

E-READINESS AMONG LEARNERS IN MALAYSIA: AN INSIGHT INTO FRESH SCHOOL LEAVERS

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the level of e-readiness among school leavers studying full-time. The higher education in Malaysia is facing a changing the delivering trend due to the effects of globalization, and the speed of change in the growth of communication. A book by Scott *The Globalization of Higher Education* has highlighted the radical processes of globalisation as implicating higher education as the creator, interpreter and sufferer of such trends (Scott, 1998). Over the years, there is an increasing number of higher educational institutions have embraced e-learning, however, with a lesser number of higher education providers in Malaysia particularly private education providers as well as colleges provides e-learning to their learners. Why is it so? There are still doubts and hesitation on the e-approach especially for young school leavers who undergo their studies full-time. There are various dimensions of e-readiness have yet to be explored such as learner readiness, management readiness, personnel readiness, content readiness, technical readiness, environmental readiness, cultural readiness and financial readiness. We wish to study on young learners' readiness on e-learning only for this paper. This study will be conducted in various public and private higher education providers whereby its respondents are young learners. The outcome of this study will be useful for education providers to draw and provide suitable learning pedagogy to their learners as well as potential learners in order to engage in an effective teaching and learning process to their learners.

Introduction

Traditional learning takes place in a classroom with much face-to-face interactions with the instructor. According to Yeo R.K. (2005), the shift in emphasis to problem based learning is most effective when learners are actively involved and learn in a context where knowledge is to be used for a specific purpose. A great deal of research has already been conducted into the effectiveness of traditional (formal) lectures. These lectures are taken to be an exposition by the instructor to members of an audience who are expected to listen and take notes (Evans. C.& Jing P.F.,2002).

Lifelong learning has come to involve a variety of learning experiences or modes (Knapper, 1988; Knapper and Cropley, 2000). Open learning, in the guise of correspondence learning existed for many years and can be traced back to the nineteenth century, but even to today, open learning is still regarded as something relatively new. Open learning is subject to many interpretations and meanings. Even their definition has been a matter of drawn-out debate, each of whom has discussed the terminological issue at some length. However, many regarded open learning as open and distance learning as well. Networked technologies have increasingly become an inseparable component of learning and delivering of educational material for the "traditional" and open distance learning. In the open and distance learning (ODL) mode, the absence of the traditional classroom face-to-face interactions between the instructor and the learners is replaced

by the online tutors and online forums. Theoretically, the more active and vibrant the learners participate in the online discussions forum, the more learning should take place. Flexible, open and distance learning are educational approaches that are designed to be adaptable to the needs to a variety of learners. In this paper, the term open and distance learning will be used.

In open and distance learning, the reliability, quality and medium richness are key technological aspects to be considered (Sanders Lopez and Nagelhout, 1995). In particular, the network set up should allow for both synchronous and asynchronous exchange; students should have convenient access (eg. Through a remote access); and the network should require minimal time for document exchange. The quality of the interface also plays a crucial role (Akerlind, G. & Trevitt A.C.F, 1995). E-Readiness is the ability to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to foster one's welfare.

However, as lamented by Hung & Chen (2001), why, despite so many creative efforts at designing chat-rooms, discussions forums, bulletin boards and other similar applications, is the online learning tool yet to attract and sustained dialogue amongst participants? Is it the learners are not ready due to the lacking in skills to use the equipment to make full use of rich and vibrant learning opportunities available for them or is it the tutors that are not adequately trained to guide and assist the online learners?

The problem highlighted above is a common issue faced by most of the open and distance institutions. All these problems caused the "traditional" education institutions in hesitance to offer online education to its learners. Perhaps one of the issue that these education providers are contemplating is the huge investment in providing quality open and distance education. Goi, C.L. & Ng, P.Y., (2009), found out five criteria (program content, Web page accessibility, learner's participation and involvement, Web site security and support, and institution commitment) is important to learners.

Literature Review

Webster, J. and Hackley, P., (1997) remarked that students' performance, measured by their marks, represents a key aspect of teaching effectiveness. However several studies have shown that there is little or no difference in student performance between face-to-face instruction and online learning. Numbers such as e-readiness indicators are an important part of the process of defining policy. They help reduce the complexity of an issue to an understandable level for non-specialists, thereby helping to focus attention, with "a single number" being "the ultimate step in the reduction of complexity" (Starr, 1987, p. 52).

One of the most popular e-readiness indicators is the Networked Readiness Index (NRI). The NRI has received much publicity over the years, as well as attracting the sponsorship and institutional affiliations necessary to guarantee not only its continued existence as an academic project, but also the annual publication of its results as a widely available reference work. For that reason alone it is worthy of study.

E-readiness assessment tools meant to show how ready the nations are to exploit the potential of new information and communication technologies. Yet being actively engaged in constructing policy problems. In the case of the NRI, the problem of the international digital divide is defined in a particular way that privileges certain interests while at the same time legitimizing its inclusion on the agenda of international organizations as a problem worthy of sustained attention. (Luyt, B., 2006)

The utilisation of emerging technologies in distance education led to the American theory of equivalency, which seeks to make equivalent the learning experiences of all students no matter how they are linked to the resources or instruction they require (Simonson et al., 2000). According to this theory, distance education providers have the responsibility to design instructions that provide learners with equal learning experiences and values.

Quinn (2005) cautioned that in designing content, educators should be designing experiences instead and keep their learners engaged in the learning process. He suggested that a structure which comprises elements of objective, introduction concept, examples, practice and summary – can be used to develop a learning experience. Learning will be at its best when it is goal-oriented, contextual, interesting, challenging and interactive.

Desmond Keegan's (1990,1996) theoretical framework for distance education focuses on the concept of reintegration of teaching acts. To Keegan, education requires intersubjectivity, and it is crucial to recreate artificially this shares experience between teacher and student by making learning materials as dialogical as possible and by utilising different communication techniques (Simonson et al., 2000).

Each year, in cooperation with the IBM Institute for Business Value, the Economist Intelligence Unit produces a ranking of e-readiness across countries, based on six pillars of e-readiness: connectivity & technology infrastructure, business environment, social & cultural environment, legal environment, government policy & vision and consumer & business adoption.

According to the latest e-readiness ranking of the World's largest economies published by Economist Intelligence Unit, Malaysia ranked 34th among 70 countries, up to 2 places from last year. E-readiness is the measure of a country's ability to use information and communication technologies (ICT) to develop its economy and to foster its welfare. It was measured based on

- Consumer and business adoption
- Connectivity and technology infrastructure
- Business environment
- Social and cultural environment
- Government policy and vision
- Legal environment

Expansion of the educational level indicator in this category to encompass enrolment in tertiary education has caused a one-off drop this year in most countries' education scores. Distance learning has been a powerful enabler of higher education: the Open University Malaysia, with over 75,000 cumulative students, is the country's largest, produced many graduates who completed their programmes through distance learning.(The economist, 2010)

Comparison between traditional and open and distance learning

	Traditional Learning	Open and distance learning
Flexibility	Does not exist	Exist
Geographical coverage	One specific location	Anywhere in the world
Delivery method	Face-to-face	Online, blended learning
Learning tools	Classrooms	Chatrooms, emails, forums, bulletin boards, network website etc

Based on the questionnaires designed, four categories are analysed, namely flexibility, geographical coverage, delivery method and learning tools. The table above shows a brief description summary of the differences between traditional learning and open and distance learning. Open and distance learning have its advantage as compared to the traditional learning. It is due to its high flexibility in its delivery method, learning tools as well as the area of coverage for its learners. In fact, its teaching tools consists of high-technology medium such as chatrooms, forums etc.

Methodology of Study

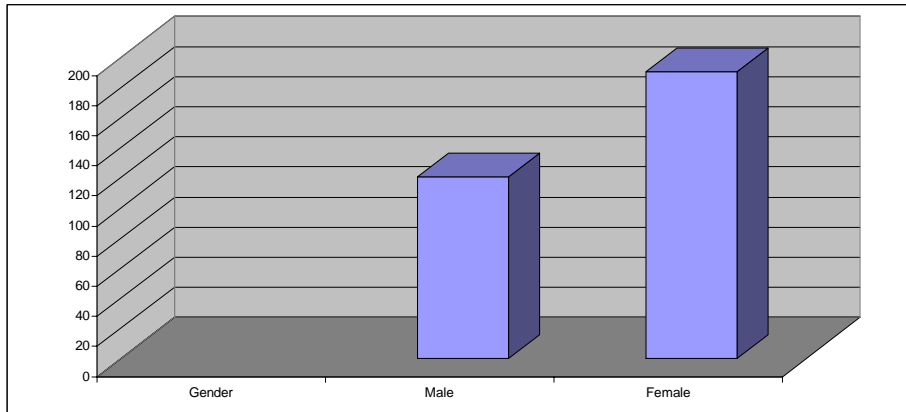
Questionnaires were distributed to a group of fresh school leavers who are currently pursuing their tertiary education in several private higher education providers in Malaysia which currently using the traditional approach of teaching and learning methodology. This study aim to study the level of readiness of the young learners in doing education using the “e” approach.

A total of 312 learners from four private higher education providers in Malaysia are selected as a pilot study. Learners are required to fill up the questionnaires according to the questions that will express their views and interest in doing their studies the “e” way. Generally, this study wish to test the level of e-readiness among young school leavers in Malaysia. This pilot study is conducted using primary data, questionnaires. The sample for this study is learners from four private higher education providers in Malaysia. The questionnaire is designed using a Likert 5-scale. 5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-neutral, 2-disagree and 1-strongly disagree. The questionnaires are distributed in the January semester for all the selected higher education providers. The results will be analysed using descriptive analysis.

Analysis and Discussions

A total of 312 questionnaires are collected and analysed from various higher education providers in Malaysia. Out from the sample, the distribution of gender for the sample are relatively even. Chart 1 illustrates that there are 39% male respondents and 61% female respondents from the sample.

Chart 1: Gender distribution



Meanwhile Chart 2 and Chart 3 shows the distribution of nationality of respondents and the distribution of respondents age respectively. From the sample, 94% are Malaysian respondents and only 6% are foreign respondents. Meanwhile, majority of the respondents are aged between 15-20 age, followed by respondents aged between 21-25 with 72% and 28% respectively. There is a very small number of respondents with an age of 26 and more and younger than 15 years old.

Chart 2: Distribution of sample nationality

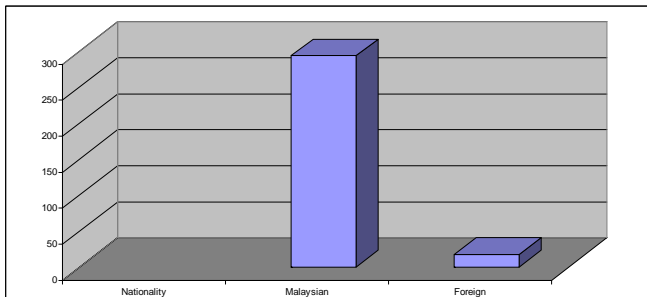
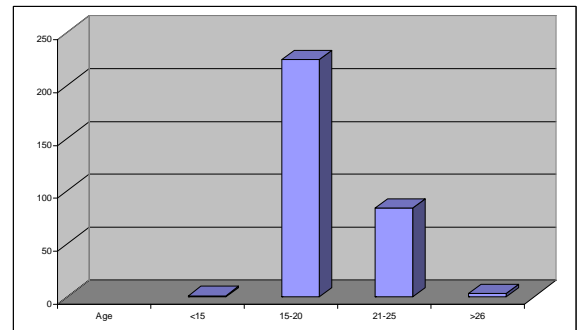
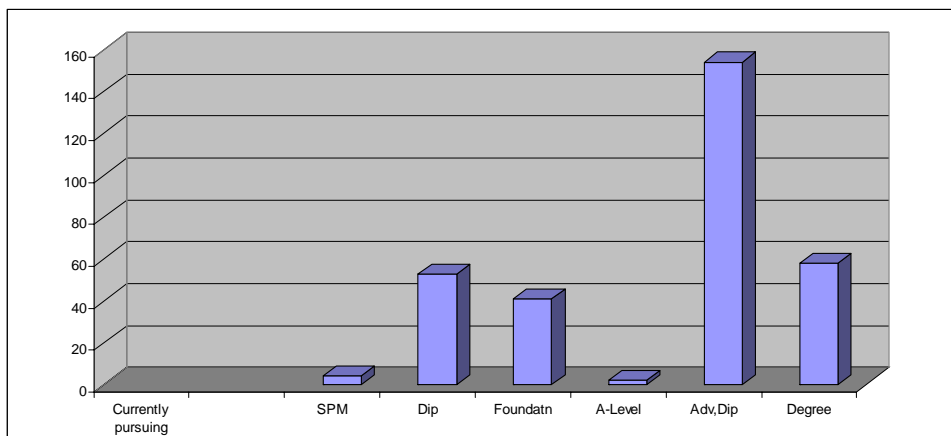


Chart 3: Distribution of sample age



The distribution on the level of education for the sample is shown in Chart 4. Most of the respondents are currently pursuing Advanced Diploma level and their acceptance and receptive level on online learning is relatively low.

Chart 4: Distribution on the level of education



In Table 1, out from 312 respondents, the mean score of respondents surfing internet daily and being comfortable chatting online is relatively high with mean score of 4.1 and 3.8 respectively with total scale of 5. However a low mean score for this study on respondents having own website, with a mean score of only 2.3. The lowest mean score is obtained when students are asked if they are ready to pursue all courses online. Meanwhile, on a positive note, a higher mean score is obtained where respondents in this study is ready to pursue certain courses online. This may be due to respondents felt that doing courses online will lost the human interactions and touch as a relatively high score for this question, which is 3.7 out of 5. A mean score of 2.6 for doing courses is of the same quality of conventional approach. Most of the respondents felt that doing online can save time with mean score of 3.2 and it is convenience but not interesting. Meanwhile, respondents in this study view doing courses online will results in lack of assistance from lecturers and the need to have strong discipline is vital.

Table 1: Mean score for e-readiness

	Mean Score
I surf internet on a daily basis	4.1
I am comfortable corresponding and chatting in the internet	3.8
I have website on my own	2.3
I am ready for certain subjects online only.	2.9
I am ready to pursue all courses online	2.2
Doing courses online loses the human interactions	3.7
Doing courses online is of the same quality of conventional approach	2.6
Doing courses online can save time and cost	3.2

Conclusion and Future Studies

From the study, the response from the sample, fresh school leavers are relatively low in the acceptance to undergo courses online. However, on the positive view, there are light where they are ready to try and do certain courses online.

Private higher education providers can use the advantages of doing online courses viewed by learners such as save cost and convenience to attract them to do courses online. Besides that, doing courses online can trained learners' discipline and have a better time management and better values as a learners. This paper can provide information to higher education providers in Malaysia the acceptance of high school leavers in doing courses online. They can tap and use various pedagogy in learning and teaching in making use of the ICT that Malaysia. There are several steps and measures that we would like to recommend to incorporate a better acceptance of doing courses online:

- Introduce certain elementary or basic courses to learners.
- Lecturers who are appointed to conduct the courses online must have good net-etiquette and have the right attitude to conduct courses online.
- A high level and volume of interactions and discussions in the forum should be conducted as students will be able to voice out their opinions and views in certain concepts and issues regarding the subjects.

A further study on the acceptance of learners on certain subjects can be conducted for private higher education providers in Malaysia to use a better teaching and learning for fresh high school leavers.

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