

**Participation of Older adults in Lifelong Learning via Open and
Distance Learning**

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Malaysia's older adult population aged 50 years and above has increased rapidly during the last twenty years, and this places a great demand on social and health care systems that needs to be paid for by the working age population. If the older adults can remain healthy, mentally active and productive, there is no reason why they cannot continue to contribute positively until the last years of life; undergoing what we call successful ageing. One approach to attain successful ageing is for older adults to be employed for as long as possible. To be employable, older adults would need to upgrade themselves with the relevant skills and knowledge that meet the requirements of new job activities. It is in this context that open and distance learning (ODL) can play a significant role. Presently there are six ODL institutions in Malaysia that offer various study programmes at the Diploma, Bachelors, Masters and Ph.D levels. This flexible education opportunity is not fully taken up by the older adult learners, and possible reasons could be that they are not aware that they are eligible and that they could participate in distance learning in ODL institutions. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to highlight the profile and the learning experiences of older adult learners in ODL institutions with the aim of encouraging others to enroll and study in relevant programmes.

Among the six ODL institutions, Open University Malaysia (OUM) was chosen for this study as it is the largest institution in terms of learner numbers. OUM has come a long way in its operations, bringing in a cumulative intake of 94,336 learners. Its total enrolment as of May 2010 stands at 66,484, and out of this, 958 are senior citizens (>50 years old). OUM delivers more than 70 of its programmes through its 53 learning centers, 11 of which are regional centers and the rest are branch learning centers. The distributed learning centers in each state allow learners easy access to study facilities such as computer laboratories, tutorial rooms, resource center and others. Learners can attend their face-to-face tutorials

without having to travel out of state to the learning centers. Besides the face-to-face meetings with their tutors, learners interact with their peers and tutors through the online learning management system, (myLMS). Through this system, learners can access the digital library which provides digital journals, books and other study materials to complement their print modules. The wide range of study programmes allow learners to pursue higher education in any of the areas of information technology, education, business, social sciences, nursing, and engineering at diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate (Masters and Ph.Ds) degree levels. As an institution that caters to the mass, OUM avails higher education to everyone regardless of age, gender, race, socio-economic status, etc. In order to draw more of the older adult population, it provides special incentives such as a 75% discount on course fees.

The participation rate of older adults in OUM, although relatively small, but has been increasing, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table1: Percentage distribution of learners by age (2008-2009)

Age (years)	September 2008 (%)	January 2009 (%)	September 2009 (%)	January 2010 (%)
<20	0.7	7.7	0.7	0.7
20-30	23.8	21.2	23.6	26.0
30-50	74.1	69.3	73.8	71.3
>50	1.4	1.8	1.9	2.0

A detailed analysis of the September 2009 learner data indicate that there were 800 older adult learners, representing a 1.9% of the population. Out of this number, 50.8% were in the 50-54 years age group, followed by 30.8% in the 55- 59; 9.8% in the 60-64 and 2.6% in the 65-69 years age groups, with the remaining 1.2% of the 70 years old and above. The sex ratio of this older adult population was found to be 1.06 indicating that there were 6% more males than female learners. The majority (89.3%) of the older adult learners were married, and the rest, 6.9% single and 3.9% widows. Just like the other learners who have a multitude of commitments, the statistics suggest that despite their older ages, family and work commitments, these older adults were still keen to pursue higher education.

The most popular programmes taken up were the Bachelor programmes followed by the post-graduate (Masters and Phds) programmes. A detailed analysis of the academic performance of these older adult learners indicate that a large majority would eventually graduate with a university diploma or degree, only 6% experienced a potential high risk of not able to graduate with a diploma or degree, unless they bring their CGPA to greater than 2 points. Age was found to

be statistically not significant in influencing older adult learners' CGPA. The mean CGPA score for the 50-59 years age group was 2.9 points while that for the 60 years and above age group was 2.8 points, and that the difference of 0.1 in the two mean scores was insignificant. These results suggest that learners in the 60s and above could perform academically as well as those younger in the age group 50-59 years old. However, the female learners performed academically better than their male counterparts.

While OUM opens its doors to older adults by the normal academic entry requirement, it also allows learners who lack the academic qualification but with rich skills and work experiences to come on board via the "flexible entry". Various initiatives are put in place to ensure that learners are able to cope with the ODL study environment. Despite of OUM's concerted efforts in retaining its learners, 4.9% of the older adults quit from their respective programmes. Another 25% are dormant, that is they have taken three semesters off from their studies, and the majority, 54% are active.

A 'Tracer Survey' on graduates was conducted by OUM jointly with MOHE during the period 2006 to 2008. A sample of 46 out of the total 191 older adult OUM graduates were asked to rate their satisfaction levels on a 5-point Likert scale towards 6 aspects of OUM's programmes, namely '*curriculum*', '*assessment system*', '*career guidance*', '*performance of tutors and facilitators*', '*facilities*' and '*knowledge and skills*' acquired. The combined survey results showed that the mean satisfaction rating was 4.1 out of 5 points, with the lowest of 3.7 points for '*career guidance*' and the highest of 4.4 points for the '*assessment system*'. These figures are evidences that the older adult graduates were satisfied with the programmes offered by OUM. They also reported that they have acquired good computer skills, which augurs well with an ODL and a lifelong learning institution. Additionally, the older adult graduates found that the average positive *influence rating on their way of life* was 4.5 on the 5-point Likert scale, indicating that the education experience has had a great influence on their daily life. Among others, the education received has improved their *general knowledge, increased their awareness of current affairs and development, enhanced their creative thinking capacity and developed self-confidence*. The success of going through the rigorous student lifecycle in OUM until graduation has also enhanced their interest to continue study and to seek for new knowledge. Finally they were now more communicative and more prepared to face problems with improved skills of problem solving. About 25% of the older adult graduates have enrolled to pursue higher degrees at Masters or PhD levels. The main reasons for furthering their education were: *interest in improving knowledge, improving academic qualification, family encouragement, and better job prospects*. These figures indicate that the learning experience in OUM has motivated many of the older adult learners to continue learning for different personal motives.

In conclusion, the analysis of the administration data as well as the graduate

tracer study revealed that older adult learners can perform well in their studies, regardless of their age. Among those who have graduated from OUM, they have acquired the skills and knowledge that they were looking for. They admitted that OUM's programmes had been very useful in terms of improving their *general knowledge, increased their awareness of current affairs and development, enhanced their creative thinking capacity and developed self-confidence*. They also felt that the curriculum offered was of relevance to them, and that they were motivated to continue learning. The above findings serve two purposes; firstly, it gives a true picture of how the older adults are doing in terms of their learning and indirectly encouraging others to do the same. The other is that OUM should increase its older adults intake, for the older adult learners found their learning experience useful and beneficial. Thus OUM should continue to develop and offer suitable and relevant programmes to retrain working adults. In this way, older adults are able to maintain their productive capacity for as long as possible, and this will lead to their better well-being. Efforts put in this area of providing lifelong learning opportunities will help realize the principles of independence, participation and self-fulfillment as well as improved health.

OUM plays a vital role in contributing to the development of human capital by providing the opportunity and encouraging adults to pursue their education to a higher level in order to enhance their skills and knowledge that is required in the ever changing world of work. This pursuit of lifelong learning is crucial in transforming Malaysia from the medium income to the high income economy as emphasized in the Malaysian New Economic Model.

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