

CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF SENIOR CITIZENS PURSUING OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In the era of technology and borderless world, open and distance learning has become a choice for many adults who wish to pursue tertiary education. In responding to this development, many higher education institutions, including Open University Malaysia, have designed various academic programmes to meet the needs of adult learners. Senior citizens naturally experience a decline in their physical, cognitive, motor and memory abilities. Despite having to face such challenges, many senior citizens have enrolled at the Open University Malaysia. The objective of this study is to examine their academic performance, analyse it by gender, age and zone of learning centres; and identify the issues and challenges they faced. Senior citizens who graduated from two schools, the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences (now known as Cluster of Education and Social Sciences) and OUM Business School (now known as Cluster of Business and Management), were included in this study. Secondary data was used to analyse learners' academic performance while interviews were conducted to identify the challenges they faced. The findings indicated that they had faced difficulties in relation to their health and information technology skills but still performed well.

Keywords: Senior Citizen Learners, Academic Performance, Learning Challenges, Open And Distance Learning.

INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements and borderless knowledge have spurred many adults, including senior citizens, to pursue tertiary education via open and distance learning (ODL). Many institutions of higher learning, including Open University Malaysia (OUM), have designed academic programmes to meet their needs.

The growth of distance learning programmes and the online format have led to increasing interest among adult learners in pursuing their educational goals (O' Lawrence, 2007). According to Belanger and Jordan (2004), this is because such programmes have opened the door for students who might otherwise have been excluded from participation in the learning process. It allows institutions to educate a larger number of students with relatively fewer instructors, and as a result, provides a cost-effective method of delivering higher education. In addition, students have the opportunity to further their studies regardless of lifestyle or location.

Today, there is a need to continue studying throughout one's working life, as labour markets demand regular updating of knowledge and skills (O'Neill, Singh, & O'Donoghue, 2004). Academic success in higher education tends to bring about economic and personal benefits, which most likely provide social, political, and economic benefits for the broader society (Ritt, 2008). National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) data indicate that 38 per cent of the 2007 enrolment of more than 18 million college students were 25 years of age or older (NCES, 2009). NCES projections of higher education enrolment from 2007 to 2018 suggest that the number of students over 25 will remain stable or increase during the current decade (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). This figure is expected to grow as people realise the importance of education and how convenient it has become to have access to online learning and virtual universities that allow educational experiences to be tailored to the needs of individuals and groups.

In this scenario, many senior citizens have enrolled as learners via ODL. For instance, 120 registered at OUM in 2009, followed by 171 in 2010 and 188 in 2011. However, there remain various perceptions of senior citizens' ability as learners, since they naturally experience a decline in their physical, vision, motor, cognitive and memory abilities. Indeed, the major problems they face are lack of economic provisions, poor health conditions, lack of emotional support and illness in the post-retirement period. This state of affairs has become a socioeconomic problem. The problem of inadequate income after retirement, loss of a spouse, lack of free time, poor health, social isolation, family relationship troubles, and physically or financial dependence – all these situations are interrelated or interdependent (Amiri, 2018).

Senior citizens are categorised into two groups, young and old adults (ages 55 to 74) and old-old (age 75 and above). According to Zakaria (2013), senior citizens are believed to face problems in adopting the latest technology because of lack of knowledge and experience in information technology. According to Karnowski, Pape and Writh (2008) cited from Zakaria (2013), elderly persons are less inclined to use mobile communication. They are catching up to the levels of mainstream innovation but largely lag behind in the use of new services integrating into the technology.

This paper will focus on the academic performance of senior citizens who undertook the Bachelor of Islamic Studies, Bachelor of Psychology and Bachelor of Communication programmes under the Cluster of Education and Social Sciences (CESS) and the Bachelor of Business Administration programme under the Cluster of Business and Management and the issues they encountered during their studies.

The challenges faced by senior citizens are complex. This is mainly due to ageing, physical problems, socioeconomic factors, cerebral pathology, emotional attitude and family structure (Amiri, 2018). Most of OUM's students are adult learners who include those 55 years old and above. They have heavy family and community commitments but wish to achieve greater academic achievement even after retirement although it is challenging for them to pursue their studies at the tertiary level. Not many studies have been done so far on the academic performance of senior citizens in Malaysia. This study seeks to examine the academic

performance and challenges faced by senior citizen learners. The specific objectives of this study are:

- (1) Examination of senior citizen learners' academic performance;
- (2) Analysis of senior citizen learners' academic performance by gender, age and region of learning centres; and
- (3) Identification of issues and challenges faced by senior citizen learners.

This study seek to answer these research questions:

- (1) How is senior citizen learners' academic performance?
- (2) What are their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) scores according to gender, age and region of learning centres?
- (3) What are the key issues and challenges faced by senior citizen learners?

Such a finding could encourage even more adults, especially senior citizens, to adopt lifelong learning. This research also provides positive feedback on how senior citizen learners handle challenges in their studies. Thus, the university can be more flexible and innovative in handling the issues faced by learners who are senior citizens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lemieux and Sauve (1999) analysed the value system of older adults who enrolled in university and those who did not. The analysis was based on a framework from the theory of Rokeach (1973). There are two reasons why the analysis was based on this framework, the first being that the operational definition of values enabled the nature of the system of values for any given group to be circumscribed. Lemieux and Sauve (1999) also saw that the Value Survey of Rokeach permitted the measurement of the degree to which individual elements could be in charge of varieties inside an individual's hierarchy of values. One of the strengths of this research, according to the authors, is that they have the profile of the personal values of both older adults who registered and those who did not register at the Institut Universitaire du Troisieme Age on their existential belief. However, there is a noticeable problem in this research as to whether older people who lived in 2000 would have a similar value profile as those who lived in the 1990s. They put forth solutions presented by Ansello (1982), Van der Kamp (1990) and Long (1990) and also their intention to conduct a similar research in 2009 to find out whether there are any differences from the current research.

According to Minxuan Zhang and Jinjie Xu (2015), whose paper, "*The role of universities in elder education: The experience of Shanghai and Shanghai normal university*," focuses on functions of universities for older citizens above 60 years old, there are three significant reasons that more elderly citizens are pursuing lifelong education. Firstly, middle-aged and older workers need lifelong education to adapt to changes in their working lives as a result of fast and radical shifts in economic and productive structures in the past few decades. Furthermore, it was observed that large numbers of adults in the cities are reaching retirement age. According to statistics, the percentage of people aged over 60 in Shanghai is around 10% higher than in other cities in China (http://news.xinhuanet.com/gongyi/2012-07/20/c_123447770.htm). Another significant reason is that the mix of modern innovation and today's business-driven economy encourages people to learn new methodologies for individual and social life. The Shanghai municipal government made several initiatives to adopt lifelong learning such as expanding and reforming the education system for schools and universities to be more flexible to cater to the needs of older citizens living in Shanghai who are pursuing their education. There are a total of 284 elder education institutions in Shanghai, which comprise:

- (1) 4 elder universities (EUs) at the municipal level – Shanghai University for the Elderly, Shanghai Senior Citizen University, Shanghai Retired Cadres University, and Shanghai University for Retired Workers;

- (2) 37 branch EUs at the municipal level, including 23 EUs for retired civil servants and 8 EUs set up by universities themselves, and 4 universities for retired workers;
- (3) 29 EUs at district or county level; and
- (4) 214 elder colleges or schools at community (street or township) level
(Minxuan Zhang & Jinjie Xu, 2013 p. 134).

Taziev (2015) presented the need to include senior citizens in the educational process and adopted the active age model in his research. He stated that the inclusion of senior citizens would produce a win-win situation. From the senior citizens' point of view, it would create a system of work to study their needs and demands. It would also help them to work with the youth in developing and implementing innovative projects for war and labour veterans, people living in rest homes, as well as lonely and sick senior citizens (Taziev, 2015). Notwithstanding, the involvement of senior citizens in the education process would spark the interest of the youth to understand and care for the needs of senior citizens and motivate them to help them.

The active age model comprises spheres like civil self-determination, national self-determination, environmental self-determination, aesthetic self-determination, value self-determination, behaviour self-determination, health saving self-determination, labour and professional self-determination, intellectual self-determination and informational literacy. The objective of using the active age model in this research is to determine the main fields of human self-determination, to set forth an idea of establishing The Active Age Institute, to reveal its actual values, mission and principles (Taziev, 2015).

In the past, families provided social security for their elderly members. Today, the changing family structure has caused increased problems for the elderly. As a result of the emerging prevalence of nuclear families in recent years, old rich family members are exposed to psychological, physical and financial insecurity. These scenarios became a part of the challenges they faced in pursuing higher education (Amiri, 2018). According to Ibrahim, Hamid, Chai, and Abdullah (2005), several factors caused senior citizens to become uninterested in furthering their studies either in public or private universities and colleges. For example, financial support and incentives for formal lifelong learning programmes were rarely extended to senior citizens. Senior citizens also faced difficulties as most of the postgraduate programmes offered in public or private universities and colleges had a specific cut-off age to ensure the return of investment in human resources.

Nowadays, the population of older people is increasing throughout the world. Ageing is a series of processes which begin with life and continue throughout the life cycle. It represents the closing period of the lifespan, a time when the individual looks back on life and lives on past accomplishments. Adjusting to the changes that accompany old age requires an individual to be flexible and develop new coping skills to adapt to the changes that are common to this time in their lives (Warnick, 1995).

KEY CONCEPTS

Senior citizens

Individuals aged 60 and above made up 2.8 million or 9% of Malaysia's population of 31 million in 2015. According to Women, Family and Community Development Minister, Datuk Seri Rohani Abdul Karim, based on projections by the National Statistics Department, Malaysia was expected to reach ageing nation status by 2035 when senior citizens make up 5.6 million or 15% of its population (Bernama, March 23, 2016; Daim, March 23, 2016). According to the National Policy on Senior Citizens, those aged 60 years old and

above are considered senior citizens (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, n.d.) In developed countries, only those above 65 years are considered as senior citizens. This difference is because those who live in developed countries have a better health level, economy, standard and organised healthcare services, longer life expectancy and higher education levels, besides other factors.

Although those aged 60 years and above claimed to be senior citizens, various facilities or service providers have different interpretations. For instance, KLIA Transit offered a concession fare (30% less than the standard fare) for those aged 55 years above. (Klia Ekspres, n.d.) (<https://www.kliaekspres.com/faqs/>). On the other hand, in the banking industries, those who are aged 49 to 50 are considered senior citizens. For example, the age of eligibility is 50 and above for those who wish to apply for CIMB Big Plus 50 for 50 Plus and BSN Senior Citizen Fixed Deposit Account, AmBank Am50 Plus, RHB Senior Fixed Deposit, and Public Bank PB Golden 50 PLUS FD Account. (BBazaar.my., n.d.). Moviegoers could obtain ticket discounts if they were aged 55 and above based on their identity cards.

For the purpose of the study, those aged 55 and above will be considered as senior citizens.

Academic performance

According to the Cambridge University Reporter (2003), academic performance is constantly defined in relation to examination performance. Academic performance, measured by examination results, is one of the major goals of a school. Hoyle (1986) argued that schools are established with the aim of imparting knowledge and skills to those who go through them and behind all this is the idea of enhancing good academic performance. The descriptive assessment information will usually be translated through grading systems such as Grade Point Average (GPA) and course grade. Generally, the indicator to gauge academic performance to measure graduates' quality in tertiary education is Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). Many employers use cumulative GPA to screen job candidates and they mostly prefer candidates with a higher CGPA (Erdem, Şentürk, & Arslan, 2007). Hence, this study will make use of CGPA as it provides information about students' academic performance across time.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study involving two different sets of data – secondary data (CGPA of senior learners) and an interview with senior citizen learners. In order to analyse the performance of senior graduates, the CGPA of 193 graduates were obtained from OUM's Assessment and Examination Division. Their names were not disclosed to maintain confidentiality.

Qualitative data was also obtained through a semi-structured interview. Twelve senior graduates were selected through the convenience sampling technique and they were interviewed to find out the challenges they faced while studying at OUM. Each respondent was interviewed through the telephone for about half an hour and the interview was recorded for data analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion will be divided into two major parts. The first is learner demographics and their academic performance while the second is challenges faced by the senior citizen learners in the pursuit of their degree studies in OUM. Tables 1 and 2

demonstrate the learner demographics for FASS and OUMBS respectively. Tables 3 and 4 are mainly on the learners' performance based on the range of CGPA.

Learner Demographics – FASS

Table 1: Learner Demographics – FASS

Item	Subject	Bachelor of Communication (Honours)		Bachelor of Psychology (Honours)		Bachelor of Islamic Studies (Honours)		Total	
		No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	3	15	4	20	13	65	20	63
	Female	0	0	10	83	2	17	12	36
Age	55-60	2	6	5	16	5	16	12	38
	61-65	1	3	4	13	5	16	10	32
	>66			5	16	5	16	10	32
Learning Centre	Klang Valley	3	25	5	42	4	33	12	38
	Northern Region	0	0	3	60	2	40	5	16
	Eastern Region	0	0	0	0	3	100	3	9
	Southern Region	0	0	4	67	2	33	6	19
	Sabah and Sarawak Region	0	0	2	33.33	4	66.67	6	19

Table 1 shows the learner demographics for FASS which comprise age, gender and learning centres. There are 32 learners from three FASS programmes – 3 from the Bachelor of Communication with Honours programme, 14 from the Bachelor of Psychology with Honours programme and 15 from the Bachelor of Islamic Studies with Honours programmes. The data also indicated that there are 20 male learners – three from the Bachelor of Communication with Honours programme, 4 from the Bachelor of Psychology with Honours programme and 13 from the Bachelor of Islamic Studies with Honours programme. The remaining 12 are females who mainly took the Bachelor of Psychology with Honours and Bachelor of Islamic Studies with Honours programmes.

Most of the senior citizen learners who graduated from FASS were aged 56 to 60, which comprised approximately 38% or 12 of them from three FASS programmes. Meanwhile, there are 10 senior citizen learners each in the 61 to 65 and 66 and above groups, which makes up 32%. The data collected showed the oldest graduate to be a 78-year-old male who had taken Bachelor of Psychology with Honours.

The Klang Valley learning centres have the highest numbers of senior citizen learners who graduated from FASS at 38%, followed by 19% from both the south region as well as the Sabah and Sarawak region. The least numbers of senior citizens who graduated from FASS were from the eastern region which consists of the states of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan, which stands at 3% only from the Bachelor of Islamic Studies with Honours programme.

Learner Demographics – OUMBS (BBA)

Table 2 Learner Demographics – OUMBS (BBA)

Item	Subject	Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours)	
		No	Percentage (%)
Age	55-60	133	83
	61-65	23	14
	>66	5	3
Gender	Male	110	68
	Female	51	32
Learning Centres	Klang Valley	45	28
	Northern Region	26	16
	Eastern Region	14	9
	Southern Region	20	12
	Sabah and Sarawak Region	56	35

A total of 161 senior citizen learners graduated from the Bachelor of Business Administration with Honours programme. From this, 68% were male and 32% female. Only five or 3% of senior citizen learners aged more than 66 years old graduated from this programme in contrast to 133 or 83% of senior citizen learners from the age of 55 to 60. Meanwhile, 23 senior citizen learners, or 14%, also managed to graduate from this programme. The table above also indicated that the majority of senior citizen learners were from the learning centres in the Sabah and Sarawak region, followed closely from the Klang Valley, northern region, southern region and eastern region.

FASS' SENIOR CITIZEN LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE (CGPA)

Table 3: FASS (CGPA)

CGPA \ Degree	2.00 - 2.49		2.50 - 2.99		3.00 - 3.49		3.50 - 3.69		Grand Total	
	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)
BCOM	1	33	1	33	1	33	0	0	3	100
BIS	4	27	7	47	3	20	1	7	15	100
BPSY	1	7	5	36	8	57	0	0	14	100
Grand Total	6	19	13	41	12	38	1	3	32	100

Table 3 shows that most of the senior citizen learners achieved 2.50-2.99 and 3.00-3.49 CGPA point with overall 20 from the Bachelor of Islamic Studies with Honours programme. However, the senior citizen learners from the Bachelor of Psychology with Honours programme had a slight edge over senior citizen learners from the Bachelor of Islamic Studies with Honours programme as eight or 57% of the former obtained a CGPA point of 3.00 to 3.49 compared to only 3 or 20% of the latter. Senior citizen learners from the Bachelor of Communication with Honours programme performed equally according to the CGPA point, as each of them obtained 2.00-2.49, 2.50-2.99 and 3.00-3.49 respectively.

OUM SENIOR CITIZEN LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE (CGPA)

Table 4: OUMBS (CGPA)

CGPA \ Degree	2.00 - 2.49		2.50 - 2.99		3.00 - 3.66		3.67-4.00		Grand Total	
	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)	No	Percentage (%)
BBA	39	24	63	39	56	35	3	2	161	100

Table 4, which shows the academic performance of senior citizen learners from the OUMB Bachelor of Business Administration with Honours programme, indicates that more than 50% of the total number of senior citizen learners obtained a CGPA of 2.50-2.99 and 3.00-3.66, while only three senior citizen learners managed to achieve a CGPA of more than 3.67. This finding demonstrates that they are still able to perform excellently in their studies.

CHALLENGES

Among the major issues highlighted by the 12 senior graduates who were interviewed were computer competency, family commitments, language proficiency, health and need for more time to understand contents. Regarding computer literacy, for instance, one of the senior citizen learners said, "We were not computer literate and we were always scared to use the computer. We were afraid of something going wrong if we did not press the right button"; "Students had to take the time to learn IT"; "It took many hours to type my assignment using a computer because I typed very slowly, and it was very tiring."

The senior citizen learners also cited family commitments as a primary challenge. One of them pointed out, "We had really little time for our studies. We had a lot of engagements and hardly had time for studies." One senior citizen said the weekend is for family so he sometimes skipped classes, especially when his grandchildren visited him. He said, "The classes held during the weekends were not suitable although they were held once or twice a month. This is because weekend is family time. I admit I skipped some classes at times."

Another challenge faced by senior citizen learners was health issues. One respondent interviewed by phone said, “*The physical environment in the learning centre was quite challenging because we were so old and had health problems. It was very difficult for us to climb and go down the staircase. Not only that, our vision was also not good like that of other students.*”

There was also the issue of the language used in the tutorials. One senior citizen learner revealed that, “*Though the modules were in English, the tutors also needed to explain in Malay, so that it was fair for those who did not have a good understanding of English.*”

Lastly, time was another challenge encountered by senior citizen learners. Undeniably as age increased, it required a person to spend more time in comprehending the contents of a course. One of the senior citizens commented that, “*Senior citizens need time to adjust to student life. When they go back to their studies, seniors have a difficult time adapting. They have to work harder because their memory is not as good as that of young students.*”

The findings in this study demonstrates that FASS and OUMBS senior learners could perform well academically although they did face some difficulties. In fact, they worked very hard to overcome the challenges described. Elderly persons are less inclined to use mobile communication. They are catching up to the levels of mainstream innovation but largely lag behind in the use of new services integrating into the technology (Karnowski, Pape and Writh “2008” cited from Zakaria (2013). Despite the numerous challenges they faced, most of the senior citizen learners managed to complete their studies at OUM well. It is important to note that they needed lots of flexibility and support to accomplish their higher education dreams. ODL providers need to explore more ways to help senior citizen learners study in an integrated way.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper has a significant impact particularly for senior citizens in Malaysia. They have proven that they could perform well academically like others. In fact, many of them have succeeded with satisfactory results as discussed above. The implication is that more senior citizens should engage in lifelong learning. They do face challenges with regard to their physical, health, vision and cognitive capabilities. Some struggle a lot as they are relatively slow in catching up with the latest technology, particularly in the ODL environment which relies heavily on ICT. So, ODL service providers need to be more innovative in addressing issues faced by senior citizen learners. More senior citizen learners should be encouraged to engage in lifelong learning. Everyone can study, including senior citizens.

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