



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**LEARNER AUTONOMY AND SOME SELECTED CORRELATES  
AMONG ADULT DISTANCE LEARNERS IN MALAYSIA**

**NG SIEW FOEN**

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA  
2009**



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**By**

**NG SIEW FOEN**

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduates Studies, Universiti Putra  
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fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**LEARNER AUTONOMY AND SOME SELECTED CORRELATES AMONG  
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**July 2009**

**Chairman : Professor Turiman bin Suandi**

**Faculty : Educational Studies**

Studies have indicated that the lack of self-regulated learning skills, or the inability to function autonomously may lead to adults dropping out of courses, failing to enroll in subsequent courses, and overall dissatisfaction with learning in distance courses (Calvin, 2005; Hisham, 2004; Zimmerman, 2001). Confessore, (1992) asserts that success is ultimately dependent upon the individual's personal characteristics that define learner autonomy which lie in the psychological paradigm of individuals.

This study examined to what extent distance learners in Malaysia are autonomous by investigating learner autonomy level among distance learners undertaking learning in the distance learning environments. Adult learners come from different background, skills and experiences and thus, may contribute to the different approaches and attitude towards learning. The adult learners' diversified background in terms of their learning styles, perception towards learning environment, computer technology experiences and English language proficiency may influence their learner autonomy or



intentions to participate actively and productively in a learning process. Thus, this study also examined whether these variables predicted the adult learners' learner autonomy. A stratified structured sampling was used to select 370 adult distance learners of three universities in Malaysia which offered distance learning program. Data was gathered using self-administered questionnaires. Two hundred and forty nine distance learners or 69% of them completed and returned the survey questionnaires in this study.

The results of the descriptive analyses revealed that distance learners in Malaysia showed a relatively low level of learner autonomy in their intention to participate in learning. Using Pearson's correlation analysis, the study found significant correlations of learning styles, perceived learning environment, computer technology experience and English language proficiency to the learner autonomy profile (LAP) scores. Chi-square test of independence revealed that the higher the learner autonomy scores, the more learning styles were being utilized in learning. The distance learners perceived that environmental supports such as personal relevance in the course structure, instructor support and satisfaction enhanced learner autonomy. In similar vein, distance learners also indicated the importance of computer technology experiences and English language proficiency. Both variables showed moderate correlation with distance learners' intentions to participate actively in their learning.

The Multiple Regression analysis revealed that the number of learning styles, perceived learning environment and computer technology experience showed statistically predictive of learner autonomy or distance learners' intention to participate. However, English language proficiency was not included as a significant predictor of learner autonomy. The overall regression model was successful in explaining approximately 39.7% of the adjusted variance in learner autonomy. The model proposed is considered a good model as the results demonstrated that the overall scores of the three predictors show statistically significant in contributing to the variance of the criterion variable.

All the hypotheses in the study were supported. The results of this study provided a number of theoretical and practical implications on the learner autonomy among distance learners in Malaysia. Recommendations were suggested to facilitate higher learner autonomy among distance learners. The need for further research on the learner autonomy was also highlighted.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Kedoktoran

**AUTONOMI PELAJAR DAN KORELASI-KORELASI YANG TERPILIH  
DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR JARAK JAUH DEWASA DI MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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Penyelidikan yang lepas telah menunjukkan bahawa kekurangan kemahiran pembelajaran sendiri atau kegagalan berfungsi secara autonomi boleh menyebabkan pelajar dewasa gagal dalam kursus, gagal mendaftar diri untuk kursus seterusnya dan keseluruhannya tidak puas dengan pembelajaran jarak jauh (Calvin, 2005; Hisham, 2004; Zimmerman, 2001). Confessore (1992) menekankan bahawa kejayaan pembelajaran sangat bergantung kepada ciri-ciri peribadi seseorang individu yang berkaitan dengan autonomi diri yang terletak di paradigma psikologi individu tersebut.

Kajian ini mengkaji sejauh mana pelajar jarak jauh di Malaysia berautonomi melalui pengukuran tahap autonomi pelajar yang sedang mengikuti pembelajaran jarak jauh. Pelajar dewasa datang dari pelbagai latar belakang, kemahiran dan pengalaman dan kesemua ini kemungkinan menyebabkan perbezaan pendekatan dan sikap terhadap pembelajaran. Latarbelakang yang pelbagai seperti stail pembelajaran, persepsi terhadap persekitaran pembelajaran, pengalaman dalam teknologi komputer dan

kemahiran Bahasa Inggeris boleh mempengaruhi autonomi pelajar atau hasrat mereka dalam melibatkan diri secara aktif dan produktif dalam proses pembelajaran. Kajian ini juga mengkaji sejauhmana pembolehubah-pembolehubah yang disebut di atas meramal autonomi pelajar jarak jauh atau hasrat pelajar ini untuk melibatkan diri dalam pembelajaran. Persampelan rawak berstrata digunakan untuk memilih 370 orang pelajar dewasa jarak jauh di tiga universiti di Malaysia yang menawarkan program jarak jauh. Data dikumpul menggunakan soal selidik yang dikendalikan oleh penyelidik sendiri. Dua ratus dan empat puluh sembilan pelajar jarak jauh atau 69% daripada mereka telah melengkapkan dan mengembalikan tinjauan soal selidik dalam kajian ini.

Hasil kajian ini telah menunjukkan autonomi pelajar atau hasrat pelajar jarak jauh Malaysia melibatkan diri di dalam pembelajaran adalah rendah. Analisis korelasi Pearson menunjukkan stail pembelajaran, persepsi terhadap persekitaran pembelajaran, pengalaman teknologi komputer dan kemahiran Bahasa Inggeris mempunyai perhubungan signifikan dengan skor autonomi pelajar. Analisis *Chi-square of Independence* menunjukkan semakin tinggi skor autonomi pelajar, semakin banyak stail pembelajaran digunakan dalam pembelajaran. Selain itu, sokongan persekitaran seperti struktur kursus yang relevan dengan pelajar, sokongan tenaga pengajar dan kepuasan pembelajaran juga meningkatkan hasrat penglibatan pelajar dalam pembelajaran. Dalam pada itu, pengalaman dalam teknologi komputer serta kemahiran dalam Bahasa Inggeris juga penting dan menunjukkan korelasi



sederhana dengan hasrat pelajar melibatkan diri secara aktif dalam pembelajaran.

Analisis regresi pelbagai menunjukkan jumlah stail pembelajaran, persepsi terhadap persekitaran pembelajaran dan pengalaman teknologi komputer didapati sebagai peramal autonomi pelajar atau hasrat pelajar melibatkan diri dalam pembelajaran. Akan tetapi, kemahiran Bahasa Inggeris tidak termasuk sebagai peramal yang signifikansi kepada autonomi pelajar. Secara keseluruhan, model regresi ini berjaya menerangkan 39.7% varians dalam autonomi pelajar. Model yang dicadangkan boleh dikatakan bagus kerana keputusannya memaparkan bahawa skor ketiga-tiga peramal telah menyumbang secara signifikan terhadap varians pembolehubah autonomi pelajar.

Kesemua hipotesis dalam kajian ini telah disokong. Keputusan kajian ini memberi beberapa implikasi teori dan praktikal terhadap autonomi pelajar dalam kalangan pelajar jarak jauh di Malaysia. Beberapa syor telah diberi bagi meningkatkan autonomi dalam kalangan pelajar. Ia juga mengengahkan perlunya penyelidikan lanjut terhadap autonomi pelajar.

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I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 2009 to conduct the final examination of Ng Siew Foen on her Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled “Learner Autonomy and Some Selected Correlates Among Adult Distance Learners in Malaysia” in accordance with University Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and University Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

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**NG SIEW FOEN**

**Date: 26 August 2009**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DELES	Distance Education Learning Environment Survey
GRSLSS	Grasha-Riechmann Student Learning Style Scales
LAP	Learner Autonomy Profile
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
OUM	Open University Malaysia
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
TRA	Theory of Reasoned Action
UiTM	Universiti Teknologi Mara Malaysia
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Study

The uncertainty and continuous changes in global economy has led to the continuous changes of the nature of jobs and work. The key features of an ideal workforce are flexibility, adaptability and multiple skills. This current learning requirement of the workforce has driven home the importance of lifelong learning (Gose, 1997). There is a vital need to develop people's skills and competencies, and their capacity for further learning so that they may deal with change and uncertainty. In accordance with Marcotte (1999), a growing consensus suggests that education and training should not be limited solely to an intensive period prior to entrance into the labour force, but should be undertaken regularly throughout a worker's career. The recurrent education concept and increased competition in the workplace have encouraged and increased the participation of adults in continuing their education.

In local context, the participation of adults in continuing their education has become more prevalent and gained tremendous attention from various quarters. Educationists like Ungku Aziz (1997) contends that academics have for long maintained that adult education will play a major role in



producing a knowledge workforce, with competency in basic skills in literacy, numeracy and operacy in thinking. Mazanah (2001), agrees that it is also imperative that adult learners be trained to become “knowledge workers” to meet the growing needs of the country’s human resource base and it is in this regard that distance education has become the most popular alternative for adult learners who choose to continue their learning.

Learning at a distance is the fastest growing segment of adult education (Derrick, 2003). With advancements in the computer technology and telecommunications industry, an increase in the adult population, a knowledge explosion, and the necessity of lifelong learning for most learners, distance education has arrived and appears more attractive to learners, instructors, and institutions of education, as well as government, businesses, and industries. Wagner (1995) reported that it is increasingly likely that, as distance educational programs continue to proliferate, distance education in particular and distributed educational experience in general will become the norm rather than the exception. She reported, “students will enroll in distance education experiences because that is what will be available, regardless of the learners’ location, their motivation, their learning styles or their personal circumstances” (p.32)

To stay competitive in the current environment and to sustain productivity gains, public universities in Malaysia are providing lifelong learning opportunities for adults, not only while they are students, but also as they continue their education throughout their careers. Programs are offered not

only to more traditional academic students, but also adults already working in the workplace or also known as the non traditional students. This means that higher education can be pursued on a part time basis so that these adults can retain their jobs while furthering their education at the same time.

Adult learners come from diverse background and they bring a wealth of life experiences to their learning situation (Knowles, 1984; Kolb, 1984; Hiemstra, 1994). Dirkx and Lavin (1995) stressed that active forms of learning help connect the content to the learners' own meaning structures. They also stressed that these adult learners are of different background and experiences among others, which may attribute to the different approaches and attitude towards learning, with different learning styles in accordance with their background and also their reason for learning.

Adult distance students are often different from those of traditional students. Knowles (1980), in explaining the advantages of knowing the learner, believes that learner behavior is influenced by a combination of the learner's needs plus the learner's situation and personal characteristics. Similarly, Knox's (1977) developmental-stage orientation of adult life stresses the importance of understanding an individual's contextual situation, that is, he believes their family, work, and community roles; physical condition; personality; and earning interests all affect the adults' ability and willingness to participate in adult education.



Further, Moore (1994) stated that the physical separation in distance learning required distance learners to be more alert of changes, independent, self-motivated and being capable of coping with learning problems on their own. Even though these traits are quite synonymous to adult learners, Schwittman (1982) argued that it might also be a stumbling block to them due to the lack of capability to be self-directed or autonomous in their learning. Autonomous skills are most crucial as distance education provides minimal interactions between students and instructors unlike full time learning in campus which has been characterized by high interaction and dependency on instructors. The lack of learner autonomy on the part of the learners has contributed significantly to attrition and delay in the completion of their studies (Calvin, 2005; Hisham Dzakiria, 2004; Zimmerman, 2001; Daing Zaidah, 1997).

Theories of student attrition has been primarily descriptive and atheoretical (Andres & Carpenter, 1997) until the early 1970s when the emergence of psychological theories began to appear in the literature (Attinasi, 1986; Ethington, 1990; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). It is asserted that behaviours that are self-directed, independent, and autonomous are essential attributes for improving retention and completion rates in learning and these behaviours and attitudes reside in the cognitive and psychological realm of the individual. In distance learning context, retention and completion rates in learning are alarming, hence, these behaviours (self-directed, independent, and autonomous) are even more essential as learners encounter various