

Motivational Factors Influencing Educational Development in Lifelong Learning Among Late Bloomers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, the phenomenon of adults returning to higher education later in life, commonly referred to as late bloomers, remains underexplored, despite its growing significance within the discourse of lifelong learning. This study investigates the motivational factors that drive late-bloomer youth in Malaysia to pursue higher education as part of their lifelong learning journey. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research involved in-depth interviews with twelve participants aged between 25 and 40, all of whom were enrolled in higher education institutions at the time of the study. Participants were selected based on specific criteria: Malaysian citizenship, urban residency within Kuala Lumpur, and a household income of RM 4,000.00 or below. Thematic analysis was conducted within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), allowing for the identification of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational dimensions. Three primary themes emerged: career advancement, intrinsic motivation, and family support. Career-related goals,

such as obtaining qualifications for job stability and salary progression, were key extrinsic motivators. Intrinsically, participants were driven by desires for personal growth, cognitive enrichment, and the achievement of individual aspirations. Additionally, emotional and moral support from family, particularly parents and siblings, proved vital in sustaining motivation. The study concludes that understanding and addressing these motivational drivers is essential for developing educational policies and support systems tailored to the needs of late bloomers. By doing so, institutions can better facilitate

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lifelong learning and enhance both personal and professional outcomes for this demographic. This research offers valuable insights into adult education and learner engagement strategies.

Keywords: Adult learner, late bloomer, lifelong learning, motivational factors

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning encompasses continuous learning activities individuals engage in throughout their lives to enhance knowledge, skills, and competencies for personal, societal, or employment-related reasons (Billett, 2022; Jamil et al., 2022; Kamrozzaman et al., 2020; Mohd et al., 2024; Yucedal, 2022). It involves personal learning experiences and institutional education, emphasising the importance of learning beyond formal educational settings (Bárány et al., 2023 ; Kuan et al., 2014). Lifelong learning is crucial for individual development, self-fulfilment, and adapting to the evolving demands of the globalised world. Various international organisations and institutions promote strategies and initiatives to facilitate lifelong learning, recognising its significance in personal growth, societal progress, and sustainable development (International Labour Organisation, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). The concept of lifelong learning is intertwined with continuous skill development, knowledge enhancement, and adaptability to navigate the complexities of modern life.

However, despite the global momentum around lifelong learning, less attention has been given to understanding how this concept unfolds in specific regional

contexts, such as Malaysia, where unique socio-cultural and economic factors shape learning behaviours. Late bloomers represent a unique group within this context, with distinct motivations and barriers that merit focused attention (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2011). Understanding these factors is critical for educational policymaking aimed at encouraging broader participation in lifelong learning among late bloomers. The complexities of returning to education after a long hiatus, often driven by personal, familial, or professional reasons, make late bloomers an important yet under-researched demographic.

In addition, adult learners' involvement in lifelong education heavily depends on motivational factors (Alexandrova, 2023). Multiple studies highlight the importance of motivation in adult education (Ilie, 2019; Lukianova, 2016). Adults are motivated to engage in continuous learning activities by the aspiration for career progression, personal fulfilment, and overall life contentment. Furthermore, adult learners are motivated by the need for social connection, influence, and information acquisition. Components such as emotional considerations, goal setting, and learning capacity are recognised as internal factors that influence the motivation of adult learners (Lukianova, 2016). Comprehending these many motivational

factors is crucial for creating efficient educational programmes customised to the requirements and ambitions of adult learners (Min et al., 2021).

This study aims to explore the motivational variables that lead young individuals to pursue higher education at a later age in life. Late-bloomer youths, typically characterised as individuals who postpone their academic aspirations beyond the conventional age range, are an increasingly prominent group in higher education (Kasworm, 2009; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Although this phenomenon is becoming more common, there remains a gap in the understanding of the unique motivational dynamics that drive these individuals to re-enter education (Hasif et al., 2024; Othman et al., 2023). Specifically, there is limited research that situates this phenomenon within the Malaysian context, where socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors may differ from those in Western countries (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2011). A deeper understanding of how these factors interact in Malaysia is critical for designing more inclusive educational frameworks that accommodate late bloomers.

This study debate aims to analyse the motivational variables that impact the decisions of late-bloomer teenagers to pursue higher education at a later age. The goal is to enhance the current knowledge of lifelong learning groups. This study aspires to provide significant insights by comprehensively analysing these aspects. In doing so, the study seeks

to inform the development of educational strategies and policies that could better support late bloomers in their pursuit of academic qualifications, thereby addressing a critical demographic in the lifelong learning ecosystem. The findings will inform educational policies and practices, enabling the development of successful strategies to support and engage late-bloomer youths in their higher education journeys. Furthermore, by addressing the needs of this demographic, educational institutions can foster a more equitable learning environment that promotes both personal and professional growth for all learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Late bloomers in education play a significant role in lifelong learning for adult learners (Zin et al., 2020). While American norms emphasise academic achievement "on schedule", there is also a tolerance for educational late blooming, providing unique opportunities not found in other societies (Levin & Levin, 1991). Late bloomers, who often return to education after overcoming significant personal or professional challenges, engage with learning through a complex interplay of personal resilience, external support, and shifting life circumstances (Pascua et al., 2024). This unique context highlights the importance of studying the diverse factors that influence their re-engagement with education. Learning in later life is distinct from adult learning, exhibiting characteristics aligned with the benefits of

later life (Kassim et al., 2019). European societies, however, tend to focus on older adult learning within the framework of lifelong learning policies, often driven by economic motives rather than social values (Brink, 2017). To enhance late-life learning, it is crucial to address barriers to participation, ensure quality, improve guidance and re-skilling, rethink higher education opportunities, bring learning closer to communities, and establish opportunities for housebound elders (Laal, 2011). However, while these international models provide useful frameworks, they may not fully capture the specific socio-economic and cultural factors influencing late bloomers in non-Western contexts, such as Malaysia (Salleh, 2019). This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the Malaysian perspective on lifelong learning and late bloomers.

According to a model of late blooming in higher education by Levin and Levin (1991), late bloomers in higher education are individuals who re-enter the educational system at a later age, often after facing personal or economic challenges, and achieve academic success that was not apparent in their earlier educational careers. In the same discussion, J. Levin and W. Levin (1991) also mentioned that these individuals may include former juvenile delinquents, drug addicts, alcoholics, educational 'burnouts,' and members of the urban underclass who, despite leaving the educational system voluntarily, return to experience their first academic success in college. This model illustrates how

late bloomers differentiate themselves from those who remain in education without genuine engagement, driven more by societal expectations than personal motivation. In contrast, late bloomers often exhibit renewed purpose, fuelled by personal growth, career aspirations, and a desire for social integration.

The phenomenon of continuing study at a later age among adult learners is driven by a complex interplay of motivational factors, which can be broadly categorised into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the influence of personal, socio-relational, and environmental factors. Intrinsic motivations, such as a desire for self-improvement, play a crucial role in late bloomers' decisions to return to education, particularly as they seek to overcome earlier perceived failures or missed opportunities (Lockhart et al., 2013). Intrinsic motivations are pivotal, with many youths and adults pursuing education for personal development, a desire for cognitive stimulation, and a sense of purpose and motivation contributing to successful ageing and prolonged health (Subramanyam et al., 2024). This internal drive is often fuelled by a desire for self-fulfilment, the joy of learning, and the aspiration for professional advancement and improving the quality of lifestyle (Verasingam et al., 2020). Additionally, the quest for ontological security and the influence of habits highlight the complex interplay between individual agency and social structures in motivating older adults to learn (Heinz et al., 2022).

Extrinsic motivations, such as pursuing career advancement, monetary gains

(Yasuzato & Katagiri, 2019), and social pressures (Hachem, 2022), also play a significant role. These external factors often stem from the need to remain competitive in a job market that increasingly values higher educational qualifications (Evans et al., 2013). In this context, late bloomers may feel compelled to return to education to secure job stability or career progression (Evans et al., 2013). This is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where government policies and corporate structures increasingly prioritise formal qualifications, even for those who have substantial work experience.

Moreover, learning programmes' educational and cultural benefits are attributed to external motivations by providing opportunities for social interaction and community engagement (Lukianova, 2016). Personal factors, such as past learning experiences and access to learning opportunities, significantly influence the continuation of learning in older age (Ilie, 2019). Socio-relational factors, including support from family and peers and the role of instructors, create a conducive learning environment that encourages continued participation (Tavares et al., 2017). Family support plays a crucial role in Malaysia, where familial expectations and responsibilities are often deeply intertwined with individual aspirations. This support, both moral and financial, is key to the success of many late bloomers (Nicholas et al., 2008). Environmental and societal changes, including integrating digital technologies in education, have made learning more accessible and appealing to

older adults, motivating them to engage in lifelong learning (Devanesan, 2020; Ilie, 2019). In Malaysia, studies on adult learners' readiness for MOOCs further highlight how digital competencies, self-regulation, and motivation shape late bloomers' capacity to benefit from flexible online learning opportunities (Ghazali et al., 2021). The availability of distance learning programmes and flexible learning schedules helps overcome barriers such as financial constraints and time limitations. These technological advancements have gained even more importance in the post-pandemic world, where online and hybrid learning models provide flexibility for individuals balancing work, family, and education. For Malaysian late bloomers, the rise of online learning platforms has been particularly beneficial, offering them the opportunity to pursue higher education while fulfilling work and family responsibilities (Muniandy et al., 2022).

Therefore, the motivation behind continuing study at a later age among adult learners is multifaceted, encompassing intrinsic desires for personal growth and cognitive engagement, extrinsic factors related to career and social pressures, and the supportive role of personal, socio-relational, and environmental factors. Understanding these factors is crucial for designing educational programmes that cater to the unique needs of late bloomers and promote lifelong learning as a pathway to both personal fulfilment and professional success. By tailoring educational programmes to the unique motivations and challenges of

late bloomers in Malaysia, educators and policymakers can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that encourages continued participation in higher education.

Motivational Theories and Lifelong Learning: A Framework for Late Bloomers

Understanding the motivations that drive adults to re-engage in formal education requires a comprehensive lens that considers both psychological and contextual factors. Two key theoretical perspectives, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and frameworks from the lifelong learning literature, offer valuable insights into how motivation operates across different life stages, particularly among individuals returning to education after a significant hiatus.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Ryan and Deci (2000), provides a foundational psychological framework for analysing human motivation. It distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, which arises from genuine interest or enjoyment, and extrinsic motivation, which is driven by external rewards or social pressures. Crucially, SDT posits that optimal motivation and sustained engagement are achieved when three basic psychological needs are fulfilled: autonomy (a sense of volition and self-direction), competence (a feeling of capability and effectiveness), and relatedness (a sense of belonging and social connection). These elements are particularly salient for individuals who

return to education later in life, as they often face the challenge of overcoming previous academic setbacks, limited support systems, or socio-economic constraints. SDT offers a nuanced lens to understand how such learners rebuild self-confidence, reconnect with educational environments, and develop a renewed sense of purpose.

Complementing this psychological perspective, theories within the lifelong learning domain underscore the significance of agency, experience, and adaptability in adult learning. Loeng (2020) highlights self-directed learning as a hallmark of adult education, emphasising the learner's capacity to take initiative, set personal goals, and actively manage the learning process. Wahl and Gerstorf (2020) further stress that adult learning is inherently contextual, shaped by the learner's life stage, accumulated experiences, and social environment. For late bloomers, these theories shed light on how motivation is not only internally driven but also closely linked to life transitions, career aspirations, or the desire for personal fulfilment. Their pathways are often complex, requiring flexible and empathetic educational structures that acknowledge their distinct needs and trajectories.

Together, these theoretical approaches offer a multidimensional understanding of motivation in the context of lifelong learning. SDT explains the internal mechanisms that sustain engagement, while lifelong learning theories situate these mechanisms within broader life circumstances. Integrating these perspectives provides a robust conceptual

foundation for exploring how late bloomers navigate educational opportunities, particularly within the evolving landscape of adult and continuing education in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a phenomenological approach, aiming to explore the lived experiences of individuals within a defined social context. Phenomenology, as mentioned by Creswell (2014), emphasises the in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences. In alignment with this tradition, the current study sought to investigate participants' perceptions, emotions, challenges, and adaptive strategies in navigating the social phenomenon under examination. The selection of phenomenology as the research typology was deliberate and justified by the study's overarching objective to uncover and interpret the essence of shared human experiences within a specific demographic and situational context. This design provided the researchers with a powerful lens through which to engage deeply with participants' perspectives, facilitating rich, contextually nuanced insights into their thought processes and lived realities. Data collection was executed through semi-structured interviews, which enabled a balance between guiding the conversation and allowing for emergent themes. This flexible interview format also empowered participants to articulate their views freely while ensuring the core areas of inquiry were systematically explored.

A total of twelve informants were recruited for this study through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. These sampling strategies were implemented sequentially to ensure both targeted representation and access to participants who met specific inclusion criteria. The purposive sampling phase involved the selection of participants using data retrieved from the university's student information system, accessed with formal institutional approval prior to the data collection phase. Participants in this study were selected based on specific inclusion criteria to maintain the focus and relevance of the research. They were: (1) Malaysian citizens aged between 25 and 40 years; (2) residing in urban areas within Kuala Lumpur; (3) currently pursuing a bachelor's degree at a higher education institution; and (4) from households with a monthly income level of RM 4,000.00 or below. In Table 1, the study's demographic profile is shown:

Following the purposive phase, snowball sampling was employed to identify additional participants who fit the study's strict inclusion parameters. Existing participants were invited to refer peers or acquaintances who met the specified criteria. This approach enhanced the efficiency of participant recruitment and addressed the challenge of identifying suitable individuals within a constrained demographic niche, thus ensuring the selection of high-quality, information-rich cases. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided

Table 1
Demographic

Informant	Age (year)	Gender	Monthly income (RM)
A	27	Male	2,700.00
B	26	Male	1,500.00
C	27	Female	900.00
D	31	Male	2,700.00
E	26	Female	No income
F	27	Female	No income
G	37	Male	3,000.00
H	29	Male	3,000.00
I	39	Female	3,800.00
J	29	Male	3,500.00
K	28	Female	3,000.00
L	28	Male	2,700.00

by a set of open-ended questions developed through an extensive review of relevant literature. These questions were further subjected to expert validation by academic professionals specialising in the field, to ensure content relevance and construct validity. The interview protocol explored three main domains: career advancement, intrinsic motivation, and family support. Each interview was conducted individually and lasted approximately two to two and a half hours, allowing sufficient time for detailed exploration.

In addition, participant recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached, with no new codes or themes emerging from subsequent interviews. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and later transcribed verbatim within 48 hours of completion to preserve the integrity and

accuracy of the data. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the transcribed texts were shared with the respective participants for member checking, a process through which participants could confirm, clarify, or amend their statements to ensure authentic representation.

Following transcription and participant validation, the data underwent a systematic thematic analysis. This analytic approach involved coding the data, which is known as a multi-phase coding process: open, axial, and selective coding to identify patterns, categories, and overarching themes that emerged from participants' narratives. The analysis was iterative and interpretative, consistent with phenomenological research principles, allowing the researchers to distil meaning structures and generate grounded insights into the social phenomenon under investigation.

Analysis

Theme 1: Career Advancement

The study explores career motivation as a significant factor driving individuals to pursue higher education. It highlights how investing in education for career development is viewed as securing prospects. Notably, the research emphasises the correlation between educational attainment and improved social status within careers. Findings reveal that informants prioritise career fields that offer job security, leading them to seek higher education for better qualifications. This is supported by Barroso-Hurtado and Chan (2019) and Kamrozzaman et al. (2019), who underscore the role of education in enhancing career prospects.

In 2014, there was a turning point for me. I told my mother I wanted to quit and find a job. However, even if I wanted to work with just a diploma, the scope of work was very limited because it was in the religious field. So, the main factor was to obtain a good job. That was the main factor that drove me to continue studying. (Informant F)

This narrative reflects a decision-making process shaped by structural limitations in the job market. Informant F demonstrates how career limitations in specific sectors (such as religious services) motivated a return to education, where the goal was not abstract improvement but concrete upward mobility.

At that time, I was working in the accounting department. So, to obtain

the ACCA certificate, a basic degree is required. That is why I pursued a degree. For the enhancement of my career status. (Informant D)

Informant D's quote reveals how institutional requirements (e.g., ACCA prerequisites) create a pathway that necessitates educational advancement, suggesting a systemic push towards lifelong learning for career continuity.

In addition, this study highlights that salary increment is a contributing factor driving informants to pursue higher education. The rising cost of living compels people to recognise the enhanced benefits that come with higher education levels. This aspect also receives attention from several researchers who explain that salary increment is a primary motivator for individuals already in the workforce to continue their education (Nordlund et al., 2013; Blossfeld et al., 2014; Boeren & Holford, 2016; Midtsundstad, 2019). This also provides a solution to addressing the escalating cost-of-living issue. Therefore, salary increment and promotion emerged as intertwined motivations:

It is also because of the salary factor. Since promotions are time-based, I need ten years of work experience to reach grade 32. Earning around RM4k-RM5k per month is okay to support a better life. However, it's not like I am studying just for the money. One of the factors that makes me want to continue studying is the salary. (Informant A)

Secondly, it's about the salary. Typically, there's a considerable gap between diploma and degree holders' salaries, possibly hundreds. However, at the time, the organisation didn't value diplomas much, especially in terms of pay—it was low. Higher pay would have been preferable, especially considering the cost of living in the city. (Informant B)

These insights showcase how the perceived economic returns of a degree, such as greater job security, salary, and promotion, act as compelling extrinsic motivators.

The researcher found that promotion is one element contributing to the need for informants to pursue higher education. This aligns with the discussion on salary increments previously mentioned. Therefore, informants must choose to further their education to ensure their chances of being promoted to the next level are more accessible with the academic qualifications required in their job scopes. The study also explains that most of the working population will choose opportunities to continue their education as a platform to build their careers and elevate their status to a better level (Blossfeld et al., 2014; Midtsundstad & Nielsen, 2019; Talib et al., 2024).

I'm fine spending money on commuting for studies now because it'll pay off with a promotion later. Our organisation lacks U41 positions despite many having degrees. Completing this programme could fast-track me to U41,

with a higher salary and rank quickly. There's a position for a psychology and counselling officer in our department, so my degree could place me there to work with patients. Whenever there's a vacancy, they'll call to fill it. (Informant A)

Informant A conceptualises his educational pursuit as a long-term investment with clear institutional outcomes, tying motivation to real-world benefits such as access to specific job grades and positions.

Oh, for sure. When there's demand from the organisation to tackle work challenges, it's a plus point for me. Whether it's applying for a higher position or annual increments, it adds value. Otherwise, there's no reason for promotion if there's no effort to advance. So, at least there, there's added value. (Informant I)

Theme 2: Self-motivation

In this study, the element of self-motivation (Elekwa, 2021) within each informant greatly contributes to their strong drive toward education. This makes the informants clear about their goals and purposes for pursuing further education at higher levels. The study found that this element of self-need encompasses several values that give meaning to each informant in instilling motivation to pursue higher education. According to Maslow's Theory (1943), self-need is a level that individuals strive to achieve to realise their potential (McLeod, 2018).

Therefore, these self-needs translate into the desires an individual aims to achieve to ensure their aspirations and dreams become a reality.

For informant F, her desire to achieve her aspirations as a public speaker in the mental health field is profound. This makes her always enthusiastic and highly motivated in the studies she pursues.

I aspire to be a public motivational speaker, and my passion for writing, especially poetry, aligns well with my counselling journey. Discovering my illness ignited a desire to understand it better, driving my motivation to continue studying. I want to delve deeper into the subject, feeling that my past struggles shouldn't go to waste. (Informant F)

Informant F views education not just as a tool for employment but as part of a larger identity transformation. Her motivation stems from turning personal adversity into purpose, which resonates with Maslow's concept of self-actualisation.

In addition, referring to the element of self-belief, this study found that several informants exhibited a profound belief in their ability to pursue education even at a later age. The psychological strength within them makes them more transparent about their personal goals to achieve success through educational attainment (Solberg et al., 2012).

First, it's because of myself. I'm a former MRSM student. When I think

back, having only a diploma made my self-esteem very low. So, I had to do something. Then, I was determined to continue studying because I wanted to be as successful as my other friends. (Informant D)

Informant D connects his educational motivation to personal esteem and a desire to match peer success. The quote illustrates how intrinsic motivation can arise from internalised comparisons and a restored self-image.

Seriously. We need to recognise our strengths. For me, life is not just about what we achieve. It's about falling and how strong you are to get up every time you fall. In other words, it's about knowing ourselves. If you want to hold onto something that isn't yours, it will hurt. Honestly, there's worry, but I've never felt like I won't finish learning. Because I'm determined to finish this degree. (Informant E)

Here, education is framed as a personal journey of resilience and perseverance. Informant E's statement exemplifies a growth mindset and the deep psychological strength required for late bloomers to persist.

Theme 3: Family Support

The family institution plays a crucial role in providing its members with physical and spiritual support. Additionally, it serves as the most profound connection in everyone's life, fostering feelings of love and mutual dependence among its members. This is

also supported by several previous studies, stating that family support is highly essential and necessary for individuals to provide confidence and support as motivators for them to continue their studies until successful completion (Boeren & Holford, 2016; Hamzah et al., 2022; Mello & Braga, 2018).

In this study, on average, informants consider parental support as their primary motivation to pursue higher education. This support makes them more enthusiastic and motivated, even when facing challenges. This is supported by research emphasising parental prioritisation of their children's educational success (Fischer et al., 2017; Kilpatrick et al., 2020).

They said it's fine. Once you start, make sure you finish. Don't quit halfway. So, I'm okay. They encourage me to continue studying. My dad has a master's and always pushes me to get a degree. My parents are overseas graduates, strong motivators for me to aim higher in education. (Informant D)

If I feel like giving up, my mom pushes me to finish my studies. She always encourages and supports me, along with my dad. (Informant A)

These narratives reveal that emotional reinforcement from parents functions as a critical support mechanism. It reinforces motivation during periods of doubt and acts as a psychological buffer against burnout or dropout.

My family says, 'You can do it, just keep going. Finish it first, whether you like it or not, you must finish that journey. (Informant J)

My parents provide moral support for me to continue studying. (Informant K)

The shared sentiment reflects how familial validation and encouragement serve as persistent motivators. This aligns with collectivist values in Malaysian culture, where family often plays a central role in individual goal setting.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that sibling relationships are not merely blood ties but also have an impact on an individual's life within the family (Burke et al., 2017). Similarly, as reported in a study conducted by Hamzah et al. (2022), one of the elements contributing to success among youth in pursuing education is their family members. The researcher clearly observes this through study findings, where sibling relationships also influence motivational drive and enthusiasm among informants to succeed in education.

According to informant A, the academic success achieved by both his older and younger siblings motivates him to pursue higher education. They serve as close role models for him in achieving success in life. He said:

My sister has a degree in Electrical Engineering and is now pursuing a master's. My younger sibling is also in the final semester of their degree. So, I am the only one who has just

a diploma. I am the only male with only a diploma. So, I feel challenged. Therefore, I decided to keep going until I succeed like my sister and brother. (Informant A)

Informant A's motivation is rooted in sibling comparison and a desire for parity. This reveals how educational ambition is often cultivated within family environments that set collective benchmarks for success.

In addition, this sentiment is echoed by informants C and D, where the achievements of their siblings serve as motivation for them to pursue higher education:

Alhamdulillah, all of us have quite impressive academic qualifications. Some have completed their degrees, while others are still pursuing them. There are five siblings, and I am the second child. (Informant C)

Another reason is when I look at my siblings, my sister has a degree. So, it's not enjoyable if I am the only one without a degree. (Informant D)

These reflections highlight how educational achievement can be a source of familial pride and belonging, motivating individuals to align themselves with familial expectations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic and socio-economic factors emerged as critical influences on participants' motivation to pursue higher education. Their economic positioning

intensified the perceived value of education as a strategic means of social and economic mobility. Financial constraints, rather than discouraging participation, often reinforced the urgency of acquiring qualifications to secure stable employment and upward mobility. Gender also played a notable role in shaping motivational drivers. Male participants frequently cited a sense of familial responsibility as a motivating force, whereas female participants expressed motivations grounded in personal growth and emotional resilience. Age differences further influenced learning goals: younger participants were typically focused on future career development, while older learners, often referred to as "late bloomers", sought to regain educational momentum or achieve parity with peers and siblings.

Career motivation is one of the factors arising from the work environment faced by informants. Those already employed are driven to pursue further education due to various career aspects such as field of work, salary increments, promotions, and understanding and maturity in job matters. The field of work is driven by the informants' desire to enhance their career status while assuring a more secure job. In addition, improvement in socio-economic status motivates individuals to continue their education. With the promise of salary increments offered by employers, it is expected that this group chooses to pursue education. It ensures better career status and higher salary returns. This aligns with the promotion aspect employers offer when having an education level equivalent to the

position offered. It indirectly guarantees a better career and future.

On the other hand, this study also acknowledges the importance of setting clear goals, which helps them stay motivated in their studies, overcome obstacles to success, and contribute positively to society through their achievements. The desire for self-advancement inspires each participant to succeed in life. They believe that failure is temporary as long as they strive for improvement toward success. This aspiration is also driven by the desire to recognise their potential and never give up. Moreover, self-confidence plays a significant role in motivating participants to succeed, supported by psychological strength, observing and emulating peers' success, and feeling inspired by their spouse's achievements. All these elements significantly motivate the participants to strive for more tremendous success.

Furthermore, parental support is the closest and most significant factor influencing late bloomers' motivation to pursue higher education. This is because parental attempts to counsel and offer their kids consistent support to achieve in school have a significant impact. Furthermore, communicating with parents about problems helps them stay motivated to finish their education since it gives them confidence-boosting advice that encourages them to work hard in their studies. Moreover, parents who help with home concerns and are generally understanding also considerably lessen the burden on these late bloomers, enabling them to concentrate more on their education.

Interestingly, several unexpected insights surfaced from the participants' stories. While most informants shared that their motivation to pursue higher education stemmed from practical needs such as career advancement, job security, or salary improvement, a few offered deeply personal perspectives that went beyond professional goals. Informant F spoke about using education as a path to recover from mental health struggles and to fulfil a long-held passion for public speaking. These accounts remind us that learning is not always about climbing the career ladder; sometimes, it's about healing, rediscovering oneself, and embracing personal growth.

There were also moments where participants' experiences of family support revealed emotional complexity. Although many described their families as a steady source of encouragement, others, like Informant C, felt a quiet pressure to live up to the achievements of their siblings. In these cases, support was tinged with a sense of obligation, showing that what motivates us can sometimes be a mix of love, expectation, and comparison. It highlights how family encouragement can be both empowering and emotionally demanding at the same time.

Family, Career, and Self in the Educational Pathways of Adult Learners

While the three primary motivational themes were generally consistent across participants, some nuanced contradictions and unexpected insights emerged. For instance, although family support was

predominantly positive, a few participants shared the emotional pressure from high family expectations. This suggests that while support systems bolster motivation, they can simultaneously introduce stress, particularly when participants balance work, education, and personal life. Moreover, although career advancement was frequently cited as the initial motivator for returning to education, it did not always sustain motivation over time. Participants noted that their goals evolved throughout their academic journey in several cases. As one informant described, while salary increments were initially appealing, the intrinsic joy of learning and fulfilment became more central as they progressed. This shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation was unanticipated and reflects the dynamic nature of adult learners' motivations.

A significant insight is the interconnectedness of the three themes. Career aspirations often acted as the entry point into education, while intrinsic motivation and family support played critical roles in maintaining momentum. For example, participants who started their degree to meet career goals frequently drew on family encouragement during challenging moments and experienced increased intrinsic satisfaction. In this way, the three themes operated less as isolated factors and more as interdependent elements in a holistic motivational system. Their synergy contributed to sustained participation in higher education among late bloomers.

Participants' narratives reflect a rich interplay between external career-driven

motivations, internal psychological resilience, and familial encouragement. The manifestation of these themes in lived experiences underscores the complex, layered nature of motivation among late bloomers in Malaysia. By presenting not only what participants said but also how these motivations shaped their educational journeys, this study provides a more credible and nuanced understanding.

Theoretical Contributions

Reinforcing and Recontextualising Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT posits that human motivation is shaped by fulfilling three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This study affirms the applicability of SDT among adult learners, showing that although many participants initially pursued higher education due to extrinsic motivations such as promotions or salary increments, as highlighted by Informants A, B, and D, their motivation evolved into more intrinsic forms as they progressed through their studies. Participants described a growing sense of self-worth, personal success, and fulfilment, aligning with the developmental trajectory posited by SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Solberg et al., 2012).

I want to be a motivational speaker... I do not want my life journey to go to waste. (Informant F)

I have fallen before, but now I know my potential... I must prove that I can succeed. (Informant E)

Notably, the element of relatedness, often considered a secondary motivator in SDT, emerged in this study as a primary and enduring force. Several participants cited familial expectations, sibling achievements, and parental support as central to their educational persistence:

I am the only male in the family with just a diploma... All my siblings have degrees. (Informant A)

My parents always remind me to finish my studies. They constantly support me. (Informant D)

In the collectivist Malaysian context, relatedness operates as emotional support and normative pressure, forming an internalised social obligation. This expands the understanding of SDT by demonstrating that in collectivist cultures, relatedness may function as a core motivational axis, rather than a peripheral one (Cockburn et al., 2022).

International Comparison of Late Bloomer Motivation

This study's findings are compared with those of similar research conducted internationally to provide a broader perspective. In the United States, Levin and Levin (1991) found that late bloomers often return to education driven by personal transformation, resilience, and self-directed growth characteristics echoed in the Malaysian context.

I almost quit school before... but now I know why I must continue for my future and my family. (Informant C)

I am not studying just for money. I want to prove that I'm capable too. (Informant E)

However, unlike Western studies, where motivations tend to be individualistic, Malaysian participants strongly relied on familial support systems, underscoring the influence of collectivist cultural values. In contrast, European research (Bélanger, 2015) often frames lifelong learning through economic reintegration policies, emphasising workforce productivity over psychosocial development. In Japan, structural challenges such as credentialism and job market rigidity have been identified as significant motivators (Billett et al., 2022), which parallels the Malaysian late bloomers' emphasis on educational qualifications as gateways to promotion. These comparisons highlight universal and context-specific dimensions of adult motivation, suggesting that policy frameworks must be sensitive to national and cultural differences when addressing the needs of late bloomers.

Practical Contribution

This study extends existing research on adult learning motivation by examining how motivational themes, namely career advancement, intrinsic motivation, and family support, manifest within the distinct socio-cultural and economic context of urban low-income late bloomers in Malaysia.

In addition, these findings highlight the centrality of family expectations and evolving motivations, where extrinsic career goals often shift toward intrinsic self-fulfilment. These insights contribute to a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of adult learner motivation, calling for policies that reflect the lived realities of late bloomers in developing nations.

Policy Recommendations for Supporting the Educational Development of Late Bloomers

Drawing on this study's findings, this section outlines four key policy recommendations targeting multiple stakeholders: individual learners, families, universities, and government policymakers. These integrated strategies aim to address motivational challenges and foster equitable participation in lifelong learning among urban low-income late bloomers.

An important contextual factor in shaping these recommendations is Malaysia's national commitment to lifelong learning. Notably, the Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011–2020) emphasised inclusive access through flexible learning pathways, modular programmes, online education, and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). These frameworks aim to widen participation and theoretically support late bloomers. However, this study's findings reveal that implementation gaps persist. Despite the policy architecture in place, many late bloomers from low-income

urban areas continue to face financial barriers, limited psychosocial support, and inflexible work-study arrangements. The current policy focus does not fully address the emotional, structural, and cultural challenges unique to adults returning to higher education later in life. Therefore, a more targeted and inclusive policy approach is needed, one that bridges these gaps and aligns national objectives with the lived experiences of late bloomers.

Individual-level Interventions

At the individual level, targeted interventions are essential to support late bloomers in their educational and professional development journeys. A primary focus should be on building self-confidence and enhancing self-efficacy, which can be achieved through structured mentoring systems and goal-setting initiatives embedded within lifelong learning frameworks. These interventions help mitigate the fear of failure and foster a growth-oriented mindset. Additionally, policies must promote reflective learning practices and provide robust career guidance services. Such measures enable individuals to explore their potential more effectively by identifying their unique strengths, clarifying career aspirations, and designing personalised learning pathways that align with long-term goals.

Family Engagement Policies

Family engagement plays a pivotal role in sustaining the motivation and perseverance of adult learners, particularly those who return to education later in life.

To harness this potential, national family education initiatives should incorporate dedicated modules that emphasise emotional support, shared responsibility in educational pursuits, and the promotion of mental wellness within the household context. Such efforts help create a nurturing and stable learning environment. Furthermore, policy measures should actively encourage parental and spousal involvement through targeted awareness campaigns and university-led family engagement programmes. These strategies not only strengthen the learner's support network but also foster a culture of collective educational commitment within families.

Institutional Support from Higher Education Providers

Higher education institutions must adopt inclusive and adaptive designs to effectively support part-time, distance, and non-traditional learners who are late bloomers navigating complex life circumstances. A critical step in this direction is expanding flexible academic advising systems, integrating blended learning platforms, and establishing adult-focused learning centres that cater specifically to diverse learner profiles. Moreover, university counselling units should evolve into proactive support systems, with trained professionals capable of identifying at-risk learners early in their academic journey. By providing continuous psychosocial and academic assistance, these units can play a transformative role in enhancing student retention and fostering long-term success for late bloomers.

Government Policy and Systemic Reform

Policymakers must significantly expand financial aid schemes to foster equitable access to lifelong learning, particularly for adult learners from low-income urban communities. This includes the provision of scholarships, living allowances, and targeted subsidies for digital learning resources, which collectively reduce the economic barriers that often hinder educational advancement. In parallel, governments should enact work-study balance policies that recognise the dual responsibilities of working learners. Legislative measures such as educational leave entitlements and employer incentives are essential in promoting a sustainable integration of work, life, and study. Together, these initiatives can empower adult learners to pursue higher education without compromising their economic or personal well-being.

Cross-cultural Applicability and Global Relevance

Although the findings are situated within the Malaysian context, they are relevant to other multicultural and developing country settings. The motivational themes of economic necessity, familial responsibility, and personal redemption identified in this study are consistent with challenges faced by adult learners in many regions across Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and other countries.

These insights support the argument that international adult learning models should be adaptable to local cultural realities,

particularly in societies where education remains strongly interwoven with familial expectations and community norms. As Salleh (2019) and Kassim et al. (2019) suggest, the future of adult learning lies in its ability to integrate global frameworks with local values and needs. Thus, this study contributes to regional policy and practice and provides a culturally grounded perspective that can enrich comparative research and international education development efforts.

These recommendations align with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Implementation of these measures will contribute to a more resilient, adaptable, and inclusive higher education ecosystem in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, belief in oneself is crucial for late bloomers to succeed despite challenges in continuing education. Clear goals help reduce the risk of failure and instil self-confidence. Continuous motivation is essential to stay focused on goals. Late bloomers should explore their potential and maintain a positive mindset to overcome limitations and seize opportunities for self-improvement. Family support is vital in promoting education among late bloomers, instilling positive values, and providing moral support. Support from parents, encompassing communication and social support, is significant for late-bloomer students facing learning challenges.

Studies show that parental and family support fuels late bloomers' success and motivates them to make their parents proud. Therefore, late bloomers should receive moral support from family members to build motivational, solid spirits for success.

However, this study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size and the focus on urban Malaysian late bloomers aged 25 to 40 limit the generalizability of the findings. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which may introduce selection bias and overlook perspectives from rural areas, those not currently enrolled, or individuals facing more severe socio-economic barriers. Additionally, cultural factors such as family expectations and social norms about adult learners in Malaysian society may have shaped both participants' experiences and their willingness to share openly. These limitations suggest caution when applying the findings to other cultural or demographic contexts.

Future research should investigate how lifelong learning affects late bloomers and identify other elements that support their achievement. It is crucial to get deeper into the strategies and interventions to assist them in their educational journey and improve their general development. Research should also concentrate on comprehending the long-term effects and implications of lifelong learning for late bloomers, including their potential for professional success and personal development.

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