

## **UNDERSTANDING OLDER ADULT LEARNERS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: The Case of Universiti Sains Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

World population ageing is unprecedented and pervasive which will affect all countries in the world. According to a United Nation report (2010): "By 2045, the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in history." The number of the older adult learners in distance education programs is also expected to increase in tandem with the growth of ageing population throughout the world. As such distance education institutions and instructors should be vigilant to this new emerging group of learners. The objectives of this study were to identify factors related to older adult learners' participation in the distance education degree programs and their characteristics. Data were collected by using interviews and questionnaires. Respondents for the study were older adult learners age 50 and over who enrolled in degree programs at the School of Distance Education (SDE), Universiti Sains Malaysia in Malaysia. Five older adult learners were interviewed and 72 out of 123 respondents completed the questionnaires. The findings indicated that older adult learners' participation in the distance education degree programs is mainly due to career advancement and to seek knowledge. The older adult learners' distinct characteristics are high motivation, eager to learn, health conscious, effective time management, good social skills, no financial difficulties and have strong family support.

**Keywords:** Older adult learners, Distance Education, Participation, Characteristics

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to a United Nation report (2010): "World population ageing is unprecedented, a process without parallel in human history and the twenty-first century will witness even more rapid ageing than did the century just past. Population ageing is pervasive since it is affecting nearly all countries of the world. By 2045, the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in history." In developed countries, 15% of the population are old and will increase to 26% by 2050. Japan and Italy, which currently have the world's oldest populations, with nearly 20% of their populations above 65 will face greater increase to more than 30% (Hayutin, 2007).

A key indicator of population ageing is the median age (the age that divides the population into two equal parts, one with ages below the median age and other with ages above the median age) at which 50 per cent of the population is older and 50 per cent younger). In 2050, half of the world's population is projected to be older than 38 years (United Nation, 2010).

The reasons for this shift in demographics have been attributed to several factors such as better healthcare, improved lifestyles, low mortality rate, declining fertility and life expectancy (United Nation, 2010; Ong Fon Sim, 2002).

In view of this development, many sectors such as health, education and economics would be severely affected. For instance, higher education sector including distance education programs will soon have greater number of older adult learners in their programs. Consequently, relevant policies and programs should be planned to cater for this new group.

Distance education is expected to play a greater role in accommodating the needs of the older adult learners to participate in the learning programs. Distance learning has benefitted tremendously from the rapid advancement of communication technology which makes learning and teaching possible to people anytime and anywhere. As distance education programs are more student-centered in nature, thus knowing the characteristics and demographics of the distance learners would help the institutions and distance educators to provide better services and to help older adult learners to overcome potential problems during their studies. Additionally, knowledge about older adult learners' characteristics and motivations helps us understand who is likely to participate in distance education and how do they study.

As in other developing countries Malaysia's population may still be considered 'youthful' with median age of 27.4 years old (Economic Planning Unit, 2010) but the trend towards ageing society is unavoidable. The percentage of ageing people in Malaysia is rising but slowly and the full impact of an ageing population will not be felt in near future. However, the indications of an ageing population should be recognised and adequate preparations should be considered.

In Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has offered opportunities for the older adult learners above 50 years old to enroll in the degree programs either through face-to-face or distance mode with several incentives such as minimum qualification entry and fifty percent discount of tuition fees. At present about 123 older adult learners are enrolled in this program through distance mode which is managed by the School of Distance Education (SDE). Currently, SDE offers academic programs at undergraduate and graduate level. For undergraduate level, degree programs which are offered by the SDE are Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Management, Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Social Science. It is expected that the number of older adult students will increase gradually as the changes occur toward an ageing society.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Higher education institutions like universities used to be the home for the young students aged 18-23, who were also known as traditional students. The number of young students, however, began to shrink in the 1980s as more students age over 25 years enrolled in the universities in the USA and other Western countries such as Finland and United Kingdom (CERI/OECD, 1987).

The gradual shift in the student population from young to adult students was attributed mainly to changes in demographics. In the USA and other Western countries, the low birth rate in the 1970s reduced the supply of traditional age students (CERI/OECD, 1987). However, the overall college enrollment did not decrease in the 1980s, primarily because of the participation of older students, women, and minorities (Gade, 1991).

**In 1977, 51 percent of all Americans were below the age of 30. In the year 2000, it has been projected that, that group will represent only 42 percent of the population and the largest percentage of increase will be found within the group 65 years or older (Long, 1983).**

**Several studies have been conducted for the purpose of understanding that the adult learners were. These studies found adult learners evenly divided between male and female, are usually married, 25 years of age and older, have children, usually have full-time jobs outside the home (Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Aslanian and Brickell, 1980). With these characteristics, the normal method of learning and teaching as practised by the full-time traditional students has been found rather unsuitable for many adults. Consequently, they were not able to enroll or complete the college education. Transitory or situational barriers had delay some adults from attending college and according to Sewall (1984), the top four most cited reasons given for not completing or enrolling in a degree program were that they wanted to or had to work; they had family responsibilities; funds were not available, and they lacked of interest. Family responsibilities were the single most important reason for delaying college entry, especially among women. Job responsibilities and lack of interest were more frequently cited as barriers by men. In another study by Bodensteiner (1989, p.88) similar results were found; "gaining employment, not being able to afford college, and marriage were the reasons mentioned by at least 30 percent of the respondents. Four times more women than men cited marriage as the main reason for not beginning college right away." Other reasons for delaying college education cited in that study included;**

- **attending a trade or technical school,**
- **not yet ready or interested in college and**
- **didn't graduate from high school.**

**A study to determine the reasons for non-participation in continuing education leading to a degree in the United Kingdom revealed that an inability to afford was the top reason followed by a lack of knowledge about courses, lack of entry qualifications and the need to take care of children and other dependents. Among other findings were no suitable courses in the area and too much traveling involved (cited in CERI/OECD, 1987). The various reasons given by American adults for not participating in education were categorized by Cross (1981).**

**She categorized various factors that prohibit adults from participating in a learning program into three barriers:**

- **Situational-conditions arising from one's situation in life at a given time such as lack of money, time, and childcare.**
- **Institutional-practices or procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in an educational program such as unsuitable class schedules or high tuition, and unfriendly administrative rules.**
- **Dispositional-factors related to attitudes and self-perceptions such as lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem.**

**Cost and lack of time were the most common barriers cited by adults (Cross, 1981) that prevented adults from participating in educational programs. For instance, the normal class hours from 8 am to 5 pm do not suit most adults who are working full-time. The most likely suitable time would be evening or weekends, but even then some would be prevented from participating because of schedules and other commitments.**

The three categories of barriers were interrelated. For example, the removal of one institutional barrier such as better scheduling to meet the needs of adults would not be effective unless dispositional and situational barriers as mentioned above were also overcome.

Besides knowing the barriers that prevented adults from pursuing a college degree it was also deemed important to understand what motivate them to do so. The reasons were found to be many and complex. Sewall (1984) revealed several reasons why adults choose to pursue a degree:

- to develop a new career;
- just to learn; (3) to have satisfaction of having a degree;
- to achieve independence and a sense of identity; and
- to gain career advancement.

Bodensteiner (1989) also found that career advancement, career change, and salary increase were the most common reasons cited by the respondents. Personal growth and development were also considered as an important reason for attending college. The reasons for seeking a university degree also varied with age and gender. Cross and Jones (1972, p.51) reported, "In 1961 when the study was done, men were more likely than women to express vocational motivations; today, however education for job advancement may play an increasingly important role in the educational motivations of women."

As society became more complex, the individual needed a higher level of education and knowledge in order to be an effective and productive member of society. Post secondary education, particularly at a university level was known to be a major route for increasing knowledge and skills which in turn generally led to a better standard of living for an individual. Most college graduates enjoyed better income, power and status. Altbach (1991, p.300) alleged that "A university degree is a prerequisite for an increasing number of occupation in most societies" and he also added, " indeed it is fair to say that academic certification is necessary for most positions of power, authority, and prestige in modern societies." Workers with more schooling on an average earned higher wages. A study by Kosters (1991) showed that men who completed college earned wages 43 percent higher than those who had completed a high school education in 1973 and in the 1980s. The wage premium for college increased 38 percentage points.

Studies on adults participation in learning activities are considered as the most studied areas in adult and continuing education (Blunt and Yang, 2002) but mostly focused on adults who are below 40 years of age. To date, research on older adult learners (age 50 and above) in higher education is still scarce even in the ageing country like USA (Paulson & Boeke, 2006).

A study done by the American Council on Education had identified the need for higher education to focus more on individuals aged 50 and older (Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2007 & 2008). Research studies on older adult learners in distance education are equally scanty.

Therefore, more research is needed to understand and analyze the characteristics and needs of the older adult learners in distance education programs. This exploratory study attempts to understand the older adult learners in distance education programs at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research is to explore insights and understanding of the older adult learners (age 50 and above) who continue their higher education through distance at Universiti Sains Malaysia. Specifically, the research objectives of this study are as follow:

- To determine the reasons for participation of older adult learners in distance education programs
- To examine the older adult learners' characteristics in distance education programs

## METHODOLOGY

Respondents for this study were older adult learners' age 50 years old and over who were pursuing degree programs at undergraduate level. Majors offered by the SDE are Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Management, Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Social Science. Data were collected through open-ended interviews and mailed questionnaires. Open-ended interview was used for this exploratory study on older adult learners in distance education in order to gain some insights and understanding of their participation and characteristics. Question guide was used to initiate and redirect interview conversation towards issues related to older adult learners, distance learning, problems and challenges. However, participants were allowed to express freely their opinions and ideas. Five participants had voluntarily participated in the interview and each interview session took about 45 minutes.

In addition to interview, a questionnaire was also formulated. Respondents were asked about personal information and reasons for participating in distance education degree programs. Respondent had to indicate their characteristic based on a given statement using a five-point Likert-type scale, where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree to a certain extent, 4=Agree and 5=Strongly agree.

Higher scores, therefore, indicate the statements reflect very much the characteristics of the respondents. Questionnaires were mailed to all older adult learners who were enrolled during 2010/2011 academic session at the School of Distance Education, USM. In this session, there was a total of 123 older adult learners. Seventy two respondents returned the questionnaires which represented a 58.5% rate of return. This percentage is considered as acceptable as mailed questionnaire generally had a return rate of 40% to 75% (Ary et al., 2006).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The demographic distribution of respondents is shown in Table 1. Of the 72 respondents who participated in the study, 69.4% were male and 30.6% female respondents. About 87.5% of respondents were in the age group of 50-54 and 55-59. Only one respondent (1.4%) was over 70 years old.

The majority of the respondents can be considered as belong to a "young" group of older adult learners as 87.5% of them are still below 60 years old. This percentage is consistent with the respondents' status of employment which show majority of them are still working. Most of the students at the School of Distance Education, USM are government employees that have mandatory retirement age at 58.

**Table: 1**  
**Demographic data of the respondents**

Demographic data	Frequency (n=72)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	50	69.4
Female	22	30.6
<b>Age</b>		
50-54	48	66.7
55-59	15	20.8
60-64	6	8.3
65-69	2	2.8
>70	1	1.4
<b>Employment status</b>		
Employed	55	76.4
Retired	17	23.6
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	67	93.0
Non-Married	5	7.0

Respondents were also asked about their monthly income and most of the respondents earn more than RM3,000 or USD967.74 per month (1USD=RM3.1) and majority of them (about 42.9% ) earn between RM3,000-3,999 per month. In Malaysia, this amount of monthly income can be considered as middle income group. Studies on adult learners' characteristics show that those who were in the middle income group or higher would likely participate in learning activities (Kim & Merriam, 2004).

### **Reasons for Participation**

When respondents were asked about the reasons for participating in the distance education degree programs at SDE, a significant proportion (54.2%) said they were motivated to get a degree and for career advancement.

As the majority of the respondents was between the ages of 50 and 60 and still employed, the degree that they would get is still relevant for their career. With limited years of service left (majority of the respondents retire at age 58), many of the respondents still regard the economic value of the degree as an important factor. For those who serve in the government sector the degree would allow them to retire with higher salary grade compared to non-graduate employees. This finding reaffirmed the earlier study by Bodensteiner (1989) who found that career advancement, career change, and salary increase were the most common reasons cited by the adults respondents. About 37.5% indicated that they participated because of seeking the knowledge. This is consistent with many studies on adult participation that view cognitive interest as a great influential factor (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Raghavan & Kumar, 2007).

Through interview, some of the respondents mentioned that by studying they would make their minds more active and alert. Factors like "has free time" and "social contacts" were also cited by several respondents. An interesting reason was shared by an adult learner on his reason of pursuing the degree through distance:

*"I don't have any intention to be somebody, I'm already old (age 73) and retired.... I just want to set a good example for my children and my ethnic group. That's why I study." (Respondent M)*

Respondents were also asked about who actually motivate them to study through distance mode. About 70.8% of the respondents said they were self-motivated. The spouse (11.1%), children (9.75) and friends (6.9%). This response was consistent with the statement given to the respondents when asked to indicate whether high motivation is their characteristic, about 91.7% said so by choosing "agreed and strongly agreed" scale. They enrolled in the distance learning programs on their own willingness and desire.

### **Characteristics of Older Adult Learners**

From the survey, characteristics of older adult learners in distance education programs can be related to the following areas:

- **Learners' skills**
- **Internal factors of older adult learners**
- **Handling learning activities**
- **Social skills and external support**

Frequency, percentage in parentheses, mean and standard deviation for each statement were given in the tables related to each area. With respect to the first area, Table: 2 shows that majority of respondents had a few learners' skills that would help them in their study.

In this area, skill or knowledge on practicing healthy diet and physical exercise had the highest agreement among respondents (mean=4.53), followed by managing time effectively (mean=3.93), how to use e-mail and forum (mean=3.86), and how to use library (mean=3.5).

The older adult learners should be healthy and fit in order to be able to study effectively especially in the demanding degree programs. At the age of 50 and above, having knowledge on diet and physical fitness would be helpful and beneficial. It is very encouraging to note that majority of older adult learners are health conscious and aware of the importance of proper dieting and physical exercise.

Time management is critical for older adult learners to succeed in their studies. As majority of the respondents were still employed, effective time management would ensure multiple tasks were done properly and on time.

Rapid development in communication technologies has forced adult learners to acquire relevant computer skills. From the data, the respondents were able to use computer or more specifically they knew how to utilize the internet communication like e-mail and forum. At SDE, greater usage of electronic communication is on the increase.

As such more learning materials and information are transmitted electronically to the students. However, a few respondents had expressed their concerns about the use of communication through internet as for them it is still troublesome or beyond their capabilities.

*I know how to use the computer but I'm slow at it. I still prefer for the SDE to send materials or information by print. (Respondent Y)*

*I don't know how to open the e-mail, portal, downloading materials from internet ... just don't know how to do it. (Respondent K)*

**Table: 2**  
**Older adult learners' skills**

Statement	Strongly disagree	Do not agree	Agree to a certain extent	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
I know how to manage time effectively	0 (0)	1.4 (1)	23.6 (17)	55.6 (40)	19.4 (14)	3.93	0.69
I know how to use library facilities	4.2 (3)	9.7 (7)	33.3 (24)	37.5 (27)	15.3 (11)	3.50	1.01
I know how to practice healthy diet and do physical exercise	0 (0)	0 (0)	4.2 (3)	38.9 (28)	56.9 (41)	4.53	0.58
I know how to use e-mail and forum	4.2 (3)	4.2 (3)	23.6 (17)	37.5 (27)	30.6 (22)	3.86	1.04

(n=72 and frequency in parentheses)

Area related to internal factors of older adult learners is shown in Table 3. Respondents described themselves as highly motivated persons (91.7%, mean=4.42).

They would focus their efforts to achieve the stated goal with valour. This is consistent with their response to the question that had motivated them to participate in the distance education programs at SDE. They had strong desire or love to study (91.7%, mean = 4.50), believe in their ability (93.1%, mean = 4.46) and self-directed learner (82.0%, mean = 4.10). According to [Mezirow \(1981\)](#), self-confidence in one's learning ability is important for adult learners. Love to study, believe in one's ability and self-directed are among desirable characteristics for older adult learners to succeed in completing their studies.

**Table: 3**  
**Internal factors of older adult learners**

Statement	Strongly disagree	Do not agree	Agree to a certain extent	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
I'm a highly motivated person	0 (0)	1.4 (1)	6.9 (5)	40.3 (29)	51.4 (37)	4.42	0.69
I believe in my ability	0 (0)	0 (0)	6.9 (5)	40.3 (29)	52.8 (38)	4.46	0.63
I'm a self-directed learner	1.4 (1)	0 (0)	16.7 (12)	51.4 (37)	30.6 (22)	4.10	0.77
I love to learn	0 (0)	0 (0)	8.3 (6)	33.3 (24)	58.3 (42)	4.50	0.65

(n=72 and frequency in parentheses)

There are many learning activities that older adult learners have to participate and act accordingly. Table 4 below depicts several characteristics shown by respondents with regard to handling learning activities. Majority of the respondents agreed with the statement "I'm able to submit my assignments on time" (75.0%, mean=4.10) which somehow indicates their effectiveness of time management skill.



**Table: 4**  
**Handling learning activities**

Statement	Strongly disagree	Do not agree	Agree to a certain extent	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
I'm able to submit my assignments on time	0 (0)	5.6 (4)	19.4 (14)	34.7 (25)	40.3 (29)	4.10	0.91
I need friends to help me in my assignment	9.7 (7)	19.4 (14)	30.6 (22)	27.8 (20)	12.5 (9)	3.14	1.17
I will contact lecturers if I had any learning problems	5.6 (4)	12.5 (9)	31.9 (23)	30.6 (22)	19.4 (14)	3.46	1.11
I'm not embarrassed to ask from younger students	4.2 (3)	0 (0)	11.1 (8)	40.3 (29)	44.4 (32)	4.21	0.95
I feel stressful with academic works	8.3 (6)	22.2 (16)	34.7 (25)	20.8 (15)	13.9 (10)	3.10	1.15
I learn without examination in mind	6.9 (5)	11.1 (8)	29.2 (21)	40.3 (29)	12.5 (9)	3.40	1.07
I read additional reading materials	1.4 (1)	6.9 (5)	23.6 (17)	38.9 (28)	29.2 (21)	3.88	0.96

(n=72 and frequency in parentheses)

Only about 40.3% of the respondents need help from friends to do the assignments and 50.0% would contact their lecturers if they had any problems. Respondents were not embarrassed to ask younger students in academic matters (84.7%, mean=4.21).

Respondents were almost equally divided into three groups with regard to stress; stressful with academic work (34.7%), agree to a certain extent (34.7%), and not stressful (30.5%).

This indicates that some older adult learners are able to cope with the academic programs at SDE without stress and some learners display stressful characteristics.

A total of 52.8% of the respondents indicated that they learn without having examination in mind and about 18% were mindful of examination. May be at this age, respondents were less concerned about examination and majority participated because of seeking the knowledge.

About 68.1% of the respondents read additional reading materials. This figure indicates that the older adult learners are knowledge seekers that would go for extra miles to gain knowledge by reading additional materials beyond the required texts or modules.

Table 5 demonstrates that most respondents were comfortable with younger students (83.3%) and some of them were sought after by younger students for advice (43.1%). One of the respondent said:

*"I interact with younger students... they asked me to edit their writings ... they know I'm a teacher and had experienced in teaching English. I feel happy to help them." (Respondent W)*

**Table: 5**  
**Social skills and external support**

Statement	Strongly disagree	Do not agree	Agree to a certain extent	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
I feel comfortable among younger students	0 (0)	1.4 (1)	15.3 (11)	38.9 (28)	44.4 (32)	4.26	0.77
Younger students always sought advice about life from me	6.9 (5)	11.1 (8)	38.9 (28)	27.8 (20)	15.3 (11)	3.33	1.08
I don't have financial difficulties	2.8 (2)	5.6 (4)	11.1 (8)	36.1 (26)	44.4 (32)	4.14	1.01
My family support me to study	1.4 (1)	2.8 (2)	6.9 (5)	25.0 (18)	63.9 (46)	4.47	0.86

(n=72 and frequency in parentheses)

Older adult learners are more experienced in many aspects of life and they know how to communicate with people easily. For some of these respondents the younger students are just like their children or grandchildren. Financial was not a problem to most respondents (80.5%). They were able to pay for the tuition fees, transportation, room, food and other essential items without many difficulties.

A majority of respondents were also lucky to have family that support their decision to study (88.9%). Family support is paramount during older adult learning period. Words of encouragement and understanding from family members would help them emotionally.

## CONCLUSION

Distance education institutions are facing a more complex and dynamic group of learners. A new emerging group of the older adult learner population is making its presence felt especially in the developing countries as age structures are changing nations toward ageing societies. Older adult learners are capable to undertake rigorous undergraduate degree programs.

The main reasons cited for older adult learners' participation were related to career advancement (for the still employed adult learners) and for the sake of knowledge. The study found that the older adult learners have the following characteristics: They are highly motivated, eager to learn, health conscious, have effective time management, have good social skills, no financial difficulties, and have strong family support. Challenges faced by the older adult learners were related to the usage of computer and the stress of study.

Further study of older adult learners demographics, characteristics and motivation are needed to help institutions and distance educators to develop course materials and techniques appropriately. Suitable support services could also be made available. Understanding and mitigating technology problems are important, especially with regard to the rapid expansion of communication technology.

As such greater number of older adult learners would be able to utilize the technology to their advantage.

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