Socio-demographic Characteristics of Distance Learners in Malaysian Universities

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Abstract: The advancement of digital technology has triggered a growing demand for courses offered via distance education mode among potential students in Malaysia. As a result, the socio-demographic characteristics of distant learners have also evolved. Therefore, this study attempts to review the literature articles regarding socio-demographic characteristics of distance learners in Malaysia based on age, gender, ethnicity, marital status as well as their monthly salary range. Based on the sixteen articles reviewed, it was found that the majority of the distance learners in Malaysia are female (43.75%), having age between 30 to 39 years old (37.5%), married (25.0%), Malay, and earning between RM1,501.00 to RM2,500.00 per month (18.75%). It is hoped that this study will give an overview of the composition of distance education students in terms of socio-demographic factors which may be useful for decision makers.

1   INTRODUCTION

Distance education is an option which embraces the continuous learning concept or method that consists of several programmes for the enhancement of academic knowledge, professional skills, and self-improvement that calls for the distinctive characteristic of innovative teaching methods. Distance learners are part-time students who interact with the lecturers from a geographical location outside the university and who use digital tools which include course syllabus, project paper and assignments as well as slides presentations, shared via a web tool or other social media (Hakan and Güler, 2012).

Currently, many public institutions of higher learning are offering distance educational opportunities to prospective students, especially to working adults, owners of businesses and those who are self-employed. The increasing number of courses and the numerous areas of study offered through the distance education mode have attracted the attention and demand of many categories of students each year (Md Harizan, Hilmi and Atan, 2015). In addition, the changing lifestyle over the past 10 years, especially in terms of financial resources, time and geographic issues among learners, have made it a necessity for a thorough investigation of socio-demographic factors among students who have demanded for distance learning to be recognised as pertinent (Compora, 2003).

In Malaysia, pursuing a degree through the distance education mode is a popular choice especially among busy working adults because of their learning style, time, convenience, and flexibility as opposed to on-campus education methods (Md Harizan et al., 2017) . These terms also have been regularly mentioned in many other studies (Compora, 2003; Latanich, Hudson Gai, and Nonis Sarath, 2001; Murphy, 2007; Qureshi, Morton and Antosz, 2002; Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen and Yeh, 2008; Torres, And and Eberle, 2010). This has made this mode of study very attractive because it facilitates, improves efficiency and provides time autonomy in terms of control over the pace, study during one's own time and timing of studies (Latanich et al. 2001; Qureshi et al. 2002; Selim, 2007; Sun et al. 2008; Torres et al. 2010). Based on the current trends in the area of distance learning, it can be explained that the level of higher education in this country has improved by leaps and bounds and this necessitates a comprehensive study regarding the socio-demographic factors of distance learners who may contribute to the current scenario.

Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a study which investigates the socio-demographic characteristics of distance learners in Malaysia, which include age, gender, marital status, ethnicity and monthly salary range.

2 DISTANCE EDUCATION IN BRIEF

The terms of distance education and distance learning have been widely used in academic circles and have some definitions that assist in giving a succinct explanation of this mode of study. According to Moore, Dickson-Deane and Galyen (Moore, Dickson-Deane and Galyen, 2011), distance education is a method of providing facilities or access to learning for students who are geographically distant from institutions of higher learning. In addition, distance education consists of flexible delivery techniques, such as online technologies, to cater for the differing needs of distance learners (Dorrian and Wache, 2009). Furthermore, according to Md Harizan, Hilmi and Atan (Md Harizan, Hilmi and Atan, 2017), distance learners can benefit from distance education tools such as online systems as they are able to access the course resources quickly while joining the course of tertiary education. The use of social media also has an impact on this mode of study which assists many students from all backgrounds.

As we know, advances in the use of distance technology (Chiam and Loo, 2015; Fátima and Cerezo, 2014; Hakan and Güler, 2012; Karadeniz, 2009; Ng and Confessore, 2011) and changes of delivery modes from off-line to on-line interactive web-based courses have made a difference to the education system, as well as changes to the profile, needs and expectations of distance learners (Latanich et al. 2001). George (George, 2014) and Salleh et al (Salleh et al. 2015) have explained the background changes of distance learners who have diverse backgrounds in terms of experience, age, socio-cultural factors, previous educational levels attained, occupations, as well as learning styles. In applying for distance education courses, it can be noted that students from various educational backgrounds have the desire to pursue their studies because of time autonomy and the need to upgrade their academic or educational qualifications due to promotional and job enrichment requirements. This is happened as in today's educational system, opportunities are open to anyone with desires and qualifications regardless of

socio-demographic characteristics. Although socio-demographic factors have changed in tandem with current economic developments, this change should also be taken into consideration by institutions offering distance learning. Thus, policy makers should also do so when considering their background characteristics, problems in their studies, attitudes, needs, interest, motivation, expectation, study habits and other commitments throughout the course of study (Salleh et al. 2015).

3 METHODOLOGY

The study involves the review of the literature articles regarding socio-demographics profile of distance learners in Malaysia based on past studies. The profile is categorised into gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, and salary range per month. To collect primary studies, the exploratory search process included digital libraries as well as manual search of journals and conference proceedings. These search databases consist of the published studies in distance education and distance learners research.

In order to perform automatic search on the selected libraries, the search string used was: ("distance learning" OR "distance education") AND ("socio-demographic" OR "demographic") AND "Malaysia". The results generated research articles covering the period from year 2002 to 2017. The selection process was done based on thorough reading of the collected articles so that the most relevant studies was selected in order to address the research questions. The inclusion criteria is papers with a focus on demographic profiles of distance learners or distance education students while the exclusion criteria is papers published before year 2001, not written in English language, non-peer reviewed articles such as working papers and magazines and papers not related to socio-demographic profile of distance learners or distance education students.

4 CURRENT SCENARIOS IN MALAYSIAN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education in Malaysia is a very popular mode of study among adults especially those who have permanent jobs. Despite the availability of a plethora of studies investigating various scopes of study and important aspects related to distance education, less emphasis has been placed on socio-

demographic profiles of distance education students. In particular, studies on socio-demographic are significant within Malaysian distance education context. Therefore, in order to develop a framework or model of the distance education system, socio-demographic studies are important to improve the existing education systems in order to meet current needs. The aim is to explore the socio-demographic of distance learners based on their age, gender, marital status, ethnicity and salary range per month. In fact, socio-demographic factors have also affected the use of technology or tools employed in distance education as reviewed by Ng and Tan (Ng and Tan, 2017), which may have some effects in terms of the accessibility to the system, preferred communication technology and course content.

The School of Distance Education (SDE), Universiti Sains Malaysia is the pioneer of the off-campus programme since it was established in 1971. Since 1996, it has become one of the renowned centres of study in Malaysia. Most of the lecturers in SDE have the PhD qualification and are involved in managing courses for each academic session. SDE utilizes a blended learning approach, which takes into account pedagogical and cost-effective ways, in line with the rapid growth in information and communication technology (ICT). It can be noted that the internet has become the driveway for all distance learners to access all the information, online learning aids as well as discussion groups (Islam, Abdul Rahim, Chee Liang and Momtaz, 2011). In addition to the SDE in USM, other public and private universities such as Open University Malaysia (OUM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Wawasan Open University (Md Harizan, Hilmi, & Atan, 2015) are also offering distance learning programme in various fields of study. University Technology Mara (UiTM) Shah Alam which is the oldest and largest public institution of higher learning in Malaysia also offers distance learning programmes with the aim of providing opportunities for the working population in Malaysia to further their study as the key to socio-economic development (Hashim, Ahmad and Abdullah, 2010).

5 RESULTS AND FINDINGS ON THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE STUDENTS

This paper illustrates the demographic conditions of students who are studying through the distance learning mode in Malaysia based on recent studies. Sixteen articles were finally collected and analysed. In fact, most of these distance education students are female students (Amoozegar, Daud, Mahmud and Jalil, 2017; Chiam and Loo, 2015; Md Harizan et al. 2017) which is formed by 43.75% of the total articles reviewed. Previous studies also show that most of them are between 30 and 39 years old formed by 37.5% of the total articles reviewed (Chiam and Loo, 2015; Ismail, Gunasegaran, Koh and Idrus, 2010; Md Harizan et al. 2017; Raghavan and Kumar, 2008; Rasid and Zin, 2012; Rosli, Ismail, M. Idrus and Abu Ziden, 2010) and married (formed by 25.0% of the total articles reviewed) (Chiam and Loo, 2015; Md Harizan et al. 2017; Raghavan and Kumar, 2008; Rasid and Zin, 2012). In terms of ethnicity, most distance education students are Malay students (formed by 43.75% of the total articles reviewed) (Chiam and Loo, 2015; Islam et al. 2011; Md Harizan et al. 2017; Raghavan and Kumar, 2008; Rasid and Zin, 2012) followed by Chinese and Indians. However, only a few studies have taken the salary range among distance education students in Malaysia into account. The study conducted by Md Harizan et al (Md Harizan et al. 2017) shows that most of its respondents (formed by 6.25% of the total articles reviewed) having a monthly salary of approximately RM2,501.00 and RM3,500.00 while studies by Ghani, Said, and Nasir; Ismail et al; Raghavan and Kumar (Ghani, Said, and Nasir, 2008; Ismail et al. 2010 and Raghavan and Kumar, 2008) have discovered that distance learners were in the middle-income category earning from RM1,501.00 to RM2,500.00 per month (formed by 18.75% of the total articles reviewed).

In the study of Islam et al (Islam et al. 2011), 100 questionnaires were distributed among a sample population and it should be noted that the response rate for this study was 80%. Based on the feedback received, it is clear that that there were more female students as they made up about 78.8% of total respondents while only 21.2% of the respondents were male students. According to this study, a majority of the respondents were relatively young as they were between the ages of 21 and 23 years, which formed 58.8% of the total respondents. It should be noted that 46.3% of the respondents were Malays who made up nearly half of the total number of respondents followed by Indians (37.5%) and Chinese (16.3%).

In the findings of Md Harizan et al (Md Harizan et al. 2017), 88.8% of the randomly selected respondents for this study were single while in the study of Chiam and Loo (Chiam and Loo, 2015), the

researchers obtained a total of 320 respondents between the ages of 28 and 72 years old with a mean of 35 years old. Based on the study, the researchers discovered that the respondents' gender distribution was 36.9% for male students and 63.1% for female students. The majority of respondents were Malay (66.3%), followed by Chinese (19%), Indians (11.3%), and others (3.4%). It was observed that 50.9% of the respondents were married while 42.54% were single.

Another study of Md Harizan et al (Md Harizan et al. 2017) which involved 226 respondents representing a 56.5% response rate that is reasonable. Based on the demographic information obtained, most of the students were female (62.4%), married (53.1%), and Malay (72.1%). It was also found that the respondents consistedof adults aged between 25 and 34 years old (65.0%) and who had a monthly salary range between RM2001.00 and RM3000.00 (38.9%). Raghavan and Kumar's study involved a large number of respondents with a total of 454 valid responses or a 83% return rate from the total of 550 questionnaires sent to the selected distance learners at the Open University Malaysia (Raghavan and Kumar, 2008). This study found that 55.5% of respondents were female, compared to males (44.5%). Three hundred and fifty-four students (78%) were young adults below the age of 39 years old. The survey also showed that 69.4% of respondents were Malay, 13.2% were Chinese, 8.1% were Indian and 9.3% were 'other'. Most of the students were married (78.6%). The findings also revealed that a very high percentage of students earned less than RM3,000.00 per month (94.8%).

The study of Amoozegar et al. (Amoozegar et al. 2017) involved 303 respondents who were enrolled in distance learning programmes. It could be seen that 190 female students participated in this study (about 63%). Respondents between 18 to 25 years old formed the highest category (54.8%), followed by respondents between 26 to 35 years old (35.1%). From the study it could be gleaned that only 31.3% were married compared to 52.2% or 158 respondents who were single. However, no findings were discovered regarding the monthly income of distance learning students. Ismail et al. (Ismail et al. 2010) maintained that there was no missing data in the survey among 105 respondents. Most of the students were between the ages of 30 and 39 years old (43.8%). The study found that the respondents in the second highest age group were between the ages of 20 and 29 years old (41.9%). The study revealed that most of them were Malay (57.1%) and Chinese (25.7%). From the findings, it could be surmised that

26.7% of the distance education students earned around RM1,500.00 to RM2,000.00 per month. Overall, the data from the survey showed that 70.6% of respondents had a salary below RM2,500.00 per month.

The study of Rasid and Zin (Rasid and Zin, 2012) focused on measuring some personality styles among adult distance education students and their attitudes towards examinations. The response rate was satisfactory with 746 respondents or 49.7%, compared to their previous postal questionnaire surveys. There were more male students (402 or 53.6%) than female students. It was noted that 608 distance education students were married (81.5%). Of the total respondents, 70.5% were Malays, followed by Chinese (20.8%), Indians (6.8%) and other ethnic groups (1.9%). The study did not include the monthly income earned bythe students.

Ghani et al. (Ghani et al. 2008) undertook a study which involved first year students who were enrolled in social sciences courses as the sample population. A total of 1,500 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents through their respective lecturers. Only 980 responses were usable despite of 65% response rate. From the survey, it was noted that approximately 33.4% of the respondents were between the ages of 26 and 30 years while 29.1% of the respondents were between the ages of 20 and 25 years. Only 15.4% of respondents were above 35 years old. It was observed that most of the respondents earned between RM1,001.00 and RM2,000.00 per month (39.7%), 30.1% of the respondents obtained between RM2,001.00 and RM3,500.00 per month, while 12.4% of the respondents earned between RM3,501.00 and RM5,000.00 per month. The data obtained showed that 5.9% of the respondents earned more than RM5,000.00 per month. However, there was no data regarding gender in this study. In short, table 1 below summarises previous findings from recent studies involving the socio-demographic profiles of distance learners:

Table 1: The majority of demographic details based on previous studies.

Demographic factors	Demographic details	Previous studies done in Malaysia
Gender	Male	Md Harizan et al. (2017)
	Female	Amoozegar et al. (2017), Chiam and Loo (2015), Islam et al. (2011), Ismail et al. (2010), Md Harizan et al.

Demographic factors	Demographic details	Previous studies done in Malaysia
		(2017), Raghavan and Kumar (2008), Rosli et al. (2010)
Age	20-29	Amoozegar et al., (2017), Ghani et al. (2008), Islam et al. (2011), Md Harizan et al. (2017)
	30-39	Chiam and Loo (2015), Ismail et al. (2010), Md Harizan et al. (2017), Raghavan and Kumar (2008), Rasid and Zin (2012), Rosli et al. (2010)
Marital status	Single	Amoozegar et al. (2017), Islam et al. (2011)
	Married	Chiam and Loo (2015), Md Harizan et al. (2017), Raghavan and Kumar (2008), Rasid and Zin (2012)
Ethnicity	Malays	Chiam and Loo (2015), Islam et al. (2011), Ismail et al. (2010), Md Harizan et al. (2017), Raghavan and Kumar (2008), Rasid and Zin (2012), Rosli et al. (2010)
Salary range	RM1,501-RM2,500	Ghani et al. (2008), Ismail et al. (2010), Raghavan and Kumar (2008)
	RM2,501-RM3,500	Md Harizan et al. (2017)

6 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The findings presented recent studies' demographic composition of the distance education population in Malaysia. The study did not represent the whole population as it was concerned only with distance learners, especially in the private universities which offer many similar courses. From the existing information, it is clear that studies showed significant differences between the genders. The number of female students seems to have been higher than that of male students. There is a tendency of those above the age of 30 to pursue distance learning; most of them are married and have family commitments. In terms of ethnicity, since most of the studies were undertaken at public institutes, it is more likely that Malays will form the majority among students, followed by Chinese and Indians. Most of the students are working adults and have an income of less than RM2,500.00 per month.

With the increasing number of distance learning students in the country, some important issues are to be highlighted in line with the current economic challenges and rising cost of living. Among other issues that can be highlighted are the unemployment issue, course fees, and economic pressures among students who are married or having families and facing difficulties in obtaining financial aid in order to cover thecosts of study. It is hoped that this study will give an overview of the composition of distance education students in terms of socio-demographic factors which may be useful for decision makers. Future studies may also look into other background factors of distance education students such as personality, motivation and attitude in pursuing studies as well as comparing socio-demographic characteristics of distance education students in other countries. It seems to be that the economic changes over the past decade have affected the students and the management of institutions of higher learning may attempt to solve the problem by offering more courses delivered through distance learning.

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