"Cher! I need help!" Understanding motivating factors of and challenges faced by Continuing Education and Training (CET) learners.

Miah Kiat Goh, Gin Hin Loh, Pengchi Zhang, Lay Khee Tan, Mar Mar Khin, Ren Guo.

Temasek Polytechnic, Singapore

Background

Learning is a continuous process throughout our lives and adult learners continue to learn and upgrade their skills by returning to institutions of higher learning as part-time learners. Therefore, continuing education and training (CET) programmes are developed to allow the adult learners to increase their skills and knowledge in their areas of interests ("CET 2020", 2014).

As an adult doing a CET programme, the challenges faced by them are different from young learners (e.g. children) (Cozma, 2015). Therefore, practitioners must know the motivation factors and challenges that the adult learners faced. In order to have a more in-depth understanding of the adult learners, a Continuing Education and Training (CET) survey has been conducted, focusing on the 2 main aspects, the motivation factors and challenges faced by adult learners.

Objectives

As there is an increasing number of CET programmes in the institutions of higher education and more adult learners are encouraged to upgrade their knowledge and skills, there is a need to investigate the key motivating factors of and challenges faced by part-time adult learners during their course of study. By understanding these factors and challenges, the school could help to support the adult learners for better performance.

Literature Review

Factors Motivating Adult Learners in Higher Education

Importance of motivation to adult learners

According to Sogunro (2014), motivation affects learning and behavior of students. It is through motivation that behavior is directed toward a specific goal. It affects choices made by the adult learners because it determines specific goals toward which learners strive. For example, motivation affects whether to attend a football game or complete an assignment or enroll in an art class. Motivation also leads to increased energy and effort. It determines whether an adult learner will handle a task with a lackluster attitude or enthusiasm. West (2012) claims that motivation increases persistence and initiation of activities. It is an important factor that affects achievement and learning among adult learners because it increases their time on task. Sogunro (2014) further posits that motivation enhances cognitive processing. Motivated adult learners try to understand what is taught by paying attention, hence making learning easier. Additionally, motivation helps learners to concentrate on what they are doing and hence gain satisfaction. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) thus argue that continuous motivation helps adult learners to concentrate on the lessons being taught.

Motivating factors affecting adult academic achievement and/or learners' learning

Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (2012) claim that factors that motivate learners differ although they may be equally motivated to do a certain task. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivate adult learners, especially part-time students in colleges. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) find that learners who are intrinsically motivated put more effort into their studies. In polytechnics or colleges, learners are mainly interested in socializing with others, enjoyment, and personal advancement. Earlier work from Ryan and Deci (2000) have mentioned in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) that there are three factors that are important for learners' intrinsic motivation. They are namely, competence (relating to mastery of skills and knowledge), autonomy (learner's control), and relatedness (a sense of belonging to the group or community). Apart from intrinsic motivation, extrinsic factors also motivate adult learners to learn (Sogunro, 2014). Adult learners who are extrinsically motivated do tasks in order to avoid some punishments or to obtain some rewards. Extrinsic factors that motivate learners include mere appreciation, promotional, and financial rewards.

West (2012) also posits that adult learners studying part-time at college levels have limited time to engage in formal learning. According to Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017), self-efficacy affects learners' academic achievement. Learners who expect to succeed put more effort into their academics and are likely to be more cognitively engaged in thinking and learning than those adult learners doubting their capabilities. Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (2012) posit that building self-efficacy will motivate learners in colleges, especially those who are working and studying part-time.

Strategies to be used by educators in motivating adult learners

Marschall and Davis (2012) claim that there are various ways of motivating adult learners. One of them is focusing on practical skills and knowledge. Institutions of higher learning, especially colleges and polytechnics, should concentrate on real life or workplace performance rather than teaching theories. Marschall and Davis (2012) further posit that creating relevant and useful learning experiences will motivate adult learners. Students at college levels appreciate immediate relevancy and hence it is important for these institutions to promote it.

According to Nilson (2016), facilitating exploration is another way of motivating adult learners. This can be achieved through the provision of videos, references, and resources to help in creating an ideal environment that supports personal exploration. Additionally, exploration helps adult learners to construct knowledge in a meaningful way. Sogunro (2014) adds that creating active learning also motivates adult learners. Most college students prefer active learning over passive learning, and hence it is important for institutions to create active learning.

Petty and Thomas (2014) argue that setting appropriate goals is another way of motivating adult learners. Adults have various reasons that make them pursue an education at polytechnic or college levels and hence, instructors need to break down learners' learning goals into short-term goals in order to motivate their persistence and success. In order to ensure this, their progress should be communicated to them on weekly basis. Petty and Thomas (2014) further argue that offering clear and accurate feedback will motivate adult learners. This will help learners to know areas where they need to improve and hence motivating them to aim higher. Apart from the motivation factors that help learners succeed, there are difficulties that adult learners encounter in the course of their studies.

Barriers faced by adult learners

The profiles of adult learners can be very diverse since the admission requirements for adult education programmes tend to be broad. The heterogeneity of the adult learners could be attributed by their wide age range, and the diversities in their educational qualifications, work experiences and family commitments. Since the adult learners can be uniquely different, it is not unexpected that they would have different learning needs and may identify different barriers that they need to handle. There are 3 key categories of challenges perceived by adult learners – namely situational, dispositional and institutional barriers (Cross, 1981).

Situational barriers

Situational barriers arise from one's life circumstances at a given point in time. It is recognized that family and job commitments could contribute towards situational barriers (Cross, 1981; Fairchild, 2003). Fairchild (2003) adds that basic needs of the family would usually take priority in the face of tension between educational outlays and family obligations. Job and career-related challenges may include lack of support from the workplace while pursuing education as well as the high job expectations that compromise the time that can be committed in studies (Deggs, 2011).

Dispositional barriers

Dispositional barriers, as defined by Cross (1981, pp.98), refer to barriers "*related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner*". Fairchild (2003) acknowledges that dispositional barriers, being intrapersonal, are hard to define and may manifest from the dissonance among role demands. Indeed, the adult learners may experience stress and vulnerability while trying to cope with the role contagion. In the study conducted by Deggs (2011), the most common intrapersonal barrier was time management and other barriers include "*money management, balance of family responsibilities, handling of physical and emotional matters and fear of failure*" (pp. 1547). Deggs (2011) asserts that the juggling with multiple roles and responsibilities may drain the adult learners physically and emotionally.

Institutional barriers

Institutional barriers are systemic barriers, where Cross (1981) cites inconvenient schedules or locations, inappropriate course of study as some examples of institutional barriers. Deggs (2011) names them as academic-related barriers and lists "*understanding and utilizing technology*" and "*lack of face to face interaction with faculty and peers*" as the two most common themes elicited in his study (pp 1547-8). Since institutional barriers could differ among institutions, this warrants collection of more empirical data to gain relevant insights of challenges faced by the adult learners in our classrooms.

Methodology

Research Methods

Mixed methods, which consist of surveys and interviews were conducted to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data and the use of combination of the two methods will help us to understand the research problem better (Creswell and Garrett, 2008). Greene, Caracelli and Graham, and Tashakkori and Teddlie highlight that the advantage of using mixed methods is that "*different methods combined can enrich and improve our understanding of the phenomena under study*…" (Lopez-Fernanadez and Molina-Azorin,2011, pp.269)

The exploratory design using sequential phases was described by Ponce and Pagan-Maldonado (2015) where qualitative method is used and followed by quantitative method. This design method is used when there is not much information is known about this topic. Another method, using explanatory design using sequential phases was described by the same authors, which is used when an in-depth study of the topic is needed. This design uses quantitative method followed by qualitative method.

After considering the exploratory and explanatory designs, we employed the explanatory mixed methods design in our study. In this design, the comments regarding the motivation factors and challenges faced by adult learners from CET survey were selected. The selected comments were funneled down and quantitized into different categories using quantitative method. Interviews were carried out to further understand on the challenges faced by the adult learners.
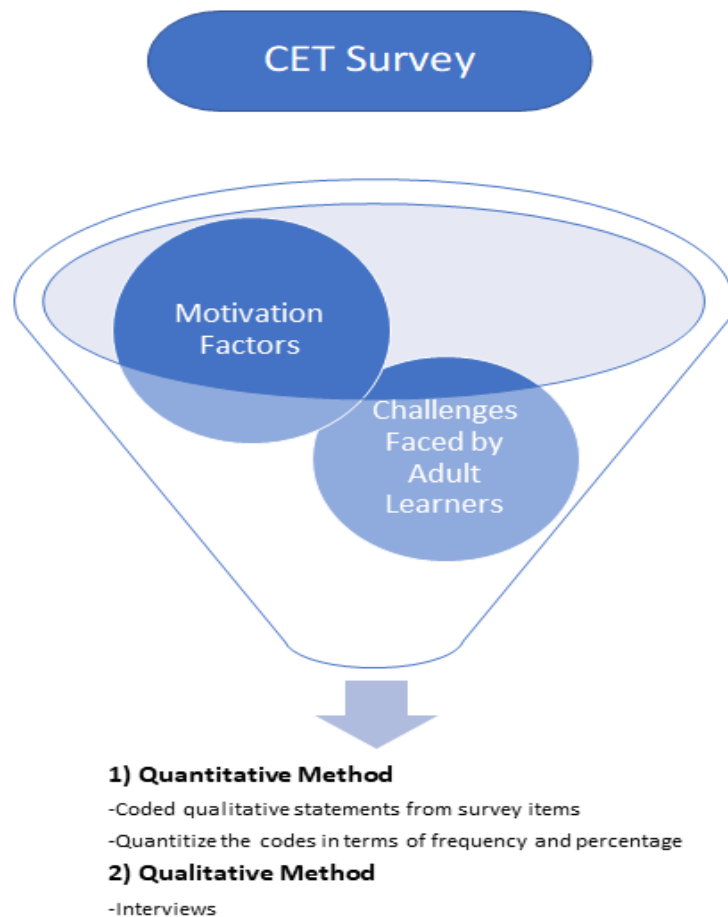
Figure 1: Motivation factors and challenges faced by adult learners using mixed methods.

In figure 1, the qualitative statements from survey items were coded and quantitized in terms of frequency and percentages. This would help us to uncover key motivating factors and challenges faced by adult learners. Since adult learners were generally more highly motivated in their learning, we conducted interviews to further clarify the challenges faced by the adult learners.

A survey was administered to a total of 103 adult learners for Academic Year 2017/18 October semester across 4 specialist diplomas and 2 part-time diplomas. The survey content was validated by six academic staff and a pilot survey was carried out with two adult learners to ensure that the learners could understand the questions from their perspectives before the larger scale survey was carried out. Based on the open comments by the participants, the comments were grouped into various categories. The categories were quantified as percentages to find out the categories that have greater impact on the motivation and challenges faced by CET learners.

Group Interviews were carried out for all specialist diplomas and diplomas. A total of 41 students attended the interviews. A semi-structured interview checklist was provided to 4 interviewers involved in this study. The interviewers discussed key challenges surfaced by interviewees to have a more in-depth and holistic understanding of pertinent issues involved. Excerpts of interview transcripts were used to complement quantitative data analysis.

Results

Results for AY2017/18 October Semester (Motivation)

Table 1: Different categories of motivating factors for the Adult Learners.

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Pragmatic reasons (PR)	25	27%
Personal Interest (PI)	24	26%
Content (C)	22	24%
Instructional (I)	9	10%
Social (S)	12	13%
Total	**92**	**100%**

Pragmatic reasons include career progression, relevance, sponsorship, salary and change of job. Personal interest includes interest in the course and personal reasons. Content includes knowledge and skills, Social includes non-tutors and Instructional includes tutors.
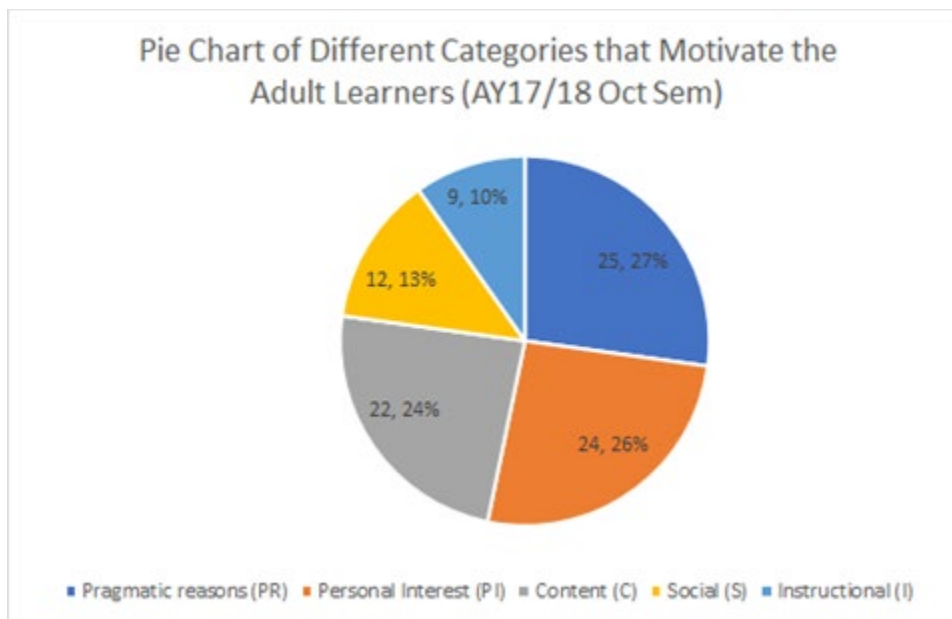

Figure 2: Pie Chart of Different Categories that Motivate the Adult Learners (AY2017/18 Oct Sem)

Results for AY2017/18 October Semester (Challenges)

Table 2: Different Types of Barriers faced by Adult Learners.

Barriers	Frequency	Percentage
Dispositional	54	64%
Institutional	29	35%
Situational	1	1%
Total	**84**	**100%**

Dispositional barriers include time management and personal. Institutional barriers include content, travel time, assessment, e-learning, content delivery, course duration, course recognition and subject administration. Situational barriers include personal reasons.
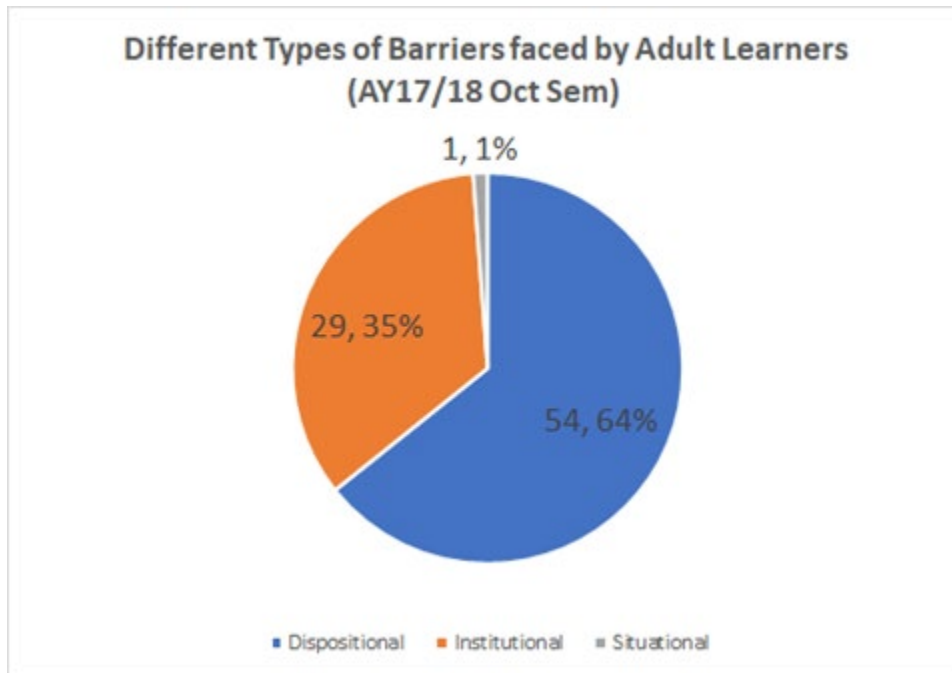

Figure 3: Different Types of Barriers faced by Adult Learners (AY2017/18 Oct Sem)

Dispositional barriers

Interview Excerpt 1 alludes to the challenge of time management faced by adult learners

> Question: What about the balancing between family, work and studies? How are you all managing?
>
> Interviewee 1: To be honest, I am mentally tired and very exhausted.
>
> Question: Exhausted?
>
> Interviewee 1: Yes. I had to wake up early in the morning and go to work. After work, I need to go to school. It is the same routine for the following day again.

Institutional barriers

Interview Excerpt 2 serves as an example of the challenge of assessment load faced by adult learners.

> Question: How many tests and assignments do you have in a subject?
>
> Interviewee 2: Two tests, one assignment and one lab test.
>
> Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 3: Yes.
>
> Question: So there are 4 assessment points in total.
>
> Interviewee 2: Yes, but you must multiply by 3 because there are 3 subjects.
>
> Interviewee 2: There will be test 1 after you have studied for one month. Then after that, they will give you the assignment. There is test 2 one month later. Then maybe a few weeks later, you have to the submit assignment. There was a gap. And if it is multiplied by 3 for 3 subjects, it will be very tedious.

Institutional barriers

Interview Excerpt 3 illustrates the difficulty faced by adult learners with e-learning.

> Question: What is about e-learning that you don't like? Is it you don't have the time, or could you tell me more about it?
>
> Interviewee 1: Seriously, I don't have the time.
>
> Interviewee 2: Seriously, we don't have the time.
>
> Question: Is it about the content?
>
> Interviewee 1: We are OK with the content, but I mean we don't have the time, to manage our time to see the emails because we have some other commitments.

Discussion

Motivating Factors

Using the survey data (quantitized from short response items) from Academic Year 2017/2018 October semester, we classified a list of motivating factors of the adult learners from our study (refer to Table 1). The first key motivating factor for the adult learners was a multi-faceted motivating factor termed as pragmatic reasons (27% for AY 2017/18 October Semester). The factor categorized practical and realistic reasons that kept our adult learners motivated in their studies, and key reasons include potential career progression with the completion of their studies, relevance of studies to their work, potential increase in salaries, and a change of jobs. Our proposed motivating factor, pragmatic reasons concurred well with one of the motivating factors, "relevance and pragmatism" for adult learners in higher education (Sogunro, 2015:26). He asserted that adult learners would value learning experiences only if they were "relevant and applicable to their need" (Sogunro, 2015:29). To us, the motivating factor, pragmatic reasons alluded to career and employment-related needs of adult learners in the school. Amongst the adult learners were those who had just changed jobs or hoped to join a new industry in addition to those who wished to be promoted in their existing jobs.

The second motivating factor in our study was termed as personal interests (26%) because it categorized aspirations and interests of the adult learners that did not make direct reference to career progression, relevance to current/ future workplaces, job salaries and companies' sponsorships (refer to Table 1). To us, this motivating factor categorized adult learners' interests that are not career and employment related in nature. Examples of these interests were "increasing self-confidence", "enjoying school", "pursuing dreams". It supported Wlodkowski's (2003) assertion that adult learners would be more interested (and motivated) in their studies when the studies were meaningful to them. We believed the first two motivating factors: pragmatic reasons and personal interests complemented each other and enriched our understanding of the interests of the adult learners in the school.

Borrowing idea from Marschall and Davis (2012), the third key motivating factor in our study was termed as knowledge and skills (24%). Our data supported Ryan and Deci's (2000) notion that gaining competence in their knowledge and skills was an important motivational factor as well. A related fourth motivating factor was the tutor (10%). To us, these two motivating factors referred to new knowledge and skills in the course content that kept adult learners motivated in their studies. In support for Sogunro's view (2015), syllabi should not be seen as a finished product, and need to be modified during instruction where necessary to cater to the learning needs and expectations of their students.

The fifth motivating factor was termed as social factor (13%) because the adult learners viewed their classmates and family members as sources of motivation for them to stay motivated in their studies. Our data supported Ryan and Deci's (2000) notion that relatedness of adult learners to a community is a key motivation factor. Perhaps, in the case of classmates, it might have to do with having a "conducive learning environment" as proposed by Sogunro (2015). We inferred that encouragement and support from key family members to continue/ complete their studies would be important for adult learners.

Challenges

We used Cross' (1981) ideas of three key barriers namely dispositional-related, institutional-related and situational-related challenges faced by adult learners in the universities to analyze the quantitative and qualitative survey data of respondents in our study. We shared the same stand as Deggs (2011) that his proposed barriers, namely, academic-related, career and job-related, and intrapersonal barriers, were not meant to replace Cross' (1981) proposed barriers for adult learners. In Academic Year 2017/2018 October semester, barriers faced by adult learners in our study were predominantly dispositional-related barrier (64%) in nature and institutional-related barrier (35%).

In our study, by dispositional-related barrier faced by adult learners in the school, we meant regular challenge faced by adult learners in juggling between (shift) work, family and studies and in finding time for revision and assignment/ project due to the multiple roles of adult learners as students, workers and members of their respective families.   The institutional-related barrier was multi-faceted, and by this term, we meant challenges faced by adult learners due to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices in the school. We have broadly classified these challenges in terms of course duration and recognition, learning contexts (e.g. e-learning), instruction, administration and assessments. In our study, we construed situational-related barrier to be one-time or non-regular challenges faced by our adult learners in their studies during the semester.

To our knowledge, the blend of challenges faced by adult learners in a university was not reported in the earlier study by (Deggs, 2011).   Adult learners in our study seemed to be challenged by dispositional-related (64%) and institutional-related (35%) barriers. From the group interviews conducted in this study, adult learners shared about dispositional-related barrier in terms of fatigues and mental exhaustion from night classes and having to work the next morning (refer to Interview excerpt 1). They also spoke about institutional-related barrier in terms the subject assessments (refer to Interview excerpt 2).   Adult learners also shared about other institutional-related barriers such as e-learning that required more of and diverted their personal time at home (refer to Interview excerpt 3).

The clarification from interviews revealed that the challenges faced by our adult learners were not one-off episode or irregular episodes, instead, these challenges were experienced by our adult learners regularly. We have categorized "time management" to be a key dispositional challenge faced by adult learners in this study since they had to split their time amongst multiple roles in their lives.   To compound the "time management" challenge faced by our adult learners, school practices required them to engage in e-learning and clear multiple assessment points which included assignments and tests.

Conclusion

To summarize key findings from our study: firstly, three key motivating factors of adult learners to continue their studies in the school were pragmatic reasons (27%), personal interest (26%), and skills and knowledge (24%) and secondly, two key barriers faced by the same group of adult learners were dispositional-related (64%) and institutional-related (35%) barriers.

What can be done to reduce the challenges faced by adult learners in their part-time studies? Our study shared West's view (2012) that adult learners have limited time to study due to their other work/ life commitments. One way is to manage the institutional barrier faced by adult learners and reduce the dispositional barrier as well.   Some interviewees asked the school to consider different modes of assessment other than reports and tests to reduce the amount of time needed for preparation and revision.   Other assessment approaches such as on-site, performance-based assessment could be further explored without compromising the assessment rigour.

A second way is to "de-stigmatize" the need for additional support through professional counsellors to better manage adult learners' multiple life roles, a provision made available to all students and adult learners in the school. Perhaps, some adult learners can be further equipped to better prioritize and manage their time with the counselling and student care support. More can be done by the school to educate adult learners on the essential provision for them.

Finally, the paper calls for more support to be considered for adult learners by reviewing and reducing institutional barriers. The challenge stemming from having to juggle amongst study, work and family commitments is real. It requires the adult learners to prioritize and balance various life roles.   It requires the school to work alongside and support adult learners as well.   Hopefully, we will then hear less of "Cher! I need help!"

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