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PAGES: 0-0

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/156596>

Self-Transitional Characteristic Of Distance Education Learners: A Case Study Of Three Malaysian Universities

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Introduction

The impact on adult students returning to formal education has been of considerable interest. Rice (1982) described that such impact or change on the students could be described as educational transition. The impact would be experienced not only by the students but affect their family unit as well as other inter-personal relationships such as relationships in the workplace and society. In a related study, Schlossberg (1984) defined educational transition as the occurrence or change which brings about transformation in associations, habits, characters and/or presuppositions, not only within the working environment, but also within the home environment. Hence, the educational transition as described by Rice (1982) that is relevant to this study is the transition of adult learners from being non-students to students enrolled in the distance education programmes.

Our study on educational transition was a modification and refinement of an earlier study by Lauzon (1989a). Lauzon (1989a) who focused his study on adult male students enrolled in full-time undergraduate degree programmes, found that the transition from the role of non-students to students went beyond the re-entry process and may continue as the students learn to balance the complexity of roles they perform. In the further exploration of the educational transition, Lauzon (1989b) identified variables that contribute to the educational transition of adult learners. The variables are study skills and related factors, family life and relationships and the social and recreational life of the adult learner. Lauzon (1989b) also suggested a model to explain the educational transition experienced by adult learners in the changing role from being non-students to students. In this model, Lauzon (1989b) suggested that the adult learners move through a sequential transition process that is characterized by three phases. During the first phase of transition, the pervasiveness of the actual transition to the student role is dominant and the adult concentrates fully in adapting to this new role. In the process, the adult learns and relearns skills such as writing and mathematical skills that have laid dormant. This phase of transition is usually associated with much academic stress. The second phase occurs when the adult learner realises that family life has suffered as a results of his studies. Thus the adult learners makes an effort to be more available for his family, sometimes at the expense of academic performance. In the third and last phase, the adult learner manages to balance his studies and his responsibilities well enough to succeed in his endeavour.

In the related study but in the Malaysian scenario, the adult educational transition among East Malaysian distance learners of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has been investigated (Saw et al., 1999). Saw et al., (1999) looked at various aspects of the distance learners' educational transition and observed some changes in their characteristics. They found significant evidence to suggest that distance learners make adaptive responses to accommodate the transition and the disruption to other elements of their lives. Idrus et al., (2001) subsequently looked at the educational transition among USM female adult

distance education learners. They found significant evidence that female distance education learners also experienced many changes and that they had to make numerous sacrifices as a result of becoming students. They were required to change and adjust accordingly in order to play the many roles, primarily as a student, but also as a spouse, mother, daughter, sister, member of the society and worker (Azli et al., 2000).

Unlike our previous research that looked at the educational characteristics of the USM East Malaysian distance Education learners (Saw et al, 1999) and USM female distance education learners (Idrus et al., 2001; Azli et al., 2000), this research attempts to obtain the national profile of the educational transition among Malaysian distance education learners enrolled at public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia excluding that of USM. This research is part of the long-term research project under the Seven Malaysia Plan 'Intensified Research in Priority Area' category and the findings reported here focused on the self-transitional characteristics of the students themselves. These self-transitional characteristics were the personal transition experienced by the students in their life which include the aspects of study skills, recreational activities, health matter, financial situation and religious activities that might undergone changes as a results of becoming a distance learner.

The results of this research are significant as they would provide an understanding of the changes of the characteristics that are common among Malaysian distance learners with respect to various aspects of their life as a result of becoming distance learners. Such results would also help in providing a suitable institutional support system to the distance learners that is tailored to the specific changes they experience. As highlighted by Gallagher and Dekkers (1996), it is imperative for the provider of distance and open learning institutions to have a range of support mechanisms made available to the students that cater to their differing needs.

Methodology

The instrument used for this study was a modification to the questionnaire formulated by Lauzon (1989a) and a refinement of the questionnaire that were used by Saw et al (1999), Idrus et al., (2001) and Azli et al., (2000). The modified and refined questionnaire for this study consisted of 45 statements under the category of study skills, recreation, health, finances, and religion. Each statement was accompanied by two five-point Likert scales (1=agree very much, 5=disagree very much). The first Likert scale corresponded to the students' perception immediately following their enrolment and the second to their current perception, i.e., after they have completed at least a year of study. The students were asked to reflect on their experiences as distance learners at the beginning of the programme and at the time of the study and record their responses on the respective Likert scale. They were instructed to do this for each of the questionnaire statements.

The questionnaires were distributed to all public institutions of higher learning that offered distance education programmes during the 1997/98 academic session Responses were obtained from three public universities namely, Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Only the responses from students in the second year onwards were selected for this study. This implies that only respondents who have been with the distance education programmes for at least the period of a year were involved. This selection of respondents ensured that each respondent had sufficient exposure and experience in the distance education programmes to reflect the true transitional changes that had taken place in them. The total number of respondents inclusive of the first year students was 258 and the distribution according to the universities is shown in Table 1. There was a total of 121 respondents that consisted of the 2nd year students onwards that were used in this study.

University	Number of Respondents	%
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Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)	157	60.85
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	73	28.29
Universiti Malaya (UM)	28	10.86
Total	258	100

Table 1. Distribution of respondents according to universities

The analysis involved a comparative analysis of the students' perceptions immediately following their enrolment with their current perceptions, utilizing the pair student t-test. The significance level reported was 0.05. The null hypothesis for this comparative analysis was that there was no difference between the two perceptions and that the students' characteristics remained unchanged in relation to the items in the categories mentioned above. Only statement that showed significant changes between the two means were reported.

Results And Discussions

Table 2 shows the comparative analysis related to the study skills statements that showed significant changes. Generally, the results indicated that being distance education learners at Malaysian institution of higher learning had resulted in many significant changes in the students' study skills that corresponded to those statements.

Positive and significant changes were observed in their self-confidence after being successful in completing a year of their course. They adapted well to the learning style demanded by the distance education programme. Various Malaysian universities have adopted various models of distance education but the results indicated that the students have made common and appropriate adjustments towards the demands of the new learning environment, leading to the build-up of confidence at being successful in their endeavour. Significant changes were also observed in the ability of the students to think critically. After at least a year of enrolment in the distance education programme, the learners perceived that they were able to think more critically, compared to the period when they first started the programme. It is probable that the independent learning style necessitated by the distance education programme and course materials had nurtured the students' ability to think critically.

The students have also indicated positive transitional changes with respect to coping with the demands of university education. As the students progressed into the demands of educational life, they adapted and developed required skills in terms of management of their time and other home-related and workplace responsibilities and hence, they perceived that they were able to cope with the demands of university education. Time and skills are needed for the students to adjust to the new life to be able to be successful in their studies.

The students have indicated positive transitional changes with respect to their understanding of the distance education modules. The common medium for the course delivery system in distance education is the printed format with self-learning course modules. As this is the main course delivery mechanism, the findings are consistent with the assumption that the students should be able to understand the modules after a year of enrolment as adult distance learners.

The students also recorded positive changes in their usage of the library facilities. They had perceived having difficulties in using the library facilities earlier in their studies but had made a positive transition of being able to utilize the facilities to support their

learning needs. The students were also perceived to be more positive about presenting different views in the class and they could assess their understanding of the lesson objectives better.

All the above positive changes in study skills were the results of the efforts by the students to understand the subject contents in the distance learning modules and to take on activities associated with the role of distance learners, such as searching for relevant supplementary materials, answering self-evaluation questions, doing assignments and corresponding with tutors and course managers (Saw et al., 1999). The adult students adapted and coping with study-related problems by various mechanisms that include collaboration with peers and facilitator, seeking for the relevant study material independently as well as forming a study group (Dass, 2001). The educators have important role in helping and facilitating the development of new skills and knowledge among adults as well as fostering the critical exploratory skills such as reflection, visualization and goal setting that are important in their career development (Kerka, 2001).

Table 2. Comparison of perceptions regarding statements on study skills

Code	Statements	N	Perception just enrolled as students		Current perception		T-value
			Mean	std	Mean	std	
SS3	I am convinced I will succeed	117	1.931	0.838	1.683	0.795	-2.680
SS4	I am critical in my thinking	113	2.398	0.840	1.831	0.812	-6.140
SS8	I cannot cope with the demands of university education	116	3.172	1.032	3.491	1.067	3.020
SS10	I have difficulty in understanding distance education modules	118	2.983	1.004	3.415	1.081	3.560
SS11	I do not know how to use the library facilities	117	3.196	1.093	3.521	1.171	3.680
SS14	I am reluctant to present a differing view in class	115	2.982	0.964	3.321	1.105	3.020
SS15	I believe in participating in peer assessment during class to improve my understanding of the subject materials	119	2.319	0.833	3.020	0.976	-2.620
SS16	I do not know how to assess my own understanding of lesson objectives	118	2.788	1.037	3.084	1.181	2.720

$p < 0.05$

Table 3 shows the students' perceptions regarding the statements on recreation. All the statements under this category recorded positive changes. This is a reflection that by becoming students, there was a decline in their recreational activities with significantly less time being spent on physical activities and hobbies, watching TV and having vacations. The significant reduction of time for such recreational activities was replaced by studying as indicated by statement R7. Saw et al., (1999) also observed similar changes with respect to recreational activities experienced by the USM East Malaysian distance

education learners.

Table 3. Comparison of perceptions regarding statements on recreation

Code	Statements	N	Perception just enrolled as students		Current perception		T-value
			Mean	std	Mean	std	
R1	My physical activities have decreased	120	3.333	1.024	2.975	1.184	-4.090
R2	I now have fewer hobbies	115	3.139	1.083	2.687	1.180	-4.760
R3	I have to cut down spending time on my hobbies	119	2.697	1.054	2.253	1.087	-5.180
R4	I spend less time watching TV	118	2.720	1.069	2.194	1.006	-5.600
R5	My family is prepared to sacrifice their vacations	120	2.850	1.010	2.508	1.029	-4.540
R6	I have no time to spend on vacations	120	3.191	1.048	2.775	1.212	-4.450
R7	All my free time is allocated for studying	120	3.300	1.009	3.016	1.159	-2.860
R8	My family always goes on vacations without me	120	3.558	1.052	3.308	1.172	-3.420

$p < 0.05$

Only two statements relating to health showed significant changes (Table 4). The distance learners perceived that they slept less and their life was filled with stress as a results of their return to formal education. For most adults learners, coping with family demands, child care and other related aspects exert pressure on the time available to study. With full-time employment during the day time, the only available time to study is to stay up late at night. For adult learners, the effect of age on their study habits, memory, stamina and fatigue could be the source of stress. Sharing the limited time and finance at a learner's disposal to meet family, employment and study commitments could potentially also be stressful (Jegede and Kirkwood, 1994).

Table 4. Comparison of perceptions regarding statements on health, finance and religion

Code	Statements	N	Perception just enrolled as students		Current perception		T-value
			Mean	std	Mean	std	
	Health						
H3	I sleep less	119	2.789	1.073	2.495	1.049	-3.370
H7	My life is full of stress	117	3.359	1.110	3.188	1.217	-2.220
	Finance						
F1	My budget is very tight	120	2.550	1.099	2.083	0.984	-5.270
	Religion						

L1	I have time for religious activities	120	2.216	0.891	2.316	0.907	2.030
L3	I have more understandings of my religious teachings	117	2.094	0.881	1.897	0.855	-3.900
L4	I am more tolerant of other religious beliefs	117	2.623	1.040	2.538	1.079	-2.280

$p < 0.05$

Table 4 also shows the changing perceptions regarding the aspect of finances. Only one statement, F1 showed significant changes. Distance learners discovered that their budget after a year in the distance education programme was very tight compared to the time when they had newly enrolled as students. Dass (2001) also discovered that the aspect of academic financial difficulties was one of the major problems faced by the students. Various new expenses such as course fees, books, travel to regional centres and to the university for the annual residential course, had resulted in the constraint of their finances. However, these new kinds of expenditure had not been the cause of disagreement between them and their spouse. Even with the amount of money spent on education, there was no change in the perception that such expenditure was for their future investment. These results were consistent with the results obtained by Lauzon (1989a) as well as those of Saw et al., (1999).

Table 4 also shows the results of the changing perceptions among distance education learners with respect to the statements on religion. There were significant changes related to the time spent on religious activities. The students perceived that as in the case of social activities, such time spent had decreased due to the lack of time itself and energy. The students also perceived that becoming students had enhanced their understanding of other religious teachings and made them more tolerant of other religious beliefs. All these perceptions evolved partly due to the curriculum of the programmes which was strictly designed with an emphasis on enhancing specific skills and knowledge among the students.

Conclusion

It is evident from this study that adult distance learners at public Malaysian universities make common adaptive responses to the changing of their role from a non-student to a student. They perceived that they and their families experience various transitions as a result of their participation in higher education. It is, therefore, imperative for Malaysian distance education institutions to provide adequate student support services that not only focus on the adult learner themselves but also take into consideration the learners' home and working environment with particular attention given to the different types and phases of transition. Such support services should take into consideration the complexity of the role the adult learners have to play and the unique difficulties that are associated with this role. With such support services, the adult students are better prepared to participate in higher education, achieving a balanced and satisfying lifestyle during such an endeavour.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Malaysian Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment and Universiti Sains Malaysia for the research grant No. 190/9603/2402 that enabled this research to be conducted.

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