

Chapter 9

Identifying Predictors of Academic Success for Part-Time Students at Polytechnic Institutes in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

A central challenge for higher education today is to understand the diversity and complexity of non-traditional students' life experiences and how these factors influence their academic success. To better understand these issues, this study explored the role of demographic characteristics and employment variables in predicting the academic success of part-time students at four polytechnic institutes in Malaysia. Demographic characteristics studied included respondent's age, gender, marital status, number of children, parent's educational level, and financial resources. Employment variables assessed were number of years working, job relatedness to the program, job satisfaction, and monthly salary. A total of 614 part-time students completed the survey. Results indicated that being an older student, being female, paying for their own education, and having high job satisfaction were statistically significant predictors of part-time students' academic success. Understanding the effects of demographic characteristics and employment variables on students' academic success might help administrators and educators to develop teaching and learning processes, support services, and policies to enhance part-time students' academic success.

INTRODUCTION

To remain competitive in a rapidly changing economy, many adults are continuously acquiring new knowledge and skills to improve their competencies in their workplace (Desjardin, Rubenson, & Milana, 2006; UNESCO, 2009). Ritt (2008) emphasized that the fastest growing jobs require a postsecondary qualification. In addition, possessing postsecondary credentials enables adults to gain broader economic and social benefits such as higher income over a lifetime (Brennan, Mills, Shah, & Woodley, 1999; Ritt, 2008). An increasing number of adults participating in higher education has led to greater attention focused on understanding the diversified needs of adults in higher education.

Malaysia, one of the developing countries in Asia, has placed an emphasis on providing wider opportunities for adults to continue their education in such higher education institutions as public and private universities, polytechnics, and community colleges (National Higher Education Research Institute [NHERI], 2007). In 2010, the working-age population (15–64 years) in Malaysia was expected to increase to 65.7% with the median age of 26.7 years (Bax & Hassan, 2003). Only 14% of the labor force in Malaysia, however, possess tertiary education qualifications (Bax & Hassan, 2003). This implies a need for more opportunities for adult learners to improve their education and training to meet the challenges of a knowledge-based economy.

To facilitate adults' participation, higher education institutions in Malaysia offer full-time and part-time enrollment with a broad range of e-learning instructional settings that offer learners more flexibility and greater autonomy (NHERI, 2007). Part-time enrollment seems to be the most preferred program in higher education, particularly for working adults because they can seek higher qualifications while still maintaining their jobs as well as their earnings (Chen & Carroll, 2007; Tuttle, 2005).

Polytechnic institutions are one segment in the Malaysian higher education system that provides tertiary level technical education and training. In 2000, these institutions began to offer part-time programs to adults to upgrade their academic qualifications (Bax & Hassan, 2003). These part-time programs adopt similar courses and the same assessment methods used for traditional full-time students, except that classes and practical activities in the workshop are held on weekends. The duration for the part-time diploma program is two years, compared to one year for full-time students (Bax & Hassan, 2003). From 2000 to 2009, a dramatic increase of part-time enrollment occurred. The part-time student population grew from 171 to 2,972 students (Department of Polytechnic and Community College Education [DPCCE], 2009).

As adult learners, part-time students may have different expectations of their learning and different needs due to their maturity and the complexity of their daily lives (Graham, Donaldson, Kasworm, & Dirx, 2000; Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002). Treating them like traditional students, who enter higher education immediately after finishing high school, means that educators often neglect to take into account the influence of their diverse needs and life experiences on their academic learning and success.

The purpose of this quantitative study, therefore, was to examine whether demographic characteristics and employment variables predict academic success of students in a part-time weekend program at four Malaysian polytechnic institutes. Previous research has shown that the diversity and complexity of adult learners' life experiences have a considerable impact on their academic success in higher education (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Graham et al., 2000; Rogers, 2002; UNESCO, 2009). This area remains largely unexamined, particularly in the context of the polytechnic educational system in Malaysia.

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