

Catering for Adult Learners through the Transformation of Higher Education

Faizah Abd. Majid and Hazadiah Mohamad Dahan
Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

Introduction

A ten year research (1996-2006) conducted in the United States on American adults returning to school identifies several reasons, the primary being to equip themselves with knowledge and skills needed for their careers and better prospects (Aslanian, 2007). In a developing country like Malaysia, the prime reason adult learners are making a comeback to school is similar. In 1991, the Prime Minister of Malaysia announced "Vision 2020". It is a blueprint that serves to direct the country to the aspired status of a fully developed nature by the year 2020. Envisaged in the blueprint is what was coined as k-economy, an economy which is based on knowledge. K-workers and of late, 'Human Capital' were identified as the greatest asset which could easily elevate the k-economy. This in turn, has brought back many adults to continue their education (Mazanah, 2001). In the context of this article, 'adult learners' refers to adults who pursue their studies in higher education institution (HEI) while at the same time play several other roles such as a parent, spouse and an employee (Hazadiah and Faizah, 2006; Rogers, 2002; Knowles, 1990). This definition opens to various interpretations of the adult learning challenges and strategies whilst juggling several responsibilities at the same time.

Developed countries such as America and Japan, to mention a few, have a high capacity for innovation and adopt global strategies in international markets. Hence, they require a workforce equipped with multiple intelligences to translate their business models and offerings to international marketplaces. These include verbal intelligence, problem solving skills and ability to offer cross-border perspectives and solutions, cross-cultural intelligence and environmental intelligence which would enable the workforce to adapt to change. A similar observation is made by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, (2007 as cited in 21st Century Skills, Education and Competitiveness, 2008) when they claim that "fuelling creativity, innovation and adaptability that are the hallmarks of competitive, high-growth and emerging industries requires a highly skilled, creative and nimble workforce" (www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/21st_century_skills_education_and_competitiveness_guide.pdf)

Malaysian Higher Education and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Strategic Plan

Ninth Malaysia Plan places emphasis on Human Capital. In order to be relevant with the market demand for the 21st century which requires "...a highly skilled, creative and nimble workforce" (ibid), it is paramount for higher education institutions to produce "holistic, knowledgeable and highly skilled, flexible and creative as well as imbued with positive work ethics and spiritual values" human capital

(Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006–2010), 2005: 248). The inclusive culture in providing training and knowledge premised on research innovations, collaborations with companies as well as global partners is seen as a platform to realise the concept of lifelong learning which could meet the needs of the 21st century such as creativity and innovation both at work and at home.

Datuk Dr. Zulkefli A. Hassan, the Secretary-General of the MoHE states that in fulfilling the needs of the workforce and preparing Malaysians to meet the global challenges in the 21st century, quality, competitiveness, creativity, and innovation must be emphasised. Consequently, in producing competitive graduates who will meet the 21st century market, Malaysian higher education undergoes a transformation agenda which aims at producing human capital. Seven strategic thrusts have been outlined by the MoHE to materialise the transformation in the higher education system (National Higher Education Action Plan, 2007-2010). They are:

1. Widening access and enhancing equity
2. Improving the quality of teaching and learning
3. Enhancing research and innovation
4. Strengthening institutions of higher education
5. Intensifying internationalisation
6. Enculturation of lifelong learning
7. Reinforcing the Higher Education Ministry's delivery system

However, it is quite well documented in the literature that adult learners encounter various difficulties while pursuing their studies (Wisker, 2001; Habibah, 2006; Faizah, Nur Hashima and Fatin Aliana, 2008). If left untreated, this scenario may hamper the aspiration of the government to materialise the Ninth Malaysia Plan regardless of the outlined strategic thrusts. Basically, the challenges faced are due to their characteristics as adult learners.

Challenges Facing Adult Learners

There are three main challenges faced by adult learners. First is the physical and material or situational challenge. According to Cross (1981, cited in Silva, Cahalan and Lacierno-Paquet, 1998), situational challenges are those related to one's situation at the time. Hillage and Aston (2001) claim situational challenges include "barriers which prevent adult learners from taking up learning opportunities even if they wanted to" and referred them as physical and material challenges. Finance and time constraints such as transportation, childcare, books and difficulties in getting time off work are some of the situational challenges. Generally, lack of financial support prevents the working class from participating in higher education. According to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2006) a number of adult

learners particularly those with low economic background tend to fail their adult education programmes or drop out of their studies due to financial constraints. This is not uncommon in Malaysian higher education too. Sustaining adult learners' participation in higher education is one of the bigger challenges in the transformation of higher education in Malaysia. This is compounded by the practices of many financial aid programmes which are designed to support only traditional students financially. For instance, the Malaysian government education loan programme by the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) has been designed primarily to finance traditional students through undergraduate programmes. This forces adult learners to seek financial help from institutions which levy high interest rates, and which drain their financial resources.

A study conducted on a local university by Hazadiah and Jamiah (2006) reveals that the university displays many tributes of a traditional university whose traditional students are better provided for in terms of on-campus accommodation, and transport facilities in the system. The absence of accommodation for married students with families means that adult learners have to stay out of campus in rented rooms and apartments. Being out of the campus environment, they are not able to participate in extracurricular activities. They become alienated from a full campus life and culture. As a result many do not connect with the university system.

The second category is the structural challenge that relates to both the learners and the service providers. Cross (1981, cited in Silva, Cahalan and Lacierno-Paquet, 1998) refers to them as "institutional challenges or those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities" (p. 36). It is concerned with how learning opportunities such as the form of education and training, and the availability of appropriate facilities are being provided (Hillage and Aston, 2001). MacKeracher et al. (2006) explain that institutional or structural barriers are found wherever learning takes place and it includes learning institutions and the workplace. "These barriers are created by policies and practices of educational providers as well as government policies..." (p. 15). Thus, institutional challenges include the lack of transport, limited local learning opportunities, the lack of facilities and equipment and the lack of knowledge about local learning opportunities and learning advice sources.

The attitudinal type is the third challenge and is referred to as dispositional challenges by Cross (1981, cited in Silva, Cahalan and Lacierno-Paquet, 1998). Both Cross (1981, cited in Silva, Cahalan and Lacierno-Paquet, 1998), and Hillage and Aston (2001) agree that this challenge manifests itself through the perceptions or the attitude of the learners about themselves and their education or learning opportunities that includes face-saving reasons and the lack of motivation. Some of the challenges affected by perceptions are, the lack of confidence, the fear of failure, the lack of confidence in their learning abilities, the lack of motivation, peer group culture, being surrounded by people who are anti-learning, low

aspirations and lack of role models, feelings of inadequacy, the lack of trust in 'officialdom' and formal institutions or organisations and the perception of being too old to learn (MacKeracher et al. 2006).

Catering for Adult Learners

This article is written on the premise that the Higher Education Transformation agenda may assist adult learners to overcome their challenges. This is done by capitalising on the identified strategic thrusts.

First, adult learners are faced with the situational challenge. The Higher Education Transformation agenda has indirectly provided relevant strategies which when used may minimise if not curb the situational barrier. This is reflected in two of the strategic thrusts namely:

1. Widening access and enhancing equity
2. Improving the quality of teaching and learning

Hence, in assisting adult learners overcome the situational challenges, HEIs are urged to upgrade their basic infrastructure and facilities which could support the basic physical needs of the adult learners. To widen the access to HEIs, childcare centres and 24-hour resource centres have become a necessity. Likewise, to ensure equity, financial assistance needs to be provided to those who suffer difficulties in making tuition fee payments. Arrangements with related finance institutions could be initiated to enable such support. The Malaysian Government's in the form of PTPTN loans designed primarily to finance traditional students through undergraduate programmes should also be extended to adult learners pursuing postgraduate programmes.

Second, adults face structural challenges that relate to both the learners and the service providers. However, with the implementation of the Higher Education Transformation agenda and the strategic thrusts in action, it is almost possible to eradicate the structural challenge. Two of the strategic thrusts in particular which focus on this issue are:

1. Improving the quality of teaching and learning
2. Reinforcing the Higher Education Ministry's delivery system

From the two strategic thrusts, HEIs need to accelerate the activities which may lead to the changes required in policies, and teaching and learning practices. Hence, parallel with 'improving the quality of teaching and learning' and 'reinforcing the Higher Education Ministry's delivery system', HEIs may also opt to improve their services in providing advice and information required by adult learners from time to time. As adult learners may be working at a distance away from the university, flexible office hours on the part of the university's administration would be helpful to support such learners. A 24-hour information kiosk and e-administration are some possible alternatives. Finally, e-learning which is supported by an effective on-line communication system is also vital. This coheres with Tracey's (2004) suggestion that an efficient communication system could provide the academic and administrative support needed by the adult learners.

Third, adult learners also face attitudinal challenges. Hence, there is a need for HEIs to provide relevant support and opportunities for adult learners to overcome the challenges. The following strategic thrust in particular addresses the need for support and opportunities:

1. Enculturation of lifelong learning

As generally accepted, lifelong learning covers the whole range of learning which includes formal and informal learning and workplace learning. More importantly, it also includes the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that people acquire in their day-to-day experiences (The Scottish Executive, 2000 cited from <http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/lifelonglearning.htm>). Additionally, according to Kasworm (2007), the inclusive culture in providing training and knowledge premised on research innovations, collaborations with companies as well as global partners is seen as a platform to materialise the concept of lifelong learning which could meet the needs of the 21st century such as creativity and innovation both at work and at home. Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development and Bandura's Social-Cognitive theory on learning are reflected in the collaborations suggested. Psychologically, the collaboration could provide emotional support to the identified attitudinal challenges faced by adult learners. Hence, embracing lifelong learning through the participation in collaborative works could increase the adult learners' motivation, confidence, and also change their perceptions. This in turn will help them to overcome their attitudinal challenges.

Conclusion

The Malaysian Higher Education Strategic Plan sets the background to this article. Issues surrounding the challenges facing adult learners are also highlighted. The participation of adult learners in higher education is seen as another alternative to accelerate the innovative and research culture as aspired to Vision 2020 and the Ninth Malaysia Plan. Hence, it is important that assistance is provided to help adult learners overcome their challenges. It is expected that with such support, the participation of adult learners would be likely to increase. This article has attempted to explore alternatives to by capitalising on the identified strategic thrusts. These alternatives could be taken up by both the institution and adult learners themselves.

References

- Aslanian, C. (2007). Trends in adult learning: a recent snapshot. *The Catalyst*, 36 (3), 14-22.
- Faizah, A. M., Nur Hashima, M. S., and Fatin Aliana, M. R. (2008). *The learning strategies of successful research graduates: a case study on the PhD holders*. 20 - 21 October, International Conference on University Learning and Teaching. Shah Alam.
- Habibah, A. (2006). Voices in the wilderness: Challenges of adult students. In Hazadiah Mohamad Dahan and Faizah Abd. Majid (Eds.), *Scaffolding adult education narratives of Malaysian practitioners*, pp. 87-100. Shah Alam: UPENA.
- Hazadiah, M. D. and Faizah, A. M. (2006). *Scaffolding adult education narratives of Malaysian practitioners*. Shah Alam: UPENA.
- Hazadiah, M. D and Jamiah, B. (2006). Interface of adult learners and higher education-identifying support and needs: Our experience. In Hazadiah Mohamad Dahan and Faizah Abd. Majid (Eds.), *Scaffolding adult education narratives of Malaysian practitioners*, pp. 41-72. Shah Alam: UPENA.
- Hillage, J. and Aston, J. (2001). Attracting new learners: a literature review. *Learning and skills development agency*. Retrieved July 3, 2006 from <http://www.lsda.org.uk/files/pdf/1079.pdf>
- Kasworm, C. (2007). *The International Conference on Lifelong Learning in Chongwon, Korea*, (n.d.) September. Retrieved August 10, 2009 from <http://www4.ncsu.edu/~cekaswor/>
- Knowles, M. (1990). *Adult learners: a neglected species*. London: Kogan Page.
- MacKeracher, D., Suart, T. and Potter, J. (2006). *Barriers to participation in adult learning*. Retrieved February 15, 2007 from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research.sotfr/barriers/barriers.pdf>
- Mazanah, M. (2001). *Adult and continuing education in Malaysia*. Serdang:UPM Press.
- Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education Strategic Plan Report. (2007). Putrajaya: Ministry of Higher Education.
- Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education. (2007). *The national education action plan-laying the foundation beyond 2020*. Putrajaya: Ministry of Higher Education.
- Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010. (2005). Ministry of Prime Minister, Putrajaya.
- Rogers, A. (2002). *Teaching adults* (3rd Ed.). Buckingham: OUP.
- Silva, T. Cahalan, M. and Lacierno-Paquet, N. (1998). *Adult education participation decisions and barriers: Review of conceptual frameworks and empirical studies*. U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, D.C. Working paper No. 98-10. Retrieved November 10, 2006 from <http://nces.gov/pubsearch/pubsinf.asp?pubid=8910>
- Tracey, G. J. (2004). Aligning continuing education resources: How to capture the lifelong learner. *College and University*, 79 (4), 49 - 51.
- Wisker, G. (2001). *The postgraduate research handbook: Succeed with your MS, MPhil, EdD and PhD*. New York: PALGRAVE MACMILLAIN.
- 21st Century skills, education and competitiveness. (n.d.). Retrieved September 22, 2009 from www.21stcenturyskills.org/documents/21stcentury_skills_education_and_competitiveness_guide.pdf