

Motivation and Study Habits of Working Adults: A Case Study of Masters Students in Open University Malaysia

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore what motivates working adults to continue with their studies and what are their study habits. A group of OUM masters students from the Faculty of Business and Management were studied using the case study approach. The main implication from the case findings is that working adults are highly motivated in pursuing their studies and that there are many sources of motivation for them. A new job, increased career prospects, gaining knowledge, a pay increase and filling their time are some of the factors that motivate these students to further their studies. Their study habits also differ widely from a short time span to full concentration, from early in the morning to late at night and from formal sessions to minutes of stolen time. The research looked at how the students studied and how motivated they are. The findings from the study are useful to students, academicians and university administrators alike. Students can seek to learn from their friends' experiences, academicians can tailor the learning process to cater to students' needs and behaviour, whilst university administrators can find ways to market their programmes and retain their students. As the research has initiated some new questions in the behaviour of working adults, it can serve as the basis for further research in the area.

Keywords: Motivation, Study Habits, Life Long Learning

Introduction

Motivation has long been a popular research area for management scholars and practitioners. As the pioneer open-distance learning university in Malaysia, OUM prides itself in understanding their learners and giving them the best of services. With this in mind, the research explored what motivates our adult learners and their study habits.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine what motivates adult learners to study and their study habits. The study focused on Masters students from the Faculty of Business and Management.

Literature Review

Law *et.al.* (2009) described motivation in learning as the desire to use knowledge and skills in associated learning activities. Gallo and Ronaldo (2011) pointed out that motivation is a basic requirement of learning and that it requires effort. Law *et.al.* (2009) supported this by stating that the aim of every learning oriented activity is to explore the factors that enable and motivate individuals to learn. According to Law *et.al.* (2009), motivation is an enabler for learning and academic success. According to Brophy, the issue of motivation for learning in school progressed from the behavioural approach that focused on reward and punishment, to the personality approach that concentrated on the students' needs and their effect on learning, to a more cognitive approach focusing on the students' goals in the classroom (Mordecai and Yishai, 2006). However, this overlooked the idea of normative motivation. Deci and Ryan (2000) considered motivation to be based on natural tendencies, which they termed as internalized motivation which is based on the internalization of social expectations. In describing internalized motivation, Deci and Ryan emphasized the individual's sense of autonomy and choice, and thus the satisfaction accompanying acts that grow out of this feeling, rather than the normative component (which was the primary basis of Freud's use of the word *internalization*;? (Schafer, 1968). This accords with the goal approaches to motivation (Ford, 1992) that consider the conceptions and goals adopted by individuals as important sources of motivation; as well as the views (Bruner, 1990) that see the individual's aspiration to give meaning to the world as a basic factor in human motivation.

The concept of needs was once widely employed in empirical psychology to organize the study of motivation. Although variously defined at the physiological or psychological levels and as innate or learned, the concept of needs specified the content of motivation and provided a substantive basis for the energization and direction of action. Beginning around the 1960s, however, the dramatic shift toward cognitive theories led to the concept of needs being replaced by the concept of goals as the dominant motivational concept.

Goal-related efficacy, or Self Determination Theory (SDT) has, in contrast, maintained that a full understanding not only of goal-directed behavior, but also of psychological development and well-being, cannot be achieved without addressing the needs that give goals their psychological potency and that influence regulatory processes directing people's pursuits of goals. Such a dynamic motivational

viewpoint provides an alternative explanation of behavioural persistence and changes in behaviour; it shows how important it is to look at the broader personal and social life context of students when trying to explain their educational choices, persistence, academic achievements and even their well-being.

Many students have a variety of interests and live in several different worlds, thereby displaying multiple selves (Gergen, 1991). Indeed, students' educational life is not lived in splendid isolation. To the contrary, it is part of a (more or less) complex dynamic system of which the different parts affect each other. These various interests, self-concepts and life domains may mutually reinforce each other, but might also be in conflict. The fact that students face a broad variety of alternative activities that might disrupt their learning might be especially true given that we are currently living in a post-modern society (Gergen, 1991). Such a society is precisely characterized by the exponential growth in leisure opportunities, which might indirectly or directly interfere with adolescents' learning (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz, 2000).

Extrinsic motivation is often related to external benefits. This includes time, thus if a student can accomplish the same in less time, he or she will (Gallo and Ronaldo, 2011). Intrinsic motivation is a very powerful source in our lives and can often produce fast results (Gallo and Ronaldo, 2011). As put by Gallo and Ronaldo (2011, 98):

Intrinsic motivation is generally considered more desirable, yet it is difficult to encourage intrinsic satisfactions without the use of extrinsic motivators, as the two seem related to each other and to the learning process in undefined ways.

The postulate of intrinsic motivation begins with a proactive organism; it presupposes that humans are naturally active and that there are natural tendencies toward development that require nutrients to function effectively. In particular, intrinsic motivation concerns active engagement with tasks that people find interesting and that, in turn, promote growth. In discussing the psychological meaning of intrinsic motivation and its undermining by extrinsic rewards, Deci (1975) suggested that intrinsically motivated behaviors represent the prototype of self-determined activities: They are activities that people do naturally and spontaneously when they feel free to follow their inner interests. Such activities have what deCharms (1968), extending a concept introduced by Heider (1958), referred to as an internal perceived locus of causality (I-PLOC). As studies by Deci and others (e.g., Lepper *et al.*, 1973) suggested, when extrinsic rewards are introduced for doing an intrinsically interesting activity, people tend to feel controlled by the rewards, prompting a shift in the perceived locus of causality for the behavior from internal to external. People feel less like origins of their behavior and thus display less intrinsic motivation.

Vygotsky (1987) pointed out that students need to be active learners and take responsibility for their own learning. Instructors need to understand that extrinsic motivation is recognized by students and that evaluation in the form of grades may be negative to lifelong learning (Gallo and Ronaldo, 2011). Gallo and Ronaldo (2011) found that students are more apt to be motivated when they understand the relevance of what they are learning. It also, has been found that intrinsic motivation can be enhanced through positive response to queries. This is because learners feel more capable when their responses are met with approval (Brophy, 1983).

Study Habits of Learners

Nonis & Hudson (2010) quoted that several studies have investigated and found that demographic variables, such as gender, age, and race (Beaumont- Walters & Soyibo, 2001; Haist, John, Elam, Blue, & Fosson, 2000; Wong, 2000); psychological variables, such as academic self-efficacy (Bouffard-Bouchard, Parent, & Larivee, 1991); motivation (Barling & Charbonneau, 1992); optimism (Schulman, 1999); and behavioral variables, such as time management skills (Paden & Stell, 1997), relate to student performance.

Nonis & Hudson (2010) found that study skills or habits would have a significant direct relationship with the academic performance of college students. Study habits or strategies according to them such as paying attention in class, being on time, taking good notes, completing homework in a timely manner, and reading the study material before a lecture. Although not every learning strategy or study habit produces useful results in terms of academic achievement, it would be expected that students who possess good study habits in general are better performers than are those students with poor study habits. There is some empirical evidence that shows that study habits impact academic performance. Borg *et al.* (1989) and Okpala, Okpala, and Ellis (2000) reported that good study strategies positively influenced performance in economics courses.

Elias (2005) investigated the relationship that two different approaches to studying—deep, which involved developing competencies in subject matter, and surface, which involved simply wanting to meet course expectations - have on student performance in a basic accounting course. Results showed that accounting students using the deep approach had a significant, positive relationship with their course grade, whereas students using the surface approach had a significant, negative relationship. Davidson (2002) also reported a deep study approach that demonstrated a positive relationship with course performance on complex examination questions but not on simple (less complex) ones. These results taken as a whole suggest that study skills have a relationship with student performance but the nature of this relationship is likely to be more complicated than many researchers believe.

Nonis & Hudson (2010) stated that variability in motivation across students may dampen the association between ability and performance. Similar to how motivation interacts with ability to influence academic performance, behaviours such as study effort can interact with ability to influence performance.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on findings obtained from OUM's masters' students from the Faculty of Business and Management. The case study approach was adopted for this research as the research was exploratory in nature with the objective of finding out what factors motivates adult learners and what are their study habits. According to Yin (1994:13), a case study is:

an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used

These students were asked to answer open-ended questions regarding factors that motivated them to study and their study habits. Data were entered into spreadsheets and analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1983) approach for data analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The first question asked in the survey questionnaire was what the students understood by the term motivation. Many students identified motivation as the driving force to achieve goals. Students viewed motivation as the process of "how people are driven to get something better in their life...it leads to how someone acts and behaves." Motivation was seen to be anything that gets students into a positive mood or something that drives a person to do something positive. It is something that compels people to act and achieve something, even their dreams. The findings show that students see motivation as being divided into intrinsic or internal motivation and extrinsic or external motivation. Intrinsic motivation such as "words, treatment and facilities" while extrinsic motivation such as "travelling" were cited as examples.

The next question asked was on why they enrolled into the Masters programme. Many students had multiple answers with the most popular answer being to increase knowledge and improve qualifications. Improving the quality of life and self-esteem were also additional reasons for enrolling in a postgraduate programme. The ability to do lifelong learning, applying theory to practice and getting new ideas besides gaining maturity and experience, to be better managers and leaders, to socialize and meet new friends as well as enhancing professional networks were also other reasons cited by the students. Salary increment was also an important reason for students to continue their education. Students viewed completing their studies within the stipulated time, getting 'A' grades and awarded into the Dean's List as factors which motivated them to study. OUM's accessible location and flexible programme structure were also cited as motivational factors. Additionally, many students identified self-satisfaction and self-improvement as factors which motivate them to study. An improvement in self-esteem and an aspiration for a better life were also crucial factors in motivating students for example:

"I am frustrated with my last supervisor who tended to look down on other people"

"Self-confidence, self-improvement for betterment and self-satisfaction are my motivation drivers to study".

"Successful people around me do give me a vivid picture on the importance to learn and improve as much as I can in life."

One student viewed continuing her education as a strategy to motivate herself as well as her children;

"I enrolled in the Masters programme because I want to enhance my knowledge in management from experienced lecturers. I also gain new and up-to-date information ...from research and reading...furthermore it makes me more confident. Besides that I also want to inspire my children to work hard and be smart and for them to realise that it is very important to be knowledgeable".

The findings show that all the students in the sample were motivated by their families and friends. Families especially spouses played a major role in encouraging students to continue studying especially for married women students. For example, *"my uncle who is a very successful medical physician is my role model....I want to follow his footsteps towards achieving goals....also encouragement and motivation from my very own family and peers...."*

In regards to study habits of students were asked to describe how they studied for each of their courses in the programme. Responses of studying strategies ranged from doing more reading, revision, attending seminars, concentrating in the classroom, allocating time for studying and doing group discussions. Excerpts from the students included

“Staying up late at night or reading books and notes”

“I believe very much in group study/discussion which is really effective to me”

“By attending seminars, reading and did all the researches and assignments given”

The students also intelligently categorized their studying habits according to the specific needs of the courses that they were studying, for example *“courses that required calculations means doing more exercises while qualitative subjects required more reading and referring to past year paper questions.”* Many students expressed reading from the Internet as one of their main sources of information.

The second question asked was when they studied. Many students replied that they usually study at night after 11 at night or after midnight or early morning as these students are working adults so night time is the only time that they are free to study. Students studied whenever they are free and at weekends. A few students had conscientious study habits as expressed by their responses as follows:

“At night after office every day, and including weekends”

“Every day between 8 till 12 at night”

“Normally, I will study at night when I am free. About once a week”

The third question asked to students is to describe their study routine for each week. Majority of student replies were;

“Monday to Friday, study at nights or early in the morning, get some rest on Saturday and study 2-3 hours on Sundays after spent time with family”.

“7-9 in the morning and if not tired, at least twice a week from 12 to 2 am.”

“2 main topics per week.”

“Divide each chapter according to weeks”.

“ I will study once a week(if time allows) . Will start from the easiest to the hardest.”

“I will study 4 hours during weekday and more than 4 hours during weekend.”

From the responses as shown above, the students have a study routine that they follow; only a few of the students expressed the view that they did not have a study routine, for example:

“I do not specifically have a weekly study routine. Frankly, it is all about interest in doing something that I want to do and I will do it with my all”,

“No particular routine. It largely depends on my work and family schedule.”

Analysis and Conclusion

The findings show that the learners in the study had different motivators for enrolling and studying in the programme. Most of them wanted to improve themselves and achieve their own satisfaction. This supports Law's *et.al.* (2009) findings that individual attitude and expectations are important motivators.

Learning will not happen without motivation and a supportive environment (Law *et.al.*, 2009). From the study, the learners cited their family and friends as the people who motivate them most in their studies. None cited academics or tutors as people who motivated them. This is disappointing as according to Law *et al.* (2009) academics need to be aware of and account for the effects of learner motivation in any courses which they conduct. Law *et.al.* (2009) proposed that academics need to ensure that students are motivated in order to increase the effectiveness of learning and level of performance.

The findings show that learners also had problems in terms of their time as they are all full-time working adults. Many students studied at night and whenever they can, although some had fixed study routine. Therefore, it is recommended that the university could include a time management session for the students as this would assist them in managing their studies. After all, time management is an important aptitude for students (Vanheste, Lens & Vandenberghe, 2001).

Understanding what motivates learners is important as the university needs to make sure that their learners graduate. We need to remember that learners who drop out may not have done so because of their own personal failure but rather because the education system might not have met the needs of its clients (Kosir, 2010). As most of the learners were looking for knowledge to enhance their life and also their future work, it is imperative that all the courses and academicians involved fulfill the learners' quest and thirst for knowledge and assist them in achieving their goals for a better career.

Nonis & Hudson (2010) found that study skills or habits like paying attention in class, being on time, taking good notes, completing homework in a timely manner, and reading the study material before a lecture would result in good academic performance. Our findings reflect that although these particular study skills or habits were not displayed by OUM students, but other study habits like studying regularly at night, surfing the internet for additional information, studying in groups and grabbing any free time available for revision are practiced. This might arise due to OUM students being adult learners who are working full time. Therefore, such students will be facing a time constraints in their studies.

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