

# Motivating the open distance learners in Wawasan Open University: the teaching, learning and support environments

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# Motivating the Open Distance Learners in Wawasan Open University; the Teaching, Learning and Support Environments

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## Abstract

*High level of motivation is crucial in an adult learner's pursuit of higher education. It is vital that the adult learners stay constantly in touch with their goals and remains motivated in completing their course, while simultaneously balancing work and family roles. Evaluating the elements that enhance motivation has received much attention from educators to reduce inactivity of adult learner. The institution in an open distance learning (ODL) environment has a greater challenge as students and teachers are separated by distance and time factor. As the ODL institution tries to reduce learners' inactivity, elements that motivates must be identified and designed to meet and exceed students' expectation. The purpose of this study is to examine the institutional elements that influence a students' motivation. The authors aim to identify and discuss the elements of the teaching, learning and support environment in pursuit of gaining deeper understanding on factors that motivates the ODL learners in Wawasan Open University (WOU). A primary survey on undergraduate students was conducted using a structured questionnaire. The sample consists of a combination of new and current student cohort. The ARCS model by Keller was adapted as a basis of this study, measuring elements that motivates along four dimensions of attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction. The findings and implications of the study are discussed together with managerial implications and recommendations.*

**Keywords:** Motivation, Adult Learner, Open Distance Learning.

## 1.0 Introduction

The demand from Malaysian seeking opportunities for lifelong learning and the diverse personal circumstances opens a new channel of education model that offers flexibility and accessibility. Initiatives by the government taking different measures in changing the playground of providing tertiary education to the workforce by enhancing skills, knowledge and upgrading the workforce is crucial as the nation develops towards knowledge economy (k-economy). Second-chance education materialized in the country to provide opportunities advanced education and career advancement to those that missed the initial chance (Unesco, 2002). The success of delivery of a course in ODL depends on its course materials, virtual support, and efficient coordination and delivery of the course contents. Virtual support via the learning management system (LMS) and tutorial sessions facilitates interaction replacing the conventional face to face interaction. However, the use of online courses in higher education has been criticized for its high dropout rates and low graduation rates (Howell, Williams & Lindsay, 2003). With today's changing student

population to include nontraditional, adult learners, it is necessary for faculty and administrators to recognize the learning and learning strategies which are appropriate for adult learners. Faculty can help students become more motivated, especially when they understand characteristics of adult learners, motivation and its role in the workplace, strategies and activities for promoting motivation in adult learners, and key players in adult learning (Thoms, 2001). Students' attrition and completion rate in programmes of any distance learning institution is of immense importance to the existence of such institution and its quality assurance policy, hence demanding continuous attention from researchers, administrators and policy makers. Bearing in mind this phenomenon, it becomes imperative to identify the risk behaviours that are likely to make students drop out of their programmes prematurely if not detected early enough and if the proactive measures are not taken to checkmate it (Okopi, 2011). This paper aims to identify, discuss and assess the relevance of the teaching, learning and support environment in motivating adult learners.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) generally targets adult learner. Mature individuals enrolled in education programs are considered to be non-traditional learners, as "students who possess characteristics such as including delayed enrolment, part-time student status, full-time employment, financial independence, responsibility for dependents as agreed by Salter, 2011. Salter, 2011 claimed that mature adult learners typically possess one or more of the traits associated with non-traditional learners. Earlier researchers found that a good tutor is essential in aiding a students' success, understanding and stimulating deeper studies, by providing support, constant contact, being emphatic, and respectful to the students (O'Rourke, 2003). O'Rourke (2003), further went on to mention that tutors serve as a link between learners and the educational institution. Beside tutors, communication among peers and tutor during tutorial sessions is a key motivation factor. Researchers and practitioners noted that technology-enhanced learning alone was not enough, arguing that people needed experiential learning for the mastery and retention of knowledge and skills achieved through the blending of technology and face-to-face interaction (Collis & Moonen, 2001; Singh, 2003). Study by Xie, Durrington and Yen (2011) indicate that students' motivation was related to their online participation. Distance education students should be provided with some form of accessible, relevant academic support targeted all the needs of students studying via distance education (Nemati, 2008).

Researchers also noted that technology-enhanced learning alone was not enough, arguing that people needed experiential learning for the mastery and retention of knowledge and skills achieved through the blending of technology and face-to-face interaction (Collis & Moonen, 2001; Singh, 2003). It is planned to emphasize first on the content, and then focus on institutional processes, services, technology applications, and process integration.(Fathallah & Hamayil, 2011). Park and Choi (2009), agreed that online course needs to be designed in ways to guarantee learners' satisfaction and be relevant to learners' needs.

### 3.0 Conceptual Framework of the Study

In this study, we undertake ARCS Model of Motivation Design by Keller (1987) as a basis of understanding the elements affecting students' motivation. The ARCS model aids the design of questionnaire along the dimensions of attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction. The students were asked to rate each factor on a five (5) points Likert Scale, with labels from (1)'strongly agree' to (5)'strongly disagree'.

The four dimensions, as adapted to measure the factors are explained as follows:

**Attention** refers to gaining and keeping the learner's interest. Questions were designed on tutor's skill when conducting tutorials and tutor's ability to make class lively and interesting.

**Relevance** refers to using of course information to real problems. Questions were designed on relevance of course materials to local context and relevance to industry related or work place need.

**Confidence** measures confidents in skills and abilities, and as such, questions were designed on confidence to initiate discussion with tutors in class and confidence to post and reply on LMS with tutors/ course coordinators and fellow students.

**Satisfaction** intents to gauge the satisfaction of the learners with the results of their learning experience, and uses new skills learnt in their work. Questions asked on usefulness of the course content, relevancy to work place need and if exam results and good grades are crucial to the respondents.

The framework of this study looks at students' motivation as the dependent variable. There are three independent variables, consisting of the teaching environment, the learning environment and the support environment. Under the first predictor, the role of tutors will be measured, and under the second predictor (learning environment), the role of tutorials, and course content will be measured. The roles of Support system and LMS will be measured under the third predictor (Support Environment).

### 4.0 Research Methodology

The objective of this study is to determine the factors that effects and motivates adult learners in WOU.

This study was conducted by means of primary survey. 300 questionnaires were distributed to students of various undergraduate studies based on convenient sampling. 206 completed questionnaires were collected in return, which account for 69% response rate. The result of the study is therefore, statistically sound. Chart 1 illustrate the framework of the study and Table 1 below explains the dimensions and its corresponding independent the variables for measurement.

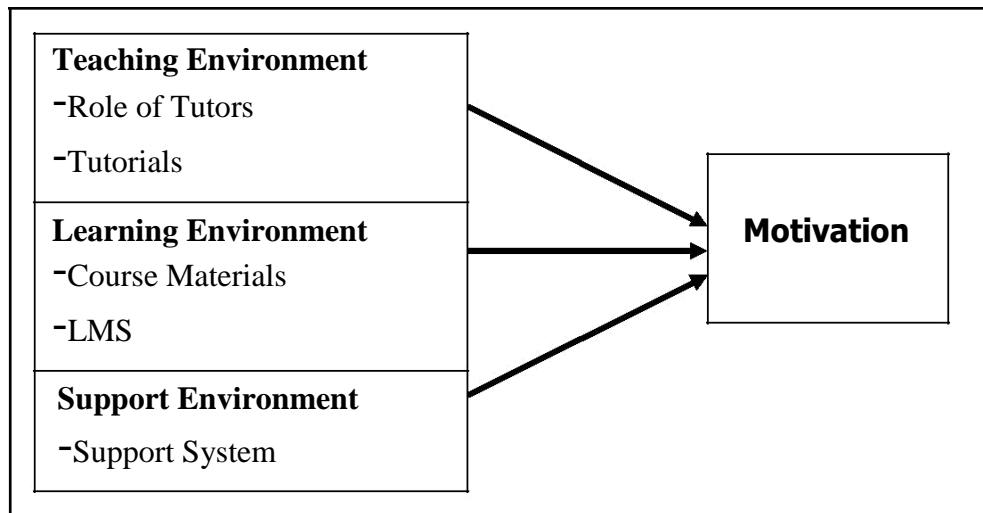


Chart 1: Theoretical Framework for ODL learners' motivation

Dimension	Related Questions
<b>Attention</b> – <i>Gaining and keeping the learners' interest</i>	Teaching Environment
<b>Relevance</b> – <i>using of course information to real problems</i>	Learning Environment
<b>Confidence</b> - <i>confidence in skills and abilities</i>	Support Environment
<b>Satisfaction</b> – <i>Satisfaction with results of the learning experience</i>	Teaching, Learning and Support environment

Table 1: ARCS Model of Motivation and measurement of variables

This study carries three (3) main objectives:-

To determine the relationship between the teaching environment and students' motivation.

To determine the relationship between the learning environment and students' motivation.

To determine the relationship between the support environment and students' motivation.

We seek to answer the following hypothesis:-

H1: The role of tutors positively affects learners' motivation.

H2: Tutorials positively affect learners' motivation.

H3: Course material contents positively affect learners' motivation.

H4: LMS positively affects learners' motivation.

H5: The teaching environment has a positive effect of learners' motivation.

H6: The learning environment has a positive effect on learners' motivation.

H7: The support environment has a positive effect on learners' motivation.

The questionnaires were structured into five (5) parts structured as follows:

- (I) Respondent's profile, covers, general questions on age, gender, family status and entry qualification.
- (II) Teaching environment, covers seventeen (17) questions on the role of tutors and seven (7) questions on tutorial sessions
- (III) Learning environment, covers two main sections, with eight (8) questions each on course materials and on LMS.
- (IV) Support environment- covers six (6) questions on support system, such as administration, library and general assistance, and the last part of the questionnaire were included to gauge the learners'
- (V) Motivation to learn - covers the section on students' own motive and attitude towards their studies.

## 5.0 Analysis of Data and Findings

The data collected were entered and analysed using SPSS with the attempt to study the most influential elements that motivates the learners. Multiple regression were used to analysed the five (5) predictors in the framework.

### Respondents profile

Respondents were selected at random using convenience sampling WOU's main campus. 300 undergraduate students were given the survey forms, and we received a total of 206 useable responses. Out of the total respondents 64% were female and the remaining 48% were male. Of all of them, 70% of them were from the regular entry, and the remainder of 30% were from the open entry. 31% were married and 27% have dependents (chidren). Out of the total respondents, 86% had full time jobs while the remaining 14% were not holding full time jobs.

Descriptive							
		Frequency	Percent			Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	74	35.92%	Entry Qualification	Open	62	30.10%
	Female	132	64.08%		Regular	144	69.90%
Ethnicity	Malay	9	4.37%	Marital Status	Single	139	67.48%
	Chinese	164	79.61%		Married	63	30.58%
	Indians	25	12.14%		Others	4	1.94%
	Others	8	3.88%				
Full Time Job	Yes	178	86.41%	Dependents	With Children	56	27.18%
	No	28	13.59%		Without Children	150	72.82%
Age Group	21-30	107	51.96%				
	31-40	89	43.20%				
	41-50	10	4.84%				

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

## Key Findings

Data from the total of 206 questionnaires were entered in SPSS for multiple regression analysis. Tested at alpha level of 0.05, the findings from the regression analysis revealed the following:-

**Coefficientsa**

Model		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)		5.795	.000		
	Role of Tutor	.078	1.094	.275	.677	1.478
	Course Materials	-.002	-.034	.973	.735	1.361
	LMS	.245	3.153	.002	.573	1.747
	Support System	.055	.738	.461	.617	1.620
	Tutorials	.320	4.576	.000	.704	1.420

Dependent Variable : Motivation

**Coefficientsa**

Model		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		Beta			Tolerance	VIF
2	(Constant)		5.347	.000		
	Teaching Environment	.413	5.998	.000	.746	1.341
	Learning Environment	.154	1.935	.054	.557	1.797
	Support System	.055	.725	.469	.617	1.621

Dependent Variable : Motivation

*Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis*

The first model (model 1) analysis were done on individual motivating factors from the individual variables on the role of tutors, tutorial sessions, course content, LMS and support system. The **Beta** value for Tutorials is 0.32, which is larger than all the other 5 independent variables, followed by LMS support at 0.245. Individually findings reveals that the role of tutors, course materials and support system is higher than 0.50, hence it is not significant to the prediction of the dependent variable. On the other hand, the **Sig.** value for LMS and tutorials is less than 0.05 showing a significant contribution to motivation.

Model 2 collapses the five individual variables into three main groups. The **Beta** value for the teaching environment is the largest (0.413), followed by learning environment and support environment. Comparatively, this suggests that the contribution of the teaching environment and learning environments against the support environment is placed at higher emphasis by the students. The teaching and learning environments were found to be significant to the dependent variable. The result showing that the support environment being non-significant is rather unexpected, as the support environment measures the importance of administrative and library services.

Looking at the support environment individually, we were interested to understand which areas that requires improvement, and hence, we look at the mean score for each questions asked.

Statement	Question No.	Mean Score
The course coordinators and tutors are always available to assist me.	1	2.592
If I experience problems, there is always someone to assist me,	2	2.504
The physical library is well equipped with relevant reference materials.	3	2.581
I constantly refer to materials from the physical library.	4	2.816
The e-resource in the e-library is well equipped.	5	2.830
I constantly refer to materials from the e-library.	6	3.04

*Table 4: Mean score (support environment)*

The results from the mean score demonstrated that the students generally find elements in the support environment is at an average level that could motivate them. Majority of the respondents do not refer to materials from the e-library, hence the low mean score as seen above was achieved.

We were keen to understand why course materials failed to achieve high mean score in motivating the learners. We looked at each individual mean score from the students' responses, and we discover two (2) main reason for this unexpected finding.

Statement	Question No.	Mean Score
I never read my course guides; I prefer to learn from the internet.	5	3.126
The course materials incorporate the latest current issues.	7	3.359

*Table 5: Mean score (learning environment)*

It appears that majority of the students do read the course materials, and at the same time they felt that the course materials did not incorporate the latest current issues. As such, the university must look at ways to include more current issues or latest concepts/ theories in the course materials.



Hypotheses	Support/ Reject
H1 : The role of tutors positively affects learners' motivation.	Rejected
H2 : Tutorials positively affect learners' motivation	Supported
H3 : Course materials positively affects learners' motivation	Rejected
H4: LMS positively affects learners' motivation.	Supported
H5: The teaching environment has a positive effect of learners' motivation.	Supported
H6: The learning environment has a positive effect on learners' motivation.	Supported
H7: The support environment has a positive effect on learners' motivation	Rejected

*Table 6: Summary of hypothesis testing*

Table 6 summarised the results of the study. The test results revealed that out of the seven (7) hypotheses tested, only four (4) of the tested hypotheses were supported and the remainder three (3) were not supported.

## 6.0 Managerial Implication

In order to enhance motivation of the students, the institution could enhance the course materials to incorporate more current issues, either by giving additional notes or via the LMS. Students could also be approached for sessions to guide them on the use of digital resources. Providing constant mentoring programs for the learners with the tutors would appeal to them. Periodic training on coaching and mentoring for tutors and staff having direct contact with the learners could also be implemented. The university may also consider providing additional tutorial session when approaching final exams for higher level papers. Uploading study materials such as articles of current issues might also be useful to the students. The university may also look at conducting short sessions intermittently to encourage students to fully utilise the online library for their research. The distance factor to access the physical library could be overcome by students utilising the digital references available.

## 7.0 Limitation and Future Studies.

In this study, we looked at motivational factors limited to three (3) factors i.e. the learning, teaching and support environments in WOU. The questionnaires were also administered to main campus students only. Due to the dispersion of students throughout the country, we have chosen convenient sampling. This study also selected undergraduate students only.

Future research could be extended to look into intrinsic motivational factors, such as seeking challenge, curiosity to learn, recognition and self-achievement goals. Additionally, this study could also be extended to involve students from other learning centers, and to postgraduate students. Additional factors such as family support, organisational support, financial condition and time, which has been known to be obstacles or motivators, should also be included in future studies. Measurement of attitudes towards motivation could be included by including the use of cumulative grade point average (CGPA) as the yardstick to measure students' achievement in longitudinal studies.

## 8.0 Conclusion

Keeping in view of the importance of teaching, learning and support environment, future study may incorporate other additional variables, such as student's aim and commitment into the present model. Knowing additional variables that could contribute to the students' motivation, would work to the advantage in motivating the learners and reduce inactivity of students in the university.

This study has provided a basic understanding of the elements that encourages students to learn and remain motivated in the system, but could still be further improved. Measurement of motivation by performing longitudinal studies could be enhanced by using students' performance to provide higher accuracy. Accurate motivational factors would enhance faculty's understanding when designing future courses and its delivery modes. Findings from this study provided some insight on factors that is regarded as important in motivating adult learners in the ODL mode.

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