Adult learners' challenges in distance learning: A case study in Universiti Sains Malaysia

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This study investigated the challenges experienced by adult learners studying in Universiti Sains Malaysia in Malaysia while remaining active in multiple roles. The research employed a qualitative approach to explore the challenges faced by adult learners studying in distance education. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve adult learners. Data were analysed using *Nvivo* version 12. The findings revealed work commitments to be one of the main challenges experienced by these learners, with work transition emerging as an additional challenge. Other observable challenges included family commitments, adaptation to studying, and the cost of the education. These challenges were found to affect adult learners who had multiple roles, and the challenges subsequently became barriers to learning. The research outcomes offer a realistic insight into the lived experiences of adult learners. Based on the research outcomes, educators and policymakers in distance education should strategise to improve the conduct of distance learning by knowing and fully considering the challenges experienced by their adult students.

Introduction

With their maturity, adult learners are often regarded as all-rounders who can manage their multiple roles effectively. Kerr (2011) defined adult learners as learners who have finished their first cycle of education and are continuing their studies for differing reasons after a period of absence. Although adult learners are expected to be of a particular age, this is often not the benchmark. Instead, the varied life demands of adult learners are what define their status as adult learners (Karmelita, 2020). Characteristically, adult learners differ significantly from traditional university students (Mackinnon-Slaney, 1994). Often, adult learners are already living as independent individuals with career and family duties (Mackinnon-Slaney, 1994). With adult learners' maturity, their intrinsic motivation to learn also differs. If traditional university students are pursuing qualifications to prepare for employment and adulthood, adult learners are driven by self-development, career change or career advancement **(**Kazis, Callahan, Davidson, McLeod, Bosworth, Choitz & Hoops 2007; Tyler-Smith, 2006; Fairchild, 2003). Kerr (2011) nevertheless cautioned that the definition should not be rigid as the educational pathways which students follow are increasingly diverse.

Several factors have prompted the surge of adult learners pursuing higher education. Owusu-Agyeman, Fourie-Malherbe and Frick (2018) identified "worldwide ageing populations, changing student demographics, individual motivational factors and rapid changes in the workplace environment" as a few of the factors which have intensified the increase in the numbers of adult learners in higher education. What is unique about adult learners is that they can be regarded as all-rounders as they pursue their higher education while simultaneously having a job, a family and other community duties (Schlossberg,

Lynch & Chickering 1989; Fairchild, 2003). Likewise, Eliason, Mortimer and Vuolo (2015) disclosed that adult learners often occupy several roles such as student, employee, partner, parent or caretaker at the same time.

With their multiple roles and socio-economic reality, adult learners are faced with unrelenting demands of their complicated life that subsequently deter their educational effort compared to traditional university students. Often, adult learners struggled with literacy programs (Miller, Esposito & McCardle, 2011) as well as having to negate their sense of self as a student with varied roles (Brunton & Buckley, 2020). To this end, Pogson and Tennant (1999) argued that serious consideration should be given to comprehending the life course and the social construction of adult learners as this will enable educators to plan learning for adult learners more effectively. Futhermore, Roumell (2019) uncovered a large percentage of learning did not transfer successfully because educators were too focused on designing content and delivery and neglected meaningful social interaction with adult learners in education. Similarly, Shih, Velan and Shulruf's (2017) research on eLearning technologies disclosed the importance of shared values and community engagement in learning.

Henceforth, to understand the life course of adult learners and to subsequently improve education and learning experience for adult learners, it is pertinent that the shared challenges of adult learners are investigated. This paper aimed to examine the daily routine of adult learners and understand how their multiple roles in their life courses affected studying. Further to this, the paper aimed to disclose the challenging experiences of adult learners. The purpose is to offer a rich insight into their shared experiences.

Literature Review

Life courses and adulthood

There are several standard stages of the life course which can be distinctly perceived: childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age (Greene, Wheatley and Aldava, 1992). Adulthood is considered the peak period in the life course because adults with jobs are recognised as active contributing members of society (Bee & Bjorklund, 1996). In addition to adult learners being active members of society, adulthood marks the commencement of family establishment. The family establishment itself involves the generic stages of courtship, marriage, child-rearing and ageing (Duvall, 1957). Although these life phases are a general expectation in adulthood, it is essential to note that the timeline of the expected life stages is not the same for everyone, and some might not even experience any of the anticipated stages. Moreover, Blatterer (2002) cautioned against oversimplifying the ideal adulthood against the actualisation of it. With recent changes in social structures such as the shift from the traditional family to the modern family structure, it is becoming harder to standardise life stages (Settersten, Ottusch & Schneider, 2015).

However, although the markers for adulthood are harder to define, one aspect remains certain in adulthood, individuals do not occupy a finite role. By inhabiting several vital roles, adult learners are plunged into having to juggle multiple responsibilities which

could, one way or another, compromise other vital roles. One notable outcome of juggling multiple roles is the concern about work and family conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In one study, women adult university students were found to encountered role conflict as they navigated conflicting role demands in their lives (Home, 1998). Another central element in the adult life course is the transition period. What is precarious about this period is the assumption of new roles and the insecurities and uncertainties which come with them (Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2015). Even though the narration of the transition period is usually confined within the emerging adults' discourses, it should be discussed beyond the young adults phase as the transition period can be a profound phenomenon continuing deep into adulthood. Anderson et al. (2011) recognised that role changes accentuate transitioning pressure, and it certainly is an added stress for adult learners. Furthermore, in considering enrolment in higher education, Karmelita (2020) believed that adult learners are already in a transitioning phase.

Adult learners and learning challenges

In addition to having multiple roles and managing the transition period, adult learners typically do not follow the traditional pathway of learning, which is full time and on campus. For adult learners, distance learning has become a flexible pathway to access higher education (Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017; Carlsen, Holmberg, Neghina & Owusu-Boampong, 2016; Pusser et al., 2007). For adult learners who have decided on distance education, studying remotely poses a challenge as they are required to adapt to studying distantly that is entirely different from the traditional learning method. So what is unique for adult learners in this situation is that they not only have to readapt to learning after being absent from education for a period of time, they also need to familiarise themselves with the new techniques of remote learning (Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017; Ch'ng, 2019). Tyler-Smith (2006) observed that adult learners are less proficient in eLearning and do not have the necessary digital literacy experience as compared to younger students.

Adult learners have multiple onerous roles. They also have to readapt to learning and gain new ability to study remotely. As adult learners become an increasing presence in higher education, it is anticipated that they will reshape the practices and policies in higher education (Sun, 2019; Kazis et al., 2017). By drawing out the lived and shared challenges of adult learners, this study contributes to the knowledge from the perspectives of adult learners. This study is particularly useful for prospective adult learners in their preparation for furthering their education. In recognising the realistic and shared challenges of adult learners, educators and policymakers of distance education could strategise to improve the conduct of successful distance learning.

Method

Research design

To gain insight into the lived experiences and shared challenges amongst adult learners, a qualitative approach was adopted for this study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005),

qualitative approaches aim to understand or construe phenomena with the meaning given by the people in their organic surroundings. For this reason, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used for this study. Qualitative research frequently engages in semi-structured in-depth interviews because it enables profound inquiries into the social and personal phenomenon (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Kendall, 2008). Furthermore, as researchers analyse patterns accumulated in individual stories and aligning it with the shared meaning of the group, discrepancies could be detected (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). Comparison between the individuals' stories is beneficial for determining the consistency of the research.

Research site

This study's research site was the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), located in the north-west of Malaysia. USM provides higher education courses delivered through traditional classrooms and distance education. USM distance education courses are based primarily on remote learning by way of eLearning, conducted asynchronously, whilst allowing students a specific time-frame to complete their studies. In USM, the mean age of adult learners in distance education was 32 years, and 95% of the students were either working or self-employed. Adult learners at this institution were therefore deemed to be active adults in their adult life stage. This research site was, therefore, ideal for the study of adult learners in higher education.

Research respondents

Table 1: Respondents' demographic data

Adult learner	Gender	Age	Marital status	Industry	Work exp. (yrs)	Child-ren	Subject
AL1	Male	45	Married	Museum	Above 10	2	Social sciences
AL2	Male	29	Married	Police	7	1	Social sciences
AL3	Male	41	Married	Museum	Above 10	2	Social sciences
AL4	Female	35	Other	Agriculture	Above 10	1	Management
AL5	Female	31	Single	Religious welfare	7-9	NA	Social sciences
AL6	Female	35	Single	Health care	Above 10	NA	Social sciences
AL7	Female	32	Single	Engineering	Above 10	NA	Management
AL8	Male	32	Single	Health care	7-9	NA	Social sciences
AL9	Female	34	Married	Insolvency	Above 10	2	Management
AL10	Female	27	Single	Museum	3-6	NA	Social sciences
AL11	Female	31	Single	Prison	Above 10	NA	Social sciences
AL12	Female	28	Single	Health care	3-6	NA	Social sciences

Source: Field data, November 2019

Respondents for the study were purposively selected based on three criteria: (1) they should be students who are currently enrolled or have recently graduated from the study site, to represent current adult learners' experiences; (2) their pathway of education is dissimilar to traditional undergraduate students, to ensure adult roles are present in the study; and (3) they should reside outside the state of the study site to establish the distance learning variable.

The research invited respondents from the research site to participate in the study. Two respondents were successfully recruited from this invitation, and they proceeded to introduce ten additional respondents through referral sampling. There were thus twelve respondents for this study. Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic backgrounds. Due to the referral nature of the recruitment of respondents, they were unintentionally focused in one state. Although the study site was based in the northern region, in the west of Malaysia, the interviews were conducted in the home state of adult learners in the east of Malaysia, Sarawak, with the exception of one respondent who was interviewed in Perak.

Data collection

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in languages which were comfortable for the respondents. They were conducted in Bahasa Melayu, English and Mandarin and ranged in duration from 35 to 70 minutes. The interview questions (*see* Appendix) consisted of two parts of semi-guided questions that intentionally left room for follow-up questions and dialogues. The first part started with basic demographic questions, and the second part focused on the multiple roles of adult learners and their relation to studying. Although the interviews began with guided questions, the researcher did not purposely interrupt or try to control the narrations but instead allowed dialogues to flow between the interviewee and the researcher. The researcher allowed the respondents to take the lead in directing their experience as adult learners because they are the expert in this field (Frank, 2010). Before the start of each interview, informed consent was collected. The interview was then recorded with a recorder on the researcher's phone and afterwards removed and stored in a researcher-only accessible hard disk. The interviews were transcribed, and transcriptions in Bahasa Melayu and Mandarin were translated before the data analysis process commenced.

Data analysis

Guided by the literature discussions on adult learners' life stages, learning challenges and underlying research aims, a thematic coding analysis was performed on the data collected. The thematic analysis would allow for the exploration of the way individuals construe meaning from their social worlds (Evans & Lewis, 2018). Hence, a thematic analysis is suited for this study as it can derive rich information from the interviews to frame the data. The analysis began with a coding process utilising *Nvivo* version 12. Following Saldaña's (2015) coding manual, the coding process began by applying classification codes to material in the transcribed data, which yielded 71 codes. In the next coding process, the 71 codes were further analysed and subsequently sorted into categories and sub-categories. As Saldaña (2015) predicted, coding is not just about labelling as it provides the link between codes which can lead to idea generation. As the data analysis progressed, themes began to emerge and therefore, five categories and one sub-category were identified from the data analysis. From here, the central theme of this study, adult learners' challenges in distance education was established.

Results and discussion

The accounts of adult learners revealed one prevailing and consistent category in their challenges as adult learners. Work commitments in the pursuit of a degree were one of the challenges which were discussed predominantly and persistently by adult learners in this study. Another recurring challenge was family commitments. Adaptation to studying, other commitments and the cost of the education were challenges but were not as prevalent as work and family commitments. These findings are consistent with those of other studies (Kara et al., 2019; Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017; Deggs, 2011).

Table 2 shows the categories derived from the *NVivo* coding analysis in sequence from themes with most references to those with least references in this study. The references reflected the regularity of a particular category being discussed by the respondents. Considering that work transition was made under work commitments, the category 'work commitments' was thus the most frequently discussed category in response to questions about the respondents' challenges as adult learners. This was followed by challenges from family commitments, adaptation to studying, other commitments and the cost of the education.

Table 2: Adult learners' challenges in distance education

Category	Respondents	References
Work commitments	11	68
Work transition	5	29
Family commitments	7	32
Adaptation to studying	7	14
Other commitments	4	10
The cost of the education	3	6

Source: Field data, November 2019

An overview of adult learners' daily routine

Before discussing adult learners' challenges, it will be useful to explain the daily routine of adult learners. The purpose of this summary of a daily routine is to provide a first-person view of the demands of having multiple roles. From the interviews, an estimated daily routine has been constructed based on the adult learners' three prominent roles; worker, parent or/and partner, and student (Figure 1). This daily routine is determined by the time allocated for each of these roles. In the daily routine, adult learners begin their day from 6 am onwards to fulfil their family obligations. Following this, they commute to work and begin work between 8 and 9 am and then finish work between 5 and 6 pm. Outside these times, adult learners continued with their family obligations. Adult learners only get into their student role when they have fulfilled their family obligations, and this will be around 9 pm and will then end about midnight.

Based on this average daily routine, adult learners spent the most hours in the day on their work, estimated to be eight to nine hours. Following this, they spent six to seven hours on family-related tasks and another six to seven hours for rest and sleep. This left about three

to four hours of studying time for adult learners. In these three to four hours, adult learners in this study had to allocate their time to six or seven courses for lesson reviews, revision, assessment preparation, content research and communication. This time allocation appeared to be the optimal pattern for adult learners, but it should be taken into consideration that by 9 pm, adult learners may have reached the limit of their mental and physical capacity with their overwhelming daily demands as often implied in their interviews. The adult learners' packed routine is disconcerting.
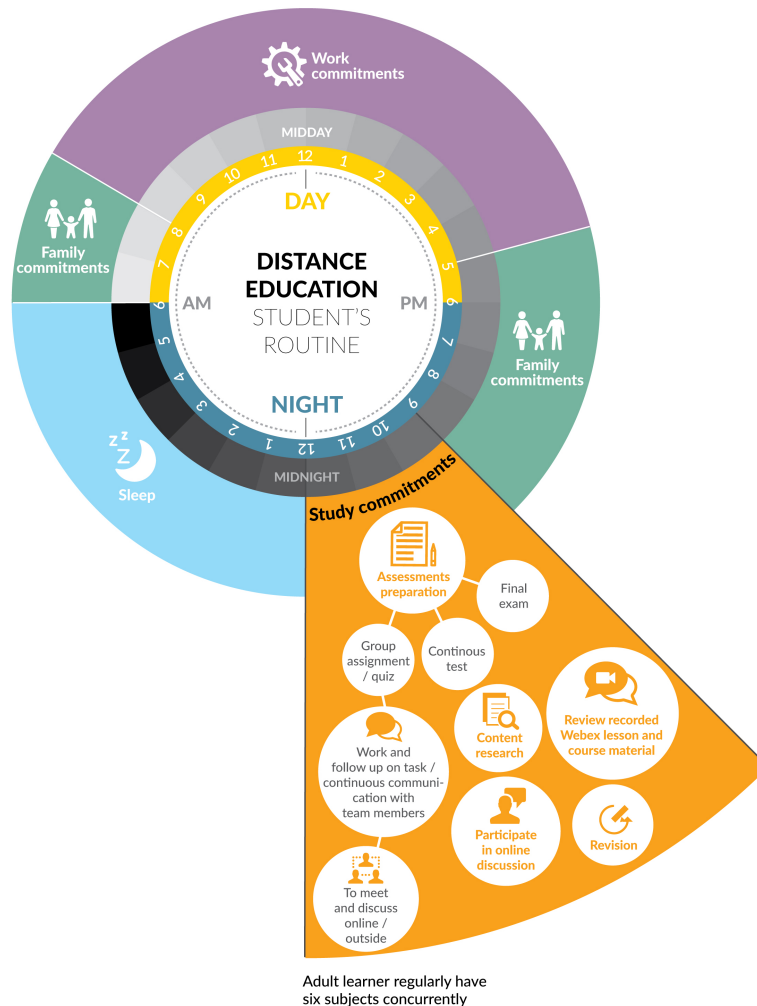

Figure 1: Adult learners' daily weekday routine
(use PDF reader 'zoom in' function to view)

For single adult learners, it was presumed that without family obligations, they would have fewer challenges to manage. This is partially accurate as respondents AL5 and AL8 allocated more time for studying after work and at weekends, and said that they were not particularly stressed in their daily activities. However, of the remaining single adult

learners, AL6, AL7, AL10, AL11 and AL12 struggled to manage their family obligations and other roles. AL10 and AL12 may have been single, but they still had to attend to their family. AL6 and AL11 were so involved with work commitments that their studies were compromised, whereas AL7 had community commitments. Single adult learners might have more flexibility compared with adult learners who have a family, but as adult learners, they still have other demanding roles to manage.

It is important to note that the daily routine is not a permanent fixture but is adaptable to the living requirements of adult learners such as sudden work demand, emergency on the home front and relocation. If such situations were to occur, the allocated study time often would be first to be compromised. What is also evident in this daily routine is that adult learners do not study on a regular nine-to-five basis. This can be a hindrance to studying for non-traditional adult learners, if their education institution only operates from 8 am to 5 pm on weekdays (Sun, 2019). From this first-person summary of adult learners' daily routine, the manifestation of barriers to learning can be observed. Having multiple roles puts a strain on time management and this, in turn, provides a reasonable explanation for the challenges which became barriers to learning for these adult learners. The following section will address the categorical challenges of adult learners. The discussion in this section will provide additional insight into how frequently adult learners' routines were interrupted by the challenges which they face.

Adult learners' challenges

Five categories of the challenge were identified from the interviews conducted with twelve adult learners. These categories emerged from their responses to questions about their challenges as adult learners and how these challenges subsequently affected their learning. These categories were work commitments, family commitments, adaptation to studying, other commitments and the cost of the education. Although these categories will be addressed individually, the narrative of adult learners often implicates other categories into the category which is being discussed. In a way, this correlation between the categories revealed the unique complexities of adult learners. Cercone (2008) believed that this is one of the reasons why adult learners tend to have a more complicated life compared with traditional college students. The discussion which follows will begin with the work commitments challenge, which was the most frequently discussed category (Table 2).

Work commitments
For adult learners in this study, work commitments referred to their obligations to the demands of their full-time paying job. Work commitments are recognised as the most challenging undertaking for adult learners in this study, in accord with the time allocated to work in adult learners' daily routine (Figure 1).

In response to work commitments, respondent AL1, who worked in a museum, said

> We have many tasks, and we have few staff members. We only have five members in our section: the head, me and the other three staff. We have to cover a lot at work. We have to conserve artefacts at the lab every day. We have to perform maintenance for historical buildings, sites and monuments around the state. Sometimes we have to work with the

archaeology section when they need conservation expertise. We also have to be involved in external programs and international conferences. I have to juggle this [work] between my studies and family. It's definitely challenging.

Similarly, AL2 felt afflicted by his work commitments. The demands and the unpredictability of his work as a police officer inevitably became a barrier to learning. He said that

It comes from the working hours; it's tiring. If there is a case, we have to observe and help if they are experiencing difficulties. We can't predict what will happen in a day, what sort of crime or if it's a suicide case, we can't predict it. That's why we have to be always alert. If this occurs, we have to go immediately. At the time, we can't decide 'OK, let's settle this case at 4 pm'. We can't. By the time we reach home, we won't even realise that we have worked twelve hours. It's tiring, '[I] need a break', '[I] had to take care of my child'. I accept the challenge, as it is my duty. We have to be good at arranging our time. If I have a duty in the afternoon, and I have a live *Webex* [live learning session], how am I going to attend? I've to find the right timing.

As a team-leader female prison officer, AL11 had her share of work commitments challenge. What is striking is that because of her single status, it just did not happen that her responsibilities were moderated. Instead, being single, she had to accommodate her colleagues with children. She said,

I have to hold on to my phone [at night]. At 11 pm, they [her team members] will call to tell me that they can't come to work the next morning because they have no-one to look after their children. I have to call the other team members one by one to see who is willing to be a replacement in the morning shift. It happens often. If I can't find a replacement, because I am single with no commitments whereas the others have children, I have to be considerate and work a double shift.

AL11 added that she only had time for studies after her work commitments were completed, even if this meant sleeping for only two hours. She related her experience,

I slept for only two hours. I was at the town café until 3 am [there was no Internet connection in her work hostel] to submit my assignment, and after that I had to wake up at 5 am for work.

AL2 and AL11 were not the only respondents who had their study routine interrupted because of work commitments. Respondent AL8, who worked as a health-care officer, could have his study routine interrupted if there is a pandemic or a transmittable disease outbreak. He explained that he usually did not work during the weekend unless there is an outbreak. There is a notable connection between respondents AL2, AL8 and AL11 in that they were all essential workers. As essential workers, they had to be on duty whenever the occasion required them to be regardless of their other responsibilities. On top of the challenge of regular work commitments, essential-worker workload further affected their work commitments as adult learners and this added constraints to their study commitments.

Work transition

One notable sub-category which emerged from the adult learners' narrations was the implications which a work transition had for their education. Whilst these adult learners accepted the challenges which can come with being an adult learner, this awareness does not take away the fact that a transition at work can still affect their learning experience adversely. Work transition refers to the changes which can occur in the work of adult learners as they pursue their degree. Based on the findings, these transitions include added responsibilities (AL1), a career change (AL4), department change (AL6), promotion (AL9) and relocation (AL12).

Undeniably, a transition period occurring during adult learners' active learning time can affect their education. Respondent AL6 experienced precisely such a predicament. Respondent AL6, who worked as an administrative assistant in a health-care department, recently shifted unit due to a workplace policy requirement said,

> My CGPA [cumulative grade point average] dropped. I believe it was due to my shift. I had to finish the previous staff's tasks, so I had to work overtime until 6 pm plus. I came back home late, and I was too tired to study.

Respondent AL4, a single mother, experienced a similar challenge when she changed job. She explained,

> Now it's more hectic. The difficult part of being in this job for me is that things are always rushed and this adds to the workload. I find it difficult to balance it with my studies now, I really have to skip a lot of videos [study material].

AL9, a mother of two young children who had recently been promoted, struggled similarly to respondents AL4 and AL6. She said

> Previously I could still sneak in some time for assignments at work. Right now, from 8 am to the afternoon, if I stop working, my work will pile up. Now I have no time to do any revision.

Work transitions are expected to be demanding, but nevertheless became an additional challenge for adult learners. Work transition is a significant challenge experienced by adult learners in this study and is related to the norms expected in stages of adulthood. Respondent AL4 summed up the continuous transition phases in adulthood. She said,

> Because once you start working, this is my experience, once you start working, it will take a very long time for you to actually go and continue your degree. Especially when in between those times there are a lot of things happening, maybe talk of marriage, all these sorts of things.

Family commitments

Next to work commitments, family commitments were considered to be another significant set of challenges for adult learners. Family commitments refer to the responsibility which adult learners have towards their family regardless of whether their

status is married, single or others. Commitment towards their family was discerned on occasions to interfere with learning by adult learners.

The concentration given to studying before and after having a child was observed by respondent AL4. As respondent AL4 progressed in life, she became a single mother, and although she admitted that her daughter was manageable and she had her family support, she discovered that there was a stark contrast between when she was studying full time without family commitments and with having a child. She found she had less concentration compared with before she had study and family commitments. She said,

> My focus is only on my studies; I don't work, I don't do any, like, any household chores.
> I don't have to do all that. All the things that I have to think of are … I have to go to
> class and then eat, find food and then study at night. So the focus is greater.

Respondent AL1, who had two young children when he began to pursue his higher education, said

> Others might not experience the same things as we do. After work, we have to attend to
> our family. I have young children, and I have to study after that and work on my
> assignment as well. It was challenging. When I was first offered the course in 2010, I had
> to postpone my study because my in-law passed away.

Respondents AL3 and AL9 shared the same sentiments as AL1 in that studying became a challenge for them when they had young children to attend to.

Another notable observation from the 'family commitments' category is that even adult learners who are single can also experience challenges to their studies due to family commitments. Respondent AL12, a single health-care worker who relocated back home to concentrate on her studies, said,

> But when I relocated back, it became more stressful because previously I didn't need to
> take care of them. It became worse [referring to studying]. I'm the eldest; eldest
> granddaughter, eldest daughter and eldest sister. I have two sisters, one brother and they
> are all very young. My youngest brother is only in form 1. Because my father and my
> mother are divorced, I have to take care of my family, my grandparents, my sisters. I'm
> just like a father and just like a mother.

Respondent AL10, who was single at the time of her studies, had the same experience as AL12: she said she had experienced time constraints having to manage her family and studies at the same time.

Adaptation to studying
As previously discussed, adult learners are often students who are continuing their education after they have finished their first cycle of studying. With a noticeable gap between their first and current cycles of education, adult learners have to adapt to studying again. This challenge of adapting to studying again refers to the struggle which adult learners have to endure when they resume the student role as an adult and also

having to familiarise themselves with remote learning and the technical requirements which it brings.

On this adaptation to studying, in particular in response to studying in higher education, AL1 said,

> If the material is too academic, of course it will be academic, however, sometimes as a student, we just started out on the [undergraduate] degree. We only had the basic [knowledge]. It's definitely easier for masters or PhD students, but for us, we just have the basics. I feel the discordance when my work and my academic reading don't match. If more straightforward language was used, it would easier to understand the material.

Respondent AL9 felt the same about adapting to higher education after her diploma eight years earlier; she said that

> Diploma level contrasts greatly with the degree level. How [am I] going to prepare a satisfactory assignment? It feels weird, I was full-time before, and now I am studying remotely. How am I going to do this? Do I ask the lecturer?

Respondent AL10 had no problem at the beginning, but as the years went by, she began to feel the challenge of studying in higher education; she said,

> In the first year, it was objective [multiple choice assessment], so I did OK, but from the second year onwards, my grade fell. I had to write many essays. and I am weak in essay writing. This was a particularly stressful year for me. I only managed to catch up in the third year.

For respondent AL6, however, instead of having difficulties adjusting to higher education, she was perplexed by remote learning, saying,

> When we sit through the *Webex* [pre-recorded study material], we could only hear the voice, but when we meet our course mates [in campus face-to-face meeting], we finally understood what it meant. If it's not OK, we can meet up with the lecturer, so it's more direct. Remote learning is hard. It takes time for the lecturer to respond. If we email and ask they don't immediately understand our questions, so we have to keep explaining our questions. So [face-to-face meeting] it is more direct.

The adult learners considered reaching out to their course managers as they were confronted by learning challenges. Still, at the same time, they were hesitant as teachers were observed as a respectful profession in the region and hence deemed best not to be questioned (Loh and Teoh, 2017). AL2 was aware that he could email his course managers anytime, but he was nevertheless 'scared'. He said,

> Rather than contacting the lecturer personally, we would send in a representative.

Interestingly, concerns about learning challenges were alleviated once these adult learners could develop a rapport with their course managers. These were noted in AL1 and AL8 experiences with their course managers.

Other commitments

Other commitments were one of the principal challenges experienced by adult learners. In this study, other commitments refer to accountability to friends and to community responsibilities.

Respondent AL4, who was single but was renting a house with friends, struggled with her studies because of her accountability both to her friends and to her community role. She said,

> It's hard to focus [on studying] because now I'm staying with friends in one house. Actually, there are four of us in the house. I've also got a church service every Saturday night. It's from 6.30 pm until 8 pm. I had to stop committing to too many activities, and my grades actually improved.

For respondent AL3, he was only able to focus 60-70% of his time on studying because in the remaining time he was distracted by his friends. This was also experienced by AL2, but he believed that studying remotely makes it especially hard to turn his friends down because he could join them anytime, compared with if he was studying full-time in class.

Cost of the education

The cost of the education was one of the struggles encountered by adult learners in this study, even though it was not as significant as the other challenges. In addition to the course fees, USM students occasionally had to travel to meetings at USM, and although all of them welcomed these opportunities to meet, the costs of travel represented a challenge for them. On this topic, respondent AL1 said,

> We struggle because we are from Kuching. When we attend a face-to-face meeting we have to buy the flight tickets, we need pocket money, and we have to leave some expenses money for our family. We bear this cost our own.

AL2, who had a young family, said,

> It's harder, though, when you have a family because you can't say that you can't buy the baby milk powder. That's certain.

AL9 was concerned about overspending, especially when there are other expected expenses to come. She explained,

> If it's possible, we don't want to spend so much travelling this month [Christmas] because we have to attend a compulsory face-to-face meeting [at USM] next month.

The study has thus far presented the everyday routine of adult learners and identified a set of challenges experienced by adult learners in USM. It is pertinent to note that adult learners' daily routine does not stay invariable, as it is highly changeable depending on their multiple roles and this is particularly true for those that are involved in essential services. This uncertainty inevitably contributed to the barriers to learning. The research outcomes offered a realistic insight into the lived experiences and shared challenges of

adult learners, and in identifying the daily routine of adult learners and the challenges that come with multiple roles, the research has accomplished the aims set out at the beginning of this study.

Conclusion

Because of adult learners' maturity, they are expected to be all-rounders who can handle their studies as they go about managing their everyday responsibilities. This case study's findings have shown otherwise; as adult learners, the respondents felt challenged by their multiple roles. Adult learners' overflowing daily routines illustrate how they experience barriers to learning. The twelve adult learners in this study were found to plan their studies around their demanding life challenges. Often their studies had to take a backseat if there was a sudden change in their living arrangements. This is to be expected, as studying is one of the tasks which adult learners can drop without causing major upheavals in their lives, such as financial, mental and emotional disturbances. With the increasing presence of adult learners in higher education, educators should strategise to improve the conduct of distance learning experiences that can be fitted into the reality of adult learners' extraordinary circumstances. Successful learning for adults in distance education is not dependent on course content design and delivery alone, but depends also on understanding adult learners as persons with busy, valuable lives.

Recommendations, limitations and future research

The insights into adult learners' lived experiences and challenges in this study offer clues for educators and distance education practitioners to recognise the learning challenges from their perspectives. Although educators cannot mitigate the adult learners' personal challenges, they can facilitate their learning experiences. One way to enhance learning experiences is to make available consistent presences and cultivate meaningful social interactions. Arko-Achemfuor's (2017) research revealed that distance education students valued continuous dialogues with their education providers and staff as this assisted them academically. With the need for consistent presences, distance education providers should extend their availability beyond the nine-to-five and encourage social connectivity with adult learners. In addition, continuous learning support should be developed and refined for adult learners who are adapting to learning after a period of absence from education to include academic writing skills, researching, referencing and eLearning skills.

This study has drawn out the challenges conveyed by a small set of adult learners and shown how these challenges can become barriers to learning. Future research should consider investigating the impact of these challenges from the educators' perspective, mainly how these can affect their teaching plans and teaching outcomes. Other prospective studies could focus on frontliners and essential workers continuing their education remotely while working under unpredictable working times and workloads, especially in trying times such as pandemics.

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Appendix: Interview questions

Part 1: Background

1. Respondents demographic background.
   - Gender, age (last enrolled age as active students if applicable), marital status, children (if any), occupation, years of working experience, sector (public, private).
2. Describe your daily routine as adult learners
   - Note relevant roles, life courses, challenges and emerging theme/pattern
3. Describe your educational pathway.
4. Describe your distance education learning experiences.
   - Note challenges and emerging theme/pattern

Part 2: Adults' roles, learning and challenges

Work
5.   Describe your occupation.
6.   Describe your role as [occupation] in relation to your role as a student.
7.   Do you have to travel/work weekend/on-call?
8.   What happens to your studies if you have to travel/work weekend/on-call?
9.   What is the observable consequence in these [work requirements] in relation to your studies?
10. Describe your work transition [emerging theme].
11. Describe your work transition in relation to your role as a student.
12. What is the noted consequence in this change to your role as a student?

Family
13. Describe your [familial role] in your family (single status students included).
14. Describe your [familial role] in relation to your role as a student.
15. What is the observable consequence in your familial role in relation to your studies?
16. Describe other roles (If relevant).
17. Describe your other role in relation to your role as a student.
18. What is the observable consequence in your role in relation to your studies?

On learning
19. When was the last time you were enrolled as an active student?
20. Did you notice any difference from the last time you were an active student [high school students/diploma] as compared to now as an adult learner in higher education? What are the observable differences?
21. What are the challenges you experienced from these learning differences as an adult learner?
22. What is the observable consequence of these learning differences as an adult learner?
23. Did you notice any difference from the last time you were an active student as compared to now as an adult learner with multiple roles? What are the observable differences?
24. What are the challenges you experienced from having multiple roles as an adult learner?
25. What is the observable consequence of having multiple roles as an adult learner?

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