OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) AND OLDER ADULT LEARNERS' ENGAGEMENT – A CASE STUDY AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS

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Abstract:

Many universities are opening their doors to the older adult population to enable them to earn certificates without compromising work and family commitments. However, many universities use the online or blended approach and as such, by default, adults who are part of this student population have to also stand by the same approach. The Open University of Mauritius offers courses using the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) approach. In the past, this blended method comprised of face-to-face lectures, but with the Covid-19 pandemic, most courses are now online, with limited face-to-face sessions. Research shows that age is actually a more powerful predictor of technology use as compared to other digital divide demographics and that technological inability may cause older adults to underperform and underuse technology. As this university has a large population of quinquagenarians, it is assumed that this population might have different experiences with technology in their process of learning. Activity theory conceptualizes a positive relationship between activity and successful ageing as, according to this theory, keeping older people socially active delays the ageing process and improves their quality of life. This study explores how these adults respond to the online mode of study and how this interaction is beneficial/challenging for this group of adults. Using purposive and convenience sampling, selected students meeting the demographic profile are interviewed to determine their personal experience with online learning, the factors that affect their engagement, and what mechanisms support them to cope with this system.

Keywords: adult education, older adults, active ageing and education

1. Introduction

Many adults are going back to universities after years of gap, and seem to be mostly attracted to those institutions offering courses through open and distance learning.

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Because of its flexibility, online education offers adult learners the benefit of life-long learning. Distance education is described as planned teaching and learning activities given inside an institutional organization over a communication link with no time or place constraints (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Due to the numerous benefits of online distance education, adults make up the majority of the audience (Ke & Xie, 2009). However, the demographic characteristics of this group distinguish older adults from younger adults. In general, adults understand why they are learning and what they need to learn (Knowles, 1996). Adult learners with various educational backgrounds and goals are also recognized as having the wish to reflect on their educational journey (Lindeman, 2015). They differ from other learners in terms of their everyday duties, which influence their educational experience (Cercone, 2008). However, for adults who are fifty and above in terms of age, their experiences and motivations might not be the same as they are mostly in the last stage of their career, where they might be more concerned with what makes them happy instead of measuring success. It is therefore anticipated that older adult learners may face particular problems as a result of their unique features, which could, in turn influence how they continue their education or participate in online distant educational programmes. An understanding of older adults' engagement in online learning is therefore crucial to explore the factors that affect their experience with this mode of learning, the challenges that they encounter and how they cope.

Mauritius is a small island situated in the Indian Ocean and is presently experiencing a growth in the older adult population. It roughly has 1.3 million inhabitants, out of which around 170, 000 are aged 50-59 years and 250,000 are aged 60 and above (CSO, 2024) and above and this number is expected to rise in the coming years. In terms of the education sector, the country was primarily marked by traditional universities which mostly attracted traditional students aged 18 to 25 when undergraduate studies are concerned. Triggering factors such as free tertiary education granted by the government as from January 2019 and the coming up of universities that offer courses through the open and distance learning mode have shifted from having mostly traditional learners to more and more older adults coming to universities.

2. Literature Review

When it comes to learner engagement and the contributing factors, motivation can be a prerequisite. Motivation can be classified into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation arises from the inside and is related to the joy or passion that the work provides the learner rather than any reward that it may provide (Irvin et al. 2007). Extrinsic motivation is related to external elements involved with the work, such as evaluation. External influences can also be linked to instructional methodologies, learning environments, educational technologies, and other components of activity systems (D. Gedera et al., 2014). Motivation may also be seen as a sense of accomplishment or success when engaging in learning. Another important construct that has been observed by Law (2022) is the personality of the students, which determines

their involvement and active engagement with peers, tutors, and course-related activities or discussions. It, therefore, depends on the profile of the learner and how the learning process is conceptualised and lived. To study this group population, the next part provides an insight into what could possibly influence their engagement.

As online education is gaining momentum across the globe, many researchers have explored this concept and a number of studies have thus emerged. However, not enough attention has been given to age as a factor to be analysed in online education systems. Given that age is a more powerful predictor of technology use as compared to other digital divide demographics, it is presumed that different age groups act differently. For example, younger adults aged between 25 and 35 years old and older adults aged 50 and above. When it comes to adult learning, education and learning can improve the quality of life and well-being of middle-aged and older persons through strengthening social networks and social support, influencing social solidarity, and supporting economic development (Albertini, 2007). When looking at participation rates in adult education programs as a key indicator for lifelong learning, it becomes clear that age matters for learning activities (Desjardins et al., 2006). As such, this research attempts to investigate one particular age group that is forming part of this adult learner group, and they are those aged above 50 years. This group is of interest as most adults reach a career phase where they are already settled and mostly look for either self-development or courses that could help them achieve promotions, but the lack of a formal degree creates hurdles. Working and studying thus gives the right mix that they can explore.

So, the next question is how is this age group different and which approach can be used to study them in the context of online learning and their motivators and challengers. This brings the current research to the Activity Theory on Ageing. According to the activity theory, there is a positive relationship between a person's level of activity and life satisfaction, which in turn increases how positively one person views himself or herself (self-concept) and improves adjustment in later life (Loue et al., 2008). Thus, successful ageing occurs when older adults remain active and maintain social interactions. And one of the ways that can could keep an older adult active and contribute to his/her successful ageing is through engaging in education. Seniors who continue their education enjoy numerous benefits. When compared to non-participants, older adult learners report higher levels of life satisfaction and lower degrees of social isolation (Winstead et al., 2014). Moreover, they meet people with different age groups than theirs and this can also be beneficial and creating social interaction. According to Schuller (2010), intergenerational learning contributes to community cohesion, community safety, health, and well-being policies by (i) bringing different generations together through meaningful activities and interactions, (ii) increasing understanding between generations, breaking down stereotypes, and providing positive role models, and (iii) preventing anti-social behaviour and challenging perceptions. International political organizations and scholars consider active aging to be a crucial element in tackling the issues associated with an aging population (Jensen and Skjøtt-Larsen, 2021).

With the possibility of joining universities and upgrading their qualifications, many adults can remain active by engaging with their studies and peers. While most younger adults tend to upgrade their qualifications for career purposes, most older adults have already passed their career peek and have started preparations for their retirement. But what brings them back to education? This question may be answered in terms of their inner drivers of motivation. McNair (2011) has argued that as an increasing number of older persons experience a smooth material and financial transition from working life to retirement, attention is directed towards their post-materialist resources – especially identity capital, human capital, and social capital. In their study, Bellare et al. (2023) found that adults return to studies for a number of reasons, and motivation and sense of accomplishment can also explain why this trend.

According to Mercken (2010), good practice in older adult learning is achieved by the adoption of four key principles – namely, empowerment, competence development, social participation, and integration – and the extent to which these principles are implemented in the learning process. However, Loue et al. (2008) explain that remaining socially active may not always be easy to achieve. The main criticisms that this theory has gathered are namely in terms of socioeconomic status, such that those from lower socioeconomic groups and/or poor backgrounds may find it difficult to remain socially active as they may lack the necessary social capital (professional networks, friends, and children) or financial resources. Another factor may be their gender since perceived life satisfaction from remaining socially active differs between men and women (Zimmer & Lin, 1996). To be able to engage in their education in an effective and efficient manner, we can thus expect that older adults need to have some of these forms of social capital. Another key determinant that can influence their engagement online is their ability to feel and demonstrate this social presence online and network with others in the group. And very often, this may require some form of preparedness in the digital kingdom.

2.1 Purpose of the Study

Given it is presumed that older adults may not have the same social capital as their younger mates in an online classroom environment, this study seeks to explore how those adults respond to the online mode of study and how this interaction is beneficial/challenging for this group of adults and the effects on their successful ageing. The objectives that guided this study were to:
- determine their personal experience with online learning,
- explore the factors that affect their engagement, and
- appraise the mechanisms that support them to cope with this system.

3. Method

As this research is more of an exploratory nature and focuses on understanding subjective experiences, the approach for this study was qualitative to meet the goal of

understanding perspectives and feelings, which would be more meaningful through in-depth explorations and interpretation.

3.1 Participants

The target population was students who are 50 years old and above enrolled in a degree programme and who had already completed one year to ensure that they have had the experience of both learning and assessments. At the Open University, there are many courses being offered, and this research took a sample from the BSc Social Work group. The Focus Group Discussion was deemed the most appropriate way to collect the data as the participants could share their perspectives and listen to others of their age group. This allowed them to also question others if ever they had conflicting views. The students were thus informed through a call for interest to participate in the FGD, and selection was made on a first-come, first-served basis and 13 students were thus recruited to participate in this study.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

An online Zoom meeting was then scheduled with participants, which was audio-recorded with the consent of all of them. The interview lasted for around 2 hours, and the questions that formed part of this discussion emanated from the semi-structured questionnaire with key questions such as:

- what were the reasons that motivated you to follow a course?
- What made you choose the OU?
- How would you describe your experience as a student?
- What are your feelings when you are online in the classroom?
- Do you also maintain contact with your peers outside the classroom? How? What do you experience out of such contacts?
- Do you see yourself fit in an online environment? What makes you feel comfortable/uncomfortable?
- How would you rate your performance in the course? What are some causes for this?
- Whom/what do you see as supporting/ supportive mechanisms during your study?
- Do you think your study keeps you happy? Why?

Such an approach also allows the researcher to further probe if something needs further clarification and this creates room to ask other related questions that may help answer the research objectives set. Once the data was collected, a combination of both inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data. "*Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data*" (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis is frequently and flexibly used in qualitative data analysis, and several attempts have been made to provide a more systematic approach to its application, with most authors combining deductive and

inductive versions to create a hybrid approach (Braun & Clarke 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006; Rishi, Jauhari, & Joshi 2015).

4. Findings

Different themes emerged from this research, and they are presented below:

Table 1: Summary of themes extracted

Personal experience with online learning	Factors that affect their engagement	Coping mechanisms
Happiness Sense of Discovery	Quality of relationship with peers and tutors	Supportive peers and tutors at the university
	Good grades earned	Support from family members
Sense of Accomplishment	User-friendly platform	Quest to persevere
Challenging	Ability to express oneself	

Older adults encounter a mix of both beneficial and adverse experiences in online learning; nevertheless, the prevalence of positive feedback generally surpasses that of negative feedback. Although they face various challenges, it is important to highlight that they experience joy, a sense of exploration, and achievement when they engage in their educational pursuits. The difficulties arise from several factors, including the integration of an educational program after many years, the need to balance professional and personal responsibilities, and navigating with technology. Despite these challenges, they view the course as an opportunity to learn new concepts, meet new people, and immerse themselves in a different environment, all of which foster active participation. When they successfully achieve course objectives, such as completing their modules, they experience a profound sense of accomplishment.

Numerous studies have identified engagement as a crucial element in achieving educational success. This group emphasizes the importance of their interactions with both peers and instructors. A supportive environment characterized by positive peer relationships fosters attendance and active participation in discussions. Furthermore, they note that the equitable treatment by tutors, who engage with all students regardless of age, contributes to a conducive learning environment. However, this group often faces challenges in adapting to new technologies, and online learning can be particularly daunting, as previously mentioned. Nevertheless, when the learning platform is user-friendly and accessible, they can engage effectively. Additionally, the opportunity to articulate their thoughts is vital; this group seeks acknowledgement of their experiences. Active participation in discussions fulfils their desire to be heard, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging.

It is observed that supportive peers and tutors serve as significant motivators, boosting this cohort of students in their academic pursuits. Additionally, encouragement from family members plays a crucial role in providing that extra motivation. When individuals such as spouses and children express their backing for the decision to engage

in an educational program and offer ongoing assistance during critical periods—such as assignment submissions, project completions, or exam preparations—a profound sense of support is experienced. This is particularly important during times when students may require solitude and may not be fully present for their families, and the understanding of this circumstance proves beneficial for this group of learners.

5. Discussions and Conclusion

In their study, Bülbül et al. (2022) analyse how older adults embrace online learning, and they discuss the term 'geragogy', which is associated with continuous education of and by older adults. The authors scrutinise the work of early authors such as John (1988), who describe how to teach older adults based on their common characteristics. They further refer to the critical analysis of Formosa (2002; 2011), who distinguishes that this group are not homogenous and proposes principles of practice of critical geragogy. Bülbül et al. (2022) also discuss the theoretical framework proposed by Creech and Hallam (2015). The research indicates that fostering a trusting interpersonal environment, appreciating previous experiences as valuable resources, assisting learners in establishing educational objectives and acknowledging the ongoing significance of progress are essential components in the practice of critical geragogy. However, it is important to note that any effort to formulate a standardized set of recommendations for facilitators of older adult education may inadvertently overlook the diverse perspectives of older adult learners, who do not constitute a uniform group. Bülbül et al. (2022) thus conclude that the educational practices for older adults necessitate careful planning and execution. Consequently, those who facilitate learning for this demographic must invest time in comprehending the needs, preferences, abilities, and various other attributes of their learners.

The factors revealed in this study are consistent with those proposed in Creech and Hallam (2015), such as autonomy, reflection, pleasure, sense of purpose and development. However, this study also highlights the challenges older adults experience and the coping mechanisms that allow them to persist despite adversities. These could serve as opportunities for policymakers to include in their curriculum design. Support from peers, family and institution are the main factors that can enhance their engagement, hence a positive learning experience. Dropout is a well-known phenomenon in ODL settings (Appavoo et al., 2023). However, there is a dearth of studies that provide information about dropout among older adults and the factors causing it. As the World Health Organization (2020) defines, active aging is the process of maximizing opportunities for health, engagement, and safety to improve the quality of life as individuals grow older. This definition underscores the importance of continuous learning, personal development, and decision-making in fostering a healthier lifestyle. These findings are thus in support of the idea that through engagement in the learning activity and process, older adults remain active, thus contributing to active ageing, while acknowledging the distinct characteristics that this population has.

In line with ageing, another phenomenon studied is the fact that this group of adults may suffer from loneliness and social isolation in the process. Cacioppo et al. (2015) identified four main categories of interventions aimed at reducing loneliness: (1) augmenting social interactions; (2) refining the quality of social interactions; (3) developing social competencies; and (4) confronting negative social beliefs or biases. This study highlights the positive experiences with peers that are part of the learning journey and which also affect the engagement of older adults. It also uncovered the feeling of pleasure and accomplishment that they derive when they do well in different milestones. Thus, entry to universities might also enable socialisation with peers and tutors, which can benefit healthy ageing.

The learning experience of each individual is not homogenous, and demographic factors can influence the learning experience and engagement of learners. Older adults are another distinct group of students who are going back to studies, and by acknowledging this, universities could design programmes that take their specificities into consideration. For instance, the trifecta of student engagement (Moore, 1989) is found as useful framework based on the experience of Leslie (2021), who implemented a pilot study of designing an online course targeting adult learners. This framework engages students with course content, with peers and with the instructor. Universities welcoming older adults could thus consider adapting/designing their courses to enable this group to make the most of the opportunities that could help towards their active participation.

Deschacht and Goeman (2015) highlighted the necessity for future research to concentrate on strategies aimed at reducing the dropout rates among adult online learners. Their findings indicated that both external and internal obstacles encountered by adults significantly heightened the probability of their discontinuation in online learning programs. As this study explores the coping mechanisms that allow older adults to navigate challenges, these mechanisms could be used in future policy and framework development. Such frameworks or policies could embed factors such as course design, interaction levels with peers and tutors, and rewarding accomplishments such as badges or earning points, as these favour a more conducive learning experience, which could, in turn, contribute to the active ageing process of older adults.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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