



Online Distance Learning provides Additional Learning Opportunities and improves the Socioeconomic Status of Working Adults in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT :

There are now three online distance learning (ODL) universities in Malaysia providing learning opportunities to working adult learners. The flexibility of ODL is very suitable for working adults who seek higher education without leaving their jobs and losing their earning power. Apart from its flexibility, ODL enables working adults applying whatever they learn to their workplace, especially those taking courses that are related to their jobs which can promote the adaptation and transfer of skills to cope with changing technology, work practices and organisational structure. This Paper reports how ODL has expanded the learning opportunities and ultimately improved the working adults' socioeconomic status. Interviews were conducted with past and present adult students at university to find out how ODL suited the lifestyle of the students as busy working adults. This Paper also reports how ODL improved the socioeconomic status of the working adult learners. Findings showed that ODL provided additional credentials and knowledge to these working adult learners to advance their careers, and that through career advancement, these working adults obtained better jobs and better pay. Thus ODL ultimately improved the socioeconomic status of working adults in Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Online Distance Learning (ODL) has become increasingly widespread throughout Malaysia in the past few years. The first two ODL based universities in Malaysia, namely University Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) and the University of Malaysia (OUM) have been successfully implemented nationwide (Wong, 2006). Learning opportunities for working adults in Malaysia have been expanded now by the addition of a new open university - the Wawasan Open University - which targets working adult learners as well. The flexibility of ODL is very suitable for working adults who seek higher education without leaving their jobs and losing their earning power. Through advancement of their studies in higher education, working

adults may able to improve their socioeconomic status in the society. Some authors have indicated these findings in various studies (Andorka et al., 1999 ; Yik, Lee & Ng, 2002 ; Gaba, 2007).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW :

2.1 Definition of Distance Learning :

Keegan (1995), Evans & Fan (2002), and Baker (2003) define distance learning as education and training resulting from the technological separation of learners and instructors that gives learners freedom from traveling, time and place in order to learn. Levy (2003) added that distance learning is where the instructor presents learning materials in computer systems, especially through the Internet and together with other

educational processes (i.e. student services, training and support). Tresman (2002) mentioned distance learning as teaching at a distance and she included the Open University in the UK as a good example of a distance learning institution. Tsai & Machado (2002) explained that distance learning involved interaction between class members, especially the faculty members and the learners, so that it is different from traditional correspondence learning where interaction is not involved. The interaction can be in the form of video-conferencing, chat rooms, and e-mail (Tsai & Machado, 2002). When we mention distance learning in this age, it is inseparable from e-learning as distance learning today utilises ICT such as e-mail and video conferencing. Therefore, distance learning is done more in online mode today. This has led to the concept of online distance learning (ODL) which is actually quite similar to e-learning and utilizes technology and networks for learning. Due to the easy accessibility of distance learning through networking technologies nowadays, ODL is very suitable for busy working adults that need to obtain higher qualification without sacrificing their jobs.

2.2 Working Adults and Flexibility :

One major selling point of ODL is its flexibility : ODL can be accessed any where and at any time through computer networks especially the Internet. The flexibility of ODL also includes self-paced learning. While some researchers such as Collins (2002), Hitzl (1997), and Koory (2003) use a very general term (i.e. flexible and convenient) to represent ODL overall, this Paper defines flexibility in ODL as being anywhere and anytime. Two other studies notably those by Baldwin-Edwards (2004) and by Evans & Haase (2001) have supported this definition that flexibility relates to location and time of learning. Some researchers have added within this definition that flexibility includes being self-paced (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004 ; Koory, 2003 ; Smith & Rupp, 2004). In addition, ODL is also flexible whereby learners can remain working to earn money (Oakley, 2004) and flexible in that there is

just enough learning (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004). All these characteristics of ODL add weight for working adults to select ODL because it is more flexible than traditional learning.

Most ODL students are working adults as indicated in the studies of Koory (2003) and Qureshi, Morton & Antosz (2002). Besides, these ODL students are said to be older working adults who need money to support themselves (Qureshi, Morton & Antosz, 2002 ; Tucker, 2001). Working adults have difficulties to find time for their studies due to their existing work, family and other social commitments (Yum, Kember & Siaw, 2001). Thus it is quite obvious that working adults are busy individuals who need more flexibility in their studies - for instance attending virtual lectures while being at the workplace or at home (Evans & Fan, 2002). Other studies which have indicated that e-learners need flexibility were conducted by Rivera, McAlister & Rice (2002), Tesone, Alexakis & Platt (2003), Oakley (2004), and Ross (2001). Moreover, the study of Evans & Haase (2001) found the majority of working adults preferred ODL. This also can be seen from the studies of Halsne & Gatta (2002) that indicated a significant higher number of ODL students were working adults, married and having higher incomes. The above reports clearly demonstrate that working adults have many commitments.

Halsne & Gatta (2002) reported that more females than males were keen on ODL, with a statistically significant higher number of females enrolled for ODL. Other studies also found that more females are keen on ODL (Qureshi, Morton & Antosz, 2002 ; Evans & Haase, 2001 ; Willging & Jonhson, 2004). To strengthen this view, Kramarae (2001) found that now there were more married female learners doing ODL. Kramarae further mentioned that married women valued ODL due to its flexibility that allows them to juggle family, studies and work commitments. In Malaysia, there is an increasing number of female learners keen on ODL (Mahmod *et al.*, 2005). The results from these studies suggest that ODL may be very suitable for working women and especially for married working women..

2.3 Career Advancement and Socioeconomic Status :

Apart from its flexibility, ODL enables working adults applying whatever they learn to their workplace, especially those taking courses that are related to their jobs (Collins, Buhalis & Peters, 2003). Similarly, ODL learners also agree that they can obtain extra knowledge for their career advancement or even future career (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004 ; Homan & Macpherson, 2005 ; Varvel, Lindeman & Stovall, 2003 ; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Garnett (2001) referred to this as ‘a process of recognising, creating and applying knowledge through and for work’ or simply work-based learning. McAleavy & McCystral (1996) even stated that this was beneficial as this type of learning enabled “adaptability and transferability of skills to cope with changing technology, work practices and organisational structure”. One important aspect of ODL is that the employee can learn at their desks between work routines and activities (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004).

Besides, ODL enables working adults to learn new technological skills. Learners agreed that they acquired ICT (Information & Communication Technology) computing skills (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004 ; Mason & Rennie, 2004 ; Varvel, Lindeman & Stovall, 2003) during the learning process.

It seemed that ODL also enables learners to have analytical minds since they are more thoughtful when compared to traditional classroom study (Koory, 2003). Besides, Meyer (2003) also found out that higher order thinking does occur in threaded discussion in ODL. Finally, Theroux, Carpenter & Kilbane (2004) also found learners thought critically in online study.

As a result, Oakley (2004) stated ODL may provide credentials and knowledge for working adult learners to advance their careers. This may include the IT skills and analytical skills, as we have just discussed. All these provide impetus for career advancement. Through career advancement, working adults may get better jobs and better pay. This improves socioeconomic status of working adults ultimately. The socioeconomic status is based on income,

education level, occupation level and social status in the community (NCREL, n.d.). As was indicated by Andorka et al. (1999), the more educated one is, the higher the income is and thus the higher social status. Besides, from an article published in *Asiaweek* (Kapoor et al., 2000), some top-ranked business school graduates are well-paid and have good purchasing power. A survey done in India also found out that females after obtaining higher degrees do improve their job opportunity in terms of promotion or changing jobs (Gaba, 2007). Moreover, some studies on data from the US Census Bureau and UPA showed similar results that higher degree graduates do earn significantly higher income than do high school leavers (EarnMyDegree.com, 2007 ; UPA, 2005). Therefore, ODL institutions may provide a knowledge platform for career advancement and consequently better quality of living for working adults.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES :

Since ODL is flexible, it may open opportunities for working adults to further their studies. Therefore, this paper set out to examine how ODL expands learning opportunities and ultimately improves working adults’ socioeconomic status. Interviews were used in the research methodology to elicit information. Secondly this study reports how well ODL suits the lifestyles of busy working adults. Thirdly this study demonstrates how ODL may improve the socioeconomic status of working adult learners.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY :

The research is basically qualitative research that focuses more on the interview. Interview is a research method whereby selected participants are asked questions in order to find out what they think and feel (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). The researcher conducted the structured interview whereby there is a list of pre-determined questions to be asked (Sekaran, 2000). According to Sekaran (2000), interview allows for more

relevant probing questions that might be asked to determine some factors for some questions. Additionally, more detailed and follow-up questions can be asked (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). Interview is deemed beneficial here as working adults can give their opinions in narrated forms compared to questionnaire about their learning opportunities and improvement to their socioeconomic status.

Respondents for this research are working adult learners currently studying in open learning institutions. Those completed their studies through ODL are also recruited as respondents. Interview questions are derived from a literature review on how ODL provides additional learning opportunities which is not otherwise available and how ODL may enhance their socioeconomic status.

Interviews are done in a relaxing coffee shop or in other suitable place. Telephone interviews are also conducted if the interviewees are not free for face-to-face interview. Each interview lasted about an hour or more. When using the structured interview method, additional questions were asked to clarify the factors or answers for questions so that more detailed and accurate findings can be obtained.

Interviews are deemed beneficial to be conducted in this research as the researcher can easily conduct interviews over the telephone when they are not available for face-to-face sessions. Five interviewees were selected for this study. While this number may be small, the interview method could obtain in-depth detail findings for the purposes of this study.

4. RESULTS :

Among the respondents in this study, three were male and two were female. Four of the five had completed an undergraduate degree through ODL, and the other had completed a doctorate degree through ODL. Concerning the ODL institutions involved, two studied at an ODL institution in Malaysia, another two at an ODL institution in Britain, and the other at an ODL institution in Australia.

4.1 Respondent #1 :

Background

The first respondent is female, in her 30s, currently working as an administrator cum property consultant. She had completed her undergraduate degree from an ODL university in Malaysia.

ODL & Additional Learning Opportunities

The first respondent responded that ODL provides flexible time in learning. She further said that lecture notes could be accessed from learning portal. There was flexibility in the time when to take tests and for participating in the forum discussions. Besides, face-to-face tutorials are available but it is optional and learners can attend tutorials in any learning centre located in Malaysia. On top of these, even assignments could be sent through e-mails.

ODL and Career Advancement

Through her studies, the respondent said she can handle a wider scope of tasks now. She also responded that she has a sharper mind for quicker decision-making. She also mentions that a higher level of trust and goodwill is given to her by her boss and more autonomy in doing her work. She conveyed that she can handle more responsibility and deal easily with financial matters. She can also lead her subordinates, supervise and monitor the projects, as well as the tasks and performance of other staff. While she is still in the same company, according to her, there are already a few companies head-hunting her.

Socioeconomic Changes

The respondent expressed that she did not get any increment in salary upon her graduation. However, through her capability and degree status, she can move on to another job easily with higher salary. While not directly related, her degree does boost her confidence, which is evidenced by her now engaging in mutual fund business on a part-time basis, which has a positive effect on her income. This is being reflected by being more highly regarded by her boss and gaining respect from ex-colleagues, family members relatives and church members. She now feels at ease to communicate easily

with all levels of people. She has no problem in her ability now to socialize with others. A skill that she learnt during her studies.

4.2 Respondent #2 :

Background

The second respondent is male, in his 30s, and currently working as the head of a department in a university in Malaysia. He completed his doctorate degree in ODL mode from a university in Australia.

ODL & Additional Learning Opportunities

ODL was beneficial for this respondent especially because he was busy working as a lecturer prior to promotion as head. The respondent conveyed that it was easy for him to obtain learning materials from the website. In addition, the e-library system helped him a lot in obtaining journals and articles for his research work. He did participate in an e-forum and found that learning was possible in his free time by sharing and discussing with others. Besides, the e-mail system did help to save costs in discussion with his academic supervisors, and he could also reply in his free time.

ODL and Career Advancement

ODL is beneficial for respondent 2 in his career. He expressed that through the course that he studied, he was able to learn many research skills and techniques. He has so far published a few papers in international journals and conferences. Research publication is important for this respondent working in a university, since subsequent promotions are based on research publication. Although he is waiting for the conferment of the doctorate, he has been promoted to head of department. In his own self-assessment, he thinks more critically in solving problems now. Moreover, he has become more independent especially in solving problems and he has better information searching skills after undergoing this programme of study.

Socioeconomic Changes

The respondent has got his promotion as head of department and received an increase in salary. Now, the increased salary enables

a better purchasing power and a better lifestyle. His promotion has not only made him feel more proud of himself, but also has facilitated a higher social ranking among his friends. He is also more respected by his family members and relatives.

4.3 Respondent #3 :

Background

The third respondent is female, in her 20s. She is currently working as a lab assistant in a college in Malaysia. She has completed her bachelor degree in ODL mode from a university in United Kingdom.

ODL & Additional Learning Opportunities

The ODL provides her with flexibility in learning. She could study at night time or at weekends especially for online chat. However, there were only a few online chat-rooms available to suit her time. On the top of this, the lecture notes and the study guides are available online.

ODL and Career Advancement

The respondent said that she is more independent now, and the course improves her various soft skills in terms of information search, reading, typing, English grammar, and interaction. Through the degree, she mentioned it could be easier for her to change job in the future. She further mentioned that through knowledge sharing in the chat rooms, she learnt some useful problem solving skills and could solve problems more easily especially work-related problems.

Socioeconomic Changes

Since the respondent has not changed job, she did not get any promotion or increase in salary. However, she does state that her social status is higher now. Relatives and friends look up to her since she is now a university graduate.

4.4 Respondent #4 :

Background

The fourth respondent is male, in his 30s. He is currently working as a senior executive in a bank in Malaysia. He had completed an undergraduate degree from an ODL university in Malaysia.

ODL & Additional Learning Opportunities

The fourth respondent responded that ODL provides advantages for him in that there was flexible time for his learning. Face-to-face tutorials are available but they are optional, and learners can attend tutorials at any learning centre throughout Malaysia. He further shared that lecture notes could be accessed from the learning website. There was flexibility in time for taking tests and for answering forum discussions. Above all, even assignments could be sent through e-mail.

ODL and Career Advancement

The respondent has recently shifted from being an operational staff to a higher level job in another bank for a higher salary after his graduation with a bachelor degree. In terms of careful thinking skills, he confessed that he can think more systematically giving emphasis to minute details when compared to the period before studying. Lastly, he also mentioned that the degree provided him with knowledge which serves as a weapon to face the competitive working environment.

Socioeconomic Changes

As mentioned earlier, the respondent did change to a higher level job in a different bank. The increased salary has improved his purchasing power and made him able to afford to buy a new house where he could not afford this before. He even mentions that nowadays he can afford more entertainment such as movies and more exclusive dining. He viewed the degree as a weapon for him for a higher socioeconomic status, which also serves as a tool to establish social networks.

4.5 Respondent #5 :

Background

The last respondent is male, in his 20s, currently working as an IT executive in a company in Malaysia. He has completed his bachelor degree in ODL mode from a university in the United Kingdom.

ODL & Additional Learning Opportunities

Indeed, for the respondent, the ODL was flexible for his learning. There were also

some online chat-rooms available to suit his time. He could study at nighttime or at weekends especially for online chat that suited his time. Above this, the lecture notes and study guides were available online. Since he was stationed in Malaysia during his studies, he would not be able to gain this degree if the degree was not ODL-based : the ODL mode has thus enabled him to earn an overseas degree.

ODL and Career Advancement

The degree did provide him with basic knowledge to solve work-related problems. Since his degree was ODL-based, this taught him to be independent in learning and searching for information. The constant updating of IT knowledge as relevant to his employment is important and facilitated through information obtained from the Internet, a skill that he mastered throughout his study by the ODL method..

Socioeconomic Changes

The respondent has moved in his job from that of a clerk in a bank to an IT executive with better salary. That has enabled better purchasing power as evidenced by the house bought now. However, he responds that the degree does not improve his position much in his family as most of his family members or relatives are graduates. But at least, this provides him an equal standing with the rest of his family members. According to him again, his status among friends has grown higher and he is thus gaining their respect.

5. DISCUSSION :

Perhaps for working adults, one great advantage of ODL is its flexibility of coupling working with his or her studies (Oakley, 2004). All respondents self-financed their studies while working at the same time. Ultimately, these working adults needed money to support themselves (Qureshi, Morton & Antosz, 2002 ; Tucker, 2001). Traditional learning might not have provided this benefit. One respondent even mentioned that she managed to pay back to her mother all the tuition fees which had

been initially financed by her mother through the mother's full-time job.

Traditional learning requires students to attend face-to-face lectures, thus students may be not able to work. Hence, the traditional learning environment may not be suitable for working adults as it is not flexible at all. Working adults have difficulties to find time for their studies due to their existing work, family and other social commitments (Yum, Kember & Siaw, 2001). The flexibility of study time for working adults in the ODL learning environment enabled learners to find suitable time for learning as one respondent mentions - she can choose an online discussion group that fits her time as there are several discussion groups at different time slots. Moreover, the online resources that ODL provided also eased the searching time and provides the flexibility of time in searching and obtaining learning materials.

All respondents agreed that they learnt some skills and these could be applied to their jobs. Most respondents said that the skills that they learned were critical thinking and problem solving skills. As we discussed earlier, it seemed that ODL also enables learners to have analytical minds since they need to be more decisive in ODL, compared to students in a traditional classroom (Koory, 2003). Theroux, Carpenter & Kilbane (2004) also found that learners thought critically for online case study. It is not surprising to get a similar finding - as some respondents mentioned that they think more critically especially for solving problems.

There are other work-related skills that respondents have learnt. One respondent has also stated that, after learning, she was able to apply leadership and controlling skills in her organization. Soft skills like information searching, interaction skills and even English grammar were learnt through the ODL environment as pointed out by a respondent. While respondents do not mention that they have learnt technological skills in this research, ODL actually enables working adults to learn new technological skills especially skills in using software for instance chat software, Internet software and even word processor.

In general, literature did point out that ODL learners either agreed that they learned ICT (Information & Communication Technology), technology or computing skills (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004 ; Mason & Rennie, 2004 ; Varvel et al., 2003).

One important aspect of ODL is that working adults can learn from their desks in between their work routines and activities (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004). Since working adults are still attached to their companies, they can apply what they learnt to their workplace unlike fulltime students that can only apply what they have learnt when they start working after graduation. As Collins, Buhalis & Peters (2003) stated ODL enables working adults to apply whatever they learn to their workplace, especially for those taking courses that are related to their jobs. McAleavy & McCystral (1996) even stated that this is beneficial as this type of learning enables adaptability and transferability of skills to cope with changing technology, work practices and organisational structure.

Some respondents do not get increased salary or job promotion at the moment. But they do point out that the degrees that they obtained through ODL do serve as 'weapons' or tools for their future career. All mentioned skills that they have learnt throughout their studies. Therefore, it can be that other ODL learners agree that they can obtain extra knowledge for their career advancement or even future career (Baldwin-Edwards, 2004 ; Homan & Macpherson, 2005 ; Varvel et al., 2003 ; Willging & Johnson, 2004).

Perhaps, career advancement does affect the socioeconomic status of working adults. This is demonstrated here by three respondents who have stated that they have better income now which has improved purchasing power. Some even mention that they have purchased house and can afford better lifestyle with more exclusive dining.

6. CONCLUSION :

The degrees that respondents obtained seem helpful for improving their socioeconomic status. All the respondents

mentioned they have gained respect at least from family members or friends. The Malaysia society look highly upon those with degrees. Some respondents even got promoted to a higher job position and thus a higher social status and this is consistent with Gaba's findings (2007). Eventually, all these fit well with what Andorka et al. (1999) had mentioned, the more educated one is, the higher the income is and thus the higher social status. ODL proves to be a good learning method for busy working adults. All working adults in this research like the idea of flexible time for learning is suitable for their working schedule. Therefore, ODL provides a good learning platform for them especially for all of them who are busy working now. The idea of learning anywhere is also beneficial for the respondents in this research, an ODL based university has many learning centres tall over Malaysia and moreover the learning materials can be accessed from anywhere in world. Therefore, it seems ODL really provided important and useful additional learning opportunities for busy working adults.

Without ODL, working adults might not be able to obtain overseas degrees. As stated in the research, some respondents pursued their studies through a foreign university located in Australia or in the United Kingdom.

All respondents also emphasised that they learnt some work-related skills. These included problem-solving, critical thinking, leadership skills and others. These skills are vital to survive in a competitive corporate world and thus for future job advancement.

It seems ODL also enables the learners to improve their socioeconomic status. Most respondents received better pay or some even climbed the career ladder by way of promotion. With higher pay, these respondents seemed to enjoy better lifestyles and have better purchasing power. Some could even afford to buy houses. All respondents also enjoyed a higher social status among family members, friends or in their organization through their newly earned degrees. This study provides good evidence that ODL does improve the socioeconomic status of working adults.

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