



Factors Influencing The Enrolment of Female Learners in Open Distance Learning (ODL) Programmes at Open University Malaysia (OUM)

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors influencing female learners' enrolment in Open & Distance Learning programmes (ODL) at the Open University Malaysia (OUM). A wide range of factors are explored including socio-economic, political, personal, and cultural factors. An online survey has been used to collect the data. A total of 214 female learners from various programmes at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities has been selected as samples using the purposive sampling procedures. 54 out of 214 responded the survey. The data was analysed using descriptive analysis involving four factors named socio-economic factors, political factors, personal factors and cultural factors. The analysis reveals factors impacting female enrolment in the programmes based on the larger frequencies. The study revealed two major variables driving female learners to engage in ODL: socioeconomic factors, particularly the convenience provided by ODL, and personal factors centred on the fulfilment obtained from furthering their education.

Keywords: Women empowerment, open and distance learning, open university Malaysia

1. Introduction

Online Distance Learning (ODL) is one of the teaching platforms that allows learners to access learning material from any location at any time (Allam et al., 2020). Studies on ODL include learners' preferences for online teaching methods, enrolment factors, and challenges and difficulties encountered during ODL (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021; Saidi et al., 2021). ODL is defined as a teaching method that fully utilises the internet network and provides easy access via a computer, tablet, or mobile phone, allowing learners to not physically attend the lecture session (Zainol et al., 2021; Zhang & Kenny, 2010). This teaching method has numerous advantages for both academics and students. The main advantage of ODL is that it saves money. Due to its flexibility and convenience, ODL may save academicians and learners time and money (Mohamad et al., 2020). Previously, the ODL mode was only available to learners who were classified as part-time students at higher education institutions. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, most learners have adapted to the new mode which is learning online. As a result, ODL is an excellent opportunity for full-time learners at a higher learning institution to complete their studies.

2. Literature Review

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is a Malaysian Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution. OUM, as an ODL institution, primarily operates through distance learning methods, providing education to learners who are unable to attend traditional classrooms. ODL enables learners to study from home or any location with internet access, giving them greater flexibility and convenience in furthering their education.

OUM delivers its courses and study materials primarily through online platforms. Learners access learning resources, lectures, assignments, and assessments through the university's learning management system named MyINSPIRE. ODL system offered by OUM adopts a self-paced learning approach, allowing learners to progress through

the coursework at their own speed. This accommodates learners with different schedules and enables them to balance their studies with other commitments. OUM's ODL programs are accredited and recognized by relevant education authorities, ensuring the quality and validity of the degrees conferred. OUM offers a wide range of academic programs and disciplines, divided into four faculties which are Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Business and Management and Faculty of Technology and Sciences.

As an ODL institution, OUM plays a significant role in expanding educational access, promoting flexible learning opportunities, and supporting individuals who may not have access to traditional higher education institutions. It serves as a model for open and inclusive education, providing opportunities for a broader spectrum of learners to achieve their educational and career goals (www.oum.edu.my).

Since the establishment of OUM as an ODL institution, teaching and learning had been conducted in the blended learning mode. Learners studied online through the myINSPIRE learning platform and attended face-to-face classes with lecturers (for specific courses only such as counselling and psychology at the university's learning centres. Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, OUM introduced full online teaching and learning and replaced physical meetings with virtual synchronous meetings through Google Meet. In addition, all examinations are conducted as take-home online examinations, which resulted in learners in having more time to answer the questions (Mat et al., 2021).

2.1 Female Learners' enrolment in ODL

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 5 plays a critical role in advancing gender equality and promoting women's rights, aiming to create a world where women can fully participate in all aspects of society and have equal opportunities for personal, social, economic, and political growth and empowerment. Thus, reducing the gender divide in access to knowledge and information has been the aim of many initiatives, and understanding how access has evolved and improved women's opportunities to learn and be empowered is key to analyse the changing society. Women are empowered when they have access to learning and access is enhanced alongside formal and informal online learning spaces and programs.

It is a trend that is not echoed, however, new data from the online learning platform Coursera, shows that women have enrolled in courses at higher rates than before the pandemic. Previously, women made up 47% of learners in 2019, but this number had jumped to 52% by 2021 (<https://www.forbes.com/>). Amina (2021) found that ODL can encourage and motivate women to actively participate in social or cultural movements as well as to modify their roles as child bearers, caregivers, and home managers. As a result, a growing number of women are choosing online education, not as a backup plan after having children, but as a first step toward their career goals. What's more, the diversification of female learners in terms of marital status and age suggests that women of all backgrounds can glean special benefits from online education. Female learners today predominate in online learning at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Many women choose to learn online due to several factors. Online learning is bound to become the educational norm, and research has proven that its structure is advantageous to women. Online courses offer female learners more opportunities to build confidence, exhibit subject mastery, and establish a sense of belonging with their peers. As a result, more women could begin to enter male-dominated majors and career tracks.

According to BestColleges (2022), trends in Online Education: gender differences report, over 40% of online learners think women face more challenges than men as online learners. Despite these challenges, female learners continue to dominate the online education space and excel in it, too (<https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/women-online-education>). In fact, ODL offers learning opportunities to all categories of women to uplift their educational qualification and thereby contribute to the development of the country. Furthermore, it has helped the underprivileged women to mobilize their capacity, develop innate potentialities, exert control over resources and raise their status and standard of living (Saikia & Bordoloi, 2020).

Of late, across the whole world, ODL has emerged as a useful alternative and supplement to the conventional system of education. Markova et al. (2017) stated that ODL is an educational novelty to meet the ever-increasing and diversified educational needs of the society. It represents approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of the learners (Saikia & Bordoloi, 2020).

However, the adaptability of ODL is not the only factor that has influenced female learners to enrol in educational programmes. Thus, the purpose of this study was to identify other factors that may influence female learners' enrolment in their studies at OUM.

2.2 Factors Influencing Female Learners' Enrolment in ODL

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of OUM offers 14 programmes: both post grad and under grad level. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of learners enrolment to the programmes has increase nationwide. Before the pandemic, Gaba et al. (2021) has discovered factors that influence a group of female OUM's learners from the Northern region across the faculties to enrol in educational program are family, career, and money. The other reasons are to enhance job prospects, challenge self-capabilities, upgrade individual skills, personal growth and development and future career.

The study proposed to further investigate the intrinsic motivation of the female learners to better understand factors of enrolment into ODL.

Magoma (2012) has concluded factors enrolment of women in ODL programmes at university of Nairobi into four main factors which are socio-economic factors, political factors, personal factors, cultural factors. Socio-economic factors significantly influence a person's decision to further their studies. Financial resources such as savings, scholarships, grants, or access to affordable learner loans can play a crucial role in enabling a person to pursue higher education. Economic opportunities such as better job prospects, higher earning potential, and career advancement, can motivate individuals to further their studies as well. The availability of educational institutions and access to learning opportunities, especially in rural or underserved areas, can influence a person's ability to further their studies. In this context, ODL has serve the best to fill the gap.

Political factors can significantly influence a person's decision to further their studies. Government funding, education policies, employment measures, and recognition of foreign degrees play essential roles. Affirmative action, diversity policies, and education reforms impact underrepresented groups. Support for research, innovation, and global education can attract learners. Political stability and security also may affect study choices. Government support for distance learning and education campaigns can increase educational access. The interplay of these political factors shapes individuals' decisions to pursue higher education.

Personal factors significantly influence individuals to further their studies. These factors include career goals, intellectual curiosity, self-improvement, academic interest, and the desire for personal achievement. Influence from role models, previous academic success, and financial independence can also play a role. Personal goals, aspirations, and passion for a particular field of study can drive individuals to pursue higher education to fulfil their academic and intellectual interests. Personal factors also include Work-Life Balance which means the ability to balance work, family, and personal life while pursuing further studies through flexible education options can be a motivating factor (Harun et al., 2021).

Cultural factors significantly influence individuals' decisions to further their studies. Valuing education, family expectations, social status, and community influence play key roles. Religious beliefs and cultural perceptions of success also motivate individuals to participate in studying through ODL. The influence of peers, friends, and role models who value education and have pursued higher studies can inspire others to do the same.

It is essential to recognize that these factors can vary from person to person and may interact differently based on individual circumstances and cultural contexts. A combination of these factors often shapes an individual's decision to further their studies and pursue higher education.

3. Methodology

The target population for this study comprises of female learners who have enrolled in various program at Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities during May semester 2023. The total population is 214 learners. The quantitative approach of questionnaires was employed to obtain data from these respondents. The questionnaire comprises two parts: a) learner's Demographics, and b) factors influencing enrolment in ODL learning programmes at OUM. A five-point Likert scale with four answer options (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree) was used to gauge learners' factors that influenced them in the enrolment. The questionnaires were constructed based on previous studies which are socio-economic factors, political factors, personal factors and cultural factors. The questionnaire form was built on the Google Form platform and distributed to the respondents thru emails. Descriptive statistics were used to parse and summarise information obtained from the data. The items in the first section were analysed based on frequency and percentage while the items in the remaining sections were analysed based on descriptive statistics percentage and mean.

4. Results

There are 54 participants answered the survey questions. From Table 1, the distribution of program enrolment reveals a relatively balanced representation, with 48.15% being enrolled in undergraduate (UG) programs and the remaining 51.85% in postgraduate (PG) programs. Regarding age distribution, the participants are spread across various age groups. The largest portion, constituting 44.44%, falls within the 21-30 years old. The subsequent groups include those aged 31-40 years old (27.78%), 41-50 years old (18.52%), individuals aged 51-60 years old (5.56%), and those above 60 years old (3.7%).

In terms of employment, the participants are evenly distributed across different sectors. Evidently, the private sector held the majority with a representation of 57.41%, followed by self-employed individuals at 29.63%, and those within the government sector at 12.96%. Religious affiliation among the participants reveals a predominant representation of Islam, constituting 72.22% of the total. Other religious groups include Hindu (11.11%), Christian (7.41%), and Buddhist (3.7%), while individuals identifying with other religious affiliations make up 5.56% of the participants. Geographically, most participants reside in urban areas, accounting for 66.67% of the total. Suburban areas house 33.33% of the participants, whereas there is no representation from rural or remote areas in the study.

Table 1: Participant demography

		<i>f</i>	%	Total
Program enrol	UG	26	48.15	54
	PG	28	51.85	
Age (years old)	21-30	24	44.44	54
	31-40	15	27.78	
	41-50	10	18.52	
	51-60	3	5.56	
	>60	2	3.70	
	Government sector	7	12.96	
Job	Private sector	31	57.41	54
	Self Employed	16	29.63	
Religion	Islam	39	72.22	54
	Cristian	4	7.41	
	Hindu	6	11.11	
	Budha	2	3.70	
	Others	3	5.56	
Area of Living	Urban	36	66.67	54
	Sub urban	18	33.33	
	Rural	0	0.00	
	Remote	0	0.00	

4.1 Socio-Economic Factors

The data reflects a split response regarding financial aid. While 33.4% of respondents agree that OUM's financial aid is favourable (13% strongly agree, 20.4% agree), 23% express disagreement (7% disagree, 16% strongly disagree). This underlines the need for transparent and accessible financial aid options.

Career progression emerges as a strong motivator, with 77.8% of respondents aiming to improve career prospects (42.6% strongly agree, 35.2% agree). Fewer respondents are neutral (9.3%), disagree (7.4%), or strongly disagree (5.6%), highlighting alignment between academic pursuits and career goals.

Online learning's convenience significantly influences enrolment decisions, with 85.1% responding positively. Specifically, 44.4% strongly agree, and 40.7% agree that online learning flexibility at OUM is appealing. Fewer respondents are neutral (9.3%), disagree (1.9%), or strongly disagree (3.7%).

The flexible mode of study online at OUM encouraged me to enrol in the program
54 responses

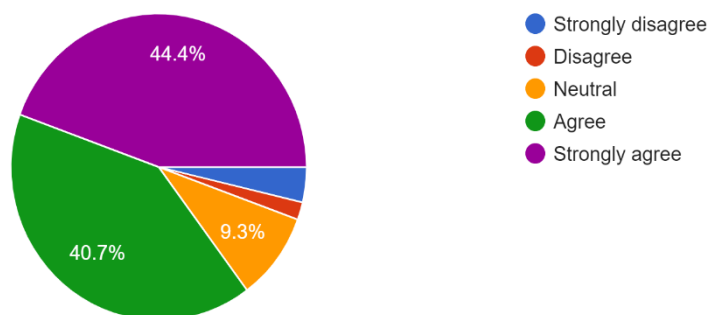


Fig. 1: Online learning and convenience's factor

4.2 Political Factors

The data indicates that encouragement from authorities holds a significant role in motivating individuals to pursue continued education. When combining the Strongly Agree and Agree responses (61.1%), it becomes evident that a notable majority of respondents acknowledge the positive influence of authority encouragement on their motivation to continue their studies. Conversely, a substantial proportion (33.3% combined Disagree and Strongly Disagree) expresses reservations regarding the motivating impact of such encouragement. This spectrum of opinions emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors contributing to educational motivation.

Encouragement from the authorities gave me motivation to continue my studies
54 responses

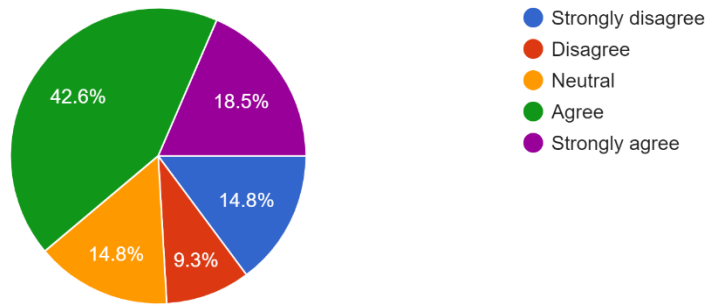


Fig. 2: Encouragement from authorities for online learning

Upon analysis, it is apparent that the government's policy on encouraging lifelong learning receives a diversified response from the respondents. While a considerable proportion either Strongly Agree or Agree (57.4%) with the efficacy of the policy, the substantial Neutral category (29.6%) reflects a degree of uncertainty or lack of awareness. Conversely, a relatively modest combined percentage of Disagree and Strongly Disagree (13%) indicates a relatively favourable reception of the policy among the participants.

4.3 Personal Factors

The data reveals that a significant majority of students consider knowledge and skill enhancement as a primary motive for their academic endeavours. With a combined percentage of 98.2% for Strongly Agree and Agree responses, it is evident that the acquisition of knowledge and skills strongly motivates students in their academic pursuits. The absence of Neutral and Disagree responses reflects the clear alignment between students' goals and the purpose of their learning.

I study for my own satisfaction.

54 responses

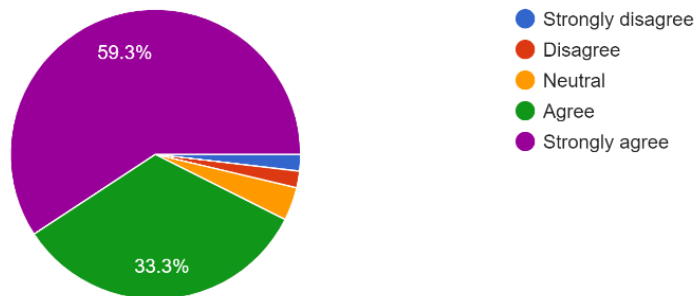


Fig. 3: Personal motivation factors

These figures underscore that a substantial majority of respondents (92.6% combined Strongly Agree and Agree) finds that personal satisfaction to be a motivating factor in their academic pursuits. The relatively low percentages of Neutral and Disagree responses emphasize the importance of personal fulfilment as a driver for students' commitment to their studies.

The data highlights the varying degrees to which students seek recognition from society through their studies. The data suggests that while a notable percentage of students (66.6% combined Strongly Agree and Agree) seek recognition, a substantial portion (25.9% Neutral, 14.8% combined Disagree and Strongly Disagree) maintain differing perspectives. This indicates a diversity of motivations driving students' educational pursuits beyond societal validation.

The study also found positive influence of online learning in balancing work, study, and family responsibilities. The results highlight a favourable perception of online learning's role in balancing life demands, with a combined 77.8% expressing agreement. The relatively low Neutral and Disagree responses reinforce the perception that online learning is a valuable tool in enabling a harmonious equilibrium among various life roles.

4.4 Cultural Factors

The data underscores the substantial impact of an individual's environment, including family and friends, on their education. With a combined 81.5% for Strongly Agree and Agree responses, it is evident that the environment

significantly influences educational pursuits. The absence of Disagree responses emphasizes the widespread recognition of the role of family and friends in fostering educational aspirations.

The data reveals a notable connection between religious beliefs and individuals' commitment to continued education. A combined 83.3% of respondents express a positive connection between their religious beliefs and their motivation to continue studying. The absence of Disagree responses underscores the strength of this association, while the presence of a small Neutral category highlights varying degrees of influence.

Online learning suits women because it is flexible and convenience.

54 responses

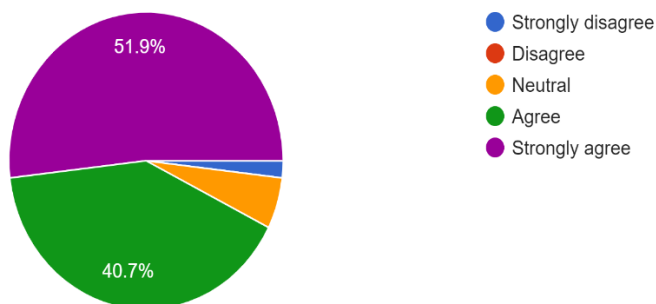


Fig. 4: Perceptions of online learning for women

The data presents insights into perceptions regarding online learning's suitability for women due to its flexibility. The data showcases a dominant perspective, with a combined 92.6% of respondents expressing agreement about online learning's compatibility with women's needs. The Neutral and Disagree responses are minimal, suggesting a widely held view about online learning's adaptability and convenience for women.

5. Discussion

Several studies have shed light on the various factors affecting the enrollment and retention of female learners in ODL programs. Kara et al. (2019) highlighted the challenges faced by adult learners in online distance education, emphasizing the meaningful factors affecting adult distance learners' decisions to drop out. This is relevant as it provides insights into the challenges faced by adult learners, which could also be applicable to female learners in ODL programs. Furthermore, this finding also was aligned with Oluwasayo & Olawumi (2020), when he was investigated the factors influencing female enrollment in Science Education programs in Distance Learning Institutions in South-West, Nigeria. While the context is different, the study's focus on factors influencing female enrollment in distance learning programs is directly relevant to the task at hand. Understanding these factors can provide valuable insights into the specific challenges and barriers that female learners may face in enrolling in ODL programs.

Moreover, Bawa (2016) studied the factors that influence adult learners to select online programs/courses, shedding light on the factors that contribute to learner retention in online courses. This is pertinent as it provides insights into the factors that may influence female learners' decisions to enroll and persist in ODL programs. Additionally, Ahmad et al. (2022) identified five factors influencing students' satisfaction towards ODL method, including student-lecturer interaction, lecturer performance, ODL course evaluation, design, and technical aspects. Understanding these factors is crucial in addressing the specific needs and preferences of female learners in ODL programs to enhance their satisfaction and retention. Furthermore, Mathew & Chung (2020) presented university students' perspectives on ODL implementation amidst COVID-19, contributing to more effective ODL management by presenting the learners' perspectives. This is relevant as it provides insights into the experiences and perspectives of learners in ODL programs, which can include female learners.

However, several studies provide valuable insights into factors influencing distance learning and enrollment in other countries, which can offer a comparative perspective. For instance, Bray et al. (2008) explored predictors of learning satisfaction in Japanese online distance learners, shedding light on the factors influencing satisfaction and engagement in online distance education. Although the study focuses on Japan, it provides valuable insights into the factors that contribute to learner satisfaction, which can be compared with the factors influencing female enrollment at OUM. Lansing (2017) presented a new model of college choice for distance learners, emphasizing the importance of course design and flexibility in empowering students to create an individualized and self-paced learning experience. This study's findings can be compared with the course structures and flexibility offered at OUM to understand how they influence female enrollment and satisfaction.

Additionally, Oluwasayo & Olawumi (2020) investigated factors influencing female enrollment in science education programs in distance learning institutions in South-West Nigeria, highlighting cultural and social factors that influence enrollment decisions. While the context is different, the study's findings can provide comparative insights into

the factors influencing female enrollment in ODL programs in different cultural settings. Sharoni et al. (2022) also examined the readiness and perceived challenges among health sciences distance learners, emphasizing the impact of online learning readiness on learning motivation, particularly for female learners. This study's findings can be compared with the readiness and challenges faced by female learners at OUM, offering insights into the unique factors influencing female enrollment and motivation in distance learning programs.

In conclusion, while direct comparisons with OUM are limited, studies on predictors of learning satisfaction in Japanese online distance learners, a new model of college choice for distance learners, factors influencing female enrollment in science education programs in Nigeria, and the readiness and perceived challenges among health sciences distance learners offer valuable insights that can be used to compare and understand the factors influencing the enrollment of female learners in ODL programs at OUM with other countries.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicated that the most significant factors influencing enrollment were socio-economic, particularly the convenience and flexibility of ODL, and personal factors, notably the fulfillment derived from furthering education. These results suggest a strong correlation between the practical advantages of ODL and the personal educational aspirations of female learners, highlighting the importance of these factors in the context of women's educational choices in distance learning environments. Thus, online learning is bound to become the new educational norm, and research has proven that its structure is advantageous to women. Based on this study, online learning's convenience significantly influences enrolment decisions of the respondents. In addition, encouragement from authorities motivates individuals to pursue further education. The study also concludes that a majority of students consider knowledge and skill enhancement as a primary motive for their academic endeavours. In this scenario, positive influence of online learning is reflected in terms of balancing work, study, and family responsibilities. As a suitable platform for lifelong learning, religious beliefs of the respondents is also a factor for oneself to choose to study using ODL platform. In summary, a conclusive insight can be drawn from the data that the primary driving forces behind female learners' enrollment in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) at OUM are twofold: socioeconomic factors, notably the convenience offered by ODL, and personal factors centered around the fulfillment derived from advancing their education.

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