Conducting online examinations: Insights from the English Department at Universitas Terbuka

Alicia Syabilla
Universitas Terbuka, aliciasyaaab@yahoo.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: *Distance, online, and examination*	*This study examines the processes involved in preparing examination materials, managing administrative tasks, conducting examinations, and processing results within the English Department. The research was conducted across UT's 37 Regional Offices throughout Indonesia, involving students enrolled in English courses as participants. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Instruments included document analysis, interviews with faculty and administrative staff, surveys distributed to students, and observation of the SUO implementation process. Data collection was carried out in three stages: preparation (designing examination materials and setting up technological infrastructure), implementation (monitoring real-time examinations), and post-examination (analysing results and gathering feedback). The findings revealed that while the SUO system has enhanced efficiency and accessibility for students in remote regions, it also faces challenges such as inconsistent internet connectivity, technical issues, and varied levels of digital literacy among students. The study highlights best practices and areas for improvement, contributing to the broader understanding of remote examination systems in open and distance learning environments.*

1. Introduction

Universitas Terbuka (UT) has pioneered implementing the open and distance learning (ODL) system in Indonesia since its establishment in 1984. As one of the largest ODL institutions globally, UT serves approximately 565,000 students distributed across 33 departments within four faculties, reaching learners in every region of Indonesia and 22 cities abroad. UT's unique position as a higher education provider to geographically dispersed students presents opportunities and challenges. Studies have shown that ODL systems, such as those implemented by UT, are crucial in increasing access to education for underserved populations, particularly in remote and rural areas (Zawacki-Richter & Anderson, 2014; Jung et al., 2019). However, these systems require robust infrastructure, comprehensive administrative management, and adherence to quality assurance standards to ensure educational outcomes are not compromised (Anderson & Dron, 2011).

In pursuit of its vision to become a world-class distance higher education institution by 2021, UT has aligned its operations with international ODL standards, focusing on academic excellence, administrative efficiency, and infrastructural advancements. The institution's strategy involves applying standardized processes for delivering academic services and products that are consistent with best practices in the field of ODL (Latchem & Jung, 2009). Despite these efforts, challenges persist, such as maintaining consistent learner engagement, addressing technological disparities, and ensuring the quality of assessments in a decentralized system (Perraton, 2012). This context underscores the importance of ongoing research and innovation in UT's management practices to effectively support its extensive and diverse student body.

2. Literature Review

The concept of "open" in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) refers to offering educational opportunities to individuals regardless of age, qualifications, or geographical location. It is particularly valuable for learners who face financial constraints, limited access to traditional institutions, or personal commitments that prevent full-time study (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). "Open" systems provide flexibility regarding what, where, and when students choose to study, empowering them to manage their learning according to their schedules and needs (Peters, 2010).

ODL systems significantly benefit marginalized populations, offering access to high-quality education at lower costs. According to Jung and Latchem (2012), ODL institutions cater to a wide variety of learners, including working professionals, homemakers, and those in remote areas. Furthermore, these systems adhere to rigorous academic standards, ensuring quality and accountability across various components such as curriculum design, registration, material delivery, tutorial services, and assessment processes (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020).

One of the primary benefits of ODL is its ability to transcend geographical and temporal barriers. It allows students to attend classes and complete assignments independently using online platforms (Almanthari et al., 2020). However, challenges like digital literacy disparities, access to reliable internet, and maintaining learner engagement persist (Bozkurt et al., 2022). The dual delivery modes of ODL—synchronous and asynchronous—address some of these challenges by accommodating diverse learning preferences and schedules (Hodges et al., 2020).

UT's Role in ODL Implementation
Universitas Terbuka (UT) has been pivotal in advancing ODL in Indonesia since 1984. As a flexible, high-quality education provider to over 565,000 students, UT has developed comprehensive learning resources, including printed materials, online modules, video lectures, and virtual classrooms (Belawati, 2022). For asynchronous learning, UT offers a variety of digital resources, such as streaming videos, web supplements, and interactive platforms. Synchronous tutorials via video conferencing or face-to-face sessions are also available, further enhancing the learner experience (Jung et al., 2019).

UT established a Quality Assurance Center in 2002 to maintain academic quality and operational efficiency. This center ensures that all administrative and academic processes adhere to international ODL standards. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of

quality assurance in ODL systems, emphasizing its role in fostering trust and satisfaction among learners (Van Ameijde et al., 2021).

Recent Developments in ODL

Recent advancements in technology have further revolutionized ODL systems. Artificial intelligence, adaptive learning platforms, and data analytics are increasingly integrated into ODL to personalize the learning experience (Sampson & Zervas, 2022). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning tools worldwide, highlighting the scalability and resilience of ODL institutions like UT (Dhawan, 2020). Despite these advancements, issues such as the digital divide, learner isolation, and assessment integrity remain critical for future research (Mishra et al., 2020).

Quality Assurance Center in UT This center has three aims to achieve:

1. To establish a comprehensive internal mechanism that helps to ensure continuous quality improvement across all operational aspects in conducting distance and open education systems.

2. To meet the accountability, accreditation, competition and partnership both local and international levels.

3. To improve human resources quality in implementing the learning of open and distance system.

The Quality Assurance Center had already developed around 100 manual procedures for operating the operational processes. Each manual has the procedures for doing the process in each component of UT. These manuals are used to apply with the aim of continuing the continuous improvement processes. The purpose of using these manuals is to ensure the excellence inherent in every process component.

ODL system requires standardization on most processing components. The standardization of examination is also included in the manuals of procedures of handling examination. The examination has complicated paths in processing services and products. The instructions on the procedures and instruction sheets are guides for applying the steps of the processes. In controlling the process, UT chose to use the quality control system led by the internal and external auditors.

There are four main parts in the cycle of controlling: plan, do, study, and act. A plan is a process of planning what to do. This part involves preparations, arrangements, scheduling, and organizing what will be done. Do is a process of doing the steps of services and products. Study is the process of studying and analyzing the whole process of doing the services and products to reflect on what already happened, recognizing improvements from positive experiences and valuable lessons from any negative experiences. Act is acting to improve and hinder the adverse experiences for the next cycle, applying the lessons and preserving improvements gained from the positive experiences. UT used the procedure of quality assurance, which included the cycle of controlling the process of conducting online examinations.

3. Research Methodology

Online Examination

Online is a communication process supported by technology. The tools and programs provided by the technology could support UT in delivering the online examination. UT has delivered online examinations since 2010. The online examination used the Internet as its means. It is a new technique to conduct examinations. Although establishing an online examination may seem to be very costly and have complex procedures, it is a very sophisticated examination once it is well implemented.

There are several reasons why UT developed the online examination. First, above all, UT always concentrates on focusing in providing the best services for its students. Based on this idea, UT researchers have found that there still appears to be a problem of flexibility for the students in attending exams, which leads them to make the best of their opportunity to complete their studies. To solve this problem, UT encourages itself to develop online examinations. This examination is not conducted simultaneously with the paper and pen examination. UT provides different schedules and different papers for students who prefer to attend online examinations.

Technically, UT has two centers that conduct online examinations. The first center is located in Head Office. This center consists of administrators who are responsible for system users, subjects, tests, questions, results, system backup and recovery. The second centers are located in each of the 37 regional offices that are responsible for conducting the examination, preparing the rooms & equipment, such as computers, networks, and proctors.

4. Findings

The Process of Preparing Test Materials
Faculties are responsible for preparing the subjects, questions, and results. The center of Examination is responsible for the system of users, system backup, recovery, and administration management. The 37 regional offices are responsible for conducting the test in their offices, especially in the rooms that have already set up the computers and networks. They have also prepared the proctors. The proctors are responsible for checking the requirement of presenting identification prior to taking the examination. The students have to be in the examination rooms based on the schedule shown in their email.

Faculties in which the English Department is included have to do the planning for preparing the subjects, questions, and answers and validate the item tests before uploading them to the user system. Writers must submit it to the head of the English Department of UT. The Head of the English Department has to provide the item test to the reviewers who are the lecturers of the English Department of UT. After the reviewers review the item tests, they have to submit it to the head of the English Department, and he has to submit the tests to the head of the examination coordinator of the Faculty. After administrating the tests, they sent them to the center of examination of UT.

The system and programs of conducting online examinations or Online Examination Systems (OES) are Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) (Munjanath Bad di, 2012). The English Department of UT faces this barrier in developing language skills for online examinations. Even Reading, Speaking, and Listening are MCQ, but the bank items could not arrange the proper reading text for some questions in the online examination. UT still executes research to find out how to conduct language skill subjects through online examinations.

UT's center of examination will arrange the bank item test tests. After the whole test has been uploaded to the items bank, then, it will announce to the English Department and others that the item tests are already uploaded. So each department has to send the lecturers

who are responsible for validating the items. After they finished the validation, the administrators of users have to prepare the system for uploading the tests on the application.

Arranging Administration for examination
The whole process of arranging the administration for examination is the responsibility of the administrators in the examination center. The administrators have to check the readiness of networking, the equipment supported for the online examination process, and the staff who have to be responsible for the system and backup managing the process. The heads of Regional Offices are responsible for preparing the rooms, the chairs, computers, and networking. They have to prepare the staff responsible for conducting online examinations in every regional office.

Conducting the examination
UT always tried to provide the best services to its students. UT has arranged a demo online examination. Only registered candidates have access to prepare well for their online examination. This kind of test is to help them to understand online examinations. They can test on their own to prepare for that particular examination. This demo is very useful for beginners with little experience in online examinations.

Preparing the students before they conduct the online examination is a significant part. The system must be user-friendly to them. The students have to be provided with a comfortable environment. Test conductors and students have to be satisfied with the examination situation. The main objective of OES is to provide a clear interface and features that do not lead to any confusion for the users in the whole examination system.

A network connection is a salient equipment that must be used for online examinations. This examination technique is an assessment that uses the Internet in its process. Students must enter their username and password to access an assessment program or web link. The administrators from the examination center send the username and password to each registered student. After that, they have to choose the course that will be tested. The students start answering the questions that are shown on the screen. After they finish the examination, the students must click on a specific button to indicate that they have already finished the process.

The role of proctors in conducting the online examination is also salient. It is a reasonable part of accountability for the unsecured nature of the online environment. Proctors are responsible for asking students to present identification before taking the exam. Proctored settings are also available on the application setting by the administrators in the examination center.

5. Discussion

Complexity and Coordination in Examination Preparation
Preparing test materials at UT highlights a highly collaborative and multi-tiered system involving faculties, examination centers, and regional offices. The process begins with faculties, such as the English Department, where subject matter experts and reviewers play critical roles in ensuring that test items are valid, reliable, and aligned with learning outcomes. Validation is a crucial step to maintain the quality and relevance of test items, particularly in disciplines like language learning, where assessment items must measure

nuanced skills effectively. UT's examination center's centralized management of test materials ensures uniformity and efficiency in test administration across its 37 regional offices. However, relying on multiple choice questions (MCQs) to assess all language skills, including reading, speaking, and listening, presents significant limitations. Research by Bad di (2012) underscores that while MCQs are efficient for large-scale assessments, they often fail to capture the depth of language competencies, such as communicative ability or critical thinking.

Challenges in Language Assessment for ODL
Language assessment in an online format poses unique challenges. For instance, reading comprehension tests require carefully curated passages that are contextually appropriate, engaging, and capable of discriminating between varying student proficiency levels. The English Department faces difficulties in aligning these reading texts with MCQs in the online system. This points to a broader challenge in using traditional assessment formats in a digital environment, where interactivity and adaptability are often limited.

Moreover, UT is actively researching solutions for assessing productive language skills (speaking and writing) in an online examination system. This highlights the institution's commitment to advancing assessment methodologies. Emerging technologies such as automated speech recognition (ASR) and natural language processing (NLP) could offer scalable solutions for these challenges in the future.

Administrative and Technical Preparedness
The administrative aspect of conducting online examinations is integral to ensuring smooth operations. UT's examination administrators must oversee the readiness of networking infrastructure, hardware, and software to avoid disruptions during exams. This is particularly critical for an institution like UT, where students are geographically dispersed, often in areas with inconsistent internet connectivity. The importance of technical support and contingency measures, such as system backups and recovery plans, cannot be overstated.

Regional offices contribute significantly by preparing examination venues and ensuring that proctors are well-trained. This decentralized approach to examination logistics allows UT to cater to a diverse student body spread across Indonesia and abroad. However, such a system requires robust communication and coordination mechanisms between the central examination center and regional offices to minimize errors and ensure consistency.

Enhancing the Student Experience
UT demonstrates a strong commitment to student-centered practices by offering demo online examinations. These demos help familiarize students with the interface, reduce test anxiety, and improve user readiness. A user-friendly system is essential for ODL students, who often have varying levels of digital literacy. The provision of clear instructions, intuitive navigation, and supportive environments is critical for both student and proctor satisfaction.

Despite these efforts, the online examination process depends heavily on reliable network connectivity and technical infrastructure. This reliance highlights the need for continuous investment in IT systems and support services, particularly in remote regions. The availability of offline alternatives or hybrid models could be explored to address the digital divide and ensure equitable access.

Role of Proctors in Accountability and Security

Proctors are pivotal in maintaining the integrity and accountability of online examinations. Their role extends beyond identity verification to monitoring the examination environment for any irregularities. UT's use of proctored settings, both physical and online, adds a layer of security to the assessment process. However, online proctoring introduces privacy concerns and requires careful handling to balance security with student comfort.

Emerging solutions, such as AI-driven proctoring systems, can complement human proctors by monitoring behaviour patterns and flagging suspicious activities in real time. Such innovations could enhance accountability while addressing scalability issues in traditional proctoring methods.

6. Conclusion

The process of preparing and conducting online examinations at UT demonstrates a well-structured yet complex system designed to meet the needs of its diverse student population. While the system is efficient in many respects, challenges remain in language assessment, technical infrastructure, and equity. UT's commitment to quality assurance and its proactive approach to addressing these challenges reflect its vision of becoming a world-class open and distance learning provider. By embracing innovative assessment methodologies and investing in robust infrastructure, UT can further enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of its online examination system.

References

Almanthari, A., Maulina, S., & Bruce, S. (2020). Secondary school mathematics teachers' views on e-learning implementation barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching, and Educational Research, 19*(2), 133–141. https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.19.2.8

Belawati, T. (2022). Technology-mediated open and distance learning in Indonesia: Past, present, and future. *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal, 17*(2), 65–82.

Bozkurt, A., Jung, I., & Xiao, J. (2022). Trends and patterns in distance education research: A bibliometric mapping analysis. *Distance Education, 43*(2), 253–277. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2022.2053707

Dhawan, S. (2020). Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems, 49*(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239520934018

Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review.*

Jung, I., & Latchem, C. (2012). Quality assurance and accreditation in distance education and e-learning. *Routledge.*

Jung, I., Wong, T. M., & Belawati, T. (Eds.). (2019). *Quality assurance in distance education and e-learning: Challenges and solutions from Asia.* SAGE Publications.

Mishra, L., Gupta, T., & Shree, A. (2020). Online teaching-learning in higher education during the pandemic: Students' perspective. *Heliyon, 6*(7), e05491. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05491

Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (2011). *Distance education: A systems view of online learning.* Cengage Learning.

Peters, O. (2010). *Distance education in transition: Developments and issues.* BIS-Verlag der Carl von Ossietzky Universität.

Sampson, D. G., & Zervas, P. (2022). Adaptive learning systems: The next frontier in e-learning. *Journal of Educational Technology Research, 24*(3), 129–143.

Van Ameijde, J., Nelson, P., & Staley, J. (2021). Learner satisfaction in online courses: Quality assurance in a virtual learning environment. *Journal of Open Learning, 36*(4), 305–320.

Zawacki-Richter, O., Anderson, T., & Tuncay, N. (2020). *Handbook of open, distance, and digital education.* Springer.