

# Motivation of Postgraduate Learners in Pursuing Their Doctoral Degree through Collaborative Learning

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## Abstract

Huge investments in both the public and private universities are made mainly to attract learners, yet how do we keep them engaged and retained them. On the other hand, how do these universities motivate their part time postgraduate learners to further continue their education? The implication of these learners' withdrawals will be costly to the learners' potential success in their career. It will also have repercussion on the universities' reputation, operational and manpower costs and the utmost loss of all will be in terms of potential knowledgeable workers to the nation. Therefore, it will be imperative that owners and stakeholders of these universities find ways on how to retain its learners. This study thus, focuses on collaborative learning among part time postgraduate learners who are pursuing their doctoral degree at a private open university in Malaysia. A semi-structured face-to-face interview was used to gain more insight on their experience that have an impact on their motivation to continuously work towards achieving their ambition. The finding indicated that through collaborative learning, it had lead to high level of engagement and motivation among learners. Future study should consider alternative modes of enquires such as employing a cross sectional research design and a nationwide survey covering samples from the whole population of the higher institutions of learning in Malaysia that would be more significant in making generalisation.

Key words: Collaborative learning, Malaysia, Engagement, Motivation, Open University

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia inspires to increase its labour efficiency and effectiveness though quality education by the year 2050 under TN50 vision (Malaysia, Education for All 2015 National Review). The emphasis is not only on educating the young but also for the adult learners. It is most challenging for the working adult to be engaged in learning with the hope to enhance their knowledge, skills and abilities and also improving their socio-economic wellbeing.

Various incentives such as MyBrain 15 were aimed at promoting enrolment in postgraduate programmes. Under the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016-2020), enrolment in PhD programmes showed an increased of 56.3% and masters level increased by 31.7%. In addition, it was reported that the total number of academic staff with PhD qualification in public universities have also increased by 31.6% especially among the Malaysian Research Universities (MRUs). Though the number of academic staff acquiring their doctoral degrees have increased, however, the attrition rate especially among the part timers pursuing doctoral was reported to be quite alarming. It was reported in a private university, that it takes about an average of 4.84 years for a graduate to complete their thesis (Abidin & Ismail, 2011). Other reports have indicated that the attrition rate was higher (D'Andrea, 2002, McAlpine & Norton, 2006, Gardner, 2008, Petroff, 2011, Cassuto, 2013) especially in US and United Kingdom.

Huge investments by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been spend mainly to attract learners and yet how do we keep them engaged and retain them. On the other hand, how do universities motivate their postgraduate learners to further continue their education? This issue is not only occurring in Malaysia but also

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globally. Therefore, there is a need to come out with a good device or measures to minimize the attrition issue especially among the part time postgraduates pursuing their doctoral degree. In order to do this, we need to understand the pushing factors that would encourage them to complete their doctoral dissertation. In addition, there is limited study that observes online pastime learner's engagement. Therefore, this exploratory study is designed to try and understand what motivates part time postgraduate learners to stay engaged in a collective e-learning environment of a private university in Malaysia.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Past study by Cassuto (2013) mooted that the doctoral degree learners fall into three categories namely: those who are unable to complete because there is no push factor from the committees to get them to complete their thesis writing on time, secondly the group have the aptitude to complete but opt not to. There is a change of heart- initially the learners plan to be an academician but along the way seek another occupation and finally the last group to keep up with the Joneses- follow their peers or friends who had graduated with the doctoral degree.

In order to retain the postgraduate learners is not an easy task especially when they are doing it on a part time basis on an e-learning environment. Motivation do play an important role and is considered a pre-requisite to student retention intention (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Their study in the primary school setting demonstrated that motivation both extrinsic and intrinsic is important in getting the students engaged in learning. Though extrinsic motivation is an important element in stimulating the learning process, somehow the academic activities being conducted are equally important. Motivation according to Batemen and Snell (2013), "forces that energise, direct and sustain a person's effort". A highly motivated person according to him, will be an effective person seeking to achieve the organisational goal, provided the much needed resources are being fulfilled. In the context of education, highly motivated learners will stay at their university and completed their study. They will be the one who will see their supervisors often enough. Another study by Hsieh (2014) found students in collaborative learning environment and constantly in context with their mentors are highly motivated. Nevertheless, a qualitative study by Pardasani, Goldkind, Heyman, and Cross-Denny, (2012) found otherwise. They argued that the student motivation to complete their course work was the result of being pushed by their friends and peers and not by their instructors. Therefore, it will be interesting to find out what motivates adult learners in pursuing their doctoral degree to complete their thesis.

Nevertheless, Mazer (2013) found support that students who are in close contact with their instructors tend to be more engaged in their learning and will focus more on the content of their studies. The reason being the characteristic of instructors and face to face contact will awaken the intellectual aspect of the student. Bomia, Beluzo, Demeester, Elander, Johnson, and Sheldon, (1997) describe learners' engagement as readiness, wanting, yearning, and being intimidated to participate effectively in the learning Briggs (2015) consequently define learners' engagement in cooperative learning, indicate their desire and interest to gain more knowledge on their course content. Past study fully supported the notion that when learners are fully motivated and passionate about their learning will not only achieve high performance but also will be fully engaged with their courses that they undertake (Mandernach, Donnelly-Sallee, & Dailey-Hebert, 2011). Postgraduate students in United Kingdom on the other hand were more likely to be highly engaged and motivated in a self-directed learning (Mello,2016). They felt that with the autonomy given to manage their studies supported by materials given by their instructors, they are likely to fully engaged with the online materials and thus getting good results.

Deschaine and Whale (2017) conjured that not only learners on line wanted to interact fully with their peers or their instructors rather they were there due to more personal reasons such as to develop their professional career. They suggested in order to get more learners to be engaged and participate with the online learning, instructors need to be familiar with the learning management system well. Conversely, the learners should have the necessary gadgets and skills to be able to participate in the learning. Therefore, in order to get student to be engaged in online learning it is pertinent that there should be supports not only from the teachers but also the technical supports. In addition, recent studies on student engagement have established as one feature in plummeting student attrition (Kizilcec & Halawa, 2015; Boton & Gregory, 2015)

## **3. METHODS**

Qualitative method was conducted. The research was conducted with learners undergoing their PhD and DBA that were involved in distance learning at an open university in Malaysia. Five learners were invited to participate in an interview who were at different levels of their study under the supervision of a supervisor. A semi structured interview was created with another author to find out the learner's experience and motivation in the collaborative learning environment. To ensure confidently, the investigations were conducted without the supervisor's presence. The student age ranges between 30 to 56 years old. 60% were male and 40% were female.

During the interview, the learners were being informed on the intension of the research. The interview questions were based on the expanded two (2) themes that included motivation and collaborative learning of postgraduate learners in pursuing their doctoral degree. The interview took about 45 minutes each. It was done over a period of two (2) weeks where learners can only have met during the weekends as most of them having full time jobs. The interviewer used a digital recorder to get more accurate records on the interview. The data was analysed basing on the semi-structured interview questions. Notes were made and each audio session was listened carefully, line by line. Relevant words and phrases were identified based on the repetition of phrases by the interviewee and also the interviewees remark which was unexpected and different from previous literature that was identified.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

From the interview, the learners indicate that there are some kind of collaborative learning. Though it was a known fact that doctoral studies have its characteristic of being a "lonely journey" which doctoral learners have to embark but this may not be so. As one of the respondent stated:

*"PhD is a lonely journey, so you need a group effort, two heads are better than one, so that will motivate others to continue rather than dropping away from the group. And...people continue to further their studies for various reasons. Some for personal satisfaction, some to up their career ladder and some just to fulfil academic requirement because one needs a PhD as a lecturer etc., so group effort always motivate the other in the group to persevere with their studies".*

To structure the interpretation of the results, three themes were categorised from the data analysis with reference to study objectives:

##### **4.1 Motivation could be linked to collaborative learning between peers**

Group cohesion can be built like any other undergraduate students in the on-line mode (Zakariah & Hashim, 2015). In fact, peer's relation among postgraduate learners also plays an important role in nurturing their motivation to keep going. The lack of opportunity of socialising with another human made collaborative learning deemed necessary to gain peer support and develop a comprehensive group where they could assist one another (Sit et al., 2005).

Respondents have indicated that they have good relations with their peers by giving words of encouragement through WhatsApp group and occasional self-arranged face to face class (f2f) session between them in the university. Learners work collaboratively with others, taking the responsibility for their own learning and deepening their understanding of the specific course content (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999). For instance, during the f2f session, the younger learners whom are more IT savvy will coach the senior aged learners on the techniques of formatting dissertation and the seniors would exchange work experiences and other inputs relating to the doctoral studies.

Additionally, the findings revealed that peer mentor serves as a 'helping hand' that provides support and encouragement. Their peers also act as a referral aside from their supervisor for some whom are reluctant to approach their supervisor personally. A respondent stated that:

*"We do encourage; we do push everyone to get to complete their papers but at the same time we have this (f2f) gathering. Sometimes people are shy, but we know that actually people are at their same spot, same weakness".*

Not only does the peer mentor help with the progress of the study, this particular respondent whom is deemed as a mentor for the group found that there is progression among their peers. The respondent said:

*“I could say that from zero to hero. A lot of progress, a lot improvement, I want to say about a peer. When I first saw him, he doesn't know anything about research and now I can see clearly the framework, the research problem and he is ready for proposal defense. Sometimes in our group when there is someone who suddenly achieve or are done with their proposal defense, the rest will push themselves to go further. That's what we call motivation for ourselves”.*

#### **4.2 Supervisor' support in motivating postgraduate learners**

Postgraduate supervisors are the core members of the collaborative learning that students have extensive and frequent interactions with (Schulze & Lemmer, 2017). The study result empirically shown that receiving guidance, support be it academically or emotionally from the supervisor makes the postgraduate learners feel more academically effective and spirited. Intriguingly, promptness from the supervisor's reply is a form of motivation.

A participant remarked:

*“I could ask my supervisor from whenever we want, whenever we like, wherever we are. Easily reachable. Promptness is important because sometimes it's the time pressure. Supervisors encouragement, it will be a motivation for me and if she doesn't reply it demotivates me. But she always replies”. However, if the reply is later than anticipated, the responder reported: “When she replies I feel better about myself. PhD is tough. When she replies I feel motivated. If not, I feel alone and lost”.*

The supervisor's facilitation also helps the learners in making them feel capable of achieving their academic goal. Aiding learners with research materials and provide advices on effective way of writing dissertation helps the respondents immensely with their writing. Supervisors specialisation also plays an important role in elevating learners trust and confidence with the provided advice.

A respondent commented:

*“Supervisor plays a role in giving out the tricks. For example, reading the journals. I need to be selective, for example on google scholar, type up the keywords related to my study and then select the last 5 years of study and keep on zooming until the area of focus appears that is relevant to the current studies. On top of that, try to search other dissertations or thesis at PhD level for the past 5 years. Preferably in the same field of my topic. This sort of advice is very important rather than me going from zero and trying to Google through the ocean of knowledge and I will not find what I really want to find for”.*

In another way, supervisors could also assist learners in keeping pace with their studies. A student mentioned:

*“I can see that her constant reminder makes me feel her commitment”.*

The supervisors' given commitment elevates their confidence towards finishing their tasks regularly.

But, it was found that acknowledgement from the supervisor are not important since they are all working adults, with most holding high positions in their workplace, a contrary to Ahmed et al. (2017) study which indicated that acknowledgement from the supervisor is one of the key factor that motivates PhD learners.

#### **4.3 Spiritual intelligence as a personality trait to motivate postgraduate learners**

Significance of spiritual development at workplace has been recognised among vast organisations globally (Sultan, Khan & Kanwal, 2017 & Shahjahan, 2004). Similarly, spiritual values are important to the growth of students and have meaning beyond the scope of achieving a particular test score (Shamsali & Vahdat, 2016). Spiritual intelligence (SI) is a concept that can be applied in the day to day life to experience greater meaning by practicing qualities such as mindfulness, presence and compassion, even though the person is facing extreme obstacles (Amram, 2007).

In this regard, since all of the interviewed respondents are Muslims, the explanations on spiritual linkages will be based on the Islamic virtues. The spiritual intelligence is derivative from two aspects:

#### **4.3.1 The concept of Iqra (Recite,Read)**

Iqra is an Arabic word translated as 'recite, read'. It is a concept that has a deeper notion to it as it represents humanity in relation to God. It is God's command for every creation to learn, through experience and understanding. In one instance, the (Iqra) concept is upheld by a respondent when he is challenged with a low point during writing. The respondent remarked: "I would always rely to Iqra, it means you have to read and you have to move on". The statement implies perseverance and commitment is to be upheld in which case, that humans are imperfect and there will always be moments where complexities happens. The key is to keep reading, researching and finding solutions.

#### **4.3.2 The concept of knowledge sharing**

Motivation to share plays an important part to enhance knowledge sharing among members (Sohail & Daud, 2009). As said by a respondent:  
"We know that if we help others, we receive 'pahala' (reward) and also then someone else might help us in return". In Islam, the concept of 'ilm' (knowledge) includes ethical truthfulness and sharing knowledge of what is materially useful for a person (Yaakub,2011). This concept led the believer to emulate the Islamic virtues of willingness to share with others selflessly to more people than oneself.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This paper explored the idea of what motivates part time postgraduate learners to stay engaged in a collective e-learning environment of a private university in Malaysia. All respondents stated that their postgraduate degree is for their self-actualisation even though it may take years to complete the postgraduate studies. Findings indicate that the respondents felt that collaborative learning could cultivate motivation among peers. Helping peers collectively in a group, enables the learners to strive towards achieving their goals by mentoring and throwing encouraging remarks to one another. Advancement in studies is also a factor that encourages and motivates them to keep up the pace with their fellow members and keep track on their study progression.

Furthermore, research shows that supervisor's engagement is essential for postgraduate learners. Most postgraduate students interviewed in this study shows high reliance towards their supervisor to guide them through their dissertation writing. Finally, the resulting context revealed that there is an inclination on spiritual intelligence in fostering the perseverance traits within individuals although faced with obstacles along the education journey. Sharing of knowledge is also an interesting find that could be connected to spirituality. It seemed that the connected to spirituality allows the learners to share their wisdom/ knowledge willingly without expecting any immediate reward.

Although this study specifically links the spirituality to Islamic virtues, it does not mean that the concept of SI is restricted. As found by Amram (2007), the concept of SI is based on seven dimensions (consciousness, grace, meaning, transcendence, truth, serenity and inner-directness) within most major spiritual traditions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and many others.

## **6. LIMITATION**

It is important to note that the findings were derived from a relatively small sample and this study although it may not be able to provide a generalizable result, it is suggested that the theme could be used and expanded for further investigation. This study is initiated to explore the concept of motivation and collaborative learning among part-time postgraduate's learners within the Business and Management cluster offered by the university. The spirituality intelligence (SI) concept could also be used in future studies to validate the model to other clusters and among undergraduate learners.

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