewing is an activity that requires certain skills and personal characteristics such as those suggested by Yin (1991:p.63): a. the ability to ask good questions (which he calls an 'inquisitive mind'); b. being a good listener "able to assimilate large amounts of information without bias; c. paying attention to words and terminology and 'messages between the lines'; d. being adaptive and flexible to new situations (seen as opportunities); e. having a firm grasp on issues being studied and capable of identifying another needs f. being open to contrary findings; and, g. being honest.

Last but not least, the development of effective interview questions requires creativity and insight. It depends according to Maxwell (1996: p.74) "…on how the interview questions actually work in practice." Overall, an interview is a process that requires good preparation. Kvale (1996c) outlines the various stages on the interviewing process: a. thematizing: definition of research topics and questions; b. designing the study to address the research questions; c. the interviewing situation; d. transcribing; analysing; verification and reporting.

STUDENTS' JOURNALS

DLs, like any other learners, need to reflect on their learning. Many plausible learning issues or barriers that arise in distance learning call for learners to ponder, reflect and possibly solving the problems and prevent the recurrence of the problems or to mitigate against their impact on the learning process. However, this natural, implicit process of thinking about learning often lacks regularity, intensity of focus, and reflective learning. Finding ways of promoting systematic, rigorous reflection by learners has motivated many researchers to improve the learning and teaching process. Researchers have implemented a variety of approaches promoting reflectivity, one being the *student's journal*. By having a journal as one of the research methods, the participants had an instrument to record and reflect on their distance learning experiences at UUM. The journal, although categorised by this study as a secondary instrument, I thought potentially could contribute quite extensively in helping the study to understand distance learning at UUM. One of the elements attributed to such an important role was due to its strengths as a method, and Holly said this well in the following quotation:

> A journal is not merely a flow of impressions; it records impressions set in a context of descriptions of circumstances, others, the self, motives, thoughts, and feelings. Taken further, it can be used as a tool for analysis and introspection. It is a chronicle of events as they happen, a dialogue with the facts (objective) and interpretations (subjective), and perhaps most important, it provides a basis for developing an awareness of the difference between facts and interpretations...Over time, patterns and relationships emerge that were previously isolated events 'just lived'. Time provides perspective and momentum, and enables deeper levels of insight to take place.
>
> <div align="right">Holly (1997:p.5)</div>

Another function of journals or such records according to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:p.144) "...is to develop dialogue..." The dialogue revealed in this study served two purposes: Firstly, it was a dialogue within the participants themselves. It was a dialogue of self- reflection and understanding of their own distance learning experience and perspectives. Reflection on one's learning could be beneficial and help one to ponder if s/he is making progress or otherwise. By writing in the journal, the participants could carry on a dialogue between and among various dimensions of

distance learning experience. Questions like: *What happened?, What are the facts?, What was my role? What feelings and senses surrounded events? What did I do? What did I feel about what I did? Why? What was the setting?, The flow of events?, and later, what were the important elements of the event? What preceded it? What might I be aware of if the situation recurs?* It was this process of traversing back and forth between objective and subjective views, as Holly (1997) describes it, that allowed the participants to reflect.

Secondly, the students' journals promoted additional dialogues between the participants and myself as the researcher. The presumably rich data obtained from such journal entries allowed a better understanding of DLs learning endeavour and the problems that occurred.

ISSUES AND STRATEGIES IN EMPLOYING STUDENTS' JOURNAL

Ideally, keeping a journal involves making daily or frequent entries about experiences in learning, and then raising questions and concerns about those experiences. Thus, anything experienced by the participants that developed their understanding could appropriately be placed in the journal. It was these writings that provided a basis for continuing a dialogue or communication within themselves, and most important an additional basis of communication between the participants and myself. Consequently, these writing records became the focus of reflection by the learners, and an asset for analysis in trying to unlock the doors into DLs' learning experience. According to Zeichner and Liston (1987), keeping a journal assists reflection and contributes to the critical analysis of both teaching and learning, but there are indications that the effects are more pronounced where two conditions are met. The *first condition* is that, prior to the start of the journal entry, techniques for encouraging reflection be made explicit to the participants. Francis's (1995) statement that an approach to personal empowerment worked well endorsed this recommendation. Thus, prior to the fieldwork, I committed myself to detail extensively all the research methods used in this study, including the students'

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journal. The objectives and rationales for students' journal adoption were discussed, and a framework was introduced to guide the content and methods of writing in the student's journal. The framework consisted of a clear focus and intent for the student's journal. Key words and concepts of student's reflections on distance learning were introduced, and questions like the following were discussed to re-align the participants with the task of writing the student's journal: *How do I learn? What are the problems that I am facing in my learning? How do I cope with the learning barriers and challenges? What are my learning strategies?, Does it work?*, etc. Having a framework, takes the participants as the journal keeper through the steps of description, analysis of their own information, confrontation and reconstruction, steps which are parallel to the process of reflection described earlier.

The *second condition* was that participants communicate their reflections on their journal entries by offering perspectives on, and solutions to problems, and a fuller and more rigorous inquiry into their own learning experiences. Such dialogues were conveyed in various forms and continued until the middle of 2003. The participants who participated were given a period of twelve months to sustain their journal entries.

In addition to the conditions outlined above, Kemmis and Mctaggart (1988:pp: 144-145) asserted that there should be principles that journal entries abide by. Among the principles discussed that this study finds relevant are:

   i. "... all participants keep journals in the appropriate format as agreed to for particular learning cycles." In this study, the DLs participants were informed on the format of the reflective journal writing used in this study for a specified time framework (commencing April 2002 to the end of June 2003). The students' journal required a structure and supportive environment, which was provided by establishing a focus prior to commencement of the writing of the journal. The format mentioned helped to establish a focus for the journal.

   ii. "...that there are at least some special times set aside regularly ...for uninterrupted, sustained, silent writing..." The participants were encouraged

to write as much as they could, based on their reflection of their direct learning experience in DE. In order to be able to reflect effectively, they had to find suitable time to reflect and concentrate on the writing of their distance experiences.

iii. "...that all writing is to be shared with other participants..." This principle was adopted with the notion that participants here need not refer their journal entries to other participants, but rather to me as the researcher. They were encouraged and invited to have as many informal discussions as they wished, on their reflections towards their distance learning experience or ask questions based on their concerns.

In summary, journal writing has the potential to encourage and facilitate distance learner reflection. I believed that the journals could provide valuable insights into distance learning. In a situation, where some of the research participants were not very vocal in communicating their thought and experiences in distance learning orally, they communicated in writing.

In addition to students' journals, as a qualitative researcher I also maintained a research memoir or research journal, which I used to note events that occurred within and between my fieldwork. The research memoir was a tool that allowed me to reflect on the events that occurred during my fieldwork. In doing so, the memoir was written in an organised fashion that allowed it to be used systematically to fill in any gaps within other research methods or techniques used in this study.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Research is, according to Schratz (2001), dominated by methods focusing on the human spoken or written word. Regardless of the research philosophy, methodology or thinking, researchers have been using research methods within the boundary of human language. There seems:

to be a curious neglect of the visual imagination in the social science...Despite an enormous research literature that argues the contrary, researchers have trusted words (especially their own) as much as they have mistrusted pictures

Schratz & Walker, 1995:p.72

Such a tradition, as pointed out by Walker (1993), has its own limitation, specifically limitations on language used for descriptive purposes. No one human language is perfect and able to describe every detail of any object, or action. That is one reason why many of the world's languages today are continuously evolving, expanding their vocabularies, importing words from other languages, etc.

In the context of this study, another possibility of looking into the 'inner world' of distance learning from the students' perspective, in addition to interviewing and student journal employed in this study, was to use photographs. Parallel to the study's approach – being student centred and allowing the participants to be in control, the use of photographs too would provide them additional power to contribute to the study. There has been very little literature in the area of research methods where the participants can be in control. However intangible the accomplishment of using photographs as a research method to understand social life, the potential exists (Walker, 1993).

In this study, photographs provided the opportunity to bring to the fore the different layers of reality of distance learning at UUM. The pictures could represent single elements of the research participants' life, thus enabling unimportant details to become the main focus of interest. In the context of this study, it was important to construct the knowledge on distance learning in such a way that it would become accessible. For this purpose, photography is a research method, which grasps reality in its whole complexity as a 'frozen image'. Photos according to Sontag (1979:p.88) are not only evidence of what an individual sees, not just documents, but also an evaluation of the world. In a way, photographs contribute to make visible the invisible (Schratz and Walker, 1995). Making the invisible visible has a strong demand that required the participants reflect on the reality of the depicted people or

situations. Therefore, photographs contributed to bringing the participants into discussion about their personal relation to the locations depicted on the pictures. The reflections initiated by this study, which do not usually happen often during the routines of everyday's life of a distance learner, functioned as a valuable instrument of internal self-evaluation, conducted by the research participants themselves.

ISSUES AND STRATEGIES IN EMPLOYING PHOTOGRAPHS

Initially, I was not sure how using photographs might work, but it was the CARE 2001 summer second annual conference on method and practice that convinced me of the potential of photographs as a research method. Consequently, reading the work by Banks (2001) and Emmison & Smith (2000) on visual methods provided the support to venture into the method in my study.

Having their own pictures viewed by other people caused my participants to think carefully about participating in the *photograph project*. The questions of how the photos would be used in the report of the study and the question of ownership were two concerns that were discussed in great detail with the participants. Consent and ethical procedures were once again discussed, and only when the participants had been told that the rules and procedures of the photographs were parallel to those of other research methods did they become more relaxed and accepting. Nevertheless, the potential of photographs to capture visual images of themselves and their families caused 7 out of the 12 participants to decline to participate.

Apart from that, the only problem I had in administering this method was failing to be very clear in the instructions to participants about this method. "What picture or pictures should I take?" was one of many questions raised. "How many pictures should I take, or do you need?" The participants were worried if they could not finish all the 36 films given to them. After consultation and further discussion with them, it became apparent to me that 36 negatives was rather too many, and the participants

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needed to be clear about the method's objectives. So we had a session together on the use of photographs in the study and the conditions were re-examined. As a result, we decided to abandon the first roll of 36 negatives, and they were given to the participants as a token of appreciation. In replacement, a 12-exposure film was given to all the participants, and they were instructed to use them to capture moments, objects, activities, etc. that they thought were significant in their distance learning. In addition, they were also informed that they had 12 months or so to capture those significant moments.

OBSERVATION

Observation has been characterised as the fundamental base of all research methods in the social and behavioural sciences (Adler & Adler, 1994, p.389). Stake (1995, p.60) writes that observations help the researcher towards greater understanding of the case, and apart from engaging in intense interviews, I spent a considerable amount of time making observations during the fieldwork. However, I was unable to play the role of participant-observer, a position often taken by those in ethnography, whereby the researcher immerses him or herself into the lives of those studies because the students were themselves dispensed and are 'distant' and because 'study' itself does not lend itself to observation.

However, observations of a series of on-going face to face meetings of different distance courses were carried out in order to gain further understanding and insights of what went on in a distance class. These efforts were considered essential:

- to enrich my understanding of how distance courses were conducted,
- to observe the level of learning interactivity
- to observe the teaching and learning process
- to capture any irregularities (if any) that may be of interest to this study

Field notes were taken throughout the observations. In the process of discovering the meaning of what had been observed, some tentative categories were proposed which were tested out as the study proceeded, either by checking these with those observed, or by further observations. The observations were: a.) observations of the delivery of different distance courses, b.) observations of activities, and interaction that occurred within a face to face meeting. Because the observations were to be directed towards the understanding of human interactions and experiences in particularly complex settings, it was inappropriate to begin with a pre-structured schedule in which to fit what was to be observed.

I also observed the operation of PACE, and the campus as a whole. This was more of an unobtrusive nature in obtaining information about the distance learning environment and culture of the institution. By observing the PJJ f2f meetings, and by walking along the corridors, I was able to observe in passing the teaching and learning activities that were carried out. Casual conservation with the staff gave me many hints about the climate of DE at UUM and off the institution itself. These opportunities enabled me to get an idea about how PACE organised and operated the distance learning, and the type of relationships and interactions between the DE administrators, teachers, and DLs. Reading the notices and bulletins on the notice board gave me a lot of information about the DE activities planned and carried out by PACE.

ISSUES AND STRATEGIES IN OBSERVATIONS

> Observation…is not a natural gift but a highly skilled activity for which an
> extensive background knowledge and understanding is required, and also a
> capacity for original thinking and the ability to spot significant events. It is
> certainly not an easy option.
>
> (Nisbet, 1977:15)

Anyone who has carried out an observation study will no doubt agree with Nisbet that observation is not an easy option. Careful planning is essential, and it takes practice

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to get the most out of this technique. However, once mastered, it is a technique that can often reveal characteristics of groups or individuals, which would have been impossible to discover by other means. Interviews, as Nisbet and Watt (1980:13) point out provide important data, but they reveal only how people perceive what happens, not what actually happens. It can be particularly useful to discover whether people do what they say they do, or behave in the way they claim to behave.

There are many published observation schedules and accounts of different methods of observing individuals and groups in different contexts. The sad fact is that in spite of all the tried and tested methods that have been employed by experienced researchers over the years, there never seems to be an example that is quite right for a particular task. Inevitably, a researcher will find that it is necessary to adapt or to devise a completely new approach. If access is available to only one group or one meeting, it is important to be quite sure that the selected method of recording is going to work. The researcher will probably need to invent his or her own system of shorthand symbols and these will have to be memorised. He/she will need to decide how often to record what is happening and with whom. Preparation is all important. Greatest care has to be taken to ensure that the observer gets the most out of the periods of observation tasks.

CHAPTER 7
FIELD WORK & ANALYSIS

Stenhouse (1988) refers to the collection of data on site as *fieldwork*, a term originated within anthropology and subsequently adopted more generally in the social sciences. In Education, research fieldwork has developed its own set of principles and procedures and these formed the guidelines for this study. As far as was possible, the conduct of the research was as close as possible to the CARE formulation of principles and procedures: reciprocity and equality of status, openness, non-coercion, independence, impartiality, negotiation, confidentiality and accountability. The fieldwork for this study first began with the negotiation for access and co-operation.

NEGOTIATING ACCESS AND CO-OPERATION

Entry is an issue which is characteristic of all research, but it is something of utter importance to qualitative research. To gain entry into a research site, one has to first deal with the problem of access negotiation. Access negotiation is defined here as a vital process through which one's acceptance to work within educational institutions for purposes of data collection is initiated, developed, and maintained for the entire duration of a planned study (Delamont, 1992). Gaining access and cooperation, particularly for qualitative research, may be one of the most difficult aspects of the fieldwork (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Delamont, 1984). Access is not a one time event or process. Delamont (1992:p.79), for example, states that "Access is not negotiated once and then settled for the whole fieldwork...access is a process, not a simple decision...Access negotiations are likely to be continuing and may even be continuous and continual."

In the study reported here, the use of multiple sources of data meant that multiple 'forms' of access were required to at least five different interrelated areas. They were:

1. initial access to Universiti Utara Malaysia
2. targeted access to distance learners
3. access to observe f2f meetings between DLs and their respective distance teachers
4. access to DLs' voices and distance teachers views on distance learning at UUM
5. access to documents of various kinds

At the first level, the Malaysian education system required access to be negotiated through a centre-periphery managed and centralised system with a typically strong bureaucratic top-down decision making pattern in the Ministry of Education. Compliance with directives from the Ministry is expected to assist the negotiation process with UUM. Although UUM, like other public institutions in the country, is categorised as a semi-government body, which entails that it is given the empowerment to act, and make relevant decisions on, and for the institution, it is still bound to follow certain rules and regulations administered by *Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awan* (JPA) (Public Service Department). These institutions are examples of coalarchic organisations which means that they "…exhibit both centralised and authority structures and politicised decision making routines. They contain well defined, top down chains of commands…" (Morill et.al. (1999:p.62). Conducting research in areas that may be sensitive and have relevance to the national interest of the ministry and the Malaysian government would be examples of research that need clearance top-down.

This is typical of public institutions and was illustrated by the manner in which the permission to undertake this study was granted by the *Education Planning and Research Division* (EPRD), Ministry of Education, Malaysia in March 2001. After this, the next step I took was to negotiate for permission from Universiti Utara Malaysia to enter the research site. A letter was sent to the Vice Chancellor of the Universiti Utara Malaysia and copies sent to the Deputy Chancellors and other significant stakeholders of DE programs and courses at the institution. Enclosed with

the letter was the approval letter from the EPRD, Ministry of Education and a summary of the research proposal and objectives. My explanation of the research intentions was to help the institution improve its DE courses and programmes in the future by understanding the DLs perspective and experience, and listening to their 'voices'. Specifically, I said that the study would provide a holistic understanding of DE at UUM by looking at the learners' interaction with the course, the distance teachers, administrators, and other DLs, and how they cope with this distance learning. In order to meet with the study's main objectives, I made it clear that I needed to gain access not only to the learners, but also the distance teachers, administrators, technicians, and documents such as enrolment data, success and failure rates, demography of the learners, etc. All this meant that I needed considerable flexibility, and freedom and space for movement.

A significant consequence of the need for this top-first negotiation is that you come to direct negotiation with the research 'subjects' carrying the approval of the system. Croll (1986: p.93) warns that "researchers should be sensitive to the fact that they are moving between levels of hierarchical system in which they approach the lower levels with the support of the higher levels."

The Vice Chancellor and his deputies were the main 'gatekeepers' and had the power to grant me the permission to pursue the research as defined by the research objectives and plans. Literally, they had a very significant effect in determining what could be done. As the researcher, I needed to be aware that as gatekeepers to the institution and research site, naturally they would be concerned about the nature and implications of the research. It was fortunate for this study that the Vice Chancellor, the three deputies and other important DE personnel were very supportive and granted me the permission and offered to help in one way or the other to realise the success of this study. But it was also important that I kept Croll's warning in mind.

Following the admission into the institution, the next step in access negotiation invariably involves "...charming the respondents into co-operation" (see: Ball, 1990).

The basic tenet of my role as a researcher in data collection was the conviction that access to relevant data necessarily required the creation in the field of favourable social relationships. This meant that I needed to gain the co-operation of not only the DLs who were the primary research collaborators, but also other member of DE academic, non academic and technical staff at the institution.

The PACE director, Associate Professor Dr. Zurni Omar, was very keen, supportive and interested in my study. To my surprise, after a one hour chat with him in his office, I later found out that he circulated a memo to all respective distance teachers, and administrators saying that I would be on the campus as a research student researching into UUM distance learning, and requesting everyone to accommodate the study in one way or the other. This memo established my position as a researcher and enabled me to move around with ease. Establishing a good working relationship with PACE and other important stakeholders of DE programmes at UUM was fundamental to the success of this study.

THE FIELD WORK

The field work planned for this research was divided into two (2) phases: *Phase 1: Discovering and Validating Issues and Concerns*, and *Phase 2: Field Work in Action.*

Phase 1: Discovering and Validating Issues & Concerns

This phase began first as a formality, I went to meet the director of PACE to explain my project. He then introduced me to most of PJJ department staff. Once I was properly introduced to everyone, I then met some of the DE programme co-ordinators. These were key personnel with whom I had to work very closely in order to plan my fieldwork. Initially I needed a lot of practical information, such as when the DLs were expected to be busy with tasks and assignments, face to face meetings and schedules, examination dates for the academic year of 2001-2002, and other

relevant information. These were all given to me. I was given the fullest co-operation that I could imagine. Choosing somewhere I was familiar with (and working with people who knew me) had proved to be fruitful for this stage of the study.

I was then introduced to other distance teachers, and I briefly explained my presence and my purpose and intentions. I told them my research objectives, and at the same time tried to negotiate a mutual sharing of information in order to establish rapport with them. I named phase 1 as *'Discovering and validating Issues & Concerns'* simply because phase 1 was a starting point of this research, which was used mainly to search for issues and concerns pertaining to DLs learning endeavours at UUM and to validate some of the perceptions on the learning barriers and challenges that DLs face, based on my own DE experience, observation and readings of the literature. In many respects, phase 1 was literally a scoping process where, as a researcher, my immediate objective was to scope-out issues and concerns related to DLs particularly in their learning process. Phase 1 was not a pilot study per se, because *pilot study* entails that one has a clear understanding of the methodology or a 'ready to go' research instrument to be tested in which was not the intention of phase 1 here. Rather, phase 1 was a phase of searching for relevant issues and concerns which may be influential in decision makings related to the research design and methodology, and other components of this research. In addition, phase 1 was also used to practise asking the interview questions with some of the distance teachers and students, as much to determine if the questions were clear, and if not, what reflections or revisions do I need to make. Phase 1 was important primarily because it provided an understanding of the future direction of my research endeavour (particularly the actual field work phase).

In summary, phase 1 was used to gather not only current issues and problems in distance learning at UUM, but various other information, such as the PJJ enrolment data; interviews with the UUM PJJ Director, the deputy directors, PJJ instructors and most important of all samples of the DLs themselves. The interviews with some of the DLS were intended to tap into DLs' general feelings about distance learning at

UUM. These interviews provided me information about what were the *pull factors* and *push factors* of DE at UUM. Due to the intention of phase 1, the findings and analysis of such an undertaking were much at the surface level, but were able to provide some perspectives on distance learning from the DLs involved. Such knowledge helped me to revise some of the research questions outlined in this study and improve preparation for Phase II of the fieldwork.

Last but not least, phase 1 also functioned as a phase for building a research relationship with different DE stakeholders at UUM. Before being able to explore and scope relevant issues and concerns on DLs and DE at UUM, one prerequisite that I had to attain was gaining entry to the research site, and establishing rapport with all the relevant parties in the research i.e. stakeholders of the university; the Vice Chancellor, Deputy vice chancellor, the PJJ Director, Deputy Directors; PJJ instructors, and PJJ students. Building this relationship was important, particularly to allow me to ethically learn and understand the DLs in order to validate the research questions I had for this study. The relationship intended here was a straightforward one where I tried to position my presence in the university as someone who wanted to better understand distance learning at UUM. Nevertheless, as expected, not all stakeholders took me as I intended. Some were wary about me and viewed me more as an outsider. This was to be expected, as some would be likely to think that I would report back to PACE and perhaps expose their weaknesses. This perhaps was partly due to the fact that in the year since I had left UUM, recruitment of staff had surged, and consequently there were many new faces among the DE instructors and administrators. Nevertheless, given time, I found that the establishment of at least some relationship with the different DE stakeholders at UUM had a positive impact on this study. Phase 1 helped to improve my decisions about the research design. In many ways, the development of the 'relationship' also assisted me to further break down and identifies the type of research relationship I want to generate for the second phase of my fieldwork.

Phase II: Fieldwork in Action

In Phase II, I engaged in data collection, the analysis of the data and the understanding of the cases, and its implication to the study. It was a phase that integrated all the intended research methods with two different time frameworks. In the first (from early February till end of May 2002) the interview method was primarily used, supplemented by personal observation. The research participants who participated in keeping a journal and taking photographs were given a further12 months to complete the research tasks, and these were collected late in 2003.

Phase II was intended to provide the primary data for this research. It was a phase that first worked on the relationship that was built from phase 1. The on-going process of trust building was a crucial one that I continued sustaining and developing between myself and the participants. As a researcher, I had to use this phase wisely and creatively in order to attain thick description and meaningful knowledge of distance learning at UUM.

This phase of the fieldwork, as mentioned earlier, was divided into two dimensions of interaction. The first dimension, which was intended for four months, incorporated multiple interviews with all the DLs collaborators. The interviews incorporated both structured and unstructured interview techniques, and were conducted individually and in groups.

Along the way, the research participants were again be briefed on the students' journal, its intention, format and purpose. The DLs collaborators were encouraged to use the journal to reflect on their own learning. Like any other research instruments planned for this study, the journals were confidential unless otherwise noted by the individual journal writer.

In addition, PJJ classroom observations were conducted in different PJJ classroom and courses. The intention here was to have 'a feel' of the actual PJJ teaching and learning at UUM.

The second part of phase II necessitated the DLs continuing to keep their journals to reflect on their distance learning. Continuous communication was maintained through email between myself and the participants, who continuously communicated concerns, questions and answers pertaining to the study.

Phase II was a challenge for the following reasons: My first concern was to sustain the involvement of the participants for my study. Without this involvement, I would not be able to proceed with the study. This phase required the identification and selection of a small number of DLs collaborators, which was done through asking them if they would be involved. Every distance learner who agreed to participate was carefully examined before the final selection of participants was made.

As a qualitative researcher, choosing a sample for the study was another dilemma for me. It was tough going, and challenging. I had to deal with many important questions like: How do I choose the sample? How do I know I have a good sample of learners?. Exactly how do I do it?", and many others. After a lot of discussion with my research advisor, research colleagues at CARE, and reading a lot of materials on 'sampling', I decided to use 'theoretical sampling' which Glaser & Strauss (1967) explain as:

> ...the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next, and where to find it, in order to develop his theory as it emerges (p.45).

This strategy eschews attempting to obtain a representative sample, whose study will illuminate the questions under study (Patton, 1990: p.169). Good informants, according to Bernard (1994: p.165-166) "...are people you can talk to easily, who understand the information you need, and are glad to give it to you or get it for you." The goal of this type of sampling is twofold:

1.   To gather data that will maximise opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimension (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

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2. To test developing ideas on the research phenomenon that are crucial to the validity of those ideas (see: Maxwell, 1992: p.293).

Theoretical sampling allows the emerging theory and the analyst to control the process of data collection. Thus, it requires flexibility in determining the precise number of research participants, the framework for employment of all the research methods.

Sampling through human instrumentation increases the range of data exposed and maximises my ability to identify emerging themes that take adequate account of contextual conditions and cultural norms (Erlandson et.al.1993: p.82). Theoretical sampling required me to collect, code and analyse the data during the sampling process. In the absence of definite rules for sample size, I also had to decide at what point enough is enough, a state commonly referred to as 'theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), data saturation or redundancy (see: Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, Lincoln and Guba, 1985, Patton, 1990). Theoretical saturation is a crucial aspect in developing a grounded theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.61) explain it in these terms: "The criterion for judging when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category is the category's theoretical saturation. Saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologists can develop properties of the category."

As the data collection progressed, it became clear at some point that nothing new was being said about distance learning at UUM-a sign that the sampling was sufficiently saturated to contribute to a grounded theory. It is, however, important to point out that as stated by Strauss & Corbin (1998), saturation is always a matter of degree and there is always the potential for the 'new' to emerge..

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DATA ANALYSIS

The fieldwork was exciting. There was the feeling of momentum and accomplishment; the experience of an engaging interview was energising. But while I enjoyed the fieldwork, I dreaded the data analysis. In depth interviewing, which was supplemented by students' journal and photographs, generated an enormous amount of data. The vast array of words, sentences, paragraphs had to be reduced to what was of most importance and interest (McCracken, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1984). Most important is that reducing the data be done inductively rather than deductively. As the researcher, I could not analyse the data with a set of hypotheses to test or a theory developed in another context to match the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I examined and analysed the transcripts with an open attitude, seeking what emerged as important and of interest from the data.

The analysis of data began during data collection, to allow me to cycle back and forth, thinking and reflecting on the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new – often better data (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p.49). I researched the data I had collected again, and again, and again. Each time my search changed my understandings. I drew circles and charts that might provide me with a systematic method of analysis that I could be comfortable with, one that did not leave anything important unnoticed. Every lead was pursued and checked. The evidence began to build a prima facie case for the emergent theory. I used several strategies to facilitate the process. Fieldnotes served as the backbone for analysis in the field because they contained both the straight forward 'objective' accounting of what occurred and the reflective comments. Throughout the period of the fieldwork I wrote regular analytic memos to ensure that some serious analysis was going on in conjunction with the data collection. In addition, analytic memos were used to flesh out ideas and tie them together, specifically as they pertained to emerging theories and patterns (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

The approach that I used in my analysis reflected all the research methods used in this study. As with data collection, the procedures for analysis, were unique and specific to qualitative research as iterated by Bogdan and Biklen (1982):

> Analysis involves working with data, organising it, breaking it down, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others (p.154).

The learners involved in this study served not only as the source of data collection, but also as the source for data analysis. The two remained intertwined, because data analysis began during data collection. Grounded theory, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) involves simultaneous data collection and several phases of analysis performed in systematic steps through a variety of techniques and procedures.

Once sufficient data had been collected and transcribed, I began the process of microanalysis, which included open and axial coding. This laborious work included detailed line-by-line analysis to generate initial categories and the relationships among the categories (see: Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using this method, all codes were compared repeatedly within and between each other until the basic properties of a category or construct were defined. Coding is considered to be a dynamic and fluid process and as advised by Strauss and Corbin (1998) is further broken down into three levels of activity: open, axial and selective coding.

Open coding

The goal of analysis is to generate meaning from data or the findings (Miles and Huberman, 1984). The process used to generate meaning consisted of several levels of analysis as identified by LeCompte and Schensul (1999) in conducting qualitative research. First, an item analysis related to the research questions or what they refer to as theorising was conducted. This involved a process of sifting and sorting through the transcriptions, comparing and contrasting the conversational comments as well as the themes within the data, putting together those items that were similar and separating out those that were different. I ran carefully through each transcript, the

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notes in the students' journals and the notes written to explain the photographs, highlighting what seemed to be discrete ideas and giving them a label, usually by writing a name for this code in the wide margin on the transcripts, students' journals and on the notes. This corresponds to the process which Strauss and Corbin (1990) call open coding which they refer to as:

> ...the part of the analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorising of phenomenon through close examination of the data (p.62).

Open coding describes the process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data. Using the constant comparison analysis method, the coded concepts were refined, extended and cross-referenced with the data as a whole and related to each other.

Once the concepts began to accumulate, the process of grouping and categorising them with more abstract explanatory terms called *categories*. Categories depict the problems, issues, concern, and matters that are important to this study. Once a category was identified, I began to develop it in terms of its properties and dimensions and differentiating the subcategories. Subcategories answer questions about the phenomenon as when, how, and with what consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process generated a number of different categories into which the data could be grouped.

Axial coding

Attempts were made to classify, illustrate, and connect these categories more closely to feel their importance in the general pattern of the data gained from the learners, and how these data inter-related. As themes and patterns began to emerge from the data, a pattern analysis was done. This corresponded to what Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe as *axial coding* which they refer to as:

> ...a set of procedures where by data are put back together in new ways after open coding by making connections between a category and its subcategories (p.97).

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This is a continuation of the process begun in the open coding of relating categories to their subcategories, and linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions (see: Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involved grouping similar conversations and comments that shared common themes. Finally, a structural analysis involving linking together and finding consistent relationships among patterns and structure was completed.

At an early stage of the fieldwork, five strong themes emerged which seemed to pervade most of the early data gained in the fieldwork. These themes were embedded in the data, and shed some light on the main research questions. As other data from multiple research methods started to come in, new themes began to emerge.

Throughout the analysis, some counting was done to give an idea of the density and frequency of the main categories and sub-categories. The reason was that I found some of the learners more vocal and succinct than others. They were easy to engage in conversation. Some kept repeating the key word, and others expressed the same opinion just as strongly, only using the word or phrase once. However, I was always cautious in making such counts especially in qualitative research. I have to admit that it was a very imprecise activity, because sometimes the learners expressed an opinion without using the key word that I had chosen for counting. In some cases, where the opinion was clearly present, despite the absence of the key word, I included this in the counting, but obviously this was a matter of my judgement.

Despite some problems, the process of counting did generate some interesting and useful results that gave some broad indications rather than specific measurements. As time went by, it became clearer that the data was saturated, in the sense that Glaser and Strauss describe. I was, however, quite aware when going through the students journals and notes on the photographs, which I received much later than analysing the interview data, that my reading of this material could be biased by my emerging themes. Reading the data and notes again and again was imperative, I learnt. Later on,

I read through the data again but this time focusing on negative cases and 'things', which did not seem fit the emerging pattern.

Selective Coding

Selective coding was the final stage of the analysis in this study. Selective coding is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as a:

> ...process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development (p.116).

Each of the major themes had important consequences for the understanding of distance learning at UUM. From these consequences a core category was developed to describe the essence of the understanding. The core category has explanatory, analytic power. Once the core category is identified, the grounded theory should be refined through reviewing for internal consistency, gaps in logic, supplementing any poorly developed categories, and reducing excess categories that do little to contribute to the theory (see: Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Profiling the Participants

Once the coding and analysis process was completed, I then *profiled* the data; a sequential process adopted from Seidman, (1997) (*For more information on steps in crafting a profile, please see Seidman, 1997: pp.101-107*). 'Profiles' are one way to solve the common interviewer's problem of sharing of what has been learned from the interviews. The narrative form of the profile allows the interviewer to transform this learning into telling a story. Telling stories, according to Seidman, is a compelling way to make sense of the interview data. It is "... a technique to find and display coherence in the constitutive events of a participant's experience, to share the coherence the participant has expressed, and to link the individual's experience to the social and organisational context which he or she operates (Seidman, 1997: p.103). Using profiles in the analysis of the data in this study would allow me to present the

research participants in context, to continuously clarify their intentions and to convey a sense of process and time, all central components of qualitative analysis.

CONCLUSION: REFLECTION ON DATA INTERPRETATION

I like to end this chapter by reflecting on my experiences transcribing and interpreting the data I had in this study. As in many research studies, the interpretation of collected data or research materials can be problematic. This is true of case study, and more so with naturalistic studies (Stake, 1985). This study has certainly proved to be such an instance. The amount of data and information to be analysed was massive. In all, over forty-nine hours of interviews were fully transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English. The translation work for this study does not incorporate all transcribed data. This was done for two reasons: 1. Not all data were useful and meaningful to the study. Thus it was only practical to translate the information that was helpful and relevant. 2. Time constraints were also a factor in deciding which transcriptions were useful. The transcribed version enabled references to be made at any time during the analysis. In fact, the written form was easier to carry around than the cumbersome tape recorder. The transcribed interviews also enabled initial notes to be written by the side as they were read.

If transcribing the interviews was laborious, the analysis of data from these interviews was even more so. Often, a phrase would consist of several categories of data, so that it was necessary to listen to or read the interview transcripts over and over again. Some of the interviews were read and listened to so many times that I began to memorise whole sequences. In all cases, the transcripts were read several times to determine categories of response, and notes were written beside the views expressed according to the category the statement belong to. Hence, at the end of all these transcriptions, I was able to identify several categories, which I labelled accordingly. Categories such as DLs' learning styles, DLs personality, perceptions and feelings towards distance learning, learning barriers and several more seemed to be

significant. I had considerable difficulty putting the statements into categories, as they often seemed to be inseparable and interrelated with one another. Hence, when a statement seemed to fall into two or more categories, I would put them in all of the possible categories, but also note it as not to comment on it twice.

I found it practical to perform all transcription work on my notebook using Microsoft Word. Where necessary, I used the bookmark to mark all the statements that were classified under the same categories, idea, issues or headings. The names and codes of the interviewees were noted beside the statements. This enabled the data to be crosschecked against other instances in the same category, either because of congruence in what people said or otherwise. Once I had all the interviews transcribed, I pulled out all the statements that belonged to the same category and produced a completely new file. This approach enabled me to perform the analysis according to these categories. Such categories also allowed me to identify the sub-themes emerging from the categories. All of this in turn helped me to decide on an order for their presentation, and start writing. Using the computer made the process manageable, as I was able to cut, past, transfer, insert and do whatever I wanted within and between files.

CHAPTER 8
FACING THE *'REALITY'* OF DISTANCE LEARNING

In Malaysia there exists a general feeling that there are barriers to distance learning, and that many of these barriers may be attributed to the mind set, perceptions and attitudes that the DLs hold towards distance learning. Many of the DLs in this study seem to interpret the distance learning experience based upon their former educational experience. Those who have been through the 12 years of Malaysian mainstream education, have adopted this experience into their current perception and their expectations of other and later educational pursuits like distance learning. The meanings that they attach reflect their past experiences, which may be similar or different between one learner and another. It is, then, not uncommon, for example, for two different DLs experiencing a distance course to give two different accounts of it because it is interpreted from the perspective of two different past sets of experience. Once meaning is attached to former educational experience, conclusions are established from the experience and form the basis of the learners' attitudes. Since attitudes are subjective conclusions that have been drawn from subjectively interpreted experiences, the learner's evaluation, assessment and conclusions about learning episodes or experiences might or might not correspond to others' conclusions about the same events. It is in the need to understand their experiences that this research needs to provide a *thick* description and so a better understanding of distance learning at UUM.

While it is important, in designing effective DE courses and programmes to understand how learning at a distance occurs, and the factors that influence the learning process; understanding who adult DLs are, not only their characteristics, but the impact of former educational experiences, what motivates them to seek distance learning experiences, and how they accommodate the role of a learner in addition to their other life roles is crucial to understanding and hence, development of

meaningful education programmes (Merriam & Cunningham, 1989). Approaches to course design, for example, often emphasise teaching strategies from an instructional perspective that assumes good teaching, and that effective distance teachers will produce good learning, but this may not be true for every learner. Good teaching logically helps learning, but in distance learning, there is much more than good teaching and good teachers to make learning a worthwhile effort for every distance learner. From the learners' perspective, the way they respond to instruction and the factors involved in learning are worth investigating. And, in general, the evidence revealed in this study shows that there is no universal view of what constitutes good, effective distance teaching and learning, as approaches preferred by the DLs in this study may be those disliked by others.

WHY ENROL IN DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMME?

Adult DLs usually have to study part time so the demands of a distance programme has to be accommodated alongside competing demands from work, families and friends. This becomes particularly interesting because the choice to enrol in a distance learning programme such as the UUM PJJ programme is voluntary. Therefore, the question of why they enrol in particular distance learning programme is an important one.

Although the decision to enrol looks simple, it is a complex construct embodying all the different reasons, purposes, expectations and motivations that cause the learners to choose distance learning. In interpreting the multi-faceted phenomenon that embraces all those attitudes and aims that express the learners individual relationship with part time study, the institution and the particular distance course, the construct of an orientation formulated by Taylor et al. (1981) is adopted from a theoretical standpoint. Kember et al., (2001) assert that the construct of an orientation provides a detailed insight into the complex set of purposes, interests, aims and concerns which prompt learners to enrol in a particular study programme.

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Orientation as described by Taylor et al. (1981:p.3) refers to "...all those attitudes and aims that express the learner's individual relationship with a course and the institution. It is the collection of purposes which orientates the student to the course in a particular way". In their study, they characterised orientations in terms of the learners' interest, aim and concerns, which I find relevant to this study of distance learners at UUM.

The concept of orientation itself is a complex concept with multiple component factors. The reasons underlying the learners' decision to be DLs, the rationale for enrolling and motivations to pursue the programme, I believe, have a significant impact upon subsequent behaviour as DLs. The quest to understand why they had chosen to become distance learners at UUM surfaced in the initial discussions I had with the learners in which I asked: *Why study via distance learning? Why choose UUM? What were your expectations? and How will the programme contribute to your career development?*

In my attempt to make sense of the data captured from the discussions, I decided to frame the analysis according to the DLs' orientation to their PJJ enrolment at UUM. The decision to frame the analysis in terms of the learners' orientation to enrolment was consistent with the open nature of this study and was a pragmatic approach to the analysis. The following orientations to enrolment were derived from the interviews with the DLs by the semi-inductive process, and is summarised in Table 12 below:

Table 12: Categories of orientation

Type of Orientation
Continuing Professional Development and Retraining Purpose
An alternative and Opportunity for those who did not have the chance
Other Orientations or Pull Factors to DE Enrolment

In the following section, each category is examined in turn. For each orientation, typical quotations from the interviews are inserted to illuminate the category. These categories are pertinent to the discussion of educational experience because they represent the motivations for pursuing educational experience at a distance for many of the learners in this study.

Continuing Professional Development and Career Shift

Ever since 1997 when the economy started to go 'south' in Malaysia, as in many other countries in the world, there have been many fundamental changes that have changed how companies and organisations work. *Downsizing, redundancy* and *mergers* were common phenomena, which had a direct impact on human resources and workers in general. To many of the workers, these words meant a job lost, the need to retrain, competition, searching for other jobs, and retirement. It was changes in global economy that created a demand for education, professional training and retraining of human resources, and DE has been a popular medium to attain such educational goals. This is reflected in the DLs population in most of the DE providers and institutions in Malaysia including UUM. Many of the DLs at UUM are working adults wanting to improve their professional life and careers. The following table summarises the research participants' existing profession, suggesting that a strong motive is career aspiration upon completion of their distance programme:

Table 13: Present Occupation and Anticipated Career Change

Total number of respondents	Type of Profession held presently	Anticipated Career Change after receiving the degree
03	Teacher	Graduate Teachers or Subject specialist teachers
01	Police Officers	Promotion, higher ranking officers
02	Clerks	Promotion, management positions i.e. executives
01	Secretary	Management positions
02	Technicians	Promotion, or better positions on management

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			sides
01	Self Employed		To improve managing the business and to be more knowledgeable.
02	Sales Agent		Management side

The need to enrol into a distance learning programme to keep pace with developments within the original profession was one of the primary reasons for some of the DLs interviewed in this study. One of the distance learners who work as a teacher teaching at one of the primary school in the northern region of Kedah said that:

I enrolled into distance learning to upgrade my teaching qualification. Though, the UUM PJJ programme is not a teacher training programme per se like the one offered by UNITEM or USM, it does confer a degree. That is what I needed to climb the ladder in the teaching profession in Malaysia, specifically converting myself from a DG2 teacher category to DG3 (DG3 is a pay status category for graduate teachers)   *SMD/5.02.02/Interview*

This according to him is in accordance with the Malaysian Ministry of Education's plan to upgrade and retrain teachers in realising the plan of converting all teaching practitioners or teachers from non graduates to graduates by the year 2010. He further commented:

In view of today's teaching environment and demand, a teacher without a degree I think is at a disadvantage. You lose out on many things, your pay is small, your work load is heavy, and you don't get the respect...What matters most is getting a degree so that I will be known as a graduate teacher. I can attain this at UUM, plus, I have always had a wish to major in business and management but before it was unattainable, now I can and I hope once I receive my degree, I will be sent to secondary school to teach commerce or something along that line...
                                    SMD/5.02.02/Interview

Another teacher-learner commented:

Looking at many of my friends who have already enrolled in distance programmes, it gives me the urge to follow suit. It is, I think, more to develop my knowledge as a teacher and to be better teacher in the future. I think the training and the courses I take at UUM will give me the knowledge to be better and be more professional at teaching...

FMY/4.02.02/Interview

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Other learners enrolled in distance learning courses to qualify in more specialised areas, to update their skills or to shift towards a new profession, as evident in the following discourse:

> *I have been a clerk for almost thirteen years. I am not going anywhere by not doing anything. This is my effort to move forward. Although it is financially hard to squeeze out money for tuition fees, but I think in the long run it will be a worthwhile investment. I wanted to ask for a better position within the company or a better job at a different company or organisation. I have been there too long...* CTS/4.02.02/Interview

The above discourse gives evidence of desiring a career shift as a motivation for learners' enrolment in the UUM distance programmes. Perhaps the most common change of this type is among those who wish to move into management in the same or a different organisation, as exemplified by the following:

> *By profession I am a sales agent, and do a lot of work on merchandising. With the course I am taking at UUM, I hope to ask to be considered for promotion to the management field, so I think it is useful for me to learn and improve my management skills and theory for future career purpose. In addition to that, I think majoring in a management based programme is good because it can fit any organisational type of work quite easily.* FLS/11.02.02

Increasing numbers of professionals or working adults are likely to enrol in distance courses to qualify in more specialised areas, to update and develop their skills or to shift towards a new profession. There will clearly be a need for more distance programmes at intervals during a career in many professions and a pressure to be involved in some form of workplace learning.

Alternative and Opportunity for Those Who Did Not Have the Chance and Qualification

HE is not meant for everybody. Only those learners with sufficient qualification and motivation are able to enrol in most institutions. Public universities, for example, have imposed rigid and high entrance criteria, as a consequence, only a small proportion of the country's population gets to enrol and be accepted as university learners. Some learners who can afford to can opt for private institutions,

nevertheless with the expansion of DE programmes and courses in Malaysia, many more learners who may not have had the opportunity before are able to pursue their educational goal in life and get the degree or qualification they desire:

> *I never dreamt of learning at a university before. My examination results in SPM (National Examination Certificate) and STPM (Higher Education Examination Certificate) were not good enough to apply for a university programme. But now, I am progressing in my degree course. Thank God, such a thing as DE exists and is in this country. It was a boost to my confidence. Most important of all, my enrolment in this programme at UUM will sent a positive signal to my children, to work hard like their dad...*   *DMD/3.02.02/Interview*

Such a feeling was also substantiated by one of the photographs that he submitted:

Picture1: Dewan Mas as a source of motivation
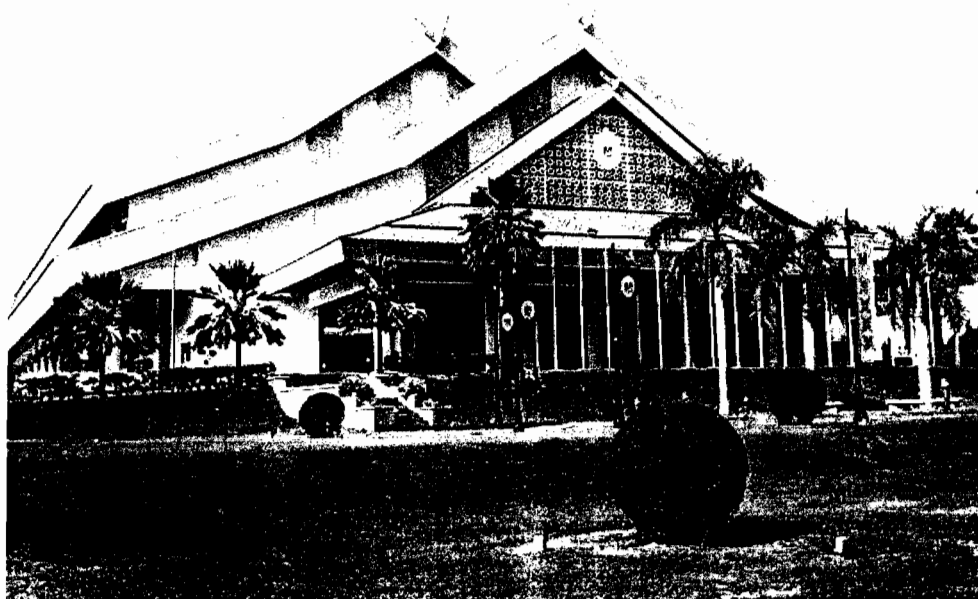
Commenting on the picture Dazman says:

> *When I first saw Dewan Mas, it sent out a very big feeling. I was very happy, to do something that I had never dreamt of before. Enrolling into a university was never in my destiny, with the qualifications that I have. Picturing myself completing the course, and receiving the degree in Dewan Mas is something that I look forward to...it will be a big boost for me, and a good thing for my kids to remember and hopefully they will follow my steps...really, Dewan Mas and such anticipation is my very motivation to move forward working towards the degree.*
> *DMD/Date taken 23.05.02/Photo*

Another learner says:

> *I can't afford to leave work (stop working) and do a full time degree course. Just not possible when you have a big family and commitment, plus I am always scared of losing everything...until distance learning was suggested to me by my friend. Now, I am able to study while working, and best of all I think it will benefit me and family later for a better life. It is a very good opportunity.*
>
> *SKC/6.02.02/Interview*

Without the flexibility of learning at a distance, many of the DLs would be unable to consider enrolling in their distance course at UUM. The DLs quoted have an exclusively or mainly vocational orientation. Many of them are very concerned with their careers and wanted some 'change' not only to their professional life but also the changes in status that follow the achievement or the completion of the degree, for example, the direct and indirect benefits to the learner and his or her family. A change in profession, or a promotion, they hope, will bring more money to the family, strengthen the family's financial ability, boost their standard of living, and in many instances it provides good examples or a model to their children to succeed and work hard in education.

Other Orientations or Pull-Factors to DE Enrolment

There are other reasons for embarking on a distance learning programme where a conventional degree programme was difficult and often impossible for these learners.

The majority of the DLs cite *flexibility* and *convenience* for example, as a pull factor to taking courses via distance:

> *It was hard to think of a HE programme, which is highly flexible, that gives you much freedom and most important of all the opportunity which seemed impossible before. I like DE. Its flexibility means I don't have to attend weekly class; I can set my own schedule; I can read the modules when I choose to, again and again; I can work in the comfort of my own home and I can stop and pause when I feel like it...great*   *FLS/21.02.02/Interview*

'Flexibility' is not just seen as an aspect of the programme, but provides scope for those students who lack confidence to practise with a degree of security.

It is good, you study and work when you want to do so...you don't have the pressure like when you are in school, always worrying if the teacher is going to call on you for an answer... RMS/15.02.02/Interview

Learners enjoy distance learning because it offers a greater degree of control, and some privacy. In addition, by removing time pressures, distance learning encourages reflective thinking. It stimulates creativity by removing perceived pressures from the peer group, and perhaps by the presence of the teacher which may inhibit certain learners from taking risks in the classroom (Moore, 1990). Perhaps paradoxically, by removing the artificial boundaries of time and space of the defined, sometimes rigid, "traditional" classroom, distance education can even enhance the ability to communicate. Although this may not be fully realised and experienced by all DLs and teachers, for those learners who are able to participate in such activities, the experience is positive and worthwhile, as elicited in the following quotation:

Distance learning has introduced me to group discussions, I think I have never involved much with talking and discussing academic matters until I enrolled and became a distance learner...it has been good, and most important of all it helps my progress in the course DMD/13.02.02/Interview

However, for other learners, as discussed later in chapter 10, the opposite may be true.

Other reasons for enrolling into DE programmes are the preference for independent study; uninterrupted lecture formats; more time to assimilate information; infrequent onsite sessions, which minimise travel; opportunity to spend more time with family; the ability to stop, pause and write.

In addition to the reasons mentioned, there may also be learning outcomes that are more readily achieved in a distance learning environment than in a traditional classroom. Adult learning can be facilitated when individual learners assess their own skills and strategies to discover inadequacies or limitations for themselves

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(Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980), which often occurs in distance learning. Other researchers have claimed that distance courses are able to support some learners in developing and honing certain learning skills such as self-directed learning, teamwork, and problem solving skills (Levenburg & Major, 1998). However, based on the findings of this study, I should caution that developing, and sustaining self directed learning, independence, group work and others itself is a challenge by itself, and poses barriers to some learners.

THE 'REALITY' OF DISTANCE LEARNING AT UUM

It has been reported that adult learners are most likely to find success with distance learning. The successful learner needs to have a number of characteristics such as tolerance for ambiguity, a need for autonomy, and an ability to be flexible (Threkeld & Brzoska, 1994). Compared to most f2f or campus based learning environments, distance learning require learners to be more focused, better time managers, and able to work independently and self direct their own learning. Interest is crucial to success. Interest is in turn affected by attitude and performance. Attitude and ability are themselves influenced by many factors. If distance teachers and educators are to understand the learners better, they need to appreciate and be aware of the problems that the learners have to face in the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of learning at a distance.

As described in the *International Dictionary of Education* (1979: 32) "Attitude is a predisposition to perceive, feel or behave towards specific objects or certain people in a particular manner." The dictionary further describes that attitudes are thought to be derived from experience, rather than innate characteristics, which suggests that they can be modified by further experiences. Realising such importance, the DLs' attitudes, perceptions and learning approaches on specific distance courses taken at UUM are dealt with in this chapter to explore the institution DLs' academic self concept in distance learning.

DLs who do not cope effectively with the demands for independence, time management (Ku Mahamud et al., 2001) and self-direction posed by distance learning do not find success in their educational pursuit. This is constantly been verified by the data gained in this study. Not all learners are suited to distance learning:

> *It has been tough going, I didn't imagine it would be like this. If I had known that distance learning entails such difficulty I would have reconsidered my decision to enrol...but, too much money, time have been invested, my task now is to complete the degree and get the scroll,*
>
> <div align="right">KS/20.02.02/Interview</div>

> *It sounds easy initially, but when confronted with some of the courses I was really put off or you can say that I was demotivated...it was not easy being a learner at a distance...*
>
> <div align="right">PL/7.03.02/Interview</div>

> *Time, and finding lots of it to study and work on the assignments, getting the reading done was not easy. It is tough, finding or even stealing 'time' from your office work is not often available, it is tight...*
>
> <div align="right">RMS/15.02.02/Interview</div>

In addition, not all courses are best learned via this medium:

> *I think the complexity and level of difficulty of some of the courses like Math, Management Science, Business English were just appalling. So much so, I feel these courses should be learned not via distance...it requires more explanation, more coaching, tutoring. If the course is a theory course or things that you memorise, then it's Ok, but once formulas and calculation are involved, things for me get complicated. Other than that, the English courses too I think is not appropriate, my English is not good, and learning at a distance, I don't think it is getting any better, it is difficult for me to practise the language in this mode of learning...*   RMS/15.02.02/Interview

This comment on the English language course was also substantiated by one of the distance teachers with whom I spoke during my first visit back to Malaysia during the scoping process:

> *It is devastating to notice that some DLs are not doing well in their studies, and this suggest that there may be some real learning issues that need to be addressed, but I think it is even frustrating to realise that language courses like the Business English and others are being taught at a distance. You can teach it, but I am doubtful it will improve the standard of the English language among the distance learners. It is already deteriorating among the campus-based learners,*

and now teaching it at a distance...doubtful it will work well. You know...it is already difficult to encourage full time undergraduates to use and speak the language within the four walls of the classroom, and now at a distance...I am a bit pessimistic. MNM/DT/14.10.01/Scooping

Learning at a distance is a difficult undertaking that requires considerable self-discipline and determination (Shoemaker, 1998), and this is exemplified in these comments by the following learners:

Distance learning is more about you controlling yourself, your learning...
FLS/21.02.02/Interview

I find that at the initial pace, I drifted quite easy...without disciplining myself and holding to my study plans and routine religiously I will sink and fail at distance learning DMD/3.02.02/Interview

The decision to enrol means giving myself another responsibility to handle in life. Without determination and the right support, I could easily drop out...
SMD/13.02/Interview

It seems that there are various obstacles that prevent many of the adult DLs from participating effectively in distance learning. One in particular, as commented by this learner, is the problem of *procrastination*:

It's easy to get behind when you have the power to postpone the power to do and not to do the learning tasks at the time of your choosing. Often such power led me to do things at the last minute...and quite often the results or the quality was not as good as it should be, shame on me...

MB/6.02.02/Interview

This learner found it easy to procrastinate, subsequently finding himself too far behind to catch up with the course. Self-discipline cannot be emphasised enough as being a key element in distance learning success. For some learners, it was difficult to stay on track without the structure of a traditional classroom and weekly lectures. Another drawback is that some learners find the distance programmes often require more homework than a traditional class:

There are not many f2f meetings, and the lecturers' assumption that you are mature adult learners so to speak entails that you have to do more work, more readings, more library visits, more effort...

CTS/11.02.02/Interview

They is a lot more work and it takes more time than a regular class...
RMS/3.03.02/Interview

Some of these learners enrolled in a distance programme thinking that the distance course would be much easier to handle, require less work and less time, only to find out that they were spending more time with readings and independent assignments. It was just not what they expected. The reality was not compatible with what some of the learners expected distance learning to be.

Another serious drawback of distance learning, which warrants detailed analysis and discussion, is the issue of interaction. Feelings of isolation often prevent students, from knowing how they are progressing academically in their distance courses. Some distance teachers have alleviated this by giving frequent tests and assignments, which allow the learners to monitor their learning progress, but that was deemed by some learners as not enough:

> *More frequent tests and exams would help to organise and structure the course content and material better. Sometimes I feel that the course is too loaded with information. What do you do? How do you know which one is important? Just look at the course modules, they are all thick, lot of pages. Without a clear learning structure, you just do not know to plan your learning activities effectively.*
>
> *KS/28.02.02/Interview*

The feeling of isolation and 'darkness' as exemplified by the above definition brings the discussion to another issue fundamental to distance learning. The primary problem faced by many of the DLs in this study is the lack of interaction. Given the importance of interaction as an important element in teaching and learning, this is a serious academic problem. If there is no one else to talk to, DLs will be more apt to blame themselves, to assume that they are 'just not up' to that level of work, and drop out without sharing their concerns. DE institutions thus have a responsibility to do whatever they can to put DLs in contact with distance teachers, and with other DLs, and to allow them success which they can build upon as they gain confidence in their own ability to persist in their studies and to work at the HE level.

Appropriate support and feedback are required in an educational transaction to counteract the sense of isolation and need for affiliation (Persons & Catchpole, 1987). This is a major setback for the overall convenience afforded by distance learning. The data confirm that lack of interaction in the distance learning experience at UUM is a major setback to some of the learners' progress in the programme. Interaction and its role in distance learning will be further discussed in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

For traditional, campus-based learners, the socialisation of a classroom, and the atmosphere that campus provides provide a significant source of support that adult DLs, with the many other activities their lives provide, lack. The different characteristics and the complexity of the adult DLs only magnify the heterogeneous quality of the learners. One example, is that it has always been said that DLs often feel less pressure to perform individually, and more pressure to collaborate and be part of the team (Kantor, 1998 cited in Greenberg, 1998), but the reality is that every learner is unique and may differ in terms of learning approach. Being involved in a collaborative learning process is an important part of forming the foundation of a learning community. When this is not encouraged, participation is generally low and interaction is absent (Palloff & Pratt, 2000). However, ability to work as a group is itself a learned or acquired skill. Some learners do it better than others. It works for some learners, but not for others.

Most learners need the attention of their distance teachers. This is as true in a distance situation as in a traditional classroom, and is very much felt among the learners involved in this study. The role of distance teachers and the learners' perspective on it is elaborated with further detailed accounts in the next chapter.

Lack of interaction leads to lack of interpersonal information and this can amplify simple misunderstandings. In a situation where eye contact and proximity are limited, learners cannot be disciplined nor affirmed by eye contact and body language (McKnight, 2000). DLs may also have a difficult time reading the reactions

of the remote location of other DLs. This lack of interaction can cause problems when there is a dissenting opinion that cannot be picked up on with non-verbal cues, and may be misperceived as a verbal attack. This type of miscommunication can cause the learners problems as the course progresses. In some cases this may magnify the strengths and weaknesses of the instructor as perceived by the DLs. Learners are prone to pick up on what they take to be a lack of organisation and direction and respond with apathy and absenteeism (West, 1994).

False Expectation...False Promotion...We are being Deceived

For some of the DLs in this study, the incompatibility between the reality of distance learning and their expectation of it is evident in the data. Some of the learners did not know what was expected of them as distance learners. One example discussed by one of the distance learners in this study refers:

> ...to the way in which many DE courses and programmes are usually promoted, stressing convenience and flexibility rather than the difficulties faced or that will be faced by the DLs. Responding to such slogans as 'stay home education' or 'give yourself credit', many who have been attracted to such a call enrol into institutions but find themselves totally unprepared for its demands...
>
> RMS/3.03.02/Interview

This is also echoed in the learner's discussion of the following photograph. The banners do not tell the truth. They are meant to attract you but do not inform you of what you will be facing:

Picture 2: Banners can be manipulative and dishonest

He further commented:

They (the university) are not transparent in providing us with all the details about distance learning and being a distance learner...there is a lot that I did not know about being a distance learner and learning at a distance before...I always remembered about words or phrase being stressed during the welcome orientation as distance learners. They were assurances of getting the degree or paper qualification the easiest way, manageable, study with convenience and so on. True, but there is more to it. So much so I think, such promotion of the programme gives you false expectation, false promotion, it only deceives you to enrol, and to suffer later...

RMS/Date taken1.07.02/Photo

It would not be reasonable for an institution like UUM to advertise and promote its DE programmes and courses by communicating such *rhetoric* as *'earn your degree the slow and painful way'* but it is important, according to most of the DLs in this study, that incoming DLs are made fully aware of the challenges they will face, and have an opportunity to reflect on such information and make the final decision to enrol or otherwise:

I think many of us were excited to be able to pursue a HE degree which may not have seemed possible before, but the excitement is short lived, we are more in 'shock', shock at not knowing how best to conduct ourselves learning in such

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mode of education

We need more information...I think the lack of it on what to expect was the most dreadful event in my experience. Sure there is the one-week orientation, but how much can you absorb when there so many issues and speakers involved

Given the fact that UUM distance programmes employ an open entry policy - flexible, and taking working experiences into account as an entry consideration, not as rigid and difficult as full-time campus-based entry, it is hardly surprising that many of the DLs involved in this study found starting their distance course difficult. Many of the DLs, for example did not possess high academic achievement or qualifications from their former educational experience, which are the normal criteria for admission into conventional HE programmes. The following quotation graphically illustrates a common dilemma:

For me formal education is something that I have left quite a while ago and it is more of an activity that my children are involved in now. But here I am doing it again. It is hard for me. And it was hard especially as I had not been involved in such educational activities for a good 20 years. Imagine that...imagine what I go through, and what changes I need to make.

Difficulty of content is one aspect but it was made clear by some of the DLs, that it was the distance approach, which was the primary set back, or barrier in their learning. The fact was, to many of them, such a mode of learning was something they had not experienced before in their former educational experiences (referring to their primary and secondary educational years) and many found this a daunting prospect. The following quotation is indicative of the dismay many DLs felt at the prospect of studying at a distance:

In the beginning, I seemed to be studying by myself, and didn't know how to start. I was scared at the start. It was just tough. I felt so many things, feelings. Feelings of isolation, feelings of frustration, feelings of anger, and most of all, feeling of total darkness not knowing exactly how, and what direction should I take to ensure some success in my study.

Later in the year, it was found that Karim had made some progress and experienced less of the above feelings, as he wrote in his journal dated 23.11.02:

This past semester has been better. I think I am coping better than I did in the previous semester, I think I am handling my learning well, and partly I think choosing the right courses, having better teachers, and definitely due to the changes that I made in myself-learn more, read more and ask more questions.

KS/23.11.02/Student Journal

THE ISSUE OF COMPATIBILITY OF 'REALITY' AND 'EXPECTATION'

The incompatibility of the reality versus the expectations of DLs caused particular problems when tackling course assignments and tasks. Taking other evidence into account, the following learner, for example, appeared to be too dependent on his/her teachers as knowledge providers, a conception that looks upon distance teachers as the main resource for his distance educational experience. The assignment received from the course instructor called for something beyond his ability, so the student found completing the tasks difficult:

The course was difficult. I felt many times at a loss and had some confusion...The assignments were provided with some guidelines. But what good are guidelines if the lecturer does not really go through it in great detail? I didn't find it easy to fully understand the guidelines...I couldn't grasp the proper way to answer the questions. I am lost...

MB/22.02.02/Interview

The following distance learner seems to have had a similar difficulty, though he/she probably had somewhat more developed beliefs about learning at a distance:

The first two semesters were tough going! Absolutely! Lots of challenges that I did not know about and not being told about it and how to solve it. I learned from observations and discussions with my fellow friends in the course. As I progressed along, I came to understand distance learning requires a different approach and attitude, thus I had to change to survive it.

FLS/21.02.02/Interview

As I began to understand what DLs told me, their perceptions of distance teaching and learning became clear. This is particularly so when their suggestions for

improving the courses that they enrolled into were examined. The following learner, for example, wanted more didactic forms of teaching:

Good lectures and good lecture notes are important. It was the case when I went through upper secondary level and my diploma, and I think it would be better as well if such an approach is utilised a lot in distance learning. I understand the word distance means some separation between me, the teacher and everybody else, but what I am saying is that would be better, especially for people like me, to listen to more lectures. It is important for my study. I and many of my friends find that it would be good if there were more lectures. It is difficult to study all on our own and to learn by discussion.

<div align="right">

RMS/22.03.02/Interview

</div>

Another student's vision of teaching was so ingrained in a didactic approach that dissatisfaction with the f2f was expressed as a desire for more teaching. Obviously what was being provided, in the study packages was not considered to be teaching and did not help much in his learning of the course:

I would like them to provide more teaching. Modules help, but I think only minimally. Modules can't really answer some of the questions you may have when going through them, or could they?

<div align="right">

MB/22.02.02/Interview

</div>

The evidence gained seems to suggest that the desire for a particular form of teaching was related to the DLs beliefs about knowledge. An important feature of the type of teaching they wanted was that it would tell them what to study and how to prepare for the examinations. They felt that knowledge had to be defined for them by the distance teachers.

This may be seen as a consequence of Malaysian mainstream educational system which is in line with the reproductive learning approach where students preview or review their study materials, and revision serves to sum up what has been learnt and to consolidate it into memory ready for examination (Li et al., 2000). In respect of distance learning, such practice and belief function as a setback to developing self-directedness and independence in learning:

I hope that they (the distance teachers) can tell us the main points in order to save our time in learning.   *MB/Dated 13.07.02/Student Journal*

Many of the DLs believe that it is the role of the distance teachers to transmit knowledge. Their role, as DLs, is to absorb that knowledge deemed appropriate by the distance teachers. The outcome of the process of teaching and learning at a distance is, then, judged by whether the DLs are able to reproduce the body of knowledge for the examinations and other assessment. This depicts another reality of the Malaysia educational system that puts a lot of focus on examinations. Examinations and academic performance have become the key indicators of success, even in distance teaching and learning programmes and for DE courses.

The three belief components are logically consistent. If the distance teachers define knowledge, it makes sense to ask the distance teachers to pass on that knowledge to the DLs. Learning can then be assessed by examining how successfully knowledge is being absorbed by the DLs.

CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING

Detailed studies of conceptions of learning have identified more than two categories of conceptions of learning. They have been portrayed as a set of either five or six categories set (Marton, Dall'Alba & Beaty, 1993). Saljo (1979) for example, recognised five categories sets:

- *learning as the quantitative increase in knowledge;*
- *learning as memorising;*
- *learning as acquisition of facts, procedures, etc. which can be retained and/or utilised in practice;*
- *learning as the abstraction of meaning;*
- *and learning as an interpretative process aimed at the understanding of reality.*

Saljo (1979) and Marton & Saljo (1984) have examined the distinction between the first two conceptions, which refer to facts or memorisation, while the remainder involve meaning or understanding. Evidence for the two higher level orientations

comes from a study by van Rossum and Schenk (1984), which related conceptions of learning to approaches to learning. In the context of this study, the interviews with DLs suggest that the results can be interpreted as showing that DLs with the first two conceptions normally use a *surface approach* and favour didactic teaching, while those with the other conceptions used *a deep approach* in their learning and can be characterised as more independent and self directed.

The strongest argument for describing the belief sets in terms of these two orientations comes from the discussions with the DLs themselves. In each case the DLs made a clear distinction between an early sets of beliefs about the learning and teaching process, usually held in their former educational experiences, and the contrasting set of beliefs held at the time of this study. What comes through strongly from this study is the importance of making the transition from one broad orientation to the other, a transition that has proved to be difficult for some of the distance learners. Moving through positions within an orientation may be useful steps in the right direction, but making the jump between the two orientations is the most important one. But of course not all DLs can make that jump. Change does not come easily, as the 12 years experience of a teacher centred regime has established a very strong and rigid mindset of what constitute teaching and learning among Malaysian learners in general.

There are indications in the data that these beliefs can and do change. In a related study, the Universiti Sains Malaysia adult learners' educational transitional experience was investigated by Saw et al. (1999). They found significant evidence to suggest that DLs make adaptive responses to accommodate their learning. Idrus et al. (2001) subsequently looked at the educational transition among USM female adult DLs and found that the female learners also experienced many changes and had to make numerous sacrifices to be students. In light of *transformational learning* as iterated by Saw (2000) this is more evident in some DLs than others. A distance learner may be diagnosed as holding beliefs compatible with didactic belief at a point in time, but that does not mean that it is reasonable to attach the label didactic to the

distance learner. The learner may well develop beliefs corresponding to the other orientation, as did some of the DLs in this study, particularly so when further analysis was conducted on cultural differences among the DLs involved in this study. The difference between the two groups of learners (The Malay versus the Chinese DLs) was so profound that it warrants a separate discussion, a chapter on its own, later in this thesis.

The brief discussion above indicates that when discussing distance learning, three different conceptions are involved: *conceptions of learning, conceptions of teaching* and *academic self-concept*. The bulk of this research has concentrated on characterising one of these conceptions or beliefs, though some authors have considered the relationship of the selected conception with other beliefs (e.g. Perry, 1988; Saljo, 1982; van Rossum & Schenk, 1984). Based on the evidence that is presented in this and other chapters of this thesis, it is the position of this study that these three beliefs form a consistent and logical inter-related set. A belief in one of these areas influences the other two beliefs; all act in agreement to affect learning approaches and outcomes in distance learning.

Another pertinent and relevant issue that is worth discussing is that related to the transitional process involved in becoming a distance learner. There is a diverse range of work on the adjustment necessary for those who leave school and entering HE later in life (Saw, 2000; Idrus, 1996). Of this literature, the most relevant to this study is that on the development of academic self-concept. Perry (1988) portrays the adjustment to the academic demands of HE as a pilgrim's progress through epistemological steps, from recognising only one position on a topic towards making reasoned judgements between conflicting theories. King and Kitchener (1994) drew upon a large body of longitudinal data from their Reflective Judgement Interviews to show the slow pace of development of reflective thinking through high school and college.

The literature on the adjustment of adult DLs to HE also contains a range of overlapping themes. Reviews by Hartley (1998) and Richardson and King (1998) concluded that maturity in itself did not impair academic performance. Indeed there was evidence that adults were more inclined to use different learning approaches e.g. collaboration, deep approach, etc. However, these are invariably confounded because many adults study part time and a significant proportion are admitted under open entry schemes, so lack the formal qualifications required of entrants from previous educational qualification.

Many adult DLs have little option but to enrol part time. This mode of study normally has lower completion rates than full time campus based learning. Contrary to Kember's (1999) notion that it may be reasonable to argue, that these lower completion rates arise not from academic failure, but from the inability of the DLs to accommodate the time demands of studying with existing commitments to work, family and social lives (Kember, 1999), this study suggests otherwise.

Every distance learner has to juggle time with the different roles and responsibilities that they have as adult learners. To argue that academic failure makes no or little contribution towards lower completion rate or learning difficulties in DE may not prove to be acceptable: it depends on the learners' circumstances. Based on the evidence gained in this study, for example, I believe that the learners' conception of learning could be a 'predictor' of success or failure in distance learning. This is to argue that if the learner has the 'right' conception of learning for DE he or she can be successful; alternatively, if the learner is able to accommodate what is expected in distance learning success in distance learning then can also be achieved.

THE LEARNERS' SELF CONCEPT

As iterated earlier on in this chapter, what DLs believe about learning has a significant effect on how they perceive and act on their distance learning. In light of the significant repercussions of what the DLs 'belief' meant for their success, it was

tempting for me to further analyse each distance learner in this study in terms of the make-up of the individual learners, and in doing it was necessary for me to understanding the learners' *self concept.*

The frequent use of such rhetoric as *"I believe that..." "It is what I believe..." "I thought learning should or ought to be..." "It is difficult to change the learning habits inculcated in me by the educational experience I had..."* by the DLs in this study that prompted me to investigate and understand what they believed versus the reality that they were facing in distance learning at UUM.

Self concept can best be seen as a set of beliefs about the self (Boekaerts, 1994). It is viewed as the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings with reference to oneself as an object (Rosenberg & Kaplan, 1982). Brookover et al. (1967:p.8) defined self-concept as:

> symbolic behaviour in which the individual articulates a programme of action for himself as an object in relation to others

Self-concept is more likely to be related to subsequent behavioural consequences or changes in behaviour when there are discrepancies between the cognitive appraisals of self and behaviour. People, according to Shavelson et al, (1976) act in accordance with this perception and their action influences the way in which people perceive themselves.

In the context of distance learning, DLs are exposed to a variety of pressures from the environment (i.e. time, datelines, assignments, family responsibilities, and others) and they learn how to adjust to such pressures by growing in self-understanding to fulfil the needs and achieve satisfaction and adjustment required as a distance learner. Their performance in the academic setting is affected by their perception of own patterns of behaviour. The learners' self-understanding guides the interpretation of the distance learning environment, including the perception of the learning situation. This self-understanding is termed *self-concept.*

Shavelson further noted that self concept can be described in terms of seven features: organised, multifaceted, hierarchial, stable, developmental, evaluative, and differentiable. Self-concept is the sum of one's experiences, and may consist of hierarchy from *general self-concept* to *academic self-concept* (Shavelson et al., 1976).

Academic self-concept can be briefly defined as the sense of personal identity in one's academic pursuit. Gibson and Graff (1992), and Herrmann (1988) relate it to the dynamic nature of one's self concept as a learner. There are generally considered to be three categories of academic self-concept. These are *achievement, ability* and *classroom self concepts:*

> Achievement self concept is the product of a person's actual academic achievement at a particular point of time and can be measured by items such as "I am proud of my report card" and "I am satisfied with my school work". Ability self concept can be measured by items such as "I think that I have the ability to get good grades in schoolwork" and "I think that I am capable of getting the results I would like to obtain in school work." The third aspect of academic self-concept is labelled classroom self-concept. This relates to confidence in classroom activities and is measured by items such as "I feel left out of things in class," "Most teachers do not understand me," and "I feel worthless in class."
>
> (Song & Hattie, 1984:p83):

In addition, Brookover et al. (1967:p.8) noted self-concept of academic ability as "behaviours in which one indicates to himself (publicly or privately) his ability to achieve academic tasks as compared with others engaged in the same task." It is related to self-perceptions of competence. High correlation between academic achievement and self-concept of academic ability has been reported in many studies (Mboya, 1989; Michael et al., 1984; Gibson, 1996). Lyon (1993) for example, found in his study that academic self-concept is a stronger predictor of achievement than locus of control. Gibson (1996) from her research, suggested that academic self concept plays an important role in persistence in DE. She iterated that institutions modification of educational practice for the adult DLs could enhance academic self-concept and success of adult DLs:

...attention to certain institutional factors such as clearly presented expectations in course materials and ready access to faculty and other support services could positively influence a learner's academic self-concept. This influence could, in turn, contribute to increased persistence (Gibson, 1996:p.32)

Understanding the concept and potential role of self-concept in distance learning is particularly important in this study. At least, the data show that the mismatch between what is expected in DE versus the reality that the learners was attributable partly to the learners' self concept. For example, one distance learner reflecting on his levels of confidence entering his DE programme at UUM and his level after completion of several course requirements, noted:

Getting back and doing a few things and finding out that I am able to manage my study was a good feeling. So far, I don't think it is going to be a problem getting through it as regards learning on my own. From that point of view...I feel a lot more confident now than before. I was initially worried of my performance, falling behind or even failing...

DMD/17.02.02/Interview

On a less positive note illustrating that some DLs may enter DE programmes with an inflated sense of their abilities and commitment to learn at a distance, Rashid commented:

Reflecting on my initial experience in DE at UUM, I was extremely excited to be accepted...and looking at those other learners who are much, much older than me and have much more commitment in life, I told myself, how difficult can this be? If they can do it, why not me? Yes I have a good sense or level of confidence and motivation. But, once I had to take courses like Management Science, Math, economics, I went from being fully confident to less confident and such experience, I think is reflective of my ability in courses like that...

RMS/Dated 19.08/Student Journal

Not only did DLs appear to reference time as they reflected on their experience of their abilities to successfully engage with their distance courses; they also appeared to be thinking of several areas of competence. Some commented on their ability to cope with the process of learning as an adult. For example:

I thought that my weakness would be that at 41 maybe my retention power wouldn't be as great as it was... Definitely that was the case. It was horribly hard sometimes to remember to recall. My wife even bought me Gingo Billoba (medication supposedly to enhance memory), but it does little to help. Sometimes I needed to read, and read again, and I pray that I will remember well enough to

sit for the exams...

Other DLs focused more specifically on their new roles as learners at a distance. This learner stated that:

> *Learning at a distance is like coming to a new job, you need to know what you have to do. I quickly realised it was going to be a lot harder than I anticipated. This is particularly so when I go down the list of courses that I have to take. To begin with I went to an easier course...so that I would gain some confidence in this new way of learning.*
>

Still others commented on their confidence relative to a body of content. For example, when asked directly about her level of confidence, one student said:

> *Initially, on a scale of 10, I give my confidence a 5 in the Statistics Course, but once I completed the semester, I felt good, and I think my confidence stands at 7 or even 8*
>

On a more positive note, another distance learner reflected on his subject competence in a specific course:

> *I was surprised at how much I actually did know, did remember from years before!*
>

It is apparent that DLs with a positive self-concept have better cumulative grade point average (CGPA) and they usually cope with learning difficulties and exhibit more leaning abilities and skills. There is a close relationship between their attitudes and reality. The DLs who are doing relatively well in their distance courses, for example, are those who have the confidence in themselves to be successful, as exemplified by the following discourse:

> *I am not an 'A' student, I am you can say maybe a 'C' student. What helps me is my strong sense of motivation and confidence to succeed. I have got so much of my time and money invested in this programme. I am here to do what I need to do.*
>

Positive self-concept is the result of achieving repeated success and receiving from others, more power and more ability and in general whatever which makes DLs

believe that they are 'achievers' or successful learners, so as to cope with challenges in their life. The same student admitted that:

It is that sense of confidence and motivation that has helped me to get through most of the distance courses with relative satisfaction.

<div align="right">*DMD/19.02.02/Interview*</div>

Those DLs with a negative self-concept found it difficult to express those negative attitudes. They discussed the barriers they encountered in distance learning, but shared little about their attitudes. It was my inferences and interpretation of the evidence presented that suggested they had a negative self concept and this was very evident in what they said and did in their learning as illustrated by the following:

Some of the courses like economics are new to me. I have never taken any economic courses before in my life. It was foreign to me. You can't imagine my feelings when I first opened the course modules and looked at those funny looking graphs. It was difficult to make sense. I read once, twice, but nothing went through. Sometimes I feel like shouting aloud.... frustrating, what can I do? Absolutely no confidence at all. Most probably, I will have to retake the course again, that was what I was thinking, and sure enough I had to repeat, and did enough to get through the second time.

<div align="right">*RMS/1.04.02/Interview*</div>

It is evident from the above that it was difficult for the learner to think of a solution to his problems. Nevertheless, it is interesting to know that achieving success was as important for him as well as for the learners with positive self-concept. This distance learner clearly showed that he knew that the *Economies* course that he talked about was an important course, and he had to get through it, even if it meant re-taking the course. But unfortunately, because of his poor sense of confidence and actions, he was not successful in his first attempt, but prevailed the second time, with a passing grade.

A variety of confidence enhancers were mentioned as DLs reflected on the process of learning at a distance. Empathy on the part of the distance teachers was noted as an enhancer:

All I want is for the distance teachers to better understand us as learners; maybe they can then assist us better in our learning

<div align="right">*FMY/9.02.02/Interview*</div>

If I now understand that distance learning is not the same as my previous learning experience, why don't some of the distance teachers realise that teaching at a distance is also different? Why are we treated the same as the full timers?

<div align="right">

RMS/22.03.02/Interview

</div>

Some of the distance teachers are young, is too young probably 10 years younger than me and probably do not have a family yet...I suppose that is one of possible reason why some are too rigid and not understanding of our problems.

<div align="right">

LKC/5.04.02/Interview

</div>

Personal success also appeared to play a large role in enhancing confidence and commitment, indicated by such expressions as the following:

Getting through the distance courses with success give me the motivation to move on and continue working hard for my courses. I remember I think it was in my third semester when I choose to take Management Science. I was scared but continued working hard for the course and when I got a B in the course I was just overwhelmed with joy...it is such achievement that I now look at it and feel good about my ability.

<div align="right">

DMD/12.03.02/Interview

</div>

The learner then said that such a 'wonderful experience' led him to plan and make progress toward a larger educational goal. Such planning and activity raised his self-confidence from one academic semester to another.

Another distance learner suggested, *"The more you do, the easier it gets"(LKC/9.02.02/Interview)*. Another echoed the common refrain that familiarity with the process of learning at a distance enhances one's competence and confidence. Some noted that this familiarity with learning at a distance comes as a result of trial and error, as exemplified by the following:

It is more about doing it again, and again, and trying out different study approaches. Every semester is different. In my case, I learnt much from my mistakes or weaknesses before, and trying out things differently. This includes for example, trying studying alone, and studying together with friends...It is all about trying. Now I feel more competent in the sense that I'm getting to know what to do and what to expect...

<div align="right">

SMD/13.02.02/Interview

</div>

Self-growth also appeared to be a pull factor of self-concept as exemplified by the following statement:

Sitting down and having to feel that I am actively pursuing knowledge and kind of pushing out my boundaries and becoming a better person. I actually enjoy that and ...that feeds my self-confidence and self esteem.

FMY/9.02.02/Interview

What emerges is a sense of accomplishment for one's self as learner. On the flip side of the coin, DLs express a lack of confidence in themselves due to their lack of familiarity with the learning process, and related roles in distance learning, with its separation of distance teachers and DLs, increased learner responsibility, and autonomy. For example, one student said that:

Maybe after I finish a couple of courses, I'll be more confident and ...know what to do in certain situations.

LKC/9.02.02/Interview

Skill deficiencies seemed related to levels of confidence. One student questioned his ability to learn and attributed this lack of confidence as follows:

Part of it is having really rusty study skills. Part of it is never having had such study skills. It is a massive undertaking. To be studying on your own, being disciplined, group work...not easy.

RMS/1.04.02/Interview

One study skill that surfaced in the discussion is reading. Effective reading appeared to be a learning issue to some learners, as iterated in the following:

I don't know if I can read well enough, although I have no trouble reading. It is more about understanding what you are reading, and grasping the information that is most important.

PL/7.03.02/Interview

Perhaps he reflected a need to identify some reason for lack of confidence in his ability to succeed in the heavily print-based course modules in which he was enrolled. He further noted his concern:

What if I don't understand? What if it'll just enter into my brain as a foreign language? Just look at the modules of courses such as economics, management science...they require lots of reading time...mostly to understand the content...

PL/18.03.02/Interview

Peter's concern is further elaborated in relation to linguistic difficulty that Shirley had to face in her learning:

As a Chinese origin, I am very competent in Mandarin and a few other Chinese dialects, but my Bahasa is terrible, my English is worse. Reading Bahasa & English can be time consuming and problematic.

SKC/23.03.02/Interview

Maintaining Self-Concept

DLs' confidence in their ability to complete their distance courses successfully seemed directly related to their ability to juggle different roles, for instance:

trying to balance the stress of still getting my job done and coming home and studying, and organising time effectively   *SAR/27.02.02/Interview*

As one student reflected on her struggles to balance commitment to her personal life with her commitment to learning, she confided:

My biggest weakness is time. Wanting to maintain my personal life and my interest and activities and yet realising that if I'm seriously going to get through this coursework...I have to work at this every day.

CTS/11.02.02/Interview

Thus, DLs expressed apprehensions about their ability to cope with a new process of learning. Included were knowledge about their learning skills and reading competencies, and ability to assume the new roles and responsibilities needed to succeed when learning at a distance. These are common concerns of the adult learners returning to formal education at UUM.

The data also provided evidence of factors that affected the DLs' academic self-concept. For example, many of these relate to the expectations that the distance teachers and educators have of the distance course, the assignments, and the examination. One of the distance learners said:

One of my biggest challenges was to ask what were the distance teachers' expectations of me. They don't make it clear for us.

MB/9.03.02/Interview

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Another learner adds:

I try to look at distance teachers' instructions and words and do what is required of me, but sometimes you get off on a course that you think is appropriate but it really isn't.   *RMS/1.04.02/Interview*

In parallel with conceptions of learning, academic self-concept also changes with time and experience. There are distinctive facets of academic self-concept in HE at a distance; which include conceptions of the process of learning at a distance, and of themselves as adult learners. Adult learners returning to UUM to pursue a degree after some absence from an educational setting are cut off from many of the cues available to the on campus student. DLs just have to *learn how to learn at a distance*. They recognise this will be a new way of pursuing an education and are appropriately concerned that they may not be well equipped to succeed in this new venue, but they are not always aware that the process of adapting may mean rebuilding their implicit understandings of what education is.

To further represent the DLs self concept and understand the significance of it to their learning experiences and difficulties, the remaining section of this chapter focuses on the attitudes that the DLs have concerning what they see as problematic or difficult in their distance learning programmes. For example, the data seem to suggest that some of the DLs perceived quantitative courses to be difficult for them. Courses like *Management Science, Economics* and *Mathematics* surfaced frequently in our discussion as courses that some DLs like and dislike. In light of the discussion of self-concept, discussing what is perceived as difficult relates directly to the DLs conceptions of learning and teaching.

What They Say About Quantitative Courses

Teaching and learning are viewed as complementary parts of a (re) construction process that has to take place in each learner's mind and is subject to continuous reconstruction and revision (Underhill, 1988). Hence the current emphasis on distance teaching with little attention to learning which predominates in Malaysia is

seen as problematic. This is not a surprise as formal instruction is the only type, which most people in Malaysia have ever experienced, and in many parts of the world this may also be true. Hence, DLs' conceptions of quantitative courses and their need to self generate extrinsic motivation produces different beliefs about learning. DLs who view quantitative courses as a challenge according to Underhill (1988) tend to become ego-involved as they try to master or remember details of the course. They tend to develop attitudes which foster memorisation and emphasis correct answers obtained in a short time:

I have always struggled in maths courses, right from my secondary years. In my current distance course, the anxiety is there when courses like introduction to statistics, management science, and economics are there...I can't run away. Most of the time I don't understand what I learn, most of the time, in courses like Economics, I try to remember and memorise the formulas, the graphs and hope that I remember this in the exam.
                                                    KS/15.04.02/Interview

I am just bad with numbers, and formulas, and graphs. It is difficult...I do admit that I always feel shy to admit and say this to you or to my friends but that is reality. I pass these courses not because I understand the course, but by giving back what I can memorise
                                                    DMD/12.03.02/Interview

However DLs who view quantitative courses as a product of their own invention will find satisfaction in discovering relationships and approach their learning from a conceptual perspective (Underhill, 1988). They need to spend considerable time on problems because of the intrinsic value they perceive in finding new connections and making new, personnel discoveries. This is visibly evident among many of the Chinese learners (as elaborated in chapter 10). The slightest hint of urgency from any particular parties, such as their distance teachers, is likely to act as deterrent. This is similar to Nicholl's (1983) discussion about learners who are extrinsically motivated and ego involved versus learners who are intrinsically motivated and task oriented.

In his early work, Biggs (1962) said that attitudes have a very clear and striking relationship to performance in the case of quantitative courses. According to him, this is because dislike for quantitative courses is accompanied by some other, perhaps more deep-seated, emotional factor which is close to lack of confidence, an

idea he later developed in empirical studies of student learning in both Australia and in Hong Kong.

It is my belief that success in promoting development in problem solving strategies must be accompanied by changes in learners' perceptions of quantitative courses and quantitative learning (Confrey, 1987). Hence if learners perceive quantitative courses as a set of prescribed procedures, they will be perplexed and confused by tasks for which set methods will not suffice (Underhill, 1988:63). However if they believe that quantitative courses are comprehensible and rational, they are more likely to respond with interest and confidence to problem situations.

DISCUSSION

Standard completion and persistence rates are usually used as measures of DE institutions productivity, but this study suggests that producing *self directed* or *independent* DLs is ultimately a more important criterion for institutional success in light of the importance of transformational learning that is gaining a lot attention in DE in recent years (Saw, 2000). Given how little distance teachers and distance educators know about how DLs learn and the difficulties faced by them in even the most ideal learning environments in encouraging learner autonomy and independence, producing *self directed* learners should be a central goal of DE institutions.

A successful distance learner is often described as exhibiting initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; one who accepts responsibility for his or her own learning and views problems as challenges, not obstacles; one who is capable of self-discipline and has a high degree of curiosity; one who has a strong desire to learn or change and is self confident; one who is able to use basic study skills, organise his or her own time, set an appropriate pace for learning, and develop a plan for completing work; one who enjoys learning and has a tendency to be goal

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oriented (Guglielmino, 1977). It can be further inferred that to be successful in distance learning, the learner needs to be self-directed and be independent in his/her learning.

Realising this expectation poses a challenge to DLs. Not all DLs fit into these categories for successful learners. Claims that adult DLs are innately self-directed, or inherently critical thinkers, cannot be empirically supported (Brookfield, 1992). In this study some of the DLs insisted that they needed a clear structure in their learning, and this request often referred back to the familiar similar learning structures that their former educational experiences of Malaysia classroom teaching and learning provided. That is, the teacher was always there in front or near them to teach and guide their learning most of the time.

UUM is increasingly serving a broader cross-section of the country's distance learner population, including many who, would not previously have considered distance learning. The institution has continuously to recognise that the concept of self directed learning is central to its philosophy. Implementing and inculcating such a concept of learning is never an easy task, especially in the Malaysian DE context, where such practice has not been introduced into mainstream education before. It may be easier for the distance teachers and educators to employ a teaching approach that empowers the learners, but for the learners to be self-directed and independent in learning is a big change. Some have adopted and accepted the change; others see it as a learning barrier, a constraint to learning effectively.

The concept of an independent learner is not an absolute one, but the notion that DLs should be 'self-sufficient' learners at the point of entry cannot be assumed. Learning at a distance involves changes in personal values (openness to new ideas), attitudes (motivation) and the development of new skills (time management, study skills, problem conceptualisation, research and library skills). This is a quest that poses challenges of various degrees to different DLs, and one that is never completely fulfilled; nevertheless, it is a process central to distance learning.

By comparison, the dependent learner is more likely to want to be told what to learn and how to learn and tackle the course tasks and assignments in what was referred to earlier as 'a clear structure'. These learners are less apt to go beyond the minimum demands of a particular assignment to challenge the usefulness of the course or to apply what has been learned more broadly or personally. The essential difference as discussed by Boot and Hodgson (1987) is between knowledge as a process and knowledge as a commodity, a point that has been underlined by Mary Thorpe (1979:p.13): "We should begin from the assumption that course materials are not the course; rather that the course is an annual process of interaction between learners, the materials and the tutors and that, in this sense, tutors and learners 'produce courses as well as course teams."

CONCLUSION

This chapter suggests that a significant problem for many DLs at UUM is that their set of beliefs about learning, teaching and knowledge are not compatible with the requirements of distance learning. In addition, the difficulties posed by these incompatible beliefs can be related to other problems, such as inadequate learning skills; unfamiliarity with new technology used in teaching and learning, and the lack of support for effective learning to take place.

Academic self-concept is a construct affecting the success of DLs pursuing HE at UUM. However, one needs to consider the initial states of DLs, their desired end states, and the transitions between these states, given the power of instruction to influence the transition from initial to end states. Achievements become aptitudes for further learning, and knowledge, skill, strategy, regulation and motivation intermingle.

Given the importance of DLs' academic self-concept in ensuring persistence and success in distance learning, a better understanding of the nature of self-concept and

the influences on it becomes apparent. Academic self concept of DLs appears to vary along a continuum from positive to negative and it also changes with learners becoming more or less confident as they progress in their studies. Further, academic self-concept is multifaceted, related to both the process and the content of learning within the larger context of learning at a distance. The transitional process for many of the learners is a challenge, and this contributes to the mismatch between what is expected of them in distance learning versus the reality that they find themselves in. The learners, I would argue, need to undo their thinking about learning and teaching in distance learning, and re-learn the skills for learning at a distance. This may mean that DLs need to 'undo' their learning practices, and change their expectations to cope with the new ways of learning; so too do the distance teachers. They need to reassess their roles and re-examine their educational assumptions.

CHAPTER 9
THE LEARNERS' VIEW ON LEARNING: A PLEA NOT JUST FOR KNOWLEDGE...

In the previous chapter I argued that DLs are required to engage in 'new' ways of learning. To some students this is accepted and does not impede their 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 reality. The DLs involved in this study suggested that infrequent f2f meetings between distance teachers and DLs, and learners' dependency on their teachers, have caused frustrations and sometimes impeded the learning process. This has been a major factor in contributing to the mismatch between what is expected versus the reality of distance learning as experienced by the learners. Some DLs were not able to cope with distance learning expectations and find that the new ways of learning and the sets of expectations that go with them were too great. In such circumstances, many of the learners expect distance teachers to play an important role in helping them come to terms with the new ways of learning that are expected.

In order to improve the learners' educational experience in distance learning, distance teachers, too, need to undertake changes in order to engage in distance teaching. They need to understand what is involved in teaching and learning and must themselves account for this in their reassessment of teaching. Therefore, the task for UUM is to engage in a major project; to reassess and re-engineer the educational process by both learners and teachers and, indeed, by the university as a whole. It is not simply to introduce new courses, programmes or technologies but to 're-understand' the process of education and understand the fundamentals of learning support and how they might contribute to success and failure in distance learning.

LEARNING SUPPORT

Distance learning requires the adoption of a new teaching and learning paradigm. As DE 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 diversity of learners that are often to be found in DE 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 study 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 provided by Simpson (2002:). Among the issues are: *decisions about starting study; feelings about becoming a student; motivations for learning; finding the time for learning; tackling course materials; planning the learning; numeracy/reading skills; tackling the assignments; feelings about being assessed; learning from assessment;* and *dealing with failures.*

This short list of issues reveals 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 in distance learning is undoubtedly necessary for success in distance learning. Without it learning at a distance is not easy, 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 learning successfully, able to be independent learners who have good learning skills and strategies, and able to interact effectively with distance teachers, 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.

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. Some DLs appear to be able to study in many different ways and achieve good results. Rob's story, noted earlier in chapter 1, of a female distance learner in Australia who had to 'escape' from the farm and family and confined herself studying in a car to learn is one example of the extreme circumstances that a distance learner might face.

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.

GIVING MEANING TO LEARNING SUPPORT

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?'* One's role as distance teachers is just not to oversee course delivery and completion of the syllabus, but to provide sufficient support to the learners for them to complete the course successfully.

Effective learning supports enhance the learning process. Donald 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:xi)

This would seem to imply that distance teachers 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 institutional effectiveness focus on the selection and performance of staff, learners and technology used rather than on the effectiveness in changing conception of teaching and learning. 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 that learning support has on the learner and the learning process as a whole.

THE REALITY OF DISTANCE LEARNING: REVISITED

Many DLs at UUM, perhaps for the first time, are "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:p.1).

As elaborated in chapter 8, Malaysian learners who have journeyed through 12 years of primary and secondary education do not have an educational concept of learning appropriate for DE. For many, their educational experience has been very teacher-centred, and their learning characterised by dependency on their teachers as knowledge providers. Their transition into becoming DLs is not an easy task (Saw et.al. 1999). Their diversity in age, educational background, and working experience only magnifies the problem. A learner who left education many years ago (as with some of the respondents in this study) may feel incompetent and lacking in the learning skills needed to compete with other learners. Such diversity is evident in the following evidence:

> *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, Internet...I think such activities would be much appreciated especially for students like me...*
> *FMY/Dated 4.01.03/Student Journal*

Such a feeling was also substantiated by picture 3 below, picturing Fatimah, who was being helped by another learner in the same course. Fatimah says that whenever forced to complete a course task or assignment using computers, she depends on Kasim to show her, almost step by step, how to complete the tasks. Without such coaching, Fatimah says:

> *I would always be left behind, and such feelings as I experienced during my first two semesters were just daunting*   *FMY/Date taken 3.09.02/Photo*

Picture 3: Fatimah being helped by another distance learner

Other learners commented on their transitional experience:

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 activities 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.

RMS/1.04.02/Interview

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 regretably, 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...

KS29.03.02/Interview

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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 the 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 get a prompt response. The minute you post questions through email, and don't getting reply for 5 minutes, 15 minutes, an hour or more, you'll feel frustrated.

MB/9.03.02/Interview

What caused such frustrations and feelings of disappointment? Analysis of the interview 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, they appear to need help, training, coaching and perhaps mentoring in the method of DE. How should distance teachers deal with these problems and issues? First they face a remedial problem. If they are able to identify the problems that are faced by their students, what can they do to improve their situation? How should they advise the displaced student, or the student who feel isolated and frustrated at not getting prompt or immediate feedback from the instructor? Can they help? Can they put them back on the right learning path? Can they change them into 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?

As iterated in Rob Walker's (2002) paper entitled *Is there anyone there? The Embodiment of Knowledge in Virtual Environments,* teaching is always thought to take place in classrooms, "…the images that first come to mind are of a teacher in the classroom…(p.2)" and for most this signifies a precise setting and environment.

Though the idea of the classroom is not strictly relevant in distance education, the image persists. There are many people, particularly students, who think that learning

is something that happens in a classroom, with teachers feeding information face to face (f2f). Such thinking and the educational concepts of learning that underlie it are still vivid and active in DE, as is evident in the students' comments. A false expectation it may be, but it seems that DLs 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.

Distance educators would claim that the classroom is not necessary for learning and that millions of students around the world have already discovered that learning can happen at any time, place and in any setting. It is no longer necessary to be in a classroom in front of a teacher to be in a 'place of learning'. Conventional ideas about education are undergoing a transformation as the concepts of distance learning and lifelong learning gain popularity.

The learners' dependency on distance teachers, and their desperation when this was not fulfilled was constantly evident in the data. Contrary to the assumption of many DE 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. 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 of the distance learner.
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 do not 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 'face to face' setting, the reason being, the obstacles that these DLs encounter may be different from one distance learner to another, with varying degrees of complexity.

WHAT LEARNERS SAY ABOUT LEARNING SUPPORT

Support in distance learning is paramount. This was much felt by the learners when they realised that learning at a distance in today's environment of educational experience is different from their former educational experience:

> *Today's learning and teaching is very different it is like the sky and the earth (a translation of Malaysian proverb) What I need is help, constant tutoring, a class that teaches lessons on computers, Internet...I think such activities would be much appreciated especially for student like me...*
>
> *FMY/19.03.02/Interview*

Another learner made a comparison:

> *I often talk about my learning experiences with my colleague at my office who himself studied at a distance and just completed a year ago at Universiti Sains Malaysia. It seems to me that, he was well prepared by USM – he understands more the need and requirement to learn at a distance, as compared to me who gets frustrated, and sometimes lost. I sometimes feel that I am not getting the support, or the help that I needed to learn. Though, such feelings waned after my third semester, I still feel that the teachers and UUM could do more to provide the support needed.*
>
> *DMD/12.03.02/Interview*

Another learner iterated the importance of support by saying:

> *The feeling of loneliness, isolation, frustration in learning at a distance I think is caused by many different factors, but one that is most obvious is contributed by the lack of support, from the distance teachers...the library, the computer labs, other facilities are great, modern, but what is lacking is the teachers' support...*
>
> *RMS/17.04.02/Interview*

This study as have others before (Bernt & Bugbee, 1994; Beaudion, 1990; Distance Education, University of Idaho, 1996) reveals that one of the greatest problems experienced by the DLs is a feeling of isolation, which makes the possibility of a trusting relationship between the learners with the teachers, and with other learners difficult. It was as experienced by Rob Walker that the student's question of "Is anybody there...sounded a plea not just for information but also for contact, for human presence. (p.3)". Such isolation, according to Simpson (2002), must inhibit if not prevent "any possibility of dialogue" in their learning, since isolation interferes with, and may overwhelm the learning process.

In another case, feeling of isolation has led to frustration, anger, and unjust treatment.

> *What ever type of student you are, distance or campus based, you pay the same amount of fee, in fact mathematically a distance learner may have to bear more cost like printing, travelling, and what have you, but when your email doesn't get replied to within 24 hours, I feel robbed...I do. That demotivates you. So how can you progress well in such a situation?*
>
> *MB/9.03.02/Interview*

The process of student learning at a distance as revealed in the dialogues is more complex than the conventional 'face to face' setting, the reason being, the obstacles learners encounter may be different from one distance learner to another. This may be even more true in Malaysia than elsewhere, as cultural diversity provides a further complication. 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 DLs; like some other DLs or like no other DLs.

The various 'baggage' that learners bring to their role as DLs, their perceptions of the learning experience, the coping and adapting processes they develop, and their learning preferences must be addressed to gain an understanding of how to better meet the diverse needs of these DLs, and improve the quality of the DE materials development,

courses, instructions, and the learning process. Sometimes these aspects are treated as marginal or remedial, but the evidence of my interviews is that such factors are central. Learners who are actively engaged in the learning process and learning interactivity will be more likely to achieve success. Similarly, DLs 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 learners.

LEARNERS' VIEW OF THE DISTANCE TEACHERS

For 12 years prior to distance study, much of the learners' educational experience has been delivered in the traditional f2f manner, where feelings of isolation and alienation from teachers may have existed but were rare because teachers were always there five days a week, six hours a day, throughout the academic year. This was not the experience with distance learning. In DE, the learners expressed their disappointment over not having their respective distance instructors

"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"

KS/29.03.02/Interview

Feelings of isolation and alienation are strongly evident in the dialogues. The fact that instruction is delivered, not just through occasional f2f interaction, but through other media, which may not be suitable to some DLs, does not substitute for the 'teacher'. Some of the learners were concerned about not getting immediate response to their questions or problems. One pointed out that:

When I am not able to understand certain terms in the text or part of the course 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.

LKC/9.02.02/Interview

This feeling of discomfort was apparent when the learner did not receive the *"real solution"* to their queries, *just an 'it could be' or might be."* Another learner stressed that this:

> *...sometimes it kills my 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.*
>
> *DMD/12.03.02/Interview*

Another pointed out that:

> *Most of the time I will try to steal some time during the weekend from my family, or work late at night, an hour here, an hour there, to study or cope with my learning, but quite often I realise that at these hours it is almost impossible to get quick help or answers from your teachers if you have a problem or a question*
>
> *SKC/23.03.02/Interview*

Almost all the respondents mentioned that it takes much more time to get feedback on questions at a distance and that this interfered with their learning. One respondent mentioned that he/she sometimes: *"had to rely on my own knowledge and background"*, or *"had to change my learning habit"*, but further stressed that such approach sometimes works, and at other times led nowhere *(SMD/4.03.02/Interview)*.

It was also noted by a respondent that in the traditional educational experience he seldom looked for materials outside the course unless 'the teacher asked us 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*
>
> *RMS/17.04.02/Interview*

Rashid iterated this in his comments on picture 4 that he submitted:

Picture 4: UUM library as a source of initial constraint to DE
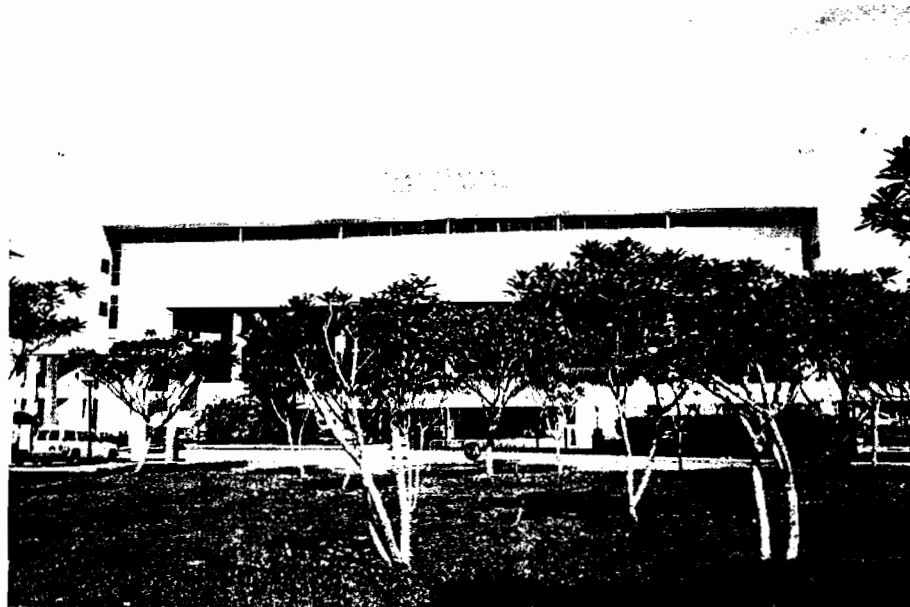
He said:

> *When I first walked into the library, it was big, filled with books, magazines, computers, I had mixed feelings, I felt proud of myself to be part of the UUM student population, but my positive feelings were quickly overtaken by anxiety and I became concerned about my well being as a student.*
>
> *RMS/Date taken 11.06.02/Photo*

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 comes in to teach, talk, provides learning materials, ask questions, perhaps answers them as well, and then the class ends and we'll see the teacher again the next day, and then comes in 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,..*
>
> *RMS/17.04.02/interview*

But, this view was seen to have its weakness, particularly in dealing with ambiguities in language and instruction as revealed here:

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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 words are 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.

<div align="right">

LKC/17.03.02/Interview

</div>

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 and their respective teachers.

In addition, depending on how the student wrote or requested help, they might receive the wrong feedback or a reply that does not answer their concerns. This only led to more frustrations:

When I receive a response through email, sometimes I just cannot understand from my reading of the message...and sometimes it is difficult to move from what is suggested to practice   *CTS/19.02.02/Interview*

In this instance, the wrong feedback clearly posed 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 feel is about distance learning.

<div align="right">

SMD/Dated:11.11.02/Student Journal

</div>

Distance Teachers-Distance Learners Relationship

Further analysis of the data seems to suggest that the learners' learning progress was clearly undermined by their distance teachers' way of handling them as distance learners. The triangulation of different evidence suggests that the distance teachers-DLs relationship adversely affected some of the DLs' attitudes towards distance learning. For example, due to the distance teachers' high expectation or assumption that mature adult learners are self-sufficient, and self directed in their learning, some

learners are worried that the questions they raised may reflect immaturity or be below standard on their part:

> *The lecturers, many of them have respect for you, too much so, such respect is based on their set expectation on you as adult learners. To ask questions that may be honest questions but trivial to them would tarnish the respect they have for you and that can be embarrassing*
>
> *SAR/27.02.02/Interview*

In addition, some other DLs who were interviewed said that they would not request help from their distance teachers when they needed it, simply because, as stated by the following learner:

> *I am too shy to ask, and it is not easy, I think, to ask and in some ways is not easy to do ...*
>
> *FMY/19.03.02/Interview*

This was even so according to Salina when the f2f class was a big class as depicted by picture 5:

> *It is not easy for you to raise your hand and ask questions with around 100-200 students watching and listening to you...that is a big task at least for me...my hands would just be too sweaty to do so...*   *SAR/Date taken21.06.02/Photo*

Mansur added an interesting note on this matter by suggesting that his academic conduct was in line with what he was taught before, that is, to listen to the teachers, be attentive and absorb the lesson:

> *I sometimes envy those learners who kept on asking questions and interacted with the Distance teachers during the f2f meeting...such activity is new for me...I am so used to teachers do the talking, and me listening and taking notes...*
>
> *MB/4.04.02/Interview*

Picture 5: The big number of students in f2f meeting deters participation

Or, as another distance learner explained:

I personally would not ask questions to the lecturer on my own, it can be a scary experience! Together as a group, I think, we can get our question out better,
RMS/17.02.02/Interview

Clearly these DLs feel so vulnerable that they would not have been able to take the initiative in an interaction with the distance teachers, even when they had difficulties with the distance courses that they were taking. The above discourse also helps to conclude that there is a fear of asking for help, and this is attributable, perhaps, to the way the distance teachers conduct themselves as lecturers of the course. Even more devastating was the experience of another distance learner, which was so bad that she totally shut herself off from even wanting to ask anymore:

Once I forced myself to approach and ask this X lecturer, and ask her to explain and help me solve a problem. To my surprise, she replied back " You can't even solve this kind of questions? This is not even half as difficult as the task given to the campus based learners " (referring to the full time undergraduates). I was just shocked because I sincerely came to ask her because I was genuinely not able to solve it myself, as she did tell us to approach her if we had any problem, hence I tried but this happened. I told myself that I would never ask her again. So, when

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she gave any other questions that I can't solve, I just couldn't be bothered.
CTS/3.03.02/Interview

The fear of being blamed by the lecturers was a recurring theme in this study. In fact, some of the lecturers habit of blaming the learners for not understanding what was being taught seems to have created a barrier between the distance teachers and the DLs. It seemed as if requesting the lecturer's assistance would be the last thing that some of the DLs would do which only contributed to more problems with interaction. As another distance learner expressed:

> *If the lecturer understood our circumstances and was more approachable and not strict, then I think I would ask questions from time to time, but because she is not, and always focuses on delivering and completing the course syllabus, I don't ask questions. And the feeling of loneliness being a distance learner is a direct result of the teacher's behaviour...*
>
> *KS/29.03.02/Interview*

This phenomenon of the relationship between distance teachers and DLs appears to be a particular problem in the Malaysian context of education, and especially within the teaching and learning in the distance programme. The evidence suggests that the way the distance teachers handle the DLs had certainly created a degree of anxiety among their DLs and this in turn had a negative effect on the learners' feelings towards distance learning. It appears that there is a very strong association between the DLs feelings towards the distance teachers, and their feelings towards the distance course. The distance teachers' attitude to the DLs affects the way the learners respond to the distance course and some of the DLs revealed that learners with high levels of apprehension blamed their distance teachers.

No or Little Interest on the Distance Learners...

A number of the DLs expressed their frustrations when they sensed that their distance teachers were only interested to teach and deliver the materials in the course but not in them as adult DLs having particular learning circumstances:

How can the lecturer equate us with the campus based young learners with not much commitment and responsibilities in life...we are different

FLS/29.02.02/Interview

Similarly, if the distance teachers did not bother or showed no or little interest, the learners tended to be disappointed and echoed their frustrations:

I think it is bad relationship because some of the lecturers never bothered about us, and who we are and did not take much initiative to encourage us and help us... *MB/4.04.02/Interview*

Or, as another learner expressed it:

They (the distance teachers) only taught the course and delivered the learning materials, but never...seldom did they attend to our individual needs and concerns. The distance teachers were too preoccupied just teaching from the front and were not at all concerned with our needs.

RMS/17.04.02/Interview

The learner continued his discourse saying:

In many cases, I see that the lecturer only repeats once, and if you ask him the second time, he will ask us to go to the library and look for ourselves or ask our friends and that really puts me off. I feel as if he is not giving me any encouragement to study. Though, not many distance teachers are of such quality, but you only need one or two to discourage you...Sometimes it is ironic to hear one of the teacher kept on saying "There is a reason why I am in front of this lecture hall, and you all at the back, I am to teach, and you are to learn..." but with much lacking support and attention, it is difficult...

RMS/17.04.02/Interview

This is not to generalise or say that all distance teachers are ineffective as distance course practitioners, but rather to exemplify the effect of such lecturers on the learning progress of some of the DLs in this study. Equally there is also evidence to show the effect of good, effective teaching by some distance teachers at the institution as described in the following section.

The good distance teachers...

Positive qualities in the teaching approach of some of the distance teachers seem to have won the hearts of most of the DLs who were interviewed. Qualities such as

patience, gentleness, caring, encouragement, kindness, helpfulness, guiding, giving lots of attention to the learners' needs and listening to the DLs' problems regarding the course tasks or assignments are some of the most prominent qualities that the DLs valued and treasured. These qualities that were shown by their distance teachers were perceived as a contribution to their success in distance learning. As some of the DLs said, the kindness and the help from the distance teachers captured their hearts:

The lecturers I think are kind and helpful;   *SKC/23.03.02/Interview*

The lecturer will teach us until we know, we are able to understand and when you don't understand, during her lunch hour, she will ask me to come to her room and would explain it again to me   *DMD/12.03.02/Interview*

Distance teachers who were very concerned, guiding and showing patience seemed to win some of the DLs attention:

If we are not able to solve a problem, he will encourage us to contact him by phone or email, and he will try to explain how to solve the problem or questions raised and my grades and most important of all my understanding would improve...

LKC/17.03.02/Interview

Sometimes, I wish Mr T could be the lecturer for all the courses in my distance programme. It is so much different in terms of my understanding and general progress in the course. His teaching approach makes the complicated and difficult lesson manageable...

SAR/17.03.02/Interview

The caring and encouraging attitudes that the Distance teachers showed had a large positive effect on the learners, and their sensitivity towards individual learner needs seemed to rank high in the DLs list of their more positive experiences:

The distance teachers know how to manage the learners by giving the tasks and assignments according to their level.

DMD/12.03.02/Interview

Such a teaching approach seems to have produced a better distance learner who is noticeably less inhibited in his learning, as he described it:

It was so different from when I took the course first time with Mr. Y and failed it, and now with Mr.Z I am progressing much better in the course and confident of going through it, and another thing that I realise is how I am not afraid of discussing and asking about any academic problem that arises with Mr.Z.

RMS/17.04.02/Interview

Distance teachers teaching styles

A lot of dissatisfaction was expressed about styles of teaching which seemed to lead to a certain degree of dislike towards certain distance courses. The most prominent issues raised by some of the DLs in this study was that their distance teachers were using old fashioned way of teaching:

An the worst extreme, the lecturer delivered point by point taken from the course module or textbook, and it is dead boring because I could have read that myself...
MB/4.04.02/Interview

Some of the lecturers were using the 'old method'...straightforward talk, figuring perhaps some numbers, and it was very rigid...   *RMS/17.04.02/Interview*

I thought that the Ministry of Education had changed its educational system and made it more exciting and interactive, but it just surprised me to get the same approach as when I was in primary and secondary years

KS/15.04.02/Interview

Memorising, drill and practice, and rigidity in the way the course was conveyed were some of the terms that the DLs used to expressed their distance teachers' way of teaching distance courses. The lecture-and-demonstration approach, however honourable its long tradition, treats distance learning primarily as the transfer of information and does not help to boost the image of some of the distance courses. Instead it does the opposite, as some of the DLs stated:

Knowing my weakness as a learner, sometimes, during f2f meetings, I forced myself to sit in front, but quite often I don't understand the way some of the lecturers teach, only when you go back and do it yourself or with other distance learners, and experience such discussions, only then I was able to do it.

DMD/Dated 12.03.03/Student Journal

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The rigidity of the way some of the distance courses were taught led the DLs to perceive these courses as having no links to everyday life, and it was more an approach of 'learned this, and deliver this in the tests and examination, and then forget it':

> *It was very rigid and does not link to your everyday life. It is all made too theoretical with little practical side added on to it.*
>
> PL/18.03.02/Interview

In addition, many of the DLs also expressed their dissatisfaction when their distance teachers were going too fast during their f2f meetings:

> *We understand that some of the lecturers have lot of things to do as academics, but when we meet 4 times a semester, 3 hours each time we value the time with the lecturers and want to get as much information and knowledge on the course. But, always, I find the lecturer is too fast and I'm not able to catch up and understand the lesson.*
>
> FMY/2.04.02/Interview

Such an approach too creates a dislike for the subject and a feeling of apprehension by itself:

> *In some distance courses, the lecturer was too fast, and there was no time to think and reflect and hence when given a task, I was not able to do it, and reoccurrence of such experience makes you feel down, this creates hatred or dislike for the course and lecturer.*
>
> FMY/Dated25.08.02/Student Journal

Such a teaching approach is a factor that triggered some of the learners' distaste for certain distance courses. One learner commented that the neglect of the individual personality which often occurs in traditional learning situations lead to feelings of frustration, discouragement, and failure.

Perhaps because Malaysian distance teachers and educators in general typically are expected to teach classes ranging from 50 to 200 learners at any one time in a f2f meeting, it is not surprising that instruction normally involves the f2f meetings as a unit rather than individual DLs as learners. Faced with the challenge of meeting the distance course curriculum objectives, measured usually by tests, and examinations, there is a tendency for distance teachers and educators to reduce the evaluation of

daily learning outcomes. Too often, the correctness of the learners' responses and answers on examinations are the product measured.

This resonates with the point that distance teachers are in some ways the most pertinent variable leading to DLs' disaffection with their distance learning experience. They further commented that dislike of some of the distance teachers was inevitably associated with other factors, in particular, teaching methodology, the lack of relevance and the perceived rigidity of the distance courses and its teaching.

The f2f meetings, in particular the behaviour and techniques employed by some distance teachers in these sessions have been an important influence on the DLs attitudes towards distance learning. The most significant contributions to the formations of negative attitudes towards distance learning appear to be:

- DLs' fear of asking for help;
- distance teachers blaming learners for not understanding;
- distance teachers not showing interest in their learners' circumstances;
- and a teaching style which emphasises the transfer of information and routines with little attention to the learning of the individual.

The distance teachers and DLs themselves have experienced Malaysian learning and teaching for twelve years of mandatory education. Such long years of experience have shaped their views and beliefs as well as expectations and images of learning and teaching at a distance and of themselves in relation to it.

GETTING INVOLVED IN THE NEW WAYS OF LEARNING

Unlike the *Malaysia Open University, Malaysia Multimedia University* or like many other Malaysian distance providers, UUM does not adopt a single, centrally determined educational strategy or employ a single system of web-based or online learning for its DE programmes. Instead, at UUM, distance teachers have the

autonomy to decide when, and for what course, ICT (use of Internet, on-line, CD-ROM, etc.) should or should not be incorporated in the teaching and learning process. This means that the curriculum and instructional system at UUM remains relatively uncentralised and unstandardised, and individual teachers are able to exercise a degree of judgement in how best to teach their courses. Learning modules remain the primary learning tool or package received by all distance learners. Nevertheless, the use of ICT is increasingly becoming central to the process of teaching and learning, due to the higher education policy adopted towards ICT by Malaysia Ministry of Education.

The evidence of this study suggests that the extent of DE learning support influenced students overall perception of their distance learning experience. It should also 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 learning modes as a result of learning at a distance.

The DLs had 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 the discussions of their distance learning experience elaborated in chapter 8 and the present chapter. Such discourse was evident in their discussion of all areas of the course such as interaction with course instructor, with other DLs, as well as 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...

DMD/7.04.02/Interview

Distance learning is about changing one's study habits. That is the secret to success in DE. You have to work harder and be more focused.

LKC/17.03.02/Interview

Having to realise that the teachers are not always there for you, I realise that that I had to put failure or success in DE into my hands. If you think this way, you know that something has to change to accommodate your learning.
FLS/29.02.02/Interview

The learners evidently noticed the fundamental differences between distance learning and learning f2f. *"It's like two different worlds, two different experiences"* says Mansur. But, what needs attention is that to transform these learners to have the educational 'change' for distance learning, distance educators need to provide optimal learning support system. This, as evident in this study is what lacking, and is what learners plead for.

Technology is a good example of how 'change' has invaded today's educational experience. The utilisation 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 respondents 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"*.

Learning at a distance is different from traditional learning experiences. Malaysian learners in general have a different orientation towards learning, which makes 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 a loss when clear instructions are not given for work, assignments, and experiments. When this happens, they are tempted to blame their teachers for an apparent lack of knowledge or commitment.

This has interesting implications for the DLs at UUM. The respondents had to change their learning and study habits, because at times the content may have been ambiguous and teacher feedback was delayed. If this were typical of Malaysian DLs, it would not be difficult to see that making the transition to DE might be challenging.

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 the immediate feedback that may come with f2f interaction in a traditional course. 'Feedback' here means more than comments on their written work and more the reassurance that comes from hearing the lecturer reiterate a point or respond to a question asked by a student. DLs are often unsure of the instructor's 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 the self-control and courage to make decisions.

PERCEPTION ON THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY'S IN DISTANCE LEARNING

DLs, particularly adult learners, appear to need computer training, coaching and perhaps mentoring as revealed by the following:

> *Computers, technology, and today another buzz word ICT never have entered my life, at least not directly....at 45 having had to learn to use computers and word processor was ...don't know what to say. Reading the IDIOT guide to Internet and Computers was hard enough. I cannot learn it on my own, it just won't happen, I just don't have the confidence. What I need is special coaching or a special class at least to teach the basics of it...*
>
> *RMS/17.04.02/Interview*

> *Today's learning environment is so change and different. It's all about technology and I know technology plays an important part in today's education...even my standard 3 son knows a great deal about what and how to do things with a computer...but I am not part of the new generation of learners who knows it all. When I first enrolled in DE...I was stunned not knowing what to do, how to do things, how to study and coming to terms with having to use the computer, and the Internet for my study and communication was initially a scary one at least for me...*
>
> *FLS/Dated 18.07.02/Student Journal*

Everybody, the government, university talks about IT, ICT, e-learning, e-government... but the reality is you are moving too fast ahead. Have you ever thought, about the learners? The sorts of problems that they may encounter...

SAR/17.03.02/Interview

My age is 45. I left school and education a good 20 years. Things are different today. You have too high an expectation on the use of a technology. Getting near to it is scary... using it is unthinkable. That was what I felt when I first came back to pursue my degree course through DE. Even today, I still feel uneasy using technology in my learning. What I need is help, coaching and more training.

KS/13.03.02/Interview

Coming back for a degree has been a true challenge for me, especially as the learning and teaching environment have changed drastically. What makes it worse; if you are slow you'll be left out fast. I am talking not just about computers and how to use it, but learning to use it.

PL/18.03.02/Interview

Distance teachers and providers have to address the problems that DLs face on a daily basis. For example, one clear problem revealed by respondents in this study is the feeling of inadequacy of technological skills. The respondents' perspective on learning and in particular the use of technology shows that they need more support and training opportunities. Technology should not be seen as "...potential silver bullet"(Twigg, 1996) to remedy learning and teaching problems. Technology is just a tool; it is the experiences that 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 propel better learning interactions.

Almost all the research respondents experienced some adjustment to the technology used in their distance educational programmes. As iterated earlier, the change or transition was not easy. Learners demonstrated several ways of dealing with

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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? (Fatimah)*"

DISCUSSION

An important point that emerges from the study is that, if distance educators and DE course providers want learners to succeed, they need to be certain that the learners are placed in an educational environment that capitalises 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 for learning support.

In order to support the learners in a distance education 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 the building and designing a learning support that encourages learning. They need to be both specialists in their subjects and educators. In DE 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 the DLs and distance teachers. The use of flexible learning elements in distance education could promote a stimulating relationship between teacher and learner and consequently enhance the attempts at building a better learning support to facilitate distance learning.

The need for a distance teachers-DLs mentor programme in distance learning is one way that learning support might facilitate distance learning. A number of the respondents viewed knowledge of distance learning principles as being essential to

their daily function as distance learners. 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 respectively in this regard. The learners tended 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 see it as their responsibility to build learning support to facilitate learning but are, however, reluctant to accept sole responsibility due to the complexity and large number of stakeholders involved in a distance education institution like UUM. One of the distance teachers, Mahadi said:

> *All of us know that we need to assist the learners as best as we possibly could. But, when you do a lot and learn that other distance faculty members are not doing as much or spending as much time helping the learners, you feel that you are doing too much. We have PACE (Centre for Professional and Continuing Education), shouldn't they be the one in charge and provider of support services?*
> *MNM/DT/14.10.01/Interview*

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 depersonalising 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 UUM has not provided adequate learning support to facilitate distance learning. 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. 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. Which implies for the teacher that they need to become someone from whom it is possible to learn (p.5)

Various conclusions can be drawn regarding 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. The students interviewed 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 that 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 educators at UUM practice regarding learning support and the role that they can and should fulfil.

3. In order to address the broad spectrum of learning needs of an increasingly diverse body of DLs, it is important that *different formats of delivery modes* are used. Distance teachers need to employ a wide variety of methods in programme design in order to accommodate as many learning approaches as possible. More focus needs to be placed on methods that stress *problem solving, and critical and reflective thinking.* Furthermore, methods that emphasise *co-operative learning* as well as those that *individualise* instruction are equally important.

4. The learners value timely feedback from their instructors regarding course assignments, exams, projects and their inquiries. It is important for distance teachers to attend to their students promptly and efficiently. Such commitment as evident in this study, will help to improve learning and ease many frustrations.

5. Facilitating self directed learning could be promoted by integrating learning activities that contain flexibility and provide DLs with opportunities to experience that there are many right answers or responses when completing assignments and projects. If the content allows, distance teachers should communicate to students that autonomy is strongly encouraged and that the learning process is just as valuable as the actual product.

6. If distance teachers in their respective departments or units could engage in *peer evaluation* and other forms of self-evaluation, this might help to determine whether their educational services reach and benefit their learners.

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

CHAPTER 10
CAN CULTURE BE A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR TOWARDS LEARNERS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE & APPROACH IN DISTANCE LEARNING?

In chapter 8, I identified conceptions of learning as a significant factor as students tried to adapt to the new demands of DE. In this chapter I will explore one particular aspect of this issue: the differences that emerged between the Chinese and the Malay DLs at UUM in terms of the ways in which they saw what good learning is. The apparent distinctions and contradictions between the Chinese and the Malay learners pertaining *to study group, individual versus collective study approach, learning strategies*, and *time orientation* suggest that there are significant cultural influences on the DLs study behaviour.

In Malaysia, culture is believed to play an important role in developing learners' perspective on teaching and learning at a distance. What counts as 'educational quality' differs not only according to the context and the course providers, DLs, and distance teachers but also by cultural belief, perspectives and practices which come with their own goals, expectations and perceptions.

As discussed in chapters 8 and 9, DLs perceptions of distance teaching are seen as related to their conception of learning. The DLs shape their interpretations of what learning and teaching is around their cultural beliefs, knowledge and practices, which are based on their prior educational experience. The Malay and Chinese DLs' perceptions of distance teachers and teaching, as evident in this chapter (shown in the following diagram) depended heavily on their perceptions of learning.

Diagram 5: Perception on Distance Teaching Determined by Learners Interpretation of Learning

Learners' Interpretation & experience of Learning ──────────► Perception on Distance Teaching & Distance Teachers (DTs)
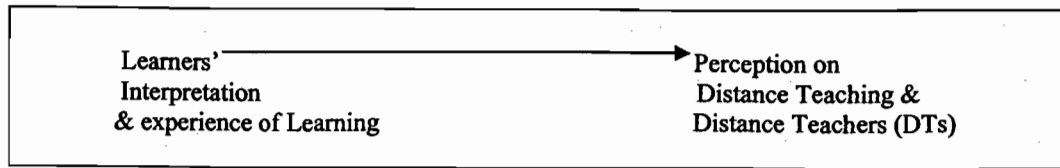
In this study, cultural difference led to fascinating and interesting discussions, but sometimes led to statements which could suggest misleading generalisations about the learners in question. For example, here are some of the common generalisations about DLs in Malaysia obtained from interviews with different DE stakeholders at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) during the scoping process for this study:

Chinese and Malay DLs like the campus based learners are very much different. They have not only different attitudes, but also different ways of studying and conducts and my observations have shown that in some respect the Chinese students perform better academically.
MHM/DT/19.10.01/Interview (SP)

The Malay learners are passive in their learning. They listen too much, and do not ask or interact with us (the distance teachers) much. The Chinese DLs on the other hand, some of them are just too aggressive, they follow you and ask you at any opportunity that they can get...
SMG/DT/23.10.01/Interview (SP)

Chinese perform better in quantitative courses than the Malay learners
AMA/Prog.Coordinator/8.10.01/Interview (SP)

All the DLs are equally good learners, it is how they approach learning that differentiates the learners, and based on my knowledge and experience as an educational counsellor at UUM, the Chinese way of doing things like studying, and group discussion needs studying. They are better learners in that respect.
HS/EduCounselor/23.10.01/Interview (SP)

What do these statements mean? Do they hold any truth? We have to be cautious about categorical statements like these which, if taken literally would lead us to expect that all Chinese DLs behave in this way and are always superior to the Malay learners.

Given the percentages of DLs enrolment at UUM, different culture gives no relevance or much grounding to such categorical generalisation like those above. The diversity

of DLs at UUM only shows that all these learners are potentially good and able learners. At the very least, they all meet the basic enrolment criteria for admission into the DE programmes. Therefore, it is understanding the *make-up* of the learners, their culture, belief and learning behaviour that will give a much better understanding of who they are, how they differ from each other, how they study, and what they do to cope with any learning difficulties.

In trying to understand the role of culture in shaping perspective and practice on distance learning, this chapter examines ways in which culture is related to the DLs' perspective, behaviour and practices in distance learning. In addition, this chapter also examines the implications of the needs of these culturally diverse learners for the design of distance teaching and learner support. Three factors that have a major impact on learning of the culturally diverse groups are described: a.) the different learning strategies employed by the students, b.) activities for planning and self-regulation, and c.) the student's goals and motivation.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN DE

The research literature provides substantial evidence that culture effects learning. It is now commonly acknowledged that a relationship exists between the culture in which DLs belong and live with their preferred way of learning (Kember and Gow, 1990; Dunn and Griggs, 1995). The latter, for example, observe that cultural values influence the socialisation practices of all ethnic groups, which in turn affect how individuals prefer to learn (Dunn and Griggs, 1995). Guild (1994) states that effective educational practices come from an understanding of the way that students learn. This includes understanding the students' culture and its effect upon learning. Parallel to Guild's assertion, Anderson (1988) notes: "All components of a culture are built upon some basic conceptual system or philosophical world view, and the various cultural systems tend to include the same general themes (life, death, birth. Mortality, human nature, religion, etc.). Even though these beliefs appear across cultures, they can be

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viewed differently within each culture" (p.3). Anderson concludes that these differences must be addressed. The initial interviews quoted above suggest that there are also cultural differences in what constitutes teaching and learning, and that this too needs attention.

Although cultural differences have been explored in recent decades, there is still much information that is lacking. While DE providers and institutions are urged to recognise the impact of cultural diversity on DE practices and learning style of DLs, relevant studies are yet very limited. Nevertheless, there are indications that culture is being taken with increasing seriousness (Cassara, 1990; Ross-Gordon, 1991) for the increasing diversity of DLs has been one of the major changes in DE world wide.

Studies conducted by Ballard & Clanchy, (1997); Burns (1991); Burke (1986) indicate that many distance teachers understand the challenges faced by DLs. However, the issues of cultural differences pertaining to academic pursuit and adjustment of DLs may not be fully understood. Building on Ballard's earlier work (1987), Ballard and Clanchy (1991) further analysed and illustrated these cultural adjustment difficulties. These include the relationship between distance teachers and DLs, learning interaction and participation, attitudes toward knowledge and distance teachers , etc.

As noted previously, Malaysian DLs who have journeyed through mainstream education may not have an appropriate educational concept of learning in DE. They may have views that are very *teacher-centred*, and their learning may be characterised by dependency on instructors as knowledge providers.

Stereotyping a certain culture or group of DLs as a homogeneous group is not helpful in facilitating the educational experience of learning at a distance. However, having an understanding of the most common difficulties which troubled the DLs from different culture and strategies used to cope with such problems may be helpful in better assisting the DLs to make an academic transition to study at a distance.

Becoming aware of and valuing the cultural factors that underpin the academic transition of the different groups of DLs would be of great benefit in having mutual understanding and respect in achieving a successful and satisfying educational experience of learning at a distance. I believe that only when the DLs' previous educational experiences, culture and values are understood, acknowledged and valued, is the DLs' educational quality most likely to be facilitated.

ARE CHINESE DISTANCE LEARNERS DIFFERENT FROM THEIR MALAY COUNTERPARTS?

Most of the DLs in this study, irrespective of their cultural group, recalled that the independent learning approach in DE was one of the important challenges they faced in distance learning at UUM. Reflecting on the differences regarding learning approaches, most of the DLs acknowledged that distance learning is different from the 12 years educational experience they had before, and that now as DLs, they have to do a lot more than was required when they were students previously.

The distance teaching approaches used by distance teachers at UUM is, in general, very different from that experienced, or expected by most of the DLs, as was reported in chapter 9. The distance teachers appeared to the DLs to regard themselves as 'teachers' of the learners' own independent pursuit of knowledge. One of the DLs made this comparison:

> *The distance teachers at UUM give you rough ideas, just main points. In earlier education (referring to his primary, secondary and previous higher education experience) they (the teachers) teach you from the beginning. DTs here at UUM, although not all, just give you the concept or question. You have to find the answer. Most of my experience before involved the teachers teaching in more detail, step by step.* KS/15.04.02/interview

> *I remember for example in form 5 being in the examination year, many of teachers even provided lecture notes as handouts. What you need is to study those, remember the facts, and you will do well in the exams, that is what the teachers normally say...it was more about helping us to pass the exams with flying colours* CTS/3.03.02/Interview

Such evidence suggests some commonalties between both groups of learners in that they had gone through the same educational experience and now acknowledged that distance teaching and learning is different. Within the two groups of DLs, there was a range of past social and educational experiences. Such a range of backgrounds gives a broader perspective to the responses, which have emerged from the interviews. Analysis of the data indicates that the DLs in this research found the expectations and learning environment governing distance learning were considerably different from those evident in their previous educational experience and study environment. Most reported that the new learning environment and expectation governing the academic culture of distance learning were not only different, but also implicit. In other words, it appeared to the DLs that they were expected to conform to certain patterns of behaviour, which were seldom consciously and explicitly made clear to them.

Many of the learners felt that there was a lack of understanding that they (the DLs) represent a different group of learners who require different support and teaching approach from that provided by the distance teachers. Irrespective of cultural differences, belief and practices in learning, they generally saw themselves as adult learners and wanted the distance teachers to see them that way. Being adult learners with many different responsibilities, they could not channel their fullest energy towards learning. They needed to be accommodated and this can be reflected in the following statement:

> *We are adult learners who don't have the energy like the young full time campus students. We want to learn and gain knowledge, but the teaching approach and the course requirement need to be accommodative...Adult learners and full time young campus based learners can be seen as 2 different drums. An empty drum that needs fuelling or filling of knowledge can represent the full time learners and teachers do this best. We adult learners are represented by a half full drum which is composed of our experience, working experience and other experiences that can be used in our learning. I think in some courses, DTs should give us tasks that allow us to benefit from the experiences and packages that we bring into distance learning, and not just lecture about theories and abstract concepts...*
>
> *MB/4.04.02/Interview*

> *Age is catching up; it is a challenge to be at par with the young campus based UUM students. The one advantage we have is the working experience that we carry into our learning. So you can say that we learn the theories like the campus*

based learners, but we also have the practical side...they don't. But, it is not often that such an advantage can be used when DTs focus more on abstract things and theories. SKC/23.03.02/Interview

Against the background of these common perceptions there were differences between cultures:

Defining Success in DE

All DLs at UUM want to get through the learning materials and complete the course requirement successfully. The numbers interviewed are too small to allow generalisation. However among the Chinese and Malay DLs studied, there were variations in learning approaches and expectation.

When asked to share their thoughts on what they meant by 'completing the distance courses successfully', the majority (almost all) of the Chinese DLs said that *successful* entails not only a good grade and achievement that will lead to an honours degree, but a good understanding of the knowledge and the courses in general. This suggests that their learning was not merely learning to get through the exam and course, but involved some degree of deep learning, that they want to have a good grasp and understanding of the courses taken. This principle of learning suggests that the Chinese DLs used it as a learning 'framework'.

The majority of the Malay DLs interviewed in this study showed similarities in expectation. They define success as completing the courses and programmes and gaining the degree. However, their stress was more on 'getting the paper qualification required' as opposed to obtaining a first class or honours degree. What mattered most was finishing the programme and getting the degree:

> *With the commitments and responsibilities that I have, you cannot expect a student like myself to have the same energy as the campus based learners to work hard and excel in their studies with flying colours. My objective is getting through. I will be the most happiest person on this planet just to get my degree...and if that means a second class, then that is fine. I can still get*

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(hopefully) the promotion that I want with a second class degree.

Getting through my distance programme is important, I jut want to finish it, get the degree and move on in my life, hopefully for a better life...

Role of Study Group

A feature of the discussions I had with DLs was the way they used *study groups*. Both groups believed that the study group is useful but placed different weightage on its importance and relevance in DE.

The Chinese DLs saw study groups as imperative to build and sustain them throughout their distance learning experience, but the Malay DLs seemed to use study groups using the 'just in time' approach (JIT), i.e. when there was an assignment to submit or a presentation to perform, etc.

For the Chinese DLs, learning was an information-collecting activity shared amongst the group as evident in the following:

> *Studying is important, but equally so having a good, effective study group is also vital. I have study group for majority of the courses I take each semester. It helps. We work and help each other. Being a business person, learning, and learning successfully mean having a good network of friends or other learners. Just like in a business environment, networking is crucial and plays an important role to support your business. Distance learning or any learning for that matter is no different.*

The study group was important to the Chinese learners particularly for activities pertaining to reading, discussion and understanding of the course material, as depicted in the following:

> *I use my study group more to help me not only for the purpose of completing course tasks and assignment and preparation for examinations, but most importantly to help me understand with my reading and learning of the content of the courses that I take. Reading is an important component, but I also believe that reading in isolation sometimes is difficult...especially if materials are in English or Malay. Being Chinese I am not good in the national and second language, we need friends to help us with our*

In their description of their learning styles, the Chinese DLs tended to focus on reading widely (meaning reading extra materials) and discussion on the materials learned was believed to provide more information and better understanding. This in turn was perceived to be the key to successful learning. Reading among the Chinese learners according to Kember (1996) and Kember and Gow, (1990) is used by the learners as a step towards reaching understanding of the learning materials.

In many ways, the Malay learners shared this notion and they stressed that they did reading and 'lots of it' if time permitted. Otherwise their learning was more dependent on the f2f meetings, the modules provided, and the lecture notes taken. In addition, they said that they gained useful information from the f2f meetings, and followed the teachers' advice and instructions. This, they say, helped them deal with their learning at a distance.

For the Chinese DLs, using the study group, reading and discussion of the materials in the distance courses was highly valued and they committed themselves to extra effort collectively in pursuing extra readings and materials relevant to the courses taken. The Chinese DLs' perception was that the information gained from readings and discussion enhanced the understanding of the course content. In addition, when talking about the importance of the examinations and doing well in them, they stressed that giving more information and examples in the examinations and assignments and essays would give them a better leverage to excel in the courses taken. This is where they believed readings, extra work, group work and discussion played a role in their learning.

Building on the need to have a good network of learners, the Chinese learners saw learning as collective work from the start. Many of the DLs in this study confessed the desire to build the 'right' study group as early as week one or two of the semester.

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Being a distance learner, you can't wait. You need to start building the learning network or study group...as soon as possible. Besides the support that you get from the institution, the study group is equally an important support system that I can not do without.

FLS/2.04.02/Interview

Nevertheless, one common problem that the Chinese learners had was to ensure they had an effective group, which would contribute to their learning and provide mutual help. Some of the Chinese learners approached this problem by initiating study groups with friends and other learners whom they had known for some time. In our discussions, the Chinese DLs told me that they were selective in choosing their study group mates. Each member was expected to perform, be committed to the group tasks and assignments and be able to work collectively to achieve group objectives and expectations.

The Malay learners tended to cite lack of *time* and inability to *find the time* as a reason for not having study groups. They also questioned the effectiveness of such groups as a defence for practising a JIT response to group work. '*It is difficult sometimes to focus your discussion in a group work*' said Salina. She further elaborated this in response to the following picture that she submitted:

Picture 6: Effectiveness of study group is undermined by social chats says Salina

When you have a study group meeting, your main priority is to get discussions going and the task completed, but that does not happen all the time especially if there are more female learners in the group, you tend to start talking about your family, work...gossiping about friends always precedes the actual academic discussion, and this wastes a lot of precious time, especially when time is limited.
SAR/Date taken 1.02.03/Photo

Individualistic versus Collective Learning

In many respects, the Chinese DLs might be said to employ more of a *collectivist/group orientation* compared to the Malay DLs. The "we" referred to by most of the Chinese learners was a source of identity, protection, loyalty, and dependent relationship. To an extent, learners who deviated from the norm were considered as "having a bad or weak character" and may face more challenges in their courses. As Andrew puts it, *we the Chinese students I think cannot learn in isolation, we need each other to help each other in our learning*

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(LKC/5.04.02/Interview). Even though this may be effective, it could be said to undermine the aim of producing 'independent learners'.

On the other hand, many of the Malay DLs in the study displayed an *individualist orientation* towards their learning. This orientation or approach emphasised the interests of the individual prevailing over those of the group. The obligation and ties between individuals were loose; everyone was expected to look after him/herself. The Malay DLs identified time and the lack of it as a common barrier to group discussion. It was the lack of it that inhibited them from having regular study group like the Chinese DLs. When provoked with the idea that every learner has twenty fours hours a day, seven days a week (24/7) and yet the Chinese DLs were able to commit time and promote the study group as a learning strategy, one of the Malay learners confessed that:

> *In many instances it is about attitude. I think the Malay learners in general are too complacent with the privilege we get from the government, the scholarship, the chances, etc. So much so we spoil ourselves by being less motivated than the Chinese learners are. They work harder because it is harder for them to get scholarship and access to HE. Yes we have 24/7 but if you ask me, I don't and can not put my distance degree top on the list of priorities. I have a big family and a job to think about 24/7. My degree comes third. I think this is why I always blame time for the shortcoming in my study.*
> SMD/21.03.02/Interview

This is not to say that *individualism* was not important to the Chinese DLs, it is important, but *collective work* that required discipline, self directedness, independent, sense of responsibility, attention, hard work, persistence, motivation and time was equally important.

Unlike the Malay DLs, the Chinese DLs were able to disregard the influence of their former educational experiences (being teacher-centred) sooner, and developed a conception of distance learning based upon their current circumstances. The major difference was that, while the Malay learners were highly dependent upon their distance teachers, the Chinese learners in this study showed significantly greater levels of independence and self direction. Some of the Chinese learners set their own

learning objectives and displayed a higher level of control over their learning. It almost seemed that the Chinese DLs did not always wait for direction from their teachers, but were willing to take initiative themselves. Andrew, for example, described his role as a learner as knowing what to do

> *not just for the next lesson but what are the things, assignments and readings that need to be done throughout the semester. Then, planning your learning and doing the tasks required systematically.*
>
> *LKC/5.04.02/Interview*

Such evidence shows that the Chinese learners like Andrew and others had to show flexibility and use different learning strategies as needed and viewed the distance teachers more as facilitators as opposed to teachers giving lectures. The distance teachers-DLs relationship was more interactive since frequent discussion with instructors' help. The Chinese DLs recognised that they could learn both from their teachers and from other DLs through class discussion and other group activities.

Interestingly, such behaviour was said to be culturally cultivated. According to Lee Seng:

> *This has been the way the Chinese learners in general work. Studying has been a competitive endeavour right from the primary up to secondary and higher education. We have to be the best and get the top grades to enrol in public university. Of course if I or my family or parents were rich and had the money, I could have enrolled into private institutions, but the reality is I am not, so public university like UUM was the only option I had and more affordable...but difficult to get into. We are not as fortunate as the Malay learners who have many scholarship and opportunities, we realise that, and one way ahead is to work hard. This principle is what we hold from one generation to the next. I am doing it, I am telling my children to work hard...and on top of that it is very challenging for us because Bahasa Malaysia and English language are not our mother tongue and this itself is a barrier...we simply have to work hard and get as much support from our friends as well.*
> *FLS/2.04.02/Interview*

The Malay DLs on the other hand, explained that 'ideally' distance learning was not for them. Given a choice and if permitted, they would prefer full time based education in which the teacher would cover the concepts, direct them to specific sources and tell them what information to look for and be there to provide immediate

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feedback to questions. In this respect, past experience of learning and teaching had some influence on the UUM Malay DLs. The Malay DLs realised that they had to become independent learners but felt that they had been unfamiliar with such an expectation especially in the earlier academic semesters of their distance course. The Malay DLs felt the need to attend classes. In these they needed to be attentive to the distance teachers presentation, lectures, so that they ended up with good notes. They recognised that a good distance learner works hard, prepares for classes and reads all relevant readings. Nevertheless, it was hard to meet these ideals due to the conflicting demands they faced as adult DLs, as mentioned earlier. These Malay learners saw knowledge as being defined by an external source by a combination of the teachers and the course content. The distance teachers were expected to present the content to them, to be learned and absorbed and reproduced during exams and tests. It is not surprising that this view was common, as their conceptions of learning would have been formed by the 12 years of Malaysian educational teacher-centred dogma.

Short versus Long Term Orientation

In addition, the Chinese and Malay DLs showed distinct *Short-Long Term Orientation.* This dimension is related to persistence and perseverance. The majority of the Chinese DLs displayed a long-term (dynamic, future oriented) approach, characterised by adaptation of traditions to the modern context, respect for tradition, perseverance toward slow results, willingness to subordinate oneself for a purpose, and concern with virtue. The preference for building a learning network among DLs was a manifestation of such an orientation-a need to plan the learning and accomplishment of the course tasks and assignments ahead of time.

The majority of the Malay learners in this study displayed a short-term orientation towards their learning. They did not necessarily plan much ahead of the time required to perform on the learning tasks and assignments. This was confirmed by their sense that the urgency of forming a study group should be based on necessity or JIT and

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priority, and with a clear intended purpose, i.e. to help complete assignments and tasks.

DISCUSSION

The academic transition experiences required by the Chinese and Malay DLs to achieve success in their distance learning appear to be significant and have many cultural and individual aspects. In some circumstances, cultural differences significantly impinged upon the educational quality and academic transition experiences of those Malay and Chinese DLs at the institution. However, there were some commonalties evident that underpinned these unique personal experiences; most of the DLs went through the initial stage of feeling lost, but then felt more confident and more settled later. A few initially experienced excitements because of the new environment or new freedom compared to their more structured previous educational experience, then they became concerned as they realised the magnitude of the hidden academic demands expected of them and the need to develop new coping strategies.

Many of the Chinese DLs interviewed perceived language as the cause of the difficulties of their academic experience. This is perhaps because language was the most obvious cause identified, rather than the course itself. The Malay learners attributed their status as adult learners to the many roles and responsibilities they have, and saw the lack of time as their common problem in learning.

Many of the DLs adjusted by making more effort, spending more time on study. This was more evident among the Chinese learners than the Malay learners. Such effort is consistent with research findings at other universities (Burke, 1986). Some of the DLs regarded the adjustment experience as a form of personal development.

Distance teachers may argue that it is obvious that students from different cultures learn in different ways and that some cultures have approaches that others do not. However, rather than being a product of culture as such, this may be a logical extension of past learning experience (how the learners have learned to learn) and the context in which decisions have been made for further learning (i.e. economic pressures, job prospects, the importance of paper qualification, etc.) Although these may be influenced by cultural factors, these decisions may be more practically based than culturally determined.

This study suggests that there is no one interpretation that can stand alone as an interpretation or generalisation that one can make on culture and its effect on learning for the Chinese or the Malay learners at UUM. Among the DLs themselves, there were deviant cases that did not conform to the general practice of the cultural group they belonged to. Not all learners (Chinese or Malays) conformed to generalisations made based on ethnic background. Rather, each individual learner is unique and individuals may vary even in the same culture. DLs are heterogeneous, not only among and within learners, but also between cultural and ethnic background.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia is a country of considerable diversity. It encompasses a variety of political and educational forms, cultures, languages and histories. This makes it impossible to generalise about Malaysian learners in general.

However, DLs' perception of distance teaching as evident in this study was seen as more affiliated to the learners' conception of learning. The DLs shaped their interpretations of what learning and teaching around their existing cultural beliefs, knowledge and practices, based on the educational experience that they had undergone. The Malay and Chinese DLs' perceptions of distance teachers and teaching, as evident in this chapter, were heavily reliant on their interpretation of their perception of learning.

Having this in mind, distance teachers must employ a variety of teaching strategies to accommodate cultural differences and variety of learning style preferences. In general, when trying to accommodate cultural differences and variety of learning styles in the instructional design, it is always best to design alternative activities to reach the same objective and give the DLs the option of selecting from these alternative activities, the ones which best meet their preferred learning styles.

CHAPTER 11
LESSONS LEARNED: POTENTIAL DISTANCE LEARNING IMPROVEMENTS

The focus of this study on the UUM DLs' experiences comes at a time when concern for quality in HE education in Malaysia is at an all time high (Khoo and Idrus, 2004). In a period when consumer choice and customer perception of quality is cardinal, institutions that can offer quality in terms of product and customer service will survive and prosper (Jenkins, 1991:97). The notion of quality in education is not new (Rinehart, 1993:260). What is new is that the quality philosophy, *quality assurance* (QA), *quality management* (QM), *ISO certification* are being adopted to solve problems encountered in educational institutions (Wilson, 1993; Daugherty, 1996). This is particularly important because the impact of DE on the process of learning defines not only distinct roles for DE institutions, administrators, distance teachers, the instruction and the technology involved but, most notably the role of the DLs who face a change from the traditional learning environment to a new way of learning. In actual fact, the learners stand in front of the new challenge with expectations, anxieties and the need to balance the responsibilities of the forthcoming tasks with the conditionings of work, family or life circumstances.

DLs must handle a number of challenges before distance learning can take place. These include: becoming and staying responsible for themselves; utilising their strengths, desires, skills, and needs; maintaining and increasing self-esteem; relating to others; clarifying what is learned; redefining what legitimate knowledge is; and dealing with the course content and expectations.

Studies of DLs and how to respond to their diversity are thus essential. Understanding who DLs are, what changes them as they progress into their learning, what motivates them to seek distance learning experiences, and how they accommodate the role of learner in addition to their other roles in life is crucial to designing satisfying and

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meaningful DE programmes which facilitate learning and provide a good educational experience.

A highly successful learner has always been described as one who exhibits initiative, independence, and persistence in learning; one who accepts responsibility for his or her own learning and views problems as challenges, not obstacles; one who is capable of self discipline and has a high degree of curiosity; one who has a strong desire to learn or change and is self confident; one who is able to use basic study skills, organise his or her own time, set an appropriate pace for learning, and develop a plan for completing work; one who enjoys learning and has a tendency to be goal oriented (Moore, 1994; Guglielmino, 1977).

However, as evident in this study, not all learners who have all those skills and values, are successful and fit into these categories. Claims that adult DLs are innately self-directed, or inherently critical thinkers cannot be empirically supported (Brookfield, 1992). This study, for example, shows that some of the UUM DLs reinforced the need for a structure that a traditional f2f classroom provides, specifically, the need to have the distance teachers *there all the time, or whenever required* was evident in this study. This is parallel with what Walker (2002) discusses in his chapter entitled *Is there anyone there? The embodiment of knowledge in virtual environments*. The need is for a clear 'structure' when many of the DLs at UUM have been away from the 'educational settings' for many years. It is important for them to learn how to study and learn again. As elicited by some of the data, learning at a distance does not come easy especially when the learners come from a dominantly teacher-centred learning environment. The learners have to re-learn what learning at a distance means.

REVISITING THE PROBLEMS & ISSUES OF LEARNING AT A DISTANCE

In general, the DLs expressed some level of satisfaction, but with a mixed set of emotions, when asked to describe their experiences in a distance education course at UUM. From the findings it became apparent that the central response was that the learning support at UUM was not sufficient or helpful enough to facilitate distance learning. Evidently, not all students are suited to distance learning. There is no guarantee that the more mature the DLs are, the likely they are to find success with distance learning. It is however true, I think that successful DLs need to have a number of characteristics such as tolerance for ambiguity, a need for autonomy, and an ability to be flexible (Threkeld & Brzoska, 1994). Hardy and Boaz (1997) found that "compared to most face-to-face learning environments, distance learning requires students to be more focused, better time managers, and to be able to work independently and with group members" (p.43).

This study confirms the fact that DLs are mostly different from full time campus based learners in that they are already in professions. They have well defined goals and are more motivated (Dibiase, 2000) and need to have a sense of belonging, and feel a part of a community. Most notable of all, they have different learning circumstances and face different challenges to complete the distance courses. As such, DLs are unique and may exhibit different ways of learning and coping strategies.

DLs are often said to feel less pressure to perform individually, and more pressure to collaborate and be part of the team (Kantor, 1998 cited in Greensburg, 1998). This is also not always true for all adult learners coming from different backgrounds, cultures and experiences. This study, for example, has shown that there are differences in learning styles between the Chinese and the Malay DLs, and not all learners are inclined to work individually, nor involved in group work. Some prefer one to the other; others may use both learning strategies when required. Nevertheless, being involved in a collaborative learning process like a study group or group activities is an important part of forming the foundation of a learning community, and this should

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be supported, as evident among the Chinese DLs in this study and others (Allen, 1995); this helps them tremendously in coping with the demands of distance learning. When this is not encouraged, participation is generally low and interaction or dialogue is absent (Palloff & Pratt, 2000) and this may disrupt their learning and understanding of the course.

The feeling of isolation seems to be dominant among the learners' general feelings about their experience in distance learning at UUM. They need more attention from their respective distance teachers. The fact that the distance teachers are not there all the time, and not comparatively 'the same' as the lecturers or instructors teaching to the full time learners was a major set back to some DLs. They found themselves lost, isolated, and in due time, potentially de-motivated to learn. Such a situation is more prevalent in a distance situation than in a traditional classroom. In a situation where eye contact and proximity are limited, students cannot be assisted nor affirmed by eye contact and body language (McKnight, 2000). Students may also have a difficult time interacting with other DLs. This lack of interaction can cause problems when there is a dissenting opinion that cannot be picked up on with non-verbal cues, and is misperceived as a verbal attack. This type of miscommunication can cause the DLs problems as the course progresses.

In summary, despite the promises and obvious advantages to distance learning in the Malaysia context of HE, there are problems that need to be resolved. As evident in this study, these problems are twofold: *the provision and quality of learning support*, and *the lack of learning interactions*. Each one of these has an effect on the overall quality of distance learning as a product. They are components of the formulation for supporting distance learning as illustrated in diagram 6 and examined separately in this section.

Diagram 6: *The Role of Learning Support & Interactions in DE*

Learning Support + Interactions = Success in Distance Learning
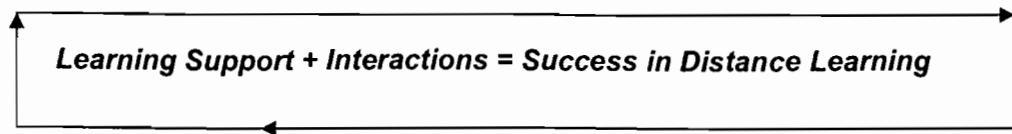
Quality of Support

The learning conditions are quite different for DLs as compared with those of f2f students, and this may affect learning outcomes significantly. In DE, there needs to be a strong emphasis on the provision of learner support, which is designed to facilitate learning and interactions between the learners and the distance teachers (Kember & Dekkers, 1987; Sewart, 1992 Hillman et.al, 1994). Khoo and Idrus (2004) for example, state that learner support is a very important component of distance education. Learners without support are most liable to delay their completion of a programme or drop out altogether. They further say "Research has consistently shown that, without necessary student support services, a distance education programme will not succeed (p.1)."

However, literature relating to support in distance learning focuses on how support can be provided and the processes and strategies involved in doing so. The concept of need is equally important to that of support, as it is learners' conceptions of needs and how they should be met which translates the different requirements for support into action, so enabling them to connect with distance teachers and other DLs. Much research on support focuses more on the distance teaching and learning itself, rather than the learning support needs of the DLs: use of technology innovation (Harrison, 1997; Kommers et al., 1998); text devices (Martens et al., 1996). Not much research to date appears to have attempted to understand learning support needs of DLs qualitatively, in order to help learners to diagnose their own support needs and therefore develop their own strategies for dealing with them.

As pointed out by some of the learners in this study, there is lack of learning support services such as academic advisors, faculty, and technical assistance that form as

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barriers that beset DLs, and this lack of support might affect motivation. In the eyes of the learners, the learning support is arguably a by-product of these processes, rather than a means of connecting the DLs to the facilities available. It is this *connectedness* (Lawton, 1997; Stark and Warne, 1999) that is important to the development of a good distance learning educational experience. Stark and Warne's findings revealed that the students felt 'disconnected' from the distance teachers and institutions, and this led them to experience the loneliness, isolation, dissatisfaction with their learning. The findings and issues discussed by Stark and Warne bear similarity to this study. DLs expectations of distance teachers indicated a desire that faculty should be interested in the learners as individuals and provide reassurance, support, advice and motivation.

Most of the learners have no private study space at home. Family, community, religious and work obligations often take precedence over studying, and although the learner's spouse and family may support the decision to study, they cannot always help and sometimes do not even fully understand the students' problems and needs. One of the constant difficulties for DLs at UUM is the geographical separation of the learner with their distance teachers, and other DLs, and with the institution itself. Some of the learners in this study found it difficult to manage their time effectively when they had to fit 'learning'' around work, family, and other commitments and without regular contact with other DLs. It can be equally difficult for UUM to keep track of and support progress over the many years needed to complete a degree by part time.

The phenomenon of the isolated learner in distance learning at UUM is an important issue that needs attention from all the institution stakeholders in distance learning. There has been a significant increase in the UUM PJJ enrolment but without matching resources, leading to higher distance teacher ratios and much greater reliance on mass teaching in lecture theatres. There has also been a shift to more modular degrees, weakening faculty responsibility for the individual learner and student identification with the faculty. The distance teachers' role, never particularly

robust, effectively faded away under the pressures of higher teaching loads and the requirement to be research active. As a result, the learners find themselves lost in the system; isolated poor oversight of progress and this may lead to increasing drop out rates. Therefore, it is crucial that DE providers and institutions find educational solutions that could improve the provision and quality of learning support to their DLs – their 'most valued clientele'. Dato' Professor Fawzi Ahmad Basri, UUM vice Chancellor said recently when he visited Hull University in the United Kingdom:

> *The learners are our biggest assets, they are our most valued clienteles, and we have to do all that is needed to improve their educational experience at the institution. We are looking at all aspect of teaching, learning and research, and constantly want to improve.*
>
> *Fawzi/26.11.03/HullUni.*

In such a positive administrative climate, and with the learners being a key concern, UUM has got to reflect on its DE practices and improve its services with learning or student support as a point of departure for DE improvement.

Thorpe (2002) provides a useful definition of student support in ODL as "all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group", in other words, it is the human face of course presentation. There are three key elements in her definition: *identity*, in other words the ability to deal with the needs of identifiable individuals; *interaction*, the ability to be responsive to student needs; and *time/duration*, the ability to maintain contact throughout the course. These elements effectively define the job of the distance teachers. Support services must promote academic progress, and hopefully, the development of the learner. The distance teachers at UUM play a very important role in fostering self-direction and student development. They hold the responsibilities for providing learning support (Brindley & Maxim, 1990; Lawton, 1997)

Quality of Instruction

Much of the quality of instruction in distance learning at UUM depends on the attitude of the administration and the distance teachers themselves. Data collected in a

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1999 study by Inman, Kerwin and Mayes (1999) showed distance teachers had conflicting attitudes about teaching distance courses. They reported that after teaching one course, the majority of distance teachers were willing to teach another, but that they rated the quality of the course as only equal to or of lower quality than other classes taught on campus. Such a feeling was common among many UUM distance teachers that I talked to, and this was precisely what my wife meant when she questioned "What is wrong with the DLs? Why don't they complete their assignments on time? Are they not competent enough?" as written in chapter one of this thesis.

In view of the development of ICT in DE, some distance teachers, and DE administrators believe the technology will improve the quality of the distance teaching. But, Palloff and Pratt (2000) remind us that "technology does not teach students; effective teachers do"(pg. 4). They make the point that the issue is not technology itself, but how it is used in the design and delivery of courses. Too often, the distance teachers do not design their lessons to take advantage of the technology presented. This affects the quality of the instruction. Research suggests that the effectiveness of distance learning is based on preparation, the teacher's understanding of the needs of the students, and an understanding of the target population (Omoregie, 1997). Sherritt (1996) found in her survey of higher education administrators that many of the decision makers view distance programmes as second rate, a "necessary but deficient form of education" (pg.2). She writes that this attitude also was found in academic departments that "have no strong mandates to adjust their curriculum and instruction to fit distance learning beyond cursory cooperation" (pg. 2). There are no rewards for doing so and the effort takes away from research time. Sherrit also cites a study by Caffarella et al. (1992), which found off campus teachers to be "a demoralised bunch, perceiving poor working conditions, isolation, personal and professional deprivation" (pg.3). This attitude hardly seems conducive to an effective learning environment for the students. If the DE administration and teachers are lacking in true commitment, it is bound to have a negative influence on the entire distance learning experience.

Technology

Besides the cost of the technology, there is the possibility of not utilising all its potential. Some of these problems arise from a lack of training and exposure, some from the distance teachers and DLs' attitudes towards using the technology, and still others by hardware problems. It seems to be self evident that some learners in this study needed to be trained to use distance learning technology, but too often they were not. Once again, it appears that the DE administration and PACE may have felt that the technology itself would improve the course. Advancement in technology does not lead to effective distance education. This is reminded by Professor H.Ian Macdonald (2004) in his key-note address at the recent 21st ICDE Hong Kong conference: "...we can shape our future to ensure that distance education and open learning...promote social good rather social devide"(p.7). He then said that, distance educators, must adhere to his seven principles, one of which explains the role of technology: "Educational technology is a significant supplement, but it does not replace the human element and the qualitative role of the teacher. In all our programmes, there must be a human presence at the end of the line. Pedagogy must remain pre-eminent"(p.7).

The best distance education practices depend on creative, well-informed instructors (Greenberg, 1998). Bates (1995) suggests that newer technologies are not inherently better than old ones and many of the lessons learned from the application of older technologies will still apply to any newer technology. Again, the learner in particular should be trained to take advantage of both their experience and to adapt that experience to the new environment of distance learning. The distance teachers, on the other hand, must be trained "not only to use technology, but also to shift the way in which they organise and deliver material" (Palloff & Pratt, 2000, pg. 3).

MEANINGFUL AND INTERACTIVE DISTANCE LEARNING

Although distance learning can help to increase accessibility of education to learners, it is UUM's responsibility to raise the educational experience and quality. It is important to note that learners must be able to deal with real-world tasks that require problem solving skills; to integrate knowledge including their own experiences, and to produce new insights in their profession. However, learners are also facing other problems such as feelings of isolation, lack of direction and time-management, and eventually de-motivation. Thus, it is important that there must be effort to increase interaction between learners with the distance teachers.

Interactivity and interactions are critical in underpinning the distance learning process. Interactions serve a diverse range of functions in the distance educational process, which include, for example:

- promoting active and participative learning on a one to one basis or within a group or learning community through social dialogue;

- enabling effective facilitation of learning to suit individual learner's needs and learning styles;

- allowing learner input to the learning process as well as enabling learners to take ownership and control of their learning;

- enabling the development of higher order knowledge and abilities, for example critical thinking, problem solving, judgement -/decision-making skills, reflection, etc.;

- providing effective feedback to inform on the teaching and learning process as well as enhance the quality and standards of the learning experience (Fahy, 2003; Juwah, 2003);

- Providing learners with some face-to-face contact and peer group interaction to help them develop a sense of belonging and to identify with the programme and the university (Bharati, 2004).

The rapid evolution of ICT and the Internet has contributed significantly to the phenomenal growth of distance education. So much so it has led to the demise of DE (Peters, 2000; Walker, 2002). Contrary to the meaning of 'demise', Peter argues that it is not about the death of DE or it being 'static' in development, but the convergence between the conventional and DE and suggest that the success of any distance educational process is and should be underpinned by sound pedagogical principles and interactions.

Defining Interactivity: Revisited

The search for an educationally viable definition of 'interactivity' has produced some valuable insights for distance teachers and educators. Interactivity in DE is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon and are critical in promoting and enhancing effective learning (Anderson, 2002; Hirumi, 2002; Sims, 1995; Yacci, 2000).

I find Yacci's (2000) description and discussion on interactivity most appropriate and practical in relation to distance learning. He describes four major attributes to interactivity: 1) Interactivity is a message loop; 2) Instructional interactivity occurs from the student's point of view and does not occur until a message loop from and back to the student has been completed; 3) Instructional interactivity has two distinct classes of outputs: content learning and affective benefits; and 4) Messages in an interaction must be mutually coherent.

Yacci's reflections reveal the existence of a student-centred orientation around their perceptions of interactivity. Therefore, a distance course, or a distance teacher for that matter can claim interactivity but DLs will not acknowledge interaction until they individually receive some form of feedback or 'interaction'. Putting that into perspective, Muirhead (2000) offers another practical definition of interactivity, which affirms the human dimension of this term; interactivity refers to communication, participation, and feedback. Additionally, interactivity involves

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participation by the learner in communication with other DLs and with their distance teachers. The definition highlights the personal nature of information sharing. Naturally, students interact with their course materials through reading textbooks, journals and discussion forum comments from other students and their distance teachers. The subject matter provides an academic foundation for meaningful dialogue within a distance education class.

ROLE OF DISTANCE TEACHERS IN CHANGING TIMES

Despite learning barriers and setbacks faced by the DLs caused by their own sets of beliefs, and perceptions on learning, we must come back to distance teachers' attitudes towards teaching in a distance-learning environment, which have been pointed out as a source and potential roadblock to effective distance learning by the learners in this study. As in any educational situation, the distance teachers set the tone for learning in the educational environment. Nevertheless, setting the right tone to produce good teaching and learning experience is not an easy task in DE.

Quite often, the default position according to Walker (2002) "...seems to be that distance teaching requires only the addition of a few skills not already in the repertoire of the conventional teacher. That once in place, most distance courses can run...(p.113). This approach is questionable particularly when implementing such a model means only providing some technical support to conventional 'trained' teachers. Walker (2002: p.113) further iterated that:

> Implementing a distance programme requires new forms of pedagogy, though these are not always fully recognised and are less easily replicated than is often assumed. Those implicated need time and resources as well as technical assistance to make the changes that this requires.

Distance teachers must be properly trained and motivated to be effective. This means that the distance teacher has a responsibility to help students learn by making sure that the demands of the teaching-learning context are pedagogically sound (Laurillard, 1993). They must have the 'know-how' and confidence to use all of the

various educational technologies in order to be truly effective in distance teaching. Distance teachers must also change the manner in which information is delivered. When the lecture mode does not work well, other media like the multimedia presentations are successful (Weber 1996). Of course this means more preparation time for the distance teacher and the motivation must be there. Walcott (1994), cited in Carter (2001) found in a study of adult distance learning that "to effectively bridge the gaps between classroom and distance teaching, faculty need to look at the distance teaching from the learners' point of view" (pg. 249). The distance teachers must also be aware of getting instructional materials, handouts, tests, and other class items to learners on time. It is important for the distance teachers to develop a sense of community, achieve maximum participation, and get the DLs to be engaged and get involved in the process. The idea of learning as a collaborative process is very important when learners are separated by distance. According to research by Palloff and Pratt (2000), "collaborative learning processes assists learners to achieve deeper levels of knowledge generation through the creation of shared goals, shared exploration, and a shared process of meaning making" (pg. 6). It is up to the distance teachers to be aware of this in the distance learning environment and to encourage collaborative learning and a sense of community among the DLs.

Another important consideration for the distance teachers is their view regarding the goal of distance education. There are two main thoughts on this. Schlosser and Anderson (1994, cited in Imel, 1998) put this thought forward in a review of distance education literature. They submit that the goal of distance education is "to offer the distance student an experience as much like that of traditional, face-to-face instruction as possible" (p.3). This would mean that distance learning pedagogy would not differ much from that used in an ordinary classroom. Bates (1995) has a different idea. He suggests that instead of using technology to replicate traditional methods, it should be used to improve instruction. Holmberg (1989) also discusses these two schools of thought and concludes that distance education as a mode of education in its own right has very different consequences (than viewing it as a substitute for face-to-face instruction). Distance teachers must decide which attitude

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they will adopt, because it has a profound impact on their approach to instruction, as evident in this study, discussed earlier

Distance teachers also have adaptations they need to make when employing other media and technology in distance learning as exemplified by findings in Mohd.Daud, Hashim & Noor Saleh's (2000) study. Distance teachers using visual cues, according to the authors, may find it difficult to adapt to a situation such as compressed video. The learners at the remote site are not always in clear view of the distance teacher. They call adapting to the lack of visual cues a major adaptation for the distance teacher. Part of this can be alleviated by good communication with the technician, but as we have seen earlier, that communication is not always present. This only leads to feelings of isolation, being 'left alone' and disregarded and contributes to lack of interaction in distance learning by the DLs.

Mohd.Daud, Hashim & Noor Saleh (2000) and McKnight (2000) contend that proximity and eye contact are important factors in education but are limited in the distance learning environment. McKnight further comments that we inherently recognise the connection these provide, but in the distance learning environment they are "both severely and sometimes permanently compromised" (pg. 2). DLs experience in coping with difficult courses such as quantitative courses are one example that resulted from the lack of proximity and interactions between the learners and the teachers. The learners in some cases find it frustrating not to have the distance teachers around when needed, and find it highly frustrating when their questions and concerns are not promptly replied to. In normal circumstances, 'troubled learners' or learners with difficulty coping with a particular course can be detected and helped. But as McKnight further asserts, in distance learning, the 'distance' often makes the distance teachers unable to observe the emotions of the learners and thus makes it difficult for the distance teachers to detect "moments of anxiety," thereby limiting their ability to respond to student needs. This puts a burden on the distance teachers and causes the DLs to respond differently than they might in a traditional classroom setting. Creating a community of DLs is an important factor

for the distance teacher to have effective course and f2f meetings. The distance teachers must do all he or she can to overcome the limits of distance learning and involve the learners in an environment of interaction, which can work to create the feeling of a true class (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997).

Herbert Simon claims that "Human beings are at their best when they interact with the real world and draw lessons from the bumps and bruises they hit " (Simon, 1994: p.74). This view of the adult learner is not new, but teachers in distance learning need to take Simon's comments to heart if they are to be successful. Distance learning offers students a far greater range of opportunities. They are no longer forced to sit and listen to material deemed irrelevant, simply to fulfil graduation requirements. Relevance of subject matter and the way it is communicated are critical.

On the other side of the coin, DLs still seek the f2f interaction with their respective distance teachers. As evident, one of the biggest frustrations from both the distance faculty and the students is this lack of interaction. Desmond Keegan believes that distance learning must do everything possible to recreate the teacher-learner model as an interactive experience (Keegan, 1986). This is substantiated by Sherry (1996: p.346) when she says: "The most important factor for successful distance learning is a caring, concerned teacher who is confident, experienced, at ease with the equipment, uses the media creatively, and maintains a high level of interactivity with the students."

STRATEGIES IN IMPROVING DISTANCE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Though distance learning is not so new to the Malaysian learners in general, many learners still have only a vague idea of what it means to study at a distance. For many of the DLs applying to UUM, such a decision has been a big move and investment, and the institution itself, with its open entry has a responsibility to ensure that the decision is the right one.

To provide a distance learner with a good beginning, UUM must make it very clear at the appropriate time and in the most accessible medium, what is on offer and what he or she will be taking on for the next three to ten years. Once a learner has decided to register, questions like the following are imperative: *Is the course as expected to be? Is the course appropriate to the learner's level and experience? Does the learner have the necessary skills to cope with it? Is the learner aware of not only how much study is involved each week, but also what this means in practice?*

As a DE provider, UUM must not only address these issues but make sufficient effort to ensure that the learner is welcomed to the University so that he or she feels a sense of belonging. UUM must provide reassurance where necessary. No matter what the learner's background or previous educational qualifications, it is unlikely that he or she will appreciate what learning at a distance means, the nature of the relationship with the teacher or what responsibilities the learner should have as a distance learner. Time management strategies are also crucial to success and need to be drawn up in advance when the course starts. Based on the evidence presented in this study, and in an attempt to improve the distance learning experience at UUM, this study proposes that the institution needs first of all to provide *a good beginning* or *a good first impression* of what distance learning entails.

Providing a Good Start

Manning's (2001) call to provide DLs with a good start in the distance course is pertinent to this study. In doing so, one activity that the evidence of the thesis suggests is of a significant value particularly to the DLs is *induction*. Induction is often offered to new UUM DLs once they have formally registered as distance learners at the institution. This is where DLs are welcomed into the institution and acquire generic studentship skills. Induction can be offered in a variety of ways. UUM's way of induction has always been a structured mandatory one week f2f induction where the new DLs will face different speakers presenting on different aspects of the distance programme and learning at UUM. It is an event where

substantial amount of information is delivered to the learners within one-week induction programme. Based on the students' perspective and experience in distance learning at UUM, perhaps it is timely for UUM to assess the effectiveness of this one-week induction programme, and realising potential short comings of the programme in preparing the learners for better educational experience in DE at UUM. Perhaps, induction should be a continuous process or make available in the forms of making information ready when needed via different methods (brochures, the web, and others)

It is evident, as discussed in chapter 8, that there is a clear mismatch between what is expected in distance learning and the reality that distance learning represents to the learners. In some cases, the learners just were not sure of what was expected of them. Some learners were 'lost'. All this suggests that perhaps these learners were not getting enough input or sufficient induction as to what distance learning means in principle.

Clear, accurate information must therefore be provided, matching what the learners need to know with what UUM thinks they need to know. There is a tension here that needs to be rectified, and improved.

In addition to the induction, the evidence suggests that students' confidence is vital and that opportunities must be made to sustain the feeling of *'a good beginning for distance learning'*, based on the evidence, here are some suggestions that UUM can consider:

1. *Hands-on training* with the technology of delivery is provided for both distance teacher and learners by providing a face-to-face meeting in using the delivery technology and learns about the roles and responsibilities of technical support staff.
2. At the start of class, *open discussions* are usually initiated to set rules, guidelines, and standards. Once procedures have been established, consistently uphold them.

It is important that all DLs are given the opportunity to benefit from what is offered, and it is important for UUM to identify a 'core' service, which can be guaranteed. A good beginning and having a positive first impression is important; although it may be difficult to prove that it makes a difference to retention, it is clear that it leads to increased confidence and motivation. Taylor and Morgan (1986) have written about the key areas of confidence, competence and control in learning. Confidence and competence increase over time. These cannot be achieved in the period leading to the start of a course, but this is an important period for inculcating the right spirit, thinking, motivation and confidence.

Meeting learner needs

Malcolm Knowles (1980), in writing about "andragogy," the art and science of helping adults learn, has made the following suggestions:

1. Provide a physical climate and a psychological climate that shows the learner is accepted, respected and supported, and in which there exists a spirit of mutuality between Distance teachers and learners as partners.

2. Put emphasis on self-diagnosis of needs for learning by giving the learner a way of constructing a model of the competencies or characteristics aspired to.

3. Involve the learner in planning a personal programme based on self diagnosis, turning the needs into specific learning objectives, changing and conducting learning experiences to achieve these objectives, and evaluating the extent to which they have been achieved.

4. The tutor acts as a resource person, a procedural specialist, and a co- inquirer, and to make the other person learn.

5. The tutor helps the learner in a process of self-evaluation. This means that learners gather their own evidence about progress toward the educational goals that they have set.

6. Place great emphasis on techniques that tap the experience of adult learners. There must be a distinct shift of emphasis away from transmittal techniques

such as the lecture and assigned readings, toward discovery learning, especially in field projects and other techniques which give the learner a chance to be actively involved.

These principles are all consonant with the evidence presented in this thesis. 'Motivation' is particularly important. Otto Peters states that the motivation of DLs is primarily focused on social improvement. "The strongest one (motivation) is certainly the ambition to climb socially, to change from a blue collar job to a white collar job. They seek economic security. Furthermore, this motivation is supported by the fact that these learners are adults who are able to judge their life chances more realistically than, say learners in secondary schools are. They are conscious of the importance of their educational goals and the consequences of reaching them" (Keegan, 1994: p.30). The values might, therefore, be summarised (using Peters' statements) as values placed on economic security and an improved social status within the community.

UUM, like many other DE institutions, is concerned at the comparatively high attrition rate of DLs. The reasons for this attrition are varied, but include inappropriate subject selection, lack of motivation, inadequate academic preparation, economic hardship, ineffective time management, unrealistic expectations, and external pressures. Whatever the reason, the effect of such attrition is undesirable from the perspective of learners and institutions. Not only should learning support services enhance learners' experience of studying at a distance, they should also assist the learners to stay on. Good institutional support can overcome most of these factors.

In general, Malaysian DLs are not school leavers or young adults; rather, they are adult learners who bring with them a range of life experiences which do not necessarily include recent successful formal educational experiences. These students, as evident in this study, are frequently less well prepared for HE than their *counterparts-the full time campus based learners*. In addition, they normally have a high level of commitment to activities other than study; hence there is a strong

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competition for their time and attention. They may be geographically isolated, and experience restricted access to resources. Layered on this are the particular demands of distance learning: the dependence on self motivation and self management, limited interactions with distance teachers and other DLs, less structured educational programme, dependence on text based instruction, lack of immediate peer support, and restricted access to support services. This creates an especially demanding educational context in which learners are tackling not only the demands of study but also the additional challenges presented by the mode of study.

To function effectively, as this thesis emphasises, learners need quickly to become comfortable with the nature of teaching and learning at a distance. The delivery systems should be adapted to best motivate and meet the needs of the learners. To achieve this, I propose the following strategies for meeting learners' needs by ensuring that learners are:

1. Familiar and comfortable with the delivery method and various ICT that a distance teacher decided to use in a particular course. In addition, DLs also need to be informed and perhaps trained to resolve the technical problems when they arise.

2. Aware of and comfortable with new patterns of communication to be used in the distance programme.

3. Able to share their backgrounds and experiences with much openness.

4. Aware of the different communication styles and varied cultural backgrounds such as language skills and culture.

5. Playing active roles in the distance delivered programme by independently taking responsibility for their learning.

6. Aware of meeting standard deadlines imposed by the distance teachers and the distance administrators at UUM

To ensure effectiveness in distance teaching and learning requires the enhancement of existing proficiency and competency. Thus, every distance teacher involved in the programme is urged to:

1. Realistically assess the content that can be effectively delivered in the module due to the fact that presenting content at a distance is usually more time consuming compared to a traditional classroom.

2. Be aware that learners will have different learning styles. Some will learn easily in-group settings, while others will excel when working independently.

3. Diversify and pace their activities and avoid long lectures by mixing content presentations with discussions and learner-centred exercises.

4. Humanize the course by focusing on the learners

5. Use locally relevant case studies and examples as often as possible to assist learners in understanding and applying course content.

6. Develop strategies for learner reinforcement

Improving interaction and feedback

'Interaction' is frequently referred to by the students as being necessary for successful study. It is clear that interactivity is a multifaceted concept and can be described to mean different things in a variety of contexts. Nevertheless, it is recognised as an important and critical characteristic in instructional design, social context and success of distance education (Lockwood, 1992; Beard and Harper, 2002). Thurmond (2003) shares an insightful definition of interaction:

> The learner's engagement with the course content, other learners, the instructor, and the technological medium used in the course. True interactions with other learners, the instructor, and the technology results in a reciprocal exchange of information. The exchange of information is intended to enhance knowledge development in the learning environment. Depending on the nature of the course content, the reciprocal exchange may be absent – such as in the case of paper printed content. Ultimately, the goal of interaction is to increase understanding of the course content or mastery of defined goal (p. 4).

Effective interaction and feedback is important in meeting individual learner needs and in providing a forum for suggesting course improvements. More importantly,

continuous interaction provides room for learning, and minimises the feeling of isolation.

Returning to the teaching and learning processes in DE, what is the essence of the educational experience? I think, if we strip away all the provisions of our educational institutions and structures, the major constant among educational experiences is *interaction*.

The interaction in educational experiences today is generally based on one of the three dyads as illustrated by diagram 3 in chapter 3 of this thesis. These interactions include interactions between distance teachers and DLs; interactions between DLs; and interactions between learner and the content. These interactions serve as the foundation of distance learning and instructional strategies and practices. Thus, all desired outcomes may be said to be achievable by combination of any of the interactions. And the arrays of ICT now available are powerful enablers of these interactions. DE providers and stakeholders need to understand the role of technology. ICT is only an enabler for interactions and learning to take place, but it does not necessarily predict success in distance teaching and learning. The distance teacher, however, has many roles in helping learners gain a satisfactory and successful educational experience in distance learning.

The key element that the students experience in distance teaching and learning is moving away from the physical classroom to the framework of interaction or what I call the *meeting place* as the point of departure for a distance learning experience. This meeting place has an important role in distance learning. Closer and increased attachment and activity within this place will help learners learn better, and teachers teach better.

This study reveals considerable variation in student attitudes and satisfaction levels. Some of this variation can be found to contribute to successful distance programs. Evidently, this variation can be attributed to variations in the amount and quality of

support available during the distance learning experience. Two elements have been raised by the learners to contribute to successful distance programmes at UUM:

1. *Increased interactions between the three dyads*, particularly between distance teachers and DLs is important. Timely student feedback has been voiced as crucial in helping learners learn, and it provides assurance to the learners that they are progressing and not dismissed, which will only lead to a state of isolation.

2. *Support and facilitation*. Providing interactions, timely feedback to learners' assignments, questions, and concerns is a form of learning support and a service which UUM has to develop and provide continuously.

The learners have clearly shown that they need human support in various forms. They are concerned with the limited opportunity for interaction between the learners and the distance teachers, as well as between the learners. They want a caring attitude from the distance teachers. It is important that distance teaching and learning is approached with a pragmatic eye towards efficient and better learning. Only then can the true potential of DE be realised and appropriately used.

There are many different strategies and efforts that UUM can implement to improve interaction and feedback at UUM. First and foremost, this study calls on UUM to reflect and evaluate the provision of interactions within the UUM PJJ programme, and identify the programme's 'strongest' and 'weakest link' in providing healthy learning interactions. Such reflection will enable the institution to focus on its weakest distance component, and strengthen its services in providing a better meeting or place of gathering for distance teaching and learning to take place. At the very minimum, this thesis proposes that PACE, and the distance teachers:

1. Use questions to encourage critical thinking and informed participation on all learners.

2. Require learners to contact distance teachers, tutors and support staff and interact among themselves via electronic mail, so they become comfortable with the process.

3. Integrate a variety of delivery systems for interaction and feedback, including one-to-one and fax and E-mail and when feasible, personal visits by the learners are equally welcomed and encouraged.
4. Have learners keep a learning journal as a requirement in each of the modules.
5. Use an on-site tutor to stimulate interaction when distance learners are hesitant to ask questions or participate.
6. Make detailed comments on written assignments and return assignments without delay.

Continuous evaluation for distance education

DLs in this study want to know if they are succeeding in their studies. A variety of evaluation and assessment means, formal and informal, can be used to determine how much and how well DLs are learning. To formally evaluate learner learning, distance teachers use term papers, and final assessment. By doing this, the distance teachers are able to evaluate learners' achievement and assign grades. Distance teachers can also evaluate f2f learning informally by using a variety of techniques such as interacting; listening carefully to learner questions and comments, and analysing body language and facial expressions. Distance teachers also need to ensure that a more informal approach is used to collect information in order to determine: how comfortable learners are with the method used to deliver the distance mode of instruction; the appropriateness of assignments; the clarity of module content; time spent; teaching effectiveness and ideas to improve the module.

Types of Evaluation. Evaluation can be either *formative*, *summative*, or a combination of both. In the formative evaluation, its intention is to:
1. Enable the distance teachers to improve the course as they proceed.
2. Facilitate the course and content adaptation.
3. Identify major gaps in the instructional plan or the need for minor adjustments.

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Summative evaluation should be conducted to ascertain the overall effectiveness of the finished product or course. It is very important in developing a revision plan for designing a new plan, programme, or course. Although this exercise may not help current DLs since it is normally conducted upon course completion, it can contribute to changes that may benefit future or new DLs at the institution. The following are some of the questions that educators may use to ask learners when collecting summative data:

- Learner background information: age, level in school, number of distance delivered courses taken prior to this one.
- List weaknesses of the course.
- List strengths of the course.
- If you were teaching the course, what would you do differently?
- What would you recommend to a friend planning to take this course?
- What did you think would be covered in this course but was not?
- Would you recommend this course to a friend? Why or why not?

Within the context of formative and summative evaluation, data can be collected through quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative evaluation involves asking questions which can be statistically tabulated and analysed, frequently using a scale, check list, or yes/no responses. Qualitative evaluation is typically more subjective and involves gathering a wider range and depth of information and allows for learner output of topics.

Increasing Learner Autonomy

The success of the future of distance learning in UUM will inevitably depend on the success of the institution in inculcating *independence* and *self-directed learning* among its DLs community. This study shows that there is a persisting need for a reorientation in HE towards a new direction in learning. This direction is to increase more student autonomy and self-directed learners.

However to reorientate HE in this direction can pose a tremendous challenge, and to increase student autonomy is yet another challenge. This is a concept foreign to many education providers in Malaysia, a redefinition of roles from a transmitter and controller of instruction to that of facilitation and resources persons to self directed and autonomous learners.

Generally, DE providers around the world have embarked on this concept although the levels may differ. In Malaysia, although many of the DE institutions have tried introducing teaching approaches for the development of autonomy, there is still much to be done. The lack of autonomous skills and ability to carry out self directed learning is evident among the DLs in this study; more so among the Malay learners compared to the Chinese UUM DLs. The fact is, DLs still find problems in coping as self directed learners.

One of the lessons to be learned from this study is that distance learning calls for re-engineering of the approach in distance teaching and learning. Traditionally, campus learning has been characterised by dependency on instructors. At the end of the spectrum, DE provides minimal interactions between DLs and distance teachers. This is where autonomous skills and the ability to carry out self directed learning are most crucial. The lack of this and the feeling of isolation have been the main factors contributing to attrition and delay in the completion of their studies. In Malaysia the realisation is that, the main weaknesses of the present education system is that it contributes very little towards nurturing *self-directedness* and *independence*.

Autonomy must be made an approach to education. Here, UUM should rethink teaching approaches for the development of autonomy and provide students with opportunities to exercise significant degrees of decision making with respect to the content and organisation of courses. This is still very much lacking in conventional institutions, at least in Malaysia. Individual departments decide the practices in content and organisation of distance courses, with the distance teachers involved. The DLs just have to take on and learn what is offered. Therefore, in such a situation,

where students have no say in the content of the courses they are taking, they may not be learning what they want or need to learn.

Gibson et al. (1980) in defining what he called *practical autonomy,* said that in self education, the learner masters all the activities usually conducted by the teacher: selecting goals, selecting content, selecting and organising learning experiences, managing one's time and effort, evaluating progress and redesigning one's strategies for greater effect. In addition, self directed learners must have the initiative to launch these processes as well as the personal motivation to continue learning, even when there is no pressure, guidance, or extrinsic reward. This is what is greatly missing among some of DLs in this study. Some of the DLs need guidance and cannot carry out the processes themselves. In the call for increasing autonomy in distance learning at UUM, this study proposes that the institution needs to look and examine different models. Whichever education model UUM choose to employ, the ultimate aim should promote self-directedness and independence among the DLs community. This is particularly important in preparation for the country and the people of Malaysia to embark on the *life long learning* concept of educational engagement. The future of life long learning shows that learners must be self directed and autonomous and the mastery of skills for this can be done while they are in schools and HE. The importance of this mastery of skills cannot be underestimated because with it adults can pursue education to its highest level, and that HE should not be the domain of a privileged few.

HELP LEARNERS DEVELOP STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING

DE is currently a hugely diverse set of practices, encompassing provision that might not be much different from that of the eighties, to provision that is state of the art in terms of online and mobile technology applications (Hanley and Marshall, 2000, in Thorpe, 2003). Inequalities according to King (2003) between the *technological haves* and *have-nots* will only increase. Today's distance learning environment is

vastly different from when it was first introduced and implemented in Malaysia in the early 1970s. Change evolves so often, that too often DE providers and institutions ignore the contradictions between the components of the DE practices adopted for the institution. For example, King (2003) asserts that "...while we put considerable effort into student support systems, often our administrative arrangements were overwhelmingly response to institutional requirements rather than student needs and frequently disempowered those who relied on our support". If DLs are valued as 'the' most important clientele, equal focus must be placed on the learners and their needs. In doing so, one significant activity that must be pursued by a university like UUM is helping DLs to realise the different learning options and strategies in learning at a distance. This is particularly important because the dominant view, as outlined by Hung and Chen (2001), is that learning is about understanding and engagement by the learner in an active process of constructing meaning. The social context of learners has been recognised as crucial to the learning process (Thorpe, 2003). Under the best of circumstances, learners require motivation, planning, and the ability to analyse and apply the knowledge received. In a distance education setting, the process of learning is indeed complex.

As mentioned earlier on, DLs must overcome a number of challenges before learning takes place. Distance teachers, on the other hand, have, the moral duty of helping learners coping with these challenges and helping them to develop learning strategies and make the options clear to the learners. This includes *helping them to become responsible learners; know their own strengths and weaknesses; have confidence in their own ability; relate to others; clarify what is learned; redefine what legitimate knowledge is; and deal with content.* These challenges are considered in relation to distance education at UUM:

Becoming a responsible learner: High motivation is required to complete distance courses because the day-to-day contact with teachers and other students is typically lacking. Distance teachers can help motivate DLs by providing consistent and timely

feedback, encouraging discussion among students, being well prepared for class, and by encouraging and reinforcing effective student study habits.

Knowing own strengths and weaknesses: DLs need to recognise their strengths and limitations. They also need to understand their learning goals and objectives. The distance teacher can help DLs to explore their strengths/limitations and their learning goals/objectives by assuming a facilitative role in the learning process. Providing opportunities for learners to share their personal learning goals and objectives for a course helps to make learning more meaningful and increases motivation.

Have confidence in own ability: Coping with distance learning in the Malaysian educational context, has proved to be a difficult task for the learners; so different, that maintaining and sustaining the right confidence level and self-esteem may be difficult. The DLs are balancing many responsibilities, including employment and raising children. Often their involvement in DE is unknown to those they work with and ignored by family members. Their performance is enhanced if learners set aside time for their learning activities and if they receive family support in their academic endeavours. The distance teachers can maintain student self-esteem by providing timely feedback. It is critical for distance teachers to respond to the DLs' questions, assignments, and concerns in a personalised and pleasant manner, using appropriate technology such as fax, phone, or computer. Informative comments that elaborate on the individual learner's performance and suggest areas for improvement are especially helpful.

Relating to others. DLs often learn most effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with other learners. Interaction among learners typically leads to group problem solving. When they are unable to meet together, appropriate interactive technology such as E-mail should be provided to encourage small group and individual communication. Assignments in which the learners work together and then report back or present to the class as a whole, encourage learner-to-learner

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interaction. Ensure clear directions and realistic goals for group assignments (Burge, 1993).

Clarifying what is learned. DLs need to reflect on what they are learning. They need to examine the existing knowledge frameworks in their heads and how these are being added to or changed by incoming information. Examinations, papers, and class presentations provide opportunities for DLs and distance teachers to evaluate distance teaching and learning. However, less formal methods of evaluation will also help the learners and teacher to understand learning. For example, periodically during the course the distance teacher can ask DLs to write a brief reflection on what they have learned and then provide an opportunity for them to share their insights with other learners.

Redefining what legitimate knowledge is. Brundage, Keane, and Mackneson (1993) suggest that adult DLs may find it difficult to accept that their own experience and reflections are legitimate knowledge. If the distance teacher takes a facilitative rather than authoritative role, DLs will see their own experience as valuable and important to their further learning. Burge (1993) suggests having learners use first-person language to help them claim ownership of personal values, experiences, and insights.

Managing the content. Learning is enhanced when content is related to examples. Distance teachers tend to teach using examples that were used when they received their training. For distance learning to be effective, however, distance teachers must discover examples that are relevant to their DLs . Encourage learners to find or develop examples that are relevant to them or their community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGNING DISTANCE TEACHING AND LEARNER SUPPORT

In supporting the DLs to cope with distance learning, distance teachers must employ a variety of teaching strategies to accommodate the heterogeneous learners with differences in learning style preference, culture and background. In general, when trying to accommodate such a variety of learner characteristic in the instructional design, it is always best to design alternative activities to reach the same objective and give the DLs the option of selecting from these alternative activities which best meet their preferred learning styles.

In order to provide a viable educational environment for all DLs, it is important that distance teachers understand their own teaching styles, adjust their teaching styles to accommodate the diverse cultures and learning styles of their DLs and redesign their teaching approach and f2f meetings with flexibility and responsiveness. Distance teachers may also want to identify the learning styles of their diverse learners, match their teaching styles to the DLs learning culture and practices for difficult tasks. Distance teachers may also want to provide various tasks by employing diverse instructional approaches and allowing the learners, not only to learn from all their senses with the use of technology and multimedia but also to incorporate their working experience into their learning. With such flexibility, the distance teachers could meet the learning needs of all the DLs with multiple opportunities for learning.

Reflecting on the motivation of the learners in this study shows a strong preference for educational feedback from their respective distance teachers. This is particularly important to minimise the feeling of isolation and loss among the learners. The Malaysian DLs, particularly based on this case study, need a well-informed learning structure and continuous learner-teacher interaction. Distance teachers need to be mindful of providing frequent and adequate feedback to support the DLs. The rate or promptness of feedback is fundamentally important to encourage learning. In doing so, distance teachers need to respond to learners' questions and concerns, and returning tests and assignments as soon as they possibly can, with comments and

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indications of the learner's work. This helps the DLs ascertain their learning and progress in the course.

The learners although at different levels and having different priorities also showed a preference for collaborative activities and like to participate in class activities. It is particularly so among the Chinese DLs compared to the Malay DLs, who use a JIT approach to study group. There is much to be learned from how learners from one culture to the other learn. Building a learning network with a JIT or just do it (JDI) approach as practised by the Chinese learners, should be encouraged among the DLs, because such a learning strategy benefits learners in tackling the course. Group discussion allows the learners to discuss the lesson, the readings, and help them to prepare for tasks, assignments and examinations. Distance teachers can instil the importance of study groups and group activities by integrating such an approach as a requirement in the course. Slowly, but surely such integration would help build a *study group* learning culture among the DLs community at UUM.

DLs in this study also showed a preference for concrete over abstract and a preference for active experimentation, that is, a preference for an action-based, active approach to learning. Therefore teaching strategies should include those that allow DLs to plan and carry out projects that require the practical application of principles and theories to real life. Using the learners' life experience, and work experiences as the basis of course activities, tasks and assignments should be integrated in the course dynamics. This can help in making the course meaningful, and it may help the learners cope with other distance course demands. After all, the adult distance learner comes into distance learning with many experiences that needs to be explored. Unlike the full time campus based learners, who can be depicted as a empty barrel that needs filling with knowledge, the adult DLs are half filled barrels with experiences that potentially can help their learning.

It is clearly evident that *interactions* are critical for enhancing motivation, communication, and a diverse range of skills and intellectual development in the

distance educational process. However, the lack of proper integration between pedagogy, organisation and technology has often resulted in some distance courses being delivered as correspondence courses, with the consequence that such courses lack interactivity, immediacy and appropriate distance teachers' feedback. Such a phenomenon has led Garrison and Anderson (2003) to state "educators have not understood and capitalised on the blend of symbol systems, such as multimedia, text-based communication systems that create new modes of expression and communication" (p. 4). Again, this requires much reflection from the distance teachers, and administration on the pedagogical aspect of the course. Distance teachers need to respond to very basic questions of: *What works? What doesn't? How can the course be improved? What teaching strategy? And, What technology best use to accommodate the teaching and learning of the course?*

In conclusion, if DE is asking students 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 they 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 DLs in making this change and must themselves take account of this in their reassessment of teaching.

This is to suggest the need for a major project; the reassessment and reengineering of the educational process by both DLs and distance teachers and, indeed, by the university as a whole. This is not simply to introduce new technologies of communication but to 're-understand' the process of education at a distance.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Continued research on distance learning is clearly essential. While many avenues might be fruitfully explored in this study, several areas offer particular promise for research in distance learning. Two of the areas that need the most attention are: *learning support* and *the role of interactions* in DE. The literature on research into the complex phenomenon of learning support and interactivity, and interactions, is rather limited in scope due to the lack of theory to guide research projects (Anglin & Morrison, 2003).

The DE research challenge is to ensure that the learning support is sufficiently addressed in striving towards a better distance learning experience. DE providers and institutions in Malaysia need to understand that its educational products and services are to serve the learner and provide an encouraging distance educational experience. We must consciously and actively develop and maintain research approaches, which enable learners to have their voices heard, and for distance teachers and DE institutions itself to be able to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said. The DLs should never be perceived as the problem, but should be perceived and integrated as part of the solution. Such an approach and attitude, I think, will benefit all stakeholders in DE. I personally think that we need more qualitative research to understand the distance learning issues and concerns in the Malaysian context of DE to move forward in offering a better distance educational experience to all learners.

CONCLUSION

Teaching and learning at a distance at UUM is demanding. Efforts need to be made to ensure that learning is made more meaningful for DLs by ensuring that the learners and their distance teacher share responsibility for developing learning goals and objectives; actively interacting with class members; promoting reflection on experience; relating new information to examples that make sense to learners;

maintaining self-esteem; and evaluating what is being learned. This is the challenge and the opportunity provided by distance education.

'The teacher is always there but isn't...' is a fair conclusion to represent the DLs' frustrations. The lack of intimacy in learning interactions surfaced as a reality, a concern that in learners' views, strongly affected their learning. *Can distance educators eradicate or minimise the feelings of isolation that distance learners have?* – This, to me, is the fundamental question that needs attention to enable DLs learns at ease with better results.

Eliminating DLs' frustration is one of the main factors in improving learner success in distance learning courses. If the learners feel they are empowered and have close contact with the distance teacher, then their learning experience will be a good one. Interaction is another key factor, because feedback is critical to keeping students involved in the class. Encouraging students to interact with one another is also important.

One of the best lessons that DLs can take from distance learning courses is that learning can take place anywhere, and at any time. In order to help learners learn at a distance successfully bearing in mind the characteristics and the heterogeneity of the learners, inculcating and developing *self-directed learning* and *independence* will give them the basic lifeline in DE. They need to be given the empowerment to shy away from being dependent on the distance teachers for knowledge and information. The DLs need to re-learn the distance learning skills. The distance teachers, on the other hand, need to facilitate distance learning and be more attentive to the needs of the DLs in constructing and planning a distance course. Thinking *outside of the box* or moving from a *teacher centred* to a *learner centred approach* for the distance teachers, and from *dependence* to *independence,* for the DLs, is difficult at first, but it will provide both parties with new methods to teach and learn.

CHAPTER 12
LEAVING THE FIELD: COMMENTARY ON METHODOLOGY

As noted in an earlier chapter of this thesis, the quantitative research approach has been the dominant approach employed by Malaysian educational researchers. To date, little has been documented on qualitative research approaches in relation to educational issues and problems in the country (Lim, 1997; Ratnavadivel, 1995; Qualitative Research Convention, 2003).

This is particularly true of research on distance learning, and specifically with students' own experience of learning in Malaysia. The decision to use qualitative research approach for this study was pursued because a qualitative approach was deemed to be most appropriate for this study to understand the distance educational experience at UUM, but it was also intended to increase the awareness of Malaysian educational researchers of qualitative research and methodology and its potential. Its use in this research was intended to be innovative within the Malaysian educational context.

Based on my experience conducting this study, I believe that this study has succeeded in meeting its objectives of generating insights into *how, why, when, and where UUM* DLs tackle their studies in a particular way. The findings reported in this thesis provide a holistic understanding or conceptual framework for understanding student learning from the learners' perspective. The focus on student learning is descriptive and interpretative; however, analysing data obtained from interviews proved to be difficult, messy and laborious. It took endless hours of listening, transcribing, translating, back translating, reading, re-reading, listening again, analysing, categorising, re-categorising, analysing again,

and so on. This is not to mention the enormous amount of translation that was involved. In short, it was a cycle of processes that went back and forth. At the end of it all, it has been worthwhile, fulfilling and, as the researcher, I am now able to see the DLs' point of view about their distance learning experience at the institution.

METHODOLOGY CHOICE

This research has provided various challenges. I remember vividly, how at the initial phase of my research, I was constantly challenged and provoked by my colleagues at UUM for choosing a qualitative methodology for this research. They repeatedly said that it would have been easier to undertake a quantitative research rather than to engage in a qualitative case study design, testing out, interpreting, and understanding the perspectives of distance learning experiences. They repeatedly questioned me, '*Why qualitative?*' '*How are you going to present your findings?, 'Is it generalizable?*', and many more questions that only strengthened my motivation to undertake the study.

Naturally, when one performs 'something' that is new or unfamiliar, there is a lot to learn. This research has precisely been that- a learning opportunity right from when I first started the study in October 2000 till its completion. I am grateful for the comments and criticism received from my colleagues. The questions and concerns outlined by my colleagues at UUM only forced me to be critical in my research decisions, and made me more conscious of the research process and decisions that I needed to make along the way.

Being an educational researcher with a different research background and practice, it is ironic that at the end of this study I now believe and am convinced that for this study, numbers, figures or percentages would not have helped to enrich my understanding of distance learning at the institution. Qualitative case

study, on the contrary, has helped me to attain a 'thick' description of distance learning and to achieve the research objectives. As I progressed into the research, I became more convinced that I needed to play with words and not numbers to help me understand what learning was to the students. It takes more than numbers to understand and to address the *how, why, when* and *where* students at UUM tackle their studies in particular ways.

METHODOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

The employment of qualitative methodology in this research does not mean that this research was intended to polarise *qualitative* versus *quantitative* research methods. Rather it was to the contrary. Although Morgan (1990) states that there can be factors within an organisation in DE which lead to what has been labelled an 'hegemony of survey method', this is not to claim superiority for one or the other method. The position set out by Saljo (1988: 35) provides a useful statement of a 'position' for this study on student learning:

> ...there is no necessary conflict between qualitative and quantitative approaches for generating and analysing data. ...Given the conception of learning outlined-it is evident that the family of methods conventionally referred to as qualitative is of primary importance. A thorough understanding of what learning means in concrete terms in various settings presupposes a detailed analysis of how students deal with the tasks they are presented...In saying this we are trying to establish another fundamental assumption behind the research into everyday human learning... Access to the learner's perspective on the activities of teaching and learning is essential for understanding educational phenomena...and for improving education.

The emphasis throughout this thesis has been on understanding 'distance learning' from the learner's perspective. Although individual, f2f interviews have been the most widely adopted method, other approaches, such as student diaries and photographs, were of value and seem to have considerable potential in DE research.

A key feature of all qualitative analysis is intense immersion in the data, looking for patterns and themes, similarities and differences between individual informants. Analysis and interpretation continued side by side with the data collection conducted within the northern region of the country. As grounded theory recommends, preliminary interpretations and insights were constantly documented through 'memoing' to myself as the research proceeded. Although I found it difficult doing the interpretation and analysis of qualitative research, particularly to specify in detail, I tried to write important notes on any research issues from the interviews as soon as each interview session was completed, as far as I could. Making such notes as soon as possible was important to capture the issues when they were 'fresh'. Time was always a constraint, and managing it for the benefit of this study and the fieldwork was constantly a challenge.

There were many instances throughout the fieldwork when I felt fortunate to have been doing a lot of reading of different books on analysing qualitative data. That helped, and where relevant I tried to apply it to my own research experience. I think that it is so easy for a qualitative researcher to get lost in direction, and in the data itself, because qualitative data can be messy and massive. Thus having knowledge, and theories, about what works, and what may not work in qualitative research and analysis is important.

Marton (1988), for instance, documents the style and approach of a phenomenographic analysis of interview data, where there is access to complete transcripts. The first step is a selection process to identify what are the relevant sections of the transcripts. It continues as follows:

> The selected quotes make up the data pool, which forms the basis for the next crucial step in the analysis. The researcher's attention is now shifted from the individual subjects (i.e. from the interview from which the quotes were abstracted) to the meaning embedded in the quotes themselves. The boundaries separating individuals are abandoned and interest is focused on the 'pool of meaning' discovered in the data. Thus each quote has two contexts in relation to which it has been interpreted: first, the interview

from which it was taken, and second, the 'pool of meanings' to which it belongs. The interaction is an interactive procedure, which reverberates between these two contexts... In concrete terms, the process looks like this: quotes are sorted into piles, borderline cases are examined, and eventually the criterion attributes for each group are made explicit. In this way, the groups of quotes are arranged and rearranged, are narrowed into categories, and finally are defined in terms of the core meanings, on the one hand, and borderline cases on the other. Each category is illustrated by quote from the data.   (Marton,1988:154)

By means of this procedure, categories are generated from the data. This form of detailed qualitative analysis was time consuming, but it has been adopted particularly to help this study attain a 'thick' description of distance learning.

The intensive reading and re-reading of interview transcripts was a crucial stage of uncovering what seem to be the 'significant points', or the 'essences' of what UUM DLs were saying about their distance learning experiences. The interpretation process was a 'dialectic' of maintaining a holistic perspective of individual informants and, at the same time, searching for overarching themes, issues and categories. Similarly, in the reporting of this research, I saw a need to retain a balance of abstract description of the emerging issues, and at the same time presenting the richness of the individual student's experience.

THE USE OF CASE STUDY: REVISITED

The most profound impact in my undertaking of this research that I can take back to Malaysia is the use of *qualitative case study* as the research methodology, though it is not very popular, in Malaysia. Although case study is hardly a 'technique' in its proper sense, it is typical of many qualitative researches. Although this has been discussed in an earlier chapter of this dissertation, it merits further discussion in the light of the evidence I have reported.

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The Choice of Case

The choice of the *case* is by purposeful selection and not by sampling. Often, cases are outstanding in their own right (Yin, 1984; 1994). The general principle is to have the subjective type of case in mind before the identification of the case. This is very different from the case of sampling where subjective selection is avoided as much as possible.

At the beginning of the research, little was known about the case- *distance learning at UUM*. The case in this study was selected by simple intuition. I decided to focus on this single case on a very unscientific ground: the UUM DE programme best fitted my picture of a 'dual system institution' providing both the conventional campus based education and DE. Such intuitions were inevitable because I was faced with the basic contradiction: if I did not know about what went on within the distance learning experience and environment at UUM, how would I know where to begin?

SINGLE VERSUS MULTIPLE CASE STUDY AND GENERALISATION

Cases are chosen for a reason, not for quantity. To think that two cases are better than one, is a misunderstanding (Yin, 1984). In other words, if only for the same reason, double 'depth' in a case is far more valuable than study of two cases, both of moderate depth.

Yin insists that multiple case study should limit itself to replication rather than sampling logic (Yin, 1984). This means that multiple case studies are not to calculate tendency or frequency, but rather, to compare and contrast. Because of the comparing and contrasting nature, multiple case study is usually less ethnographic in nature. A single case study potentially is able to provide the 'thick' description of the phenomenon or issue looked at. It is in this belief that I

decided to focus on distance learning at UUM, and not at other or multiple DE institutions and providers in the country.

Can Case Study Be Generalised?

Very often, researchers of qualitative case study are confronted by this question and this study was no exception. Contrary to what was said by colleagues and other Malaysian academicians, the case study approach in my study enables readers to have a deep understanding of the reality of distance learning from the students' own voices and experiences. Such a deep understanding, in turn, enables readers to understand much about what will never be understood by other research strategies about distance learning.

Many discussions of generalisability implicitly assume that theories are only built upon statistical inference. There is a tendency to forget that statistics are but one instrument to assist researchers to arrive at theories. Insightful findings from a case study constitute a theory in their own right, whether or not it is further developed to a theory about more cases. This is true of Piaget's theory of development psychology, which is based on only one case. Piaget's study of his child led the establishment of his entire school of thought about developmental psychology. This is also true of Graham Allison's multiple perspectives about decision making, which came out of study of one case (Allison, 1971). This is again true with, for example, Phillip Foster's theory of 'Vocational education fallacy', which was based only on his knowledge of Ghana.

Case study findings are rarely generalisable to a population or to other persons, times, or settings than those directly studied. However, it may be recognised that qualitative research *'adds'* something to statistical research. This *'something'* may be the meanings, the feelings, and the sense of the lived that cannot be measured

and thus drawn into statistical manipulation. Often this *'something'* is characterised as *'depth'* in contrast to the *'breadth'* or the coverage that a quantitative project design supposedly delivers (see Schostak, 2002).

Limited generalisability is the consequence paid for the intensity of the case study method. In qualitative research, there are two aspects of generalisability: *internal generalisability* within the community, group, or institution studied to persons, events, and settings that were not directly observed or interviewed: and *external generalisability* which refers to other communities, groups, or institutions. Internal generalisability is far more important for qualitative case studies, because qualitative researchers rarely make explicit claims about their external generalisability of their accounts (see Maxwell, 1992). Understanding the learners and how they go about learning is what mattered most to this research, and such information then could be related to other DLs at the institution. Such understanding then could help UUM to understand its DE programmes, courses, and its most valued clients, - the DLs, and then, perhaps to improve the distance educational experience.

SHOULD GENERALISATION BE AN ISSUE FOR CASE STUDY?

The issue therefore remains as to the extent to which case study can or should address the issue of generalisation. Different scholars (Stake, 1978; Hamilton, 1980, Polanyi, 1958 and Dilthey,1976) and researchers provide a strong case for rejecting the traditions of generalisability that are associated with the natural sciences. Many of them argue that traditional ways of thinking about generalisability are inadequate.

Lincoln & Guba (1985, p. 290) talk about *transferability,* by which they mean whether knowledge gained from one context is relevant to or applicable for other

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contexts, or the same context in another time frame. Transferability assumes a role similar to generalisation. Any transferability is the responsibility of the reader who seeks to make the application of theory elsewhere, and of the original researcher.

Case study can provide *vicarious experiences* that other approaches cannot. It offers an opportunity to experience vicariously, unique individuals within our own or another culture. Research on students' learning in this study permits readers to experience vicariously students undergoing the distance learning experience, which I have communicated as a narrative portrayal. This is done because Schostak (2002) states that generalisation is produced by the way in which we agree to use language in order to map our world, co-ordinate our behaviour towards each other and to the objects of the world and to account for our actions to each other within it (p. 83).

Nevertheless, this is not to say that the use of case study is always justified. Yin identifies three situations which justify the use of case studies: a critical case to confirm, challenge or extend a well formulated theory; an extreme or unique case which is so rare that it has value of its own; and a revelatory case, which presents an opportunity to reveal what is otherwise inaccessible for researchers (Yin,1984:42-43).

The use of single cases like this research is almost a general approach in human learning. Medical students trained at Universiti Sains Malaysia or any medical school in this world, for example, understand human bodies by dissecting only one body, or at most a few. A new driver learning to drive often does so in one particular car, and he or she can then drive any car. The driving principles, the law and regulations that govern safe driving are standard. One's learning on one car allows him or her to transfer the knowledge to drive other cars like Toyota,

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Mercedes, Landrover, Datsun, and others, but would not provide any knowledge of variations over different cars. On that account, the single case study adopted in this study allowed me to understand fully the internal relations within the complexity of distance learning reality, and such understanding allows the readers to generalise to other cases, but not in the statistical sense of knowing the pattern across the population.

OTHER THOUGHTS ON GENERALISATION

In general, there have been many attempts made to provide 'alternative' or solutions (partly or as a whole) to the intricate issue of generalisation. Stake's (1978) concept of *'naturalistic generalisation'* and Hamilton's (1980) notion of a *'science of singular'* referring to evaluation research; and drawing heavily on Polanyi's (1958) notion of *'personalised'* were among plausible alternatives available. Nevertheless, Michael Bassey's *fuzzy generalisation* is one that caught my attention the most.

I remember vividly that just reading the title had me troubled with the word *fuzzy*. *'Fuzzy*! Fuzzy generalisation, what on earth does that entail?' Bassey just did not stop at X may influence Y, but went further to develop what he called *a best estimate of trustworthiness* (BET) to help estimate the likelihood of the influence.

Is it always true that ' do X in Y circumstances, and Z may be the case' is always an effect? Not always! I question Basseys' thinking on three accounts, *vagueness*, the *choice of ways* to help educational practice, policy and theory, and *contradiction* on the use of BET. I think in many ways, Bassey is trying to encourage increased attention to generalisations, universals, and away from the particulars of what was actually observed. Bassey suggests that as researchers we are longing to produce predictions; this is an idea that I find difficult to accept. I

feel that prediction is never my business and desire in pursuing a research on distance learning. Personally, from this study for example, I cannot even predict what will happen to UUM distance learning programmes and courses. However, based on the evidence, I can present the findings and negotiate for changes based on the students' voices and experiences on distance learning.

And, in relation to BET, researchers particularly qualitative researchers doing case study projects, do not always think about who is going to use the research findings and how useful they may be to them, but rather we are more immersed in understanding the case, and answering the *Who, What, How , When* and *Where* questions, and not so much on how the findings of *X* can be used by *W*.

The important aspect here is the function of research and the role of the researcher and practitioner within it. From the point of view of the researcher, the aim of the research is to analyse a situation in order to understand it better and then to disseminate this new understanding in order that others might share in it. From the view of the practitioner, however, the aim of the research is to make use of the fresh insight in effecting change in his or her own context. Note that, in the first of these, the aim is the formulation of understanding, whilst in the latter, the aim is the utilisation of understanding. If research merely aims to describe a studied case, then an analysis of what happened to the practitioner suffices. However, if it aims to offer the opportunity for practitioners to change their practice as a result of understanding the studied case, then it seems sensible for the research to present the analysis in a form that emphasises the action that may be taken to facilitate that change. Indeed, this is what Bassey (1999:p.52) proposes:

> *A fuzzy generalisation carries an element of uncertainty. It reports that something has happened in one place and that it may also happen elsewhere. There is a possibility but no surety. There is an invitation to 'try it and see if the same thing happens for you.'*

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This study, however, suggests that Bassey's idea lacks the motivational component to empower the readers. In any research, the invitation 'to try' is not always made explicitly and implicitly to readers. Rather, realisation of what can or cannot be used, or whether doing X, will lead to Z are very circumstantial. At the end of the day, a particular research may not be at all beneficial to a reader, because the research and its findings are just not relevant and share no similar circumstances. It is all a matter of 'relevance' of one study to what a reader thinks to be beneficial, replicable, and may help to improve their institution. If that is the case, then why do we-researchers not allow the readers to make generalisations-specifically external generalisations? Why not give the readers the power to generalise? Why not empower the readers?

Research, cannot easily impose change on others. It may help to suggest or negotiate for improvements within the research setting. This research on distance learning at UUM, for example, helps the institution to listen to the learners' voice and experience on the distance learning programme. Such understanding in turn may help UUM to look at issues surfaced and make necessary changes to improve the educational experience of distance learners at UUM. However, it is important to note that the findings of this research may or may not be relevant to other DE providers and institutions in Malaysia. Some of the findings in this study may be generalisable internally within UUM, but not externally to DLs and distance learning at other DE institutions. I believe the power of extending the *internal* to *external* generalisation should be not a primary concern of any research. Rather, such power belongs to the readers. They know best which research and findings are relevant or not relevant, usable or not applicable to them. It is, then, only natural to allow them (the readers) to make generalisations based on the simple premise of '*relatability*':

If X produces Y, and if Y is related to Z, doing Y it may change Z

The key concept here is the word 'related'. Relatedness is a prerequisite for any generalisations to take place. Understanding the concept, and most important of

all, understanding the semantic of the word *related* only does one thing - It allows the reader to ask the basic questions of: *Is this research and its findings related to his or her interest?, Circumstances?, Institutions?, and Is it applicable, transferable?* These basic questions ultimately will help the reader to benefit or discard it as being not related and applicable to them.

THE CONCEPT OF RELATABILITY

This concept of *relatability* evolved in my attempt to steer away from science, to steer away from generalisation altogether. Rather than making generalisations based on the findings surfaced in this study, why not leave the act of making the generalisation to the readers or other DE researchers? If the findings are related to a particular organisation, setting or circumstances say 'Y', then the findings surfaced 'may be related to Y', the reader, other researcher(s) may then apply the findings to their situation.

As the researcher, my primary task is to do the research well by describing the DLs, places, and happenings of the research in sufficient detail so that the readers can reason or intuit the applicability of the vicarious UUM distance learning experience to their own circumstances.

The concept of *relatability* entails the degree of relatedness on whether knowledge gained from one context is relevant to or applicable for other contexts, or the same context in another time frame. It assumes a role similar to generalisation. The act of making generalisation is the responsibility of the reader who seeks to make the application of theory elsewhere, and of the original researcher to his or her own institution.

INTEGRITY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Another issue that merits some discussion in this final chapter of this thesis is the issue of the integrity or trustworthiness of the research findings. Qualitative research often enjoys high validity but suffers low reliability. The high validity is achieved because the research methods and analysis is most sensitive to valid data. Low reliability is due to the fact that the research like this one relies almost entirely on the researcher.

The *reliability-validity* dilemma is perhaps not unique to qualitative research. A questionnaire study may have high reliability because it involves little subjective element on the part of the researcher, and is independent of the researcher. However, it may suffer low validity because we are not sure if the questions are well understood. We are not even sure if we have asked the right questions. This is constantly emphasised by Nigel Norris (CARE Thursday seminar 5/06/03).

Asking students about their distance learning experiences can be controversial. I need to beware of its implications. There is an issue of validity and credibility of students' information. Within the last few years, the issue of validity in qualitative research has come to the fore (Kvale, 1989, cited from Maxwell, 1992, p. 279). The question of reliability and validity then arose. Validity often refers to the relationship between the account and something external to it – that is, the phenomenon that the account is *'about'*. Validity, in a broad sense, pertains to this relationship between the account and something outside of that account, whether this something is construed as objective reality, the constructions of actors, or a variety of other possible interpretations (see Maxwell, 1992). Reliability refers to the stability of findings, whereas validity represents the truthfulness of findings (see Altheide & Johnson, 1994). The basic question addressed by the notion of *'trustworthiness'* (reliability and validity), according to Lincoln and Guba, is simple: *"How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?"* (1985, p. 290). When

judging qualitative work, Strauss and Corbin (1990) believe that the *"usual canons of 'good science'...require redefinition in order to fit the realities of qualitative research"* (p. 250).

Validity may be seen as primarily a property of accounts, not the interpretations of data, or methods, which are relative to purpose and circumstances. Hammersley & Atkinson (1983, p. 191) state that 'data in themselves cannot be valid or invalid; what is at issue are the inferences drawn from them.' Validity is an issue of the account, not of method. Maxwell (1992, p. 284-285) have identified an alternative set of criteria to those typically employed to judge quantitative work. Since the criteria used to determine validity in quantitative research are not applicable to qualitative research, Maxwell (op cit.) use the five broad categories of understanding that are relevant to qualitative research: *descriptive; interpretive; theoretical; generalisability and evaluative validity.*

Descriptive validity is concerned with the factual accuracy of one's account. In this study, this refers to the accuracy of the 'reality' of students' learning at UUM. It is assessed by determining whether the description developed through inquiry *'rings true'* for those persons who are the members of the institution (see Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 30).

Interpretive validity is closely linked to descriptive validity and involves the portrayal of research that reflects the meanings and experiences that are lived and perceived by the research informants (see Sandelowski, 1986). For Maxwell (1992), interpretive validity is inherently a matter of inference from the words and actions of informants in the situation studied. The construction of accounts of these informants' meanings is usually based to a large extent on the informants' own accounts, but it is essential not to treat these latter accounts as adamant; informants may be unaware of their own feelings or views, may recall these inaccurately, and may consciously or unconsciously distort or conceal their views.

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Evaluative validity is not as important to qualitative research as are descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity. But as for Maxwell (1992) evaluative validity and evaluative understanding in qualitative research do not seem to be intrinsically different from those in any other approach to research. These are four issues of validity threats that I believe are relevant to this qualitative study. Overall attention to validity threats of distortion, bias, and inadequate portrayal of the informants or phenomenon have been addressed, ultimately contributing to quality in qualitative research.

ACCURACY OF THE LEARNERS' ACCOUNT

In conducting this research, one of the greatest concerns was the 'accuracy' of the account portrayed in the study. How well had I described and portrayed these people? Was the dialogue believable? Did the informants really make those statements or did I mishear, misremember or mistranscribe the DLs' statements? Do the results of the research reflect the experience of the learners or the context in a believable way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)? Does the explanation fit the description (Janesick, 1994)?

Such worries have encouraged me to maintain communication with the learners even at a distance. Where possible, email communication was constantly used, and alternatively phone conversations were used to sustain the researcher-informant relationship. This, I think, is important for this study.

Back Translating

In order to maximise the validity of the accounts, various strategies were put into practice. As I have chosen to write the thesis in a narrative manner, describing distance learning experience at UUM, the language and its semantics have been an

important aspect of the writing. This is particularly important because two languages are involved: Bahasa Malaysia and English; and having to translate the data from Bahasa Malaysia to English could be problematic. My concern was with the semantics: *Am I using the correct English words to describe the learning experiences of the learners?* As DLs are individuals or a group of interacting being, this continued to be a concern.

Although *back translation* was not a new method, it was however developed more for the purpose of quantitative research, batteries, and tests. Brislin (1970, 1980); Brislin, Lonner and Thorndike (1973); and Chapman & Carter (1979) for example propose that back translation be used to obtain an equivalent fair battery for verifying the translation of a questionnaire or test.

Understanding its purpose, and believing its strength, I adopted the idea but used it for a different purpose than that for which it was formerly used by Brislin, Brislin et al. and Chapman & Carter. Expanding this idea, I used it to help me verify the translated version of the data with the original transcripts of the data. The logic I used was simple. If the back translation version is similar to or almost the same in semantics, than I know that I have done a fairly good job in the translation of the data from BM to English. In pursuing the back translation, I have asked favours from two of my colleagues at UUM to perform the back translation on my behalf on the chosen translation versions, which were sent to them through email attachments. It was quite a lengthy process, time and energy consuming to get other people to be involved and to wait for the outcome of the back translation exercise. Nevertheless, the exercise is deemed to be an important one in verifying the data, especially in reassuring myself that I have done a good job in the translation. Back translation, I think, is a good method to check whether the meaning or the semantic has been preserved.

Learners' Validation of the Transcripts

Another strategy that was used is to pass the original transcripts back to the research informants. Some of these activities were accomplished during my stay in Malaysia, but some had to be posted to the learners from UK. Those cases were then followed by phone calls to confirm that the participants had received the transcripts. I asked them to look at and then read the transcripts. Next I asked them if there was anything that they would like to add, amend, omit or elaborate on. This would give them a sense of control of the data, and the feeling of 'togetherness' in the research. As Weithorn and Scherer (1994, p. 136) suggest, 'involving children (students) in decision making is a statement of respect and be seen as a useful experience, giving children (students) a sense of control over their own individuality, autonomy and privacy'. This assertion was very encouraging and it shows that I was on the right track, but as a new qualitative researcher I continuously wondered if I was doing the research 'right'.

Follows up calls were pursued to check whether the learners understood the transcripts. Naturally, some of the DLs used this opportunity to make some modification or clarify misconceptions in the transcripts. Some did it through email, others conveyed the changes through phone conversations when I called them. Description then, is an aspect of validity to establish confidence in an accurate interpretation of the meaning of the data.

Accounts of DLs' meanings are never a matter of direct access, but are always constructed by the researcher on the basis of informants' accounts and other evidence (see Maxwell, op cit.). Therefore, an attempt to remain true to the phenomenon under study is essential (see Hammersley, 1992). Who should confirm the accounts; the informants, the researcher, or an outside expert? Has a representation of the *emic* perspective been accurately portrayed and at the same time accounted for the investigator's (researcher) perspectives? Thorne (1997b) identified the need for assurance that interpretations are trustworthy and reveal

some truth external to the investigators' experience. To tackle these issues, the DLs themselves would provide the best evaluators and interpreters, but they needed to have a legitimated voice. This involved taking account of the students' perspectives, and indeed putting them at the centre of the analysis (see Mayall, 1994).

FURTHER STRATEGIES TO ESTABLISH VALIDITY

The major strategy for establishing validity in this study is *triangulation*. Schostak (2002) explains that triangulation acts as a process of co-ordinating the attention of individuals to produce a *'shared reality'*, that is an objective field where one subject instructs another subject how to 'see', how to reach, how to organise their actions in relation to the *'object'*. Another function according to Schostak (ibid.) is to provide a means of *'cross-checking'*, or the process of using more than one source to confirm information (Krathwohl, 1993). Triangulation is a concept borrowed from surveying, when the height of an inaccessible point can be determined by viewing from two points on the ground. Used in the context of qualitative research, triangulation may mean 1) checking out the consistency of findings obtained by different methods of data collection, 2) checking out the consistency of data obtained from different sources using the same method; 3) using more than one researcher to review findings; 4) using different perspectives to interpret the data.

During the fieldwork, statements from one learner were crosschecked with another learner to get varying perspectives on it. The type of triangulation that I used was *'methods triangulation'* (see Patton, 1990) or *'methodological triangulation'* (see Denzin, 1978). This is the use of several data sources and data collection methods to ensure the validity of the data.

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Method triangulation is described by Krathwohl (1993) as using multiple or different techniques to evaluate similar data. I sought to triangulate the data by including semi-structured interviews, casual conversations with students, and persistent observations made in the study. Around a year later, when I received the students' diaries and photographs, I compared the latter data with the interviews, casual conversations, and data records from all research methods used in this study.

The opportunity to compare data with a cross section of individual learners allowed for a more accurate assessment of the data that acquired. I continuously looked for the quality that Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified as 'inter-subject agreement'. I checked the interview responses about relationships with the different DLs, and then observed formal situations such as interactions and observe whether the interview information was consistent with actual experiences. I then compared the information received in the interviews, and cross-referenced the formal and informal interviews, as well as with the interviewees.

Member Checks

Other techniques employed in addressing the issue of validity included making segments of the raw data available for others to analyse, and the use of *'member checks,'* in which informants are asked to corroborate findings (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 313– 316). As much as possible, before coming back to UK, during the fieldwork, I conducted a member check by visiting other DLs who were not involved in this study and reading the narrative account of other learners to them. I then asked them the following questions: *Was this a realistic story that could have happened with you being a learner? Do they know any other students like these? What changes would you make to the story?* The students discussed the

narrative account with me and provided a 'member check' of these collections of narrative accounts. Some of the students made some recommendations related to the details, but thought the described characters and events depicted the 'reality'. As I 'fleshed out' more narrative that needed to be told, and conducted member checks, new questions emerged and I returned to the research informants for more interviews. These interviews added depth to my understanding of these students and helped me see some things I had overlooked in my earlier interviews. The purpose of these member checks was to check my interpretations of the data, not the actual text of the interviews and conversations with students. As I got back to UK, and during the analysis and even during the writing of the thesis, I conducted many more of such activities through email and phone conversations, which I found beneficial most of the time.

Peer debriefing

I also ensured that I incorporated *'peer debriefing* into my research process. In doing so, I was fortunate to have quite a few of former DTs and distance administrators at UUM in UK doing their post graduate studies. This opportunity was used to debrief them on the findings of this study. In addition, over the last two years, I had many different visits of the institution administrators and staff to the UK for various reasons, and where possible, I talked about my study and some of its findings, which provided an opportunity for them to ask questions, challenge my conclusions and provide alternative explanations or interpretations. I was also interested to see if the narrative account had communicated the themes that I intended to communicate. I gave some of the narrative accounts to my Malaysian DE colleagues in UK and asked them to read it and provide some criticism. I asked them: *Can you put real faces to these characters? What themes do you think I am trying to communicate or introduce in this narrative? Do you have*

changes to suggest? Their collective responses indicated that the story had communicated the themes and issues surfaced in this study.

Researcher's Reflective Journal

I kept a reflective journal as a base of information about methodological decisions and the reason why those decisions were made. The reflective journal supports both the validity and the reliability of this study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a reflexive journal is a kind of diary in which the researcher on a regular basis records information about him or herself. The journal provides information about my schedules and logistics, insights, and reasons for methodological decisions (see Erlandson et al., 1993). Keeping such a journal provided this study with a record that would be analysed to conclude the relationship of the fieldwork experience to emerging themes. It was also used as a tool to vent frustrations, anxieties and emotions that might have clouded the research.

POST-ANALYSIS ACTIVITIES

After being back in UK for almost a year and completing the analyses of the students' data, I was eager to fly back to Malaysia, to meet not only with my informants in order to share with them the 'story' portraying the characters in the research, but also other DLs who were not involved in this study, to see what they made of the data that I had collected. I was planning to do so in conjunction with the 21st ICDE conference on ODL in Hong Kong scheduled to be in early June 2003. However, the SARS disease, and the advice given by World Health Organisation (WHO) led to the 21st ICDE conference being postponed till Febuary, 2004, and this was a setback to my plans. My concern was getting the students' interpretation of the data, and how to do it. I just could not wait for

SARS to be resolved to be back in Malaysia. I decided then to continue to communicate through email and telephone to get the responses I so desired particularly to continue getting the students' interpretation of the data. Though this method incurred extra expense, it provided me with the learners' interpretation that I needed.

I was also curious to see how distance teachers at UUM interpreted this story. I sent email attachments to several distance teachers whom I knew as colleagues and who had not participated in my study, asking them to read it. After they had read the narratives, I asked them if these situations reflected the 'reality' of distance learning at UUM, and what were their thoughts on it?

I read John Van Maanen's writing on ethnography, suggested by Prof. Nigel Noris when I attended his talk on 'writing-up' in a postgraduate seminar (on CARE Thursday Seminar, 31/10/2002,). While reading his chapter on fieldwork, culture and ethnography, I felt a new-found competence and freedom to further progress into my work:

> A culture is expressed (or constituted) only by the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted by, not given to, a fieldworker. To portray culture requires the fieldworker to hear, to see, and most important for our purposes, to write of what was presumably witnessed and understood during a stay in the field. Culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation. This is what makes the study of culture so sticky.   (Van Maanen, 1988: 3)

I thought that this was pertinent to my study, in that I was looking at very diverse group of learners who are unique and different and represent the two major cultural group of Malaysian learners: Chinese and Malays. Van Maanen's writing assured me the best I could do would be to take what I observed and heard from these students and present it in a way that was 'true' to my own understanding, realising all along the way that I was writing these tales for anyone who would read this thesis - my supervisor, the internal and external examiner. That is not to

minimise the seriousness with which I would take this responsibility. I found great assurance from Van Maanen that my approach was legitimate, and most of my fears were unfounded. I was learning that there were different methods of representation, but that a study like this could not be reduced to a single method. I was discovering that fieldwork, analysis, and writing were not the neat, tidy, and discrete activities that I had thought them to be. They never will be, for me or for many other qualitative researchers.

The infinitely differing interpretations, assumptions, and knowledge background that I may have brought to, or developed during the study of DLs at UUM could potentially influence the account or the research process. An inquiry is judged in terms of the degree to which its findings are the product of the focus of its inquiry and not of the biases of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). The subjectivity of the researcher as a person who may interpret data uniquely requires a devout attention to the validity of accounts. The question therefore becomes not one of the indifference to the phenomenon under investigation, but of assuring that the account is valid and grounded in data. Each phase of this study had to be self-critical, examine biases, and seek integrity.

CONCLUSION

Research in student learning in DE generates unique insights into how and why students tackle their studies. Distance learning and qualitative research share the mutual goals of dealing with subjectivity, describing the complexity of lived experience, and appreciating realities where holism and intuition are valued. Qualitative methodology is, therefore, conducive to research that attempts to understand such human experiences as learning at a distance. Yin (1989), in discussing the case-study approach, stated that "the case study allows an

investigator to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events..." (p. 14). This description covers the potential range of ways in which the case study approach might be used in researching distance learning or other educational problems and phenomenon. I strongly believe that when the aims of research are understanding, extension of experience, and increase in conviction on what is known, the qualitative study is by far the better choice for research in distance learning and may prove to produce the strongest data (Merriam, 1988).

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APPENDIX A
EDUCATIONAL REFORMS AT A GLANCE

LEGISLATIVE REFORMS ON EDUCATION
- Education Act 1966
- Private Higher Educational Institutions Act, 1996
- National Council on Higher Education Institution Act, 1996
- National Accreditation Board Act, 1996
- Universities and University Colleges (Amendment) Act, 1996
- National Higher Education Fund Board Act. 1997

TOWARDS A TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY
- Promoting Computer Literacy at all levels
- Upgrading the vocational schools to technical schools
- Initiating the development of electronic resource centers
- Access to Internet and multimedia capabilities
- Development of Smart Schools
- Introducing computer aided learning in the Malay language, English language, Mathematics and Science
- Emphasis on Science and Technology courses

ENRICHING AND DIVERSIFYING THE CURRICULUM
- Introduction of Science in primary schools
- Teaching values across the curriculum
- Integrative creative and critical thinking skills
- Promoting multilingualism
- Revamping the school curriculum to incorporate the Smart School concept
- Reviewing the technical education curriculum
- Fostering life long learning
- Adopting flexible time tables

HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS
- Establishment of private universities
- Promoting branch campuses of foreign universities
- Promoting twinning programmes
- Increasing capacity of universities
- Introducing new science and technology courses
- Corporatisation of universities
- Establishing centers for education excellence
- Promoting distance education
- Greater private sector participation

TEACHER EDUCATION
- Upgrading teacher qualification
- Opportunities for professional development through in-service courses locally or abroad
- Introduction of computer literacy
- Setting up a Teachers' University – Sultan Idris Teachers University

ORGANISATIONAL CHANGES
- Restructuring educational administration
- Introducing pre-school as part of the national education system
- Universal education from 9 to 11 years
- Introducing ISO 9000 in schools, Total Quality Management
- Completion of primary schooling between 5 to 7 years (PTS)
- Develop an Educational Management Information System (EMIS)
- Establishing the Ministry of Education Intranet (KPMNET)

"To develop a world class quality education system which will realize the full potential of the individual and fulfill the aspiration of the Malaysian nation"

(Source: Ministry of Education, 1997, p:46-47)

APPENDIX B

Age

PRIMARY

| 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
| 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |

LOWER SECONDARY

| 12 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| | 13 | 14 | 15 |

UPPER SECONDARY

| 15 | 16 |
| 16 | 17 |

FORM SIX

| 17 | 18 |
| 18 | 19 |

HIGHER EDUCATION

| 19 |
| 20 | and above |

NATIONAL SCHOOL
1 2 3 4 5 6

NATIONAL TYPE CHINESE SCHOOL
1 2 3 4 5 6

NATIONAL TYPE TAMIL SCHOOL
1 2 3 4 5 6

P

I II III

IV V — TECHNICAL

IV V — ACADEMIC

IV V — VOCATIONAL

VI VI — MATRICULATION/ OVERSEAS UNIVERSITIES — ACADEMIC

COLLEGE/ POLYTECHNIC WORKFORCE

Legend:
- (P) Remove Class
- ⊕ Lower Certificate of Education
- ◯ Malaysian Certificate of Education
- ▨ Malaysian Vocational Education Certificate
- ⊕ Malaysian Higher School Certificate

APPENDIX C

ADVERTISEMENT: CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

ANNOUNCEMENT

This is to announce that a researcher is presently doing his PhD research at University of East Anglia, United Kingdom on 'Students' perspective and experience on distance learning at Universiti Utara Malaysia', and is looking for UUM PJJ distance learners to get involved in the research.

LOOKING FOR:
Registered distance learners in BPM and BBA PJJ programmes
Any semesters
Male and female learners
Any culture background
Students who are willing to be interviewed
& able to share what they feel, think of their learning experience.

If you have the qualities of the above, YOU can help improve future distance learning experience at UUM. YOU can make a difference.

If you are interested, get more information and get the participation from PACE, UUM and return it asap to PACE or contact the assistant registrar at the centre 04-9283334.

APPENDIX D

RESEARCH CONTRACT:
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH ON
DISTANCE LEARNER AT UUM

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I consent to serve and engage as a distance learner informant in the study investigation entitled *UNDERSTANDING THE DISTANCE LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE AND EXPERIENCE IN DISTANCE LEARNING AT F UNIVERSITI UTARA MALAYSIA*

The nature and general purpose of the study principles and procedure and the known risks involved have been explained to me by **EN. HISHAM DZAKIRIA**. As the researcher of this study, he is authorized to proceed on the understanding that I may withdraw my participation and involvement in the study at any time I so desire.

As a research informant, I understand that it is not always possible to identify all potential risks. Nevertheless, I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize the known and unknown risks.

Signed: _____
Distance Learner Informant's Name & Signature

Date : _____

Witness: _____
Witness Name & Signature

Consent Form To be Retained by the Researcher

Consent form adopted from Fraenkel & Wallen (1993)

RESEARCH PRINCIPLES AND PROCEDURES

This study seeks to get a deeper insights and a better understanding of DLs learning endeavor at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The study success depends on your cooperation and willingness to be involved. As the researcher for this study, it is my desire to be fair to all DLs informants involved in my study. Throughout the study and the processes involved, I will provide information as accurate as possible. This will provide everyone particularly the DLs informants their rights and obligations that permits me to meet my time schedule while also making sure that DLs are not misrepresented or exposed to undue consequence. This is necessary to create the conditions necessary for the exchange of fair and reliable information.

The research principles and procedures begin with an introduction of the study, the study background and context, purpose of the study, focus of inquiry and methodology, and ends with an elaboration of the research principles and procedures which will be implemented and reinforced.

THE TITLE OF THE STUDY

Understanding the Distance Learners' Voyage Through Distance Learning: A Case Study of Universiti Utara Malaysia Distance Education Program (PJJ)

STUDY BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

It seems apparent, that for any DE providers or institutions that intend to improve the DE courses or programs, there is no better place to start than to investigate and getting to know the DLs and the learning process that they go through. With much differences in culture, age, educational background, gender, there will be no single profile of DLs. In addition, DLs also may vary greatly in their past educational and life experiences, their preferred way of learning, their knowledge and understanding of modern teaching and learning technologies, and their exposure and experience learning at a distance. The fact is, DLs come to each learning experience with differing learning objectives, expectations and resources to achieve them.

The lack of understanding at the deeper level of what DLs at UUM go through in a DE programs, the barriers and learning challenges that DLs face and the coping strategies that DLs use calls for this study. DE providers like UUM needs to discover this diversity so we can recognize it and design programs to capitalize on it. The purpose of this study is to explore and investigate the distance education experience as perceived by UUM DLs with different backgrounds. Finding out about the circumstances under which DLs study, the practicalities of studying and getting into the mind frame of learners on what is distance learning are among the interest of this study. This study is unique to Universiti Utara Malaysia because it has the potential to bring changes and improvement to the

existing PJJ program at UUM. Understanding the odyssey that they go through will inevitably provide a better understanding of the DLs at the institution.

Purpose of the Study

This study is a research into DLS learning. The purpose of this study is to investigate the DE experience as perceived by UUM DLs with different backgrounds. This study seeks knowledge to generate insights into how and why DLs at UUM undertake their learning in particular ways. The information that is needed in this study are individual, detailed and contextual. Finding out about the circumstances under which UUM DLs study, the practicalities of studying and getting into the mind frame of learners are important elements of this study.

Focus of Inquiry & Methodology

The focus of inquiry in this study is in the complexity of everyday life of DLs at UUM. In pursuing this study's, the DLs informants will serve as constant source of knowledge and as checks on the developing of information. Multiple perspectives will be essential to provide portrayal of the 'whole' picture. This study seeks for explanations and not predictions.

This study will attempt a collaborative and participatory approach seeking to understand the DLs at UUM undergoing the PJJ program. It will employ a qualitative naturalistic inquiry with a case study approach. Due to the complex nature of the subject of inquiry, and the desire of wanting to get as much information of the DLs' true experience, this study will use a multi modal techniques in its pursuit for the truth of distance learning experience narrated by DLs at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Two of the most dominant methods of inquiry are: *interviewing* and *reflective journal entries*. Another method of inquiry that my be involved is distance learning observation (DLO) which will be carried out in DE classrooms with intention to experience and observe DE learning and teaching in action. The DLO will NOT focus on the DLs informant(s) or any specific distance learner in particular.

Research Principles and Procedures

The following are the principles and procedures which I propose to adhere to. They are open to your consideration and subjected to any comments, concerns and suggestions:

At the very minimal, the DLs informants who will involved in this study will be informed about how and why this study is pursued. The DLs informants at any time will have equal opportunities to contribute to the study and have access to the findings and final report of this study. The Study proposal. Modus operandi and writing will be open to scrutiny by those whose work and lives are to be represented. The research principles and procedures recognized for this study are as follows:

Consent

Distance learners consent will be obtained from DLs informants ONLY when the DLs informants understand the following:

1. the purpose and objectives of this study
2. their role, and what is required of them in the study
3. all possible known risks, and unknown risks that are not always possible to anticipate of engaging in the study

Consent will only be sought in written, after the DLs informants are clear with the the above. DLs informants will have to fill and signed a CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH ON DISTANCE LEARNING AT UUM.

Participation

Potential DLs involvement will all be informed on the research aims, methods and anticipated benefits and potential risks that they may have to face in the study. DLs will also be notified on the duration of involvement as DLs informants in this study. In addition, DLs will also be notified the nature and extend of their involvement

DLs will be made aware that withdrawal or declining to participate at any juncture of their involvement is possible and will carry no adverse consequences.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality to all DLs informants will be guaranteed throughout the study. No other individual(s) will have access to or the opportunity to proscribe the use of your 'input' or interview data. Where possible and desirable, information relating to you as DLs informants will be made anonymous. Where such information appears in anonymous form in the thesis or a report of a general nature, its use will not require special authorization. It is also important to note here that, the principles of confidentiality will not be used to suppress the writing of the findings or issues of general importance in writing.

Clearance of Data & Negotiation of Accounts

As informants in this study, I hope that your involvement will extend into the negotiation of the data process. This may involve follow up interviews, individual and group meetings and email correspondence to check and cross check all the data obtained through interviewing, and the reflective journal entry. For example, upon completion of the transcription and selective translation of data, DLs informants will be asked to validate i.e. to correct or improve one's statements as well as objecting or restricting the use of certain aspects of the data.

Any use of information likely to identify the DLs will be subject to negotiation with the individual concerned.

Cultural Issues

As this study will be engaged with DLs informants with diverse background and culture, stereotyping of groups or individuals based on gender, race, sexuality, age, ethnic origin, class, occupation will be avoided at all times.

Complaints Against the Researcher's Conduct

DLs right has to be respected at all times. In the event where DLs informants feel that the researcher has misconduct in the study, or misrepresented the data or not abiding to the research principles and procedures of any nature, they can submit official complaint within 30 days of the occurrence of the identified incident. The complaint can be sent to the following:

The Education Research Ethics Committee
School of Education
University of East Anglia, Norwich
NR4 7TL, UK.

Or

The Dean of School of Education
University of East Anglia, Norwich
NR4 7TL, UK.

Or

Dr. Rob Walker
Thesis Advisor for Hisham Dzakiria
The Center of Applied Research in Education (CARE)
University of East Anglia, Norwich
NR4 7TL, UK.

Upon completion of the final draft of the study, if the DLs informants themselves or their activities are reported directly in the study, DLs involved will be invited to comment on the report's fairness, accuracy and relevance. In my pursue to strike a balance among the diversity of DLs experience, views and interests I am trying to represent, DLs comments and inputs will be taken into account to improve the final version before submitting for thesis examination. As DLs informants, you will have the right to insist that a final account which concerns your roles as DLs informants includes whatever qualifications and objections you require.

Last but not least, this study will be accountable to the participants and other interested audiences (i.e. UUM UPJJ, etc.). Such accountability will take a form that is consistent with the research procedures and principles outlined above, in particular accountability requirements will not breach confidentiality.

Thank you for your attention, cooperation and involvement in this study.