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Empowerment of Lifelong Learning among Late Bloomers Youth in Malaysia

Nor Azrul Mohd Zin^{1*}, Charli Sitinjak², Noordeyana Tambi³, Siti Hajar Kamaruddin⁴

** Corresponding Author*

¹ School of Marketing and Management, Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

² Faculty of Psychology, University of Esa Unggul, West Jakarta, Indonesia

³ Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan (FSSK), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia

⁴ Fakulti Perniagaan, Ekonomi dan Pembangunan Sosial, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

norazrul.zin@apu.edu.my, charli.sitinjak@esaunggul.ac.id, deyana@ukm.edu.my, s.hajar@umt.edu.my
Tel: +603 8996 1000

Abstract

Lifelong learning is challenging for adolescents who have passed their prime age. Even many members of these groups are at risk of dropping out of higher education. This qualitative study employs in-depth interviews with twelve National University of Malaysia participants. The informants are selected via targeted sampling based on predetermined criteria. The study data are analysed thematically using three levels of encoding. The study reveals three significant challenges: workload, emotional pressure, and financial problems. Three action power strategies for youth overcoming obstacles are self-discipline, enhanced self-confidence, and wise conflict resolution.

Keywords: Youth; Late bloomer; Lifelong learning; Coping strategy

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1.0 Introduction

Lifelong Learning holds a significant place within the educational landscape of Malaysia, resonating particularly with the youth demographic aspiring to pursue further education. This trend aligns with the fourth principle of quality education outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals, aiming to ensure equitable access to affordable and high-quality educational opportunities, including higher education, for all genders by 2030 (UNDP, 2023). Moreover, Andra (2019) underscores the relevance of lifelong education in fostering andragogy, a pedagogical approach that fuels adults' intrinsic motivation to engage in meaningful learning experiences..

In Malaysia, lifelong learning manifests through two primary modalities: formal and informal educational delivery systems. Notably, the nation embraces a diverse educational landscape accommodating full-time and part-time learners (Zin et al., 2020). Furthermore, governmental provisions enable economically disadvantaged students to pursue education through

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various means. These include scholarships and study leave for civil servants, such as unpaid, half-wage, and fully paid learning leave (Kementerian Perkhidmatan Malaysia, 2021).

Malaysia's youth population is substantial, with a demographic landscape predominantly comprising young individuals. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the country boasted 4.60 million male and 4.30 million female youths in 2022. Per the Youth Development and Youth Organisation Act 207 (Act 668), amended in 2009, individuals aged 15 to 30 fall within the youth bracket. However, Dasar Belia Selangor (2020) introduces a broader age range, extending youth categorization to individuals aged 31 to 40. Consequently, Malaysia recognizes individuals aged 15 to 40 as falling within the youth demographic.

This research aims to investigate the process of empowering late bloomers within the B40 young population in Malaysia. It comprises with two main objective which are:

- 1) To investigate the challenges encountered by late bloomers youth to sustain in education journey
- 2) To identify the action strategy employed by informants to surmount the obstacles identified in this study

2.0 Literature Review

The Late Bloomer Concept in Lifelong Education

A late bloomer in education is a phenomenon that explains the state of delay experienced by an individual, especially youths who experience delays in achieving educational success at the ideal age (Zin et al., 2020). Therefore, most late bloomers are in the B40 income group, and, on average, they are already employed (Zin & Tambi, 2018; Zin et al., 2020). This phenomenon has been observed in some other developed nations, as reported in a 2018 OECD report, which stated that 80 percent of the countries listed by this nation are experiencing issues with adult learners in the higher education system.

In addition, this phenomenon of late bloomers in education was also discussed through a lifelong education model by Levin and Levin (1991), in which they focused on fostering success among individuals, albeit in a time frame distinct from that required to complete a study. In addition, the foundation for building success, according to Levin and Levin's (1991) theory, is open and is influenced by external factors such as age, career, and environmental factors (social status, economic and political status). In addition, the study aims to investigate and understand the variety and singularity found in the processes that make up the human life cycle, even though the goals remain the same.

Action strategy refers to a person's specific course of action in response to pressure or challenging situations (Ahmad et al., 2014). Consequently, selecting the action strategies relies on the assigned significance attributed to them about the preferred standard of living. Therefore, a positive reaction indicates effective stress management and the provision of stimulating factors, which also applies in the opposite direction. This concept is further explored in research, which suggests that the growth and progress of young individuals require their active involvement and assistance from their surroundings, such as their family, organizations, and community. These external factors play a crucial role in fostering positive development in various areas, including social, economic, and political aspects (Wong et al., 2010; Sakhyan et al., 2017).

3.0 Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods, specifically the phenomenological typology, to better understand the informants' experiences. Twelve informants were selected for this study using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The informants were chosen based on predetermined criteria, including adults aged 25 to 40 years, having a family income of RM4,000.00 or less, Malaysian citizens residing in urban areas, and pursuing a first university degree. Besides, in-depth interviews were conducted with the informants to gather detailed information about their experiences. The interviews were recorded with the informant's consent to facilitate transcription. This study employed thematic analysis to identify themes and subthemes based on the verbatim results. The researchers used three coding phases, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, to develop their thematic analysis. The study's participants were drawn exclusively from a single IPT because the researcher obtained permission from this public university, which is among Malaysia's top three research universities.

4.0 Discussion & Findings

Twelve informants considered urban poor late bloomers participated in this investigation (Table 1). All of them are still enrolled in higher education institutions at a later age. The analysis of this study's findings discovered six themes that significantly contributed to the growth of lifelong education among young people. Each of the six themes is subdivided into challenge and action strategies. Workloads, emotional stress, and financial issues are among the themes associated with the challenges of continuing studies. At the same time, the themes associated with action strategies are self-discipline, increased self-confidence, and conflict management.

Table 1. Demographic

Informant	Age (year)	Gender	Occupation	Monthly Income (RM)
1	27	Male	Government servant	2,700.00
2	26	Male	Private sector	1,500.00
3	27	Female	Self-employed	900.00

4	31	Male	Government servant	2,700.00
5	26	Female	Student	No income
6	27	Female	Student	No income
7	37	Male	Government servant	3,000.00
8	29	Male	Government servant	3,000.00
9	39	Female	Private sector	3,800.00
10	29	Male	Government servant	3,500.00
11	28	Female	Government servant	3,000.00
12	28	Male	Government servant	2,700.00

4.1 Difficulties in Study

Individuals who begin their studies later encounter challenges than those who begin at the ideal age (US Department of Labour, 2007). Moreover, according to Kara et al. (2019), it is undeniable that adult learners encounter significant challenges when enrolled in school, particularly managing career, family, and academic commitments.

4.1.1 The workload

Academic obstacles sometimes overwhelm adult learners. Burns (2020) states that all career-minded students will feel pressure to study. Kara et al. (2019) further note that managing households, career, and educational duties is the biggest challenge for adult learners, especially women. This makes it difficult to focus on their studies and increases the possibility of interruptions. This research found that most respondents said their load restricted them from learning. Thus, they cannot focus on their studies. They said:

My phone began to ring in class, and my expression was horrified. I knew him (the lecturer), and he was stern. I explained to the guy who called that I was in a classroom when I answered the phone. "I am sorry, I have to go to class. On weekends, I continue my studies. So, if you have an important call to make, please do so during regular business hours. (Informant 8)

In addition, the same difficulty is shared by informant 9, who struggles to concentrate on studies and when finishing assignments. This is also because she is a career woman dedicated to office obligations. Therefore, she would occasionally request assistance from her coworkers in the office to complete the lecturer's assignments. She said:

My mobile phone would occasionally ring while I was in the classroom. A call comes in from a consumer, colleague, and even boss. These are all calls that are tied to work in any way. As a result, I had no choice but to leave the classroom and complete the necessary tasks to ensure that I would not be disturbed any further while in class. Furthermore, I requested my coworkers to assist me in resolving work-related concerns over the weekend while studying. (Informant 9)

In addition, the informant felt that the burden increased due to continued study. Due to the increasing commitments, informants can only give so much attention to their existing commitments. Indirectly, it exerts pressure on the quality of work and study focus. Informant 4 said:

This happened after I had started studying again. Indeed, fulfilling our commitments beyond that initial assignment has required significant effort and much more. The amount of work to be done increases, as it always does, but we need to find a means to manage the growing amount of work within the constraints of the dateline assignment that we have to make. Sometimes, we wish to complete the task on time, but it does not happen as it is. So, we will get up under pressure when something like this happens. (Informant 4)

4.1.2 Emotional pressure

Rowe et al. (2018) showed that adult learners' growing commitment to learning while balancing their personal and professional lives contributes to their emotional stress. Adult learners' emotional stress may also impact attention and result in poor study performance (Kara et al., 2019). This research found that most informants found emotional stress challenging to manage. According to Kasworm (2008), this is also a result of the different emotional changes people experience both before and throughout their education. Thus, emotional stress will significantly impact learning and health (Liau et al., 2021). Informant 4 expressed the emotional strain caused by the lack of time spent with the family as follows:

It irritates me a little bit when I talk about the difficulties I experience emotionally. I have been away from home for a considerable time and have not spoken with my parents. My mood is low right now. He asked as to the time that I would be returning to my hometown. My work schedule is in the evening hours. Classes take place every two weeks on average and are on alternate weeks as well. This continuously happens twice a month. I am more exhausted the following day when I work the evening shift. Therefore, I am unable to return to my hometown. The weekend after next, I have a class. It made me feel bad. (Informant 4)

In addition, as a minority group during study, students of this later age must have difficulty reaching the same level as their younger peers because their abilities differ from those of their younger peers (Kolmos, 2019). This circumstance also

contributes to the occurrence of emotional stress compared to younger peers among the lecturers at the university. Informer 8 said:

The lecturer who taught us this subject ought to comprehend it because the other student was there and was getting close to 40 years old. Therefore, you should not expect us at this late age of thirty, which is a relatively slow understanding among younger people. When we take a long time to understand, lecturers will be angry. It frustrates me when I think about how it affects me emotionally as a student. (Informer 8)

4.1.3 Financial challenges

Financial challenges are not new, but they become more severe when compounded with other responsibilities, adding to the pressure encountered by those who begin their education later in life. Studying later alongside the existing financial obligations is challenging for these individuals. It traps them with significant financial problems management (Bok et al., 2021). In addition, it becomes increasingly difficult for those in the urban or B40 poor category due to the lack of financial aid resources and the family's low socioeconomic status (Jenkins, 2017). Some have received financial aid through student loans, but more is needed. They said;

A loan partially funded my education. However, the amount of the loan needs to be increased. Therefore, most of the money that was spent was given by my parents and my siblings. I will always ask for extra money when needed, such as when buying a reference book and completing an assignment that requires it. Even my parents' expenses are often barely enough to meet my daily needs because my parents also need to support other family members. (Informer 6)

In addition, due to the current financial difficulties, informants were compelled to develop income-generating initiatives to cover the current cost of living and expenses. They express this by stating:

I ran a part-time business while studying. I sell food items. I sell them to other students at my university. Then, I can pay for all my tuition fees at the university. (Informer 8)

4.2 Action strategy

In general, action strategy is an individual's response to external pressure (Harun & Md., 2019). It is a demonstration of self-control in the presence of any duress. This measure is intended to ensure their survival. In addition, it is influenced by the stimulus factor that motivates any action. Self-discipline, increased self-confidence, and conflict management are the three action strategies employed by informants to surmount the obstacles identified in this study.

4.2.1 Self-discipline

ensuring that he has a solid grasp of each subject he studies, informant 4 must also ensure that he does not squander the money he has paid to acquire the knowledge. As those who have already worked and used their funds to finance their education, it is clear that he values the knowledge he wishes to learn at the university. He said:

So far, I have always attended class because I waste money when paying tuition fees, but I need help understanding what I should learn. All of the information is useful for the exam as well. At the same time, a few of my friends who did not attend the class asked for notes from me. They should come to class to study so that they can understand better. (Informer 3).

In addition, adequate self-discipline is bolstered by an individual's time management skills while studying. According to Mumuh Abdul Ghani (2018), a student's exceptional academic performance is influenced by the level of discipline he is subjected to during his academic career. The significance of self-discipline in learning is one of the student's responsibilities for determining learning success (Faizatul et al., 2016) and one of the most significant factors in determining academic achievement. The informer 6 stated:

I liked to spend time at the library updating my lesson plans and making notes. Even though I am often exhausted and preoccupied with other things, I will continue to spend time there until night. On the other hand, I will ensure that all of my homework is finished before I move on to other things. As a usual practice, I finish all of my work at the beginning of the semester, and as a reward for my hard work, I get to hang out with my classmates for the remainder of the semester. (Informer 6)

Moreover, time management is more comprehensive than what is needed for education. It also addresses professional and social concerns. Ahmad Marzuki et al. (2015) explain that good time management comprises four primary principles: planning, managing, sharing, and organizing, which make intelligent time management feasible. When sharing the information, the informant said:

I will try to meet my friends by scheduling time for us to spend together engaging in social gatherings. I will take around 40 minutes, then tell them I have an assignment. So they will understand. Almost all of my friends understand my new life as an adult student. (Informer 10)

4.2.2 Enhanced self-confidence

Each individual must have a firm conviction in achieving their goals to succeed in education (Pajares & H. Schunk, 2002; Walsh & Robinson Kurpius, 2015). Moreover, this belief is a source of fortitude for each person's educational success (Intan et al., 2012). Each individual's self-confidence can be improved by developing a solid identity. This is one of the aspects of an individual's nature that contribute to the source of spiritual strength, inspiring improvements in their lives. Informant 4 revealed that attending the house of worship and engaging in worship was also one of the factors that encouraged him to be confident and motivated in his studies. He said:

This religious practice also holds much significance for me. If there is a difficulty, go to the mosque. If I were going back to my hometown, my father would make us go to the mosque every time there was a prayer. Five times a day, without fail. (Informant 4)

Furthermore, adopting and acknowledging every rule of life is a gift from God. Then, it aids them in gaining the inner fortitude necessary to complete their studies with a peaceful disposition. They express this by stating:

Furthermore, every time I failed, it was God's test on me. I concentrate on improving myself by thinking about myself and doing so. This is also to examine closely where our shortcomings need to be rectified. (Informant 2)

In addition to spiritual support, success is because everyone's belief and clear goals will express a spirit of motivation that can lead to achievement. They said:

Nothing is impossible. Everything that is within our capabilities at this point. At the time, I was 39 years old. In my entire professional life, I never even made it to this level. Seriously, I come from an ordinary family struggling to survive in life. After that, we can attain our goals today with our surroundings who do not encourage us. (Informant 9)

4.2.3 Wise conflict resolution

The practical aspect of conflict management is crucial for guaranteeing that all objectives and goals can be accomplished effectively. It also encompasses multiple aspects, such as the individual and the surroundings. (Mastura, Fadilah & Nor Akmar 2007). It is believed that the informant's ability to comprehend and act rationally is one of the factors that help in their problem-solving skills.

Stay calm if you are studying at a later age. Knowledge is independent of age. Because of the knowledge we learn at university, there will be different ages who enroll in the study... many of them nowadays start studying at the early age of 19. Everything is the same. God put us in situations that are best for us. (Informant 11)

Mitigating negative social perceptions from the environment helps manage stress. Thus, to resolve disagreements, one should surround oneself with positive individuals or partners to instill healthy values. Happy environments boost motivation and concentration on educational goals.

Studying at a later age is not a mistake. For me, it was a second opportunity for them. Please continue if you want to take part in the study. Boost your spirit and avoid listening to the unpleasant remarks that surround you. The fact that we know our goals and have a clear idea of the paths we wish to take in life are both critically significant. Moreover, remember, what do you aim to achieve in the future, and who will you be? (Informant 12)

Therefore, rational thought and dialogue are the most effective means of resolving this issue. Unquestionably, social stigma has a significant impact on the psychological state of everyone. Therefore, everyone should identify a healthy association to reduce the risk of stress and promote a greater sense of self-motivation.

5.0 Conclusion and recommendation

The development of lifelong education among late bloomers is a crucial phase that can lead to the success of highly motivated youths. The study's findings highlight six key elements that demonstrate the potential for success in these individuals despite the challenges they may face. These elements emphasize their capability and resilience in dealing with various obstacles throughout their educational journey. Furthermore, the effectiveness of strategic action taken by late bloomers indicates their preparedness to handle any situation that may arise. This proactive approach showcases their ability to adapt and cope with challenges prudently. The study suggests that the reactive attitude promoted among these individuals has played a significant role in their perseverance and motivation to excel in their studies.

In the future, it is recommended that more research investigates the influence of lifelong learning on individuals who experience late blooming while also identifying supplementary elements that contribute to their achievements. It is crucial to explore further the strategies and solutions for facilitating their educational progress and improving their overall growth. Furthermore, it is important for the study to prioritize comprehending the enduring consequences and implications of lifelong education for individuals who develop their skills, including their professional opportunities and personal development

By recognizing their capabilities, promoting a proactive mindset, and enhancing research endeavors, we may continually support and elevate these people in their academic pursuits. This not only benefits them directly but also enhances our understanding of lifetime learning and its impact on persons who pursue education at a later age in life. By following these ideas, researchers and educators may work together to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for individuals who develop later in life, enabling them to achieve great success and fulfill their maximum potential.

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