

# **Researching Distance Learning Experiences Using Qualitative Case Study as a Research Method: Lessons Learned**

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## **Abstract**

Qualitative case study is hardly a research technique in its proper sense, but it is typical of most qualitative research to employ its usage in the research design. Hence, it merits some discussion. This paper considers some methodological issues of collecting qualitative data from distance learners at the Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). This paper begins with an overview of the study before describing the case study and the range of methods used. Then, it examines the merits and limitations of these research methods. Specifically, this paper discusses two methodological issues in qualitative case study: generalisation of research findings and integrity of research reports. Some concluding remarks are made about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the method used. The discussion in this paper is an attempt to highlight plausible major issues that researchers may encounter when the qualitative convention is adopted in the Malaysian educational research setting.

## **Abstrak**

Kajian kes kualitatif bukan sekadar teknik penyelidikan tetapi ia kerap digunakan dalam reka bentuk kajian yang melibatkan penyelidikan kualitatif yang sah dan perlu dibincangkan. Artikel ini mempertimbangkan beberapa isu metodologi dalam pengumpulan data kualitatif daripada pelajar pendidikan jarak jauh di Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Artikel ini dimulakan dengan ulasan kajian yang telah dijalankan sebelum ini dan menjelaskan kajian kes dan juga kaedah-kaedah yang digunakan. Seterusnya, artikel ini meninjau kebaikan dan batasan kaedah penyelidikan dan secara spesifiknya artikel ini membincangkan dua isu metodologi dalam kajian kes kualitatif: kesimpulan dapatan kajian dan kesahihan laporan penyelidikan. Beberapa ulasan dibuat terhadap kesesuaian dan keberkesanan kaedah yang digunakan. Perbincangan artikel ini adalah satu cubaan untuk mengetengahkan isu-isu yang mungkin dihadapi oleh penyelidik apabila menggunakan kaedah kualitatif dalam persekitaran penyelidikan pendidikan di Malaysia.

## Introduction

Quantitative research approach has always been popular than its counterpart - qualitative research design, and has been employed by many Malaysian researchers within the Malaysia context of educational research. To date, little was documented on the use of qualitative method as a research approach in many aspects of educational issues and problems in the country (Hassan, 2003; Kamal, 2001; Lebar, 1995; Dzakiria, 2004). The situation is also true with research on learning, and specifically of students' own experience of learning within the Malaysian context of education. The situation is also authentic to distance education (DE) research in many countries in the world, and particularly so in Malaysia. Distance learners (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 Soo (1993: p. 392) who says, "...traditionally, students have been overlooked as valuable resources..." Although Soo (1993) 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..."

Hence, the qualitative case study approach was chosen for this research for two folds:

1. Qualitative approach was deemed to be most appropriate for the study to understand the learners' experiences and perspectives on distance learning at the Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM).

2. The study was meant to increase the awareness of Malaysia educational researchers on qualitative research and methodology and its potential. Its use in this research is also meant to be innovative for the Malaysian educational context of distance education.

As a qualitative researcher conducting research on students' perspectives and learning in distance learner, I felt that one of the many different things that can be learned from any research would be the choice of methodology employed in the research. Besides broadening my understanding about what has been researched, the research have provided me with an opportunity to learn about myself as qualitative researcher, and as a human being. Most important of all, the approach has provided a detail, in-depth and holistic understanding of distance learning at UUM. The richness of the data is something that I believe other research methodology cannot provide.

Although the research has provided me with various challenges, the experience gained has been worthwhile. I remembered vividly at the initial phase of the research, where I was constantly challenged and provoked by my colleagues mostly in Malaysia for using qualitative methodology in the research. They repeatedly claim and say that it would have been easier to undertake a quantitative research rather than to engage in a qualitative case study design at interpreting, and understanding the perspectives and views of students learning. They repeatedly questioned me, *Why qualitative?*; *How are you going to present your findings?*; and *Is it generalisable?* Undeniably, these questions are important question that I need to deal with, and it is these very questions too that have carefully help me to make many of my research decisions for the study. These questions have only strengthened my motivation to undertake the study.

### **Entering the Unfamiliar Territory**

Before pursuing my post-graduate study at University of East Anglia, I came from a research culture that is dominantly using quantitative research approach, and I myself was then only familiar with quantitative method, and an avid user of such approach. Therefore, when I first stated on the research, thinking and doing a qualitative research is 'something' that is new or unfamiliar. There was a lot to learn. The research has precisely been just that – a learning opportunity right from when I first started the study till its completion. I am grateful to the comments and criticism received from my colleagues and fellow academicians. The questions and concerns outlined by my colleagues only forced me to be critical on the research decisions that I had to make. It made me very conscious and reflective on all the steps that I had to undertake to see the completion of the study.

Being a DE practitioner and researcher in the Malaysian context of educational research, and having observe the research development in the United Kingdom, and other western countries, it is ironic that I came to realise that numbers, figures or percentages would not help have help me 'all the time' to understand the educational problems that I was looking at. Such realisation has helped me to explore 'the problems' of learning at a distance more deeply. As I slowly progressed into the research, I realised that I needed to play with words, and not numbers to help me understand what distance learning was to the students. It takes more than numbers to understand and to address the 'why' and 'what' issues surrounding the area of distance learning. With the completion of the study, I advocate and encourage strongly the use of qualitative case study as a research approach although, it may not be suitable with all research intent, it is however worth considering. The research method that was once 'unfamiliar', and a field that was once 'new' to me, is a method that I have strong faith in today.

### **Brief Description of the Study**

The following is a short description of the study that will be used as a reference to discuss my perspectives and experiences of using qualitative case study as a research method and the issues and problems that I encountered in the study.

### ***Study Background***

This paper is based on my Ph.D. study on students' perspectives and experiences in DE at the UUM. The research sought to generate insights into *how, why, when* and *where* DLs at UUM undertake their learning in particular ways. It was a single case study focused on the students' perspectives and experiences on distance learning at the UUM. Twelve DLs were involved and selected on the basis of voluntary participation and ability to share their distance learning experiences and perspectives with much openness. Various research methods were used with interview as the primary method for data collection, supplemented by students' journals and photographs. The information needed for this study was 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 were important elements of this study.

My interest to pursue this study was strongly motivated by work done by Segall's (1998) work. Her book helped to build my initial interest in qualitative research. Segall's (1998) 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

(1998) provided to the students in her book. To an extent, the students themselves became *producers* and *directors*. Segall's (1998) 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 (1998) 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 the UUM. As the researcher, I had to work as closely as I could with the distance learners to capture the learners' perspectives and experiences in distance learning. This was the task that I had, and Segall (1998: p. 6–7) made this clear when she 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..."

This research was based on the following three epistemological attitudes adopted from Segall (1998); *Metaphysical*: What is the story? – exploring how DLs address causality, intention, existence and truth about their distance learning; *Historical* – search for understanding of how learning barriers and challenges began. Who or what causes the learning barriers that DLs face in their pursuit of distance education? *Pedagogical* – What can the institution do to improve the educational experience of distance learning at UUM? How can the institution make changes to the existing distance learning courses and programmes, and assist learners in their endeavours based on feedback and knowledge generated from this study? The findings shared in this study can be seen as providing a holistic understanding or conceptual framework for understanding student learning from the learners' perspective.

### ***Research Objectives***

The objective of this research was to generate insights and understanding into the questions of how and why, when and where distance learners at the UUM tackle their studies. Specifically, the research objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To characterise the nature and content of DLs' learning in some detail.
2. To develop an understanding of the barriers and the challenges that DLs encounter, and the ways they cope with these problems.
3. To understand the distance learning process.
4. To demonstrate principles through which distance learning can be empowered and guided by the micro and macro environment surrounding the learners and their lives.
5. To contribute to the popularisation of qualitative research in Malaysia and encourage others to consider using a qualitative methodology to study distance education.

### ***Research Questions***

The research questions were 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 the UUM. The research were continuously revised to improve the interview questions to get a fruitful discussion.

Following are the research questions developed for this study:

1. How do DLs perceive and experience the distance learning programmes and courses at the UUM?
2. What is the meaning of distance learning for the DLs?
3. What is the nature and content of distance learning at the UUM?
4. What are the contributing factors that facilitate or deter distance learning at the UUM?
5. How do the DLs cope with the challenges they face as DLs at the UUM?

### **Methodology and Research Approach**

A qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) approach was employed to understand the experience of individual learners as they progressed through their academic careers in DE. The research used three different research instruments: the interview being the primary instrument, supplemented by students' journals and photographs. All the DLs involved in this study were interviewed on a one-to-one basis during the 2002 academic year. The following interview guide in Table 1 was used as a framework to conduct the face-to-face (F2F) interviews:

**Table 1** The interview guide

Thematic guideline	Consistent topics	Additional topic(s)
Experience of distance learning at UUM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactions with course materials</li> <li>• Interactions with distance teachers and educators</li> <li>• Interactions with other DLs</li> <li>• Attitudes towards distance learning</li> <li>• Pull and push factors of DE</li> <li>• Learning style and behaviour</li> <li>• Coping mechanism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult life</li> <li>• Family life</li> <li>• Attitude</li> <li>• Future career plan</li> <li>• Impact of curriculum and individual learning style</li> <li>• Impact of Malaysian 12 years of primary and secondary educational experience</li> <li>• Learning differences</li> </ul>

The interview guide helped to ensure good use of limited interview time available during the fieldwork. It helps to make the interviews, the use of the photographs and students' journal, and discussions with the learners more focus. Most of the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, and English language was only used when necessary and possible. The data collected were massive. Forty-nine hours of interviews, not withstanding other research mechanics used in this study, is a lot to deal with. Due to time constraint imposed by the research grant, and time availability, the interviews were selectively transcribed, translated and profiled. Only data that corresponded with the main themes and issues surfaced in the study were translated and analysed. It is almost difficult to present all the themes and issues that surfaced in a qualitative research. Therefore, it is natural for qualitative researchers to focus on the themes and issues that is of interest to the research, the researcher and other important stakeholders in the research.

### **The Research Participants**

The 12 research participants included 8 male and 4 female learners with an average age of 37. In terms of ethnic and cultural background, 7 Malay learners and 5 Chinese learners contributed to the findings of this research. 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 Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) (equivalent to GCSE 'O' Level) examination. A total of 50% of them had some post secondary education or had undergone some vocational training courses, and 25% or three out of the 12 participants had a teaching certificate from a teacher's college. The maturity of the students resulted in an overall average of 8.9 years of working experience. All of them had professional careers, including teaching, the police

force, clerical, sales, technical, self-employed and secretarial work. Most of the students earned less than RM2,000 per month. It would seem that, despite high fees for DE courses, the students seemed committed to taking the courses. Students seem willing to make considerable financial sacrifices to obtain a paper qualification. A total of 90% of them had an immediate family to care for. With an average household size of 4.7 people. Over 57% 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 persons or less.

### **Research Justification**

It is important to listen to and understand DLs' voices and perspectives on DE in Malaysia because of the complex mix of cultures, languages and urban and rural factors. Additionally, there is a need to reflect on the effectiveness of the DE programmes, teaching and services provided from time to time. In doing so, DE providers and institutions need to get a balanced picture of what is 'right' and 'wrong', and what is effective and non-effective practices in their DE programmes, courses and administration.

Understanding how the DE experience discourages or frustrates DLs enables DE providers and institutions, distance teachers and other stakeholders in DE to reflect and make constructive changes to create the condition for better distance learning in the future.

This research was undertaken in the belief that a study focusing on DLs' perspectives and experiences in distance learning and their learning interactions was 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 research sought to explore and offer an understanding of DLs' perceptions of their educational experiences in distance learning, and to construct a rich and detailed account of the wide range of factors that might have 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 open and distance learning (ODL) 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' points-of-view, not that of 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, I strongly believe that in order for UUM to improve and sustain its DE courses and programmes in the future, it is essential for the institution to gain an understanding of the DLs with whom the institution is dealing – an understanding that goes beyond attendance records and academic achievements.

Finally, I expected the implications of this study to be pertinent to how UUM DE administrators, distance teachers organise courses and programmes, and educational activities to meet with the needs of the DLs. Ultimately, this study would contribute to a deeper understanding of how DLs perceived and experience distance learning at UUM. Such an understanding would enhance our knowledge of how to go about designing and implementing effective future DE programmes and services for DLs in the future.

### **Methodology Commentary**

The most profound impact in my undertaking of this research that can be shared with academia community particularly in Malaysia is the use of Qualitative Case Study as our research approach which is not highly utilised in the qualitative sense within the Malaysia context of educational research. Although case study is hardly a ‘technique’ in its proper sense, it is typical of most qualitative research to use it.

#### ***Why Choose a Case? Why Single Case?***

The choice of the case in this study is by selection and not by sampling. Often, the cases are outstanding by their own rights (Yin, 1984; 1994). 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 (1994) insists that multiple case study should limit itself to replication rather than sampling logic. This means that multiple case studies is 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. And, this was the precise nature of my motivation pursuing the research that I have chosen to do. 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.

Nevertheless, case study is never excluded from pressing issues in research that many if not most of qualitative researchers have to face. One in particular concerns the issue of generalisation.

### **Issue 1: What is the use of the case study if the findings cannot be generalised?**

Researchers of qualitative case study are often confronted by the above question. Case study approach in my study enables readers to have a deep understanding of the reality of distance learning from the students' own voice and experience. Such deep understanding in turn enables readers to understand much about what will never be understood by other research strategies.

The question about generalisability implicitly assumes that theories are only built upon statistical inference. It tends to forget that statistics are but one instrument to assist researchers to arrive at theories. Insightful findings case study is a theory in its own, whether or not it is further developed to a theory about more cases. This is true with Piaget's theory of development psychology, which is based on only one case. Piaget's study of his daughter has led the establishment of his entire school of thought about developmental psychology. This is also true with Graham Allison's multiple perspectives about decision making, which comes out of study of one case (Allison, 1971). This is again true with, for example, Phillip Foster's theory of 'vocational education fallacy', which is based only on his knowledge about Ghana.

In this sense, similar situations occur with statistically supported theories. A theory which is well tested over one population does not necessarily apply to another population. In fact, it is a common mistake among researchers to over generalise what is true in one country to other countries.

Schostak (2002) put forward a question, 'What is meant by generalisation?' In any Case Study, the 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.

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 (Maxwell, 1992).

The issue therefore remains of the extent to which Case Study can or should address the issue of generalisation. Yin (1994) provides a stronger case for rejecting the traditions of generalisability that are associated with the natural sciences. He argues that traditional ways of thinking about generalisability are inadequate.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) talk about transferability which they refer to whether knowledge gained from one context is relevant to or applicable for other 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. Building on Lincoln and Guba (1985) concept of transferability, Dzakiria (2004) came out with the concept of 'reliability' which entails the degree of relatedness on whether knowledge gained from one context is relevant and applicable for other contexts or the same context in another time frame. This concept argues that only if the findings of a particular research is related to one's circumstances, or research interest, such findings are potentially transferable and 'generalisable'. Therefore, the concept of 'reliability' has its own merits, one that is justifiable and has its own potential to be developed.

Qualitative 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 the case permits readers to experience vicariously about students undergoing their own learning experience which I have communicated in a narrative portrayal of their experiences (Dzakiria, 2004). For Schostak (2002), generalisation is produced by the way in which we agree to use language in order to map our world, coordinate our behaviour towards each other and to the objects of the world and to account for our actions to each other within it.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that the use of case study is always justified. Yin (1984) identifies three situations which justify the use of case studies: a critical case to confirm, challenge or extend a well formulated theory; and 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.

The use of single case study like this one is almost a general approach in human learning. Medical students understand human bodies by dissecting only one body, or at most a few. Car driving is often learnt on one particular car, and one can then drive any car. The single case adopted in our studies allow us to fully understanding the internal relations within the complexity of distance learning reality, and that kind of understanding allows the learners to generalise to other cases, but not in the statistical sense of knowing the pattern across the population. One's learning on one car allows him or her to transfer the knowledge to drive other cars, but would not provide any knowledge of variations over different cars. Learning to drive a *Kancil*, a car produced by *Perodua* and used extensively by driving schools in this country, does not mean that the young driver will not have the basic know how to drive a *Mercedes*, *LandRover*, *Honda* or other cars. Where the knowledge is relevant, and related, the knowledge is transferable and generalisable, on the other hand if it is not, then generalisation will not be possible.

## **Issue 2: Integrity 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. When a questionnaire is carried out, there is 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.

Asking students about learning experiences can be controversial. We 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). The question of reliability and validity then arose. Validity often refers to the relationship between the account and 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 (1985: p. 290) is simple: "...How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?..." When judging qualitative work, Strauss and Corbin (1990: p. 250) believe that the "...usual canons of 'good science'... require redefinition in order to fit the realities of qualitative research...".

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 and 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) 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 (1992) 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 accurateness of the 'reality' of students' learning at the UUM. It is assessed by determining whether the description developed through inquiry '*rings true*' for those persons who are the members of that setting (Erlandson et al., 1993).

How could we be sure that our key indicators are actual indicators of the main concept of students learning? Were my analysis telling us what we thought they were telling us? In conducting this research, one of my greatest concerns was the 'accuracy' of the account portrayed in my study. How well had I described and portrayed these characters? Was the dialogue believable? Did the informants really make those statements or did I misheard, misremember or mistranscribed the informants' statements? Do the results of the research reflect the experience of informants or the context in a believable way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)? Does the explanation fit the description (Janesick, 1994)?

In order to maximise the validity of the accounts, the strategy that I utilised was to pass the real transcripts back to the learners who supplied data for inquiry. 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 I still wondered if I was doing it ‘right’.

Some of the learners in my study used this opportunity to make some modification or clarify misconceptions in the transcripts. Description, therefore, is an aspect of validity to establish confidence in an accurate interpretation of the meaning of the data.

*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 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 learners’ meanings is usually based to a large extent on the their own accounts, but it is essential not to treat these latter accounts as adamant; the learners may be unaware of their own feelings or views, may recall these inaccurately, and may consciously or unconsciously distort or conceal their views.

Accounts of learners’ meanings are never a matter of direct access, but are always constructed by the researcher on the basis of learners’ accounts and other evidence. An attempt to remain true to the phenomenon under study is essential (Hammersley, 1992). Who should confirm the accounts; the learners, 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 (1997) identified the need for assurance that interpretations are trustworthy and reveal some truth external to the investigators’ experience. To tackle these issues the students (informants) themselves would provide the best evaluators and interpreters, but they need to have a legitimated voice. This involved taking account of the students’ perspectives, and indeed putting them at the centre of the analysis. At the same time, the learners from a single research site may be too few to make generalisations that apply beyond this institution.

The infinitely differing interpretations, assumptions, and knowledge background that I may have brought to, or developed during the study of students learning could potentially influence the account or 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). 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 my inquiry had to be self-critical, examine biases, and seek integrity.

*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 believed are relevant to our qualitative studies. 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.

### ***Developing Technique to Establish Validity***

The major technique for establishing validity used in this study is triangulation. Schostak (2002) explains that triangulation acts as a process of coordinating 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 (2002) 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; and
4. using different perspectives to interpret the data.

In my study, statements from one informant was cross-checked with another informant 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.

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 during this time period. I compared students’ diaries to interviews, interviews to each other, and data records to all research methods used in this study.

The opportunity to compare data with a cross section of individuals allowed for a more accurate assessment of the data that acquired. I was continuously looking for the quality that Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified as inter-subject agreement. I checked the interview responses about relationships with the different informants, and then observed formal situations such as interactions and observed 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.

Other techniques employed was addressing the issue of validity which includes 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 (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before I started to write the research reports, I conducted a member check by visiting other students and reading the narrative account to them. I then asked them the following questions: Was this a realistic story that could have happened with you being a learner? Did they know any other students like these? What changes would they make to the story? The students discussed the narrative account with me and provided a 'member check' of these collection of narrative accounts. Some of the students made some recommendations related to the details, but thought the narrative described characters and events that may depict 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 students 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.

I also kept a reflective journal as a base of information about methodological decisions and the reason why the decision is made. The reflective journal supports both the validity and the reliability of my 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 himself or herself. The journal provides information about our schedules and logistics, insights, and reasons for methodological decisions (Erlandson et al., 1993). Keeping such a journal provided me 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.

An audit trail was also developed to provide a path of evidence to verify the findings of the study. This is a set of records that includes memos or other



relevant documents as a cross reference of the compilation of data. All the records were kept so that they could be examined to determine the accuracy of the research.

### **Concluding Methodology Reflection**

The employment of qualitative methodology in this research does not mean that I 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 educational organisation which lead to what has been labelled as ‘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 the present research in 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 study on student learning at a distance at the UUM is to understand the ‘phenomena’ from the students’ perspective. Although individual, F2F interviews have been the most widely adopted method, other approaches, such as student diaries, photographs are also of value and seem to have considerable potential in educational research.

From the discussion on the emerging themes and issues surfaced in my study, I have tried to make it clear that the focus on student learning was descriptive and interpretative with a methodological openness.

A key feature of all qualitative analysis is the intense immersion in the data, looking for patterns and themes, similarities and differences between individual informants. Analysis and interpretation continue side by side with data collection. Preliminary interpretations and insights are constantly documented through ‘memoing’ to myself as the research proceeds. Although I find it difficult doing the interpretation and analysis of qualitative research particularly to specify in detail during the fieldwork, I tried to spell out important notes, issues from the interviews as soon as each interview session is completed.

Detailed qualitative analysis was indeed time consuming, but it has been adopted particularly to describe the students' learning and to develop a 'thick' understanding the conception of learning and learning behaviour to study at the institution. Although the description of such analysis seems very detailed, the basic process is relevant to analysing all forms of qualitative data.

The interpretation process is 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 think there is a need to retain a balance of abstract description of the emerging issues at the same time as presenting a richness of the individual student's experience. Overall, the experiences employing a qualitative research design has been a worthwhile effort.

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