# FEMALE LEARNER TENACITY
# IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING SUCCESS:
# Life History of Sharan, Fuziah and Aleena
# as Open Distance Learnersa

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the provision for better access, flexibility, and convenience, Open Distance Learning still remain a challenge to some students. This article presents the life history of 3 female ODL learners in the state of Perlis, Malaysia in their pursuit to complete their ODL programs. Specifically, the study explored the phenomenon of female learners' tenacity in ODL among female adult learners.

The qualitative research focused on questions pertaining to learners' tenacity and perseverance in ODL and investigated the factors supporting or hindering perseverance that have influenced the learners. Longitudinal interviews with the three participants conducted over 72 months (six years) commencing 2005 revealed the complexity of variables affecting the learners' study completion. Findings suggested that multiple responsibilities, insufficient interaction with course tutors, technology, and coursework ranked highest as barriers to female learners' tenacity to ODL success. Strong motivation to complete degrees, engagement in the learning community, and appreciation for the improved accessibility and flexibility of an ODL completion option facilitated the learners' tenacity.

**Keywords:** Open Distance Learning; adult learners; female learners; persistence; perseverance; life history methodology; perseverance; barriers to tenacity

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the provision for better access, flexibility, and convenience, Open Distance Learning (ODL) still remains a challenge to some students. For many adult learners, career, family, and other types of commitment (i.e. community work) often do not allow them to enroll in higher education programs. However, convenient access, and greater flexibility to ODL courses has offered better alternative to higher education providing them with education and training they desired which was not possible with the conventional or traditional university education. ODL promise learners access, flexibility, and convenience. Enrollment of ODL learners have grown grew 10 folds in Malaysia, and more women are pursuing higher education today than before. However, although women tend to outnumber men in ODL, they struggle to succeed in ODL programs (Dzakiria, 2004; Wong, et.al.,2005; Oblinger and Rush, 1997; Ibrahim & Silong, 2002; Omar et.al. 2012) due to multiple commitments in women's lives.

The problem is that although adult female learners enroll in ODL programs in increasing numbers, we may not understand well the factors or variables that contribute to and inhibit their tenacity and persistence. This study was undertaken to investigate the female learners' tenacity in ODL study completion.

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## TENACITY, PERSEVERANCE AND RETENTION RATES IN ODL

Evidence suggests that retention rates in ODL courses in Malaysia are lower than in traditional classes (Dzakiria, 2004, 2008; Palmer, 2005; Saw, et.al., 1999). Many studies have addressed learner retention in ODL (Tresman, 2002; Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner & Ison, 2003; Martinez, P.,1997). There have been many factors or variables that support students' completion rate and success in ODL. One important factor is the level of tenacity.

Tenacity, perseverance or persistence (Tinto, 1993; Tresman, 2002; Schwartz and Peterson, 1993) can be defined persistent in maintaining, adhering to, or seeking something valued or desired as continuous or intermittent program attendance until learners reach their educational goals (i.e., the completion of a course, certificate program, or degree). Generally, it can be assumed that the less integrated students are academically and socially, the more likely they (the students) are to withdraw or drop put from courses and programs.

Based on literature, researchers have also focused on other aspects of students' dropout or non-completion rate such as institutional characteristics, environmental influences, gender differences;  ICT competencies and motivation (Barefoot, 2004; Kemp, 2002; Oblinger and Lai, 1997; Wong et.al.,2005).

While some researchers have focused on pre-entry learner variables such as grade point average and number of ODL courses previously taken (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Morris, Wu, & Finnegan, 2005), others have studied learner needs such as ICT competencies (Wong et.al. 2005; Oblinger and Rush, 1997; Savery, 2002) and the need for interaction and support (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 200; Dzakiria, 2012). Simpson (2003) examined retention strategies. Garland (1993) investigated barriers to retention and added an epistemological dimension such as lack of prior content knowledge or discourse style, and mismatch between learner and course expectations to Cross' (1981) situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers that had the potential to impede adult persistence. Most research has focused on men and women without disaggregating data by gender although some studies have identified the barriers female learners undergo when they enroll in ODL (Burge, 1998; Burke, 2001; Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001). Feelings of isolation, lost, lack of family and institutional support, time limitations, and concerns for cost are among the many hurdles many female ODL learners encounter (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001; Kramarae, 2003). Nevertheless, "few researchers have studied the ways female learners handle the multiple responsibilities of income provider, parent, and student" (Kramarae, 2001, p. 31), and how ODL can further the learners educational goals.

More research is therefore needed to elicit a better understanding on the factors or variables that support or hinder female learner's completion of their pursuit of ODL, and their tenacity and perseverance to succeed. Educators who understand the complexity of adult female learner's balancing of diverse roles can more effectively advise and prepare the learners to be successful in ODL. Similarly, educational institutions that recognize these learners' professional, social, and academic needs are better prepared to create policies and services that address those needs.

## RESEARCH SYNOPSIS

The purpose of this life history study was to gain an in-depth understanding of factors that influence the female learners' tenacity in their ODL undertaking.

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This study focused on female learners' perspectives and experiences of ODL. This study seeks knowledge to generate insights into how, why, when and where ODLs interact with their learning. It presents the female learners' voice and perspectives on factors that contributed to their ODL completion.

## RESEARCH SETTING

This research focused on ODL learning experiences of a small number of learners residing in the state of Perlis, Malaysia who have successfully completed and graduated their ODL programs offered by various ODL institutions in Malaysia.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions were based on substantial literature review on the issue of female learners' tenacity-perseverance and persistence in ODL.  The questions were then refined and grounded from the discourse and discussions with the research respondents. The research questions were subsequently revised to function as interpretative questions. This research addressed the following research questions:

What are the *Pull* and *Push* factors affecting the female learners' tenacity to successfully completing their ODL programs?

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The information needed for this study was individual, detailed and contextual. Finding out about the circumstances under which the female learners' study, the practicalities of studying and getting into their mind frame were important elements of this study. This research was based on the following epistemological attitudes adopted from by Segall (1998):

### Metaphysical
What is the story-exploring how the female learners address causality, intention, existence and truth about open distance learning as they experienced it while attending open distance learning;

### Historical Search for understanding of how learning barriers and challenges began. How or what causes the learning barriers that the female learners face in pursue of worthy educational experience?

### Institutional
What improvements can the respective institution make to support the female learners' educational experience in ODL and enhance their chances of successful completion rate?

## RESEARCH COLLABORATORS

A purposive sample of three female participants was selected as research informants. The three female learners were selected on the basis of voluntary participation and ability to share their ODL experiences and perspectives with much openness. All the respondents were working adults' age between 33 and 47 years old.

They come from various educational and economic background, are presently working in various sectors in Perlis. Following is a brief profile of Sharon, Fuziah and Eleena (the names here are fictitious to protect the actual identity of the research informant as pre agreed in the research contract).

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Interestingly, for all these three female learners, at one point or another thought to withdraw and quit the ODL program was so strong and genuine. It was the maturity, tenacity and motivation to finish what they have started kept them going.

### Sharon

Sharon is half Chinese, and half Indian. She works as senior clerk at local Municipality Department in Kangar Perlis and work full time from Monday to Friday. She is married and blessed with 5 girls whose age range from six to nineteen. Sharon is 47 years of age and has 12 more years of service to complete before she retires. She enrolled into HE because she wanted to become a role model to her children and gain new knowledge. She believes her tenacity in her pursuit of a degree will send positive message on the important of education to all her 5 girls.

### Fuziah

Fuziah has a Malay ethnic background with 38 years of age, and married with four children. She has two boys and two girls. During her years of learning in ODL, she worked as a Telco Executive in DIGI fulltime. Amongst her responsibilities were to educate, promote and market DIGI products and services. Her job sometimes requires a lot of travelling. Fuziah is married to Malaysia army captain who sometimes have to travel extensively as per required by his commanding officers. Fuziah's motivation pursuing her ODL degree is for promotion, or better position at other organizations. At the completion of this research, Fuziah has just reported duty as a manager in MAXIS and is delighted with her accomplishments.

### Eleena

Eleena is a 33 year old teacher teaching science in a secondary school in Kangar, Perlis. Like Sharon and Fuziah, Eleena is also married with three children whose age range from 3 months to 8 years old. She has a daughter and two sons. Eleena is married to a bank executive who normally works from 8:30am to 8:00pm. Life is a routine that normally starts with her normal routine-waking up at 5:30am, preparing breakfast, sending her children to schools, working, fetching her children from school, and nursery, cooking and cleaning, besides being a house wife, and an active community centre secretary.

## RESEARCH SETTING

The research was based on a self-funded research initiative. The research was conducted in the northern part of Malaysia - in the state of Perlis where the respondents reside and work. Interviews were conducted at several locations depending on the respondents' availability. Some of the interviews were conducted at the respondents' work place; others were at the respondents' home, kopi-tiam cafes, and other outlets. Over the years of data collection, various new media were used to capture the collaborators thoughts, comments, insights, stories at particular point of time in their life as female open distance learners.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An instrumental qualitative life history (Stake 1995) approach was employed so as to understand the experience of the female research collaborators as they progressed through their ODL career. The method was chosen as an empirical inquiry that investigated the phenomenon of tenacity within its real-life context of ODL (Yin, 2003). Interview was the primary instrument used in this study. All the female learners involved in this study were interviewed on a one-to-one basis, and this was the basis of the data

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reported in this paper. Most of the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, and English language was only used when necessary and possible.

The interviews were then transcribed, translated and profiled. Besides face to face interviews, the respondents also engaged and probed into more questions through e-mail, SKYPE, Blackberry messages (BBM) and chat interviews which all contributed to a substantial amount of data for the research.

## STUDY DESIGN

The design of the study was premised on an interpretive approach that assumed the research collaborators gave meaning to their tenacity and perseverance in ODL through interactions with the researcher and other learners.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data analysis gave rise to two primary themes for discussion:

- ➢ **Barriers and**
- ➢ **factors facilitating tenacity. Respondents' experiences in their ODL were mapped against the two themes above.**

Overall, facilitating factors outweighed barriers to persistence. Despite obstacles to their academic progress, the female learners interviewed found greater importance in the positive aspects of their ODL experiences.

Respondents valued being engaged in a challenging community that provided the opportunity to learn from classmates and Fellow tutors. They commented positively on their personal growth and appreciated the convenience of the ODL course option to complete their degrees. ODL was frequently stressful and accompanied by various problems and issues (i.e. limited learning time, family, work, technological barriers, delayed response, etc.). More than half of the women felt overwhelmed by the demands of the coursework. A majority remarked on struggling to balance the multiple demands of their families and jobs. All the learners interviewed had full-time job, and all three had children in daycare or school. The learners reported having spouses.

One of the husband, however, were frequently absent (e.g., in the military, engaged as a military), and others did not appear to help much with children or housework due to their work schedule.

## FEMALE LEARNER TENACITY IN ODL

From an analysis of the study's data, patterns or themes emerged that revealed the complexity of factors affecting female learners' tenacity and persistence. Community responsibilities and work and experiencing personal growth were major themes in support of persistence. The convenience of ODL degree-completion option and a variety of motivating factors were also key themes. Finally, taking advantage of support systems provided by the ODL institutions, tutors, family and spouse was a significant theme. The following sections describe the major themes and provide supporting discourse from the female learners:

### Learning Interaction

Similar to other research findings (Anderson, 2003; Dzakiria, 2012), results from this study showed that meaningful interaction with content, fellow tutors, and peers was an important aspect of ODL learning communities. When content was relevant to their professional contexts, all three respondents felt interested and engaged:

> I love it when the course assignment allows you to capture and share your own experience from work. You get to reflect in a way that you understand it, and that is great learning I think...(Sharan)

> Overall, my experiences in ODL have been good. I think the system, the tutors (most of them) understand that we are not young like the undergraduate students.....we are mature students with working experiences...and if such experiences is taking into our learning, it just make our learning better (Eleena)

> The learning is engaging because we are required to share our working experiences in completing the course task and assignments (Fuziah)

Consequently, this research also reports similar findings that show female learners prefer learning by forming or initiating personal connections (Motteram & Forrester; Hayes & Flannery, 2002; Rovai & Baker, 2005; Rovai et.al., 2007). This can be seen in the following discourses:

> Friends and your course classmates are crucial to your learning. The learning forums in LMS help me to interact. Subsequently, some of us become good learning friends and have generated opportunities for us to ask, share and learn together....that is part of a great learning experience.... (Sharan)

> Being who I am with a lot of responsibilities, I needed fellow classmates...group work is fun, joyful...but most important of all it helps me to manage my learning better...(Fuziah)

> It is sometimes ironic...being in ODL programs one would think that all you need is you, the content, and technology , but what I find most important in my successful completion is the role that learning interaction and interactivity have...without these, I don't think I could have learned effectively and complete...(Eleena)

Evidently, the analysis of the above discourse seems to suggest that much of the female learner's sense of satisfaction came from interactions with their classmates and instructors. All three learners felt positive about their asynchronous and synchronous online discussions.

### Personal Growth

The themes of personal challenge and growth are consistent with Mezirow's (2000) concept of transformational learning and play a significant role in the learners' tenacity in

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completing their ODL experiences. The ODL experience initially was new to the female learners and offered unique challenges as shown by Sharan:

> I expected some change, but did not expect to be that apart from the teacher. The tutor's role to just facilitate your learning initially trouble me....they do not give and summarize the content for you anymore like they use to do when I was in school....

Eleena also inserted similar thoughts:

> The 4 f2f meeting is so little of actual face time....I think that was the most difficult aspect to accept initially. So little time to learn and ask from the physical teacher.....I do not like to communicate with people through computers....

Nevertheless, as the learners progress through their study, they found learning how to navigate and use technology effectively. Subsequently, they found their increased academic and technical expertise the most valuable aspect of their experience:

> Within the 6 years, I learned so much....I am much a better person today than before...you won't believe how good I have become with computers, and others. (Sharan)

> I am glad that ODL has taught me to improve my computer and research skills....to some extent my computer knowledge is at par with my children, but my research skills certainly have improved greatly. Fuziah)

Eleena concluded:

> Learning is good...and I am proud of it. In part, I think the support system offered to us has been sufficient, and that help me learn and maneuver my learning accordingly...

Fuziah further inserted her own reflection of her development as a student:

> Over the years I became to be a progressive learner. Only become better from one semester to the next. All this is because I followed directions from the tutors, course content and curriculum, and most important of all able to lead my own learning ...and continuously reflecting on it...

The later comment that Fuziah made above is particularly important because research have shown that learners who continuously reflect their learning progress were more likely to continue and complete their studies (Berge, 2002; Dzakiria, 2004). Sharon, Fuziah and Eleena recognized that their ODL coursework challenged them and helped them develop the learning apparatuses needed to survive ODL. Fuziah remarked:

> All the technology use in ODL, particularly for our learning is for our learning benefit...it provides knowledge ..... I think as a learner, we just have to be quick adapting the new way of learning....feeling ashamed of not knowing basic computer skills initially compared to my children knowledge was dreadful....but it forced me to learn...Alhamdulillah.

In addition to stronger analytical abilities, the research collaborators gained independence, skills, and confidence, all three agreed in general that their tenacity to

ODL completion and requirement is attributed to self-discipline, and management of one's learning.

## Enhanced Flexibility

Sharon, Fuziah and Eleena had a positive experience during their face to face (f2f) interaction. Aleena summarized common feelings:

> *Generally, the f2f was good….great time to learn, meet the tutors and peers real time..with the physical being….I truly enjoyed it. No matter what people say about technology and all,*

> *I still find the physical teacher much more attractive to learn from….you see it all….the voice, eye contact, facial expressions, life jokes….and sincerity…*

Despite a preference for a traditional class experience, all three respondents appreciated the convenience of ODL that met the scheduling needs of their busy lives:

> *Of course time have changed….and consider myself lucky that the world has ODL to offer people like me another opportunity to higher education…most notable, I like the flexibility and accessibility of working on my ODL courses around my busy schedule and routines- this I treasured the most . . .Two thumbs up…  ODL (Sharon)*

> *A lot of times I worked in early mornings, and at night time….best thing is learning could be anytime, anywhere…. (Fuziah)*

## Learning Support System

According to various researches (Anderson, 2003; Kemp, 2002; Richardson & King, 1998; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai & Baker, 2005; Dzakiria, 2004; Dzakiria, 2012), fostering social relationships with peers and instructors provides a key support system for ODL learners. Sharon ranked high in importance the relations they built with ODL classmates:

You need your friends, and peers to learn together…have a sense of togetherness
Fuziah found communicating with classmates informative and motivating:

> *Learning in ODL sometimes is like my yoga class. Doing myself I might procrastinate or just don't do it, but when you have a Yoga buddy that reminds you of a Yoga class that we have to go together….it just kept you going….I am in great shape because of my Yoga friends…Being successful in ODL for that matter partly, beside my effort is also attributed a lot by my course mates….we help and remind each other.*

Because of a family crisis, Eleena considered abandoning her studies. She stopped out and did not plan on re-enrolling. With a classmate's encouragement, however, she continued her courses the following term:

> *Life is never perfect…I almost dropout due to personal problems I had…but having close, very close female friend that help you to learn, and fast to notice the changes in me…have prompted her to*

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> *support, check on my work, calling me and fetching me for*
> *discussions, and really being there....if not for her I would have*
> *withdrawn from the ODL program 3 years ago...*

Similar to the importance of classmates' support, tutors' availability through email, telephone, or online chat, the timeliness of their replies, as well as their words of encouragement were viewed as critical to respondents' academic success. Sharon found that tutor reminders and advise made abandoning her ODL studies not an option:

It was the constant email...pings in BBM and reminders from my course tutors that help me to continue, and continue...
Sharaon, Fuziah and Eleena held their tutors in high regard. Aleena posited:

> *My tutors were very responsive... She did get back to us fast....in a*
> *timely fashion, and she was just simply a great teacher with many*
> *hats- motivator, facilitator, cheerleader, clown, friend, counselor....*
> *She was there to help us if we needed it, so that was a very inviting*
> *and satisfactory experience*

Fuziah commented:

> *I think the tutors were well trained....they understand that we are*
> *all adult learners, and cannot be treated as similar to the younger*
> *learners on campus doing their degree full time...*

## KEY BARRIERS

Balancing multiple responsibilities was a significant theme that emerged as a potential barrier to female learners' tenacity and perseverance in ODL. A second theme was disappointment in tutors' response time to learners. Interestingly all three learners preferred a traditional classroom setting, having a face-to-face preference was not as important a barrier as the emotional hurdles of feeling anxious, frustrated, and overwhelmed. In addition to that, the female learners also mentioned technology problems. However, similar to all the barriers to persistence the female learners faced, Internet access, email, or software problems did not pose overwhelming problems for them.

### Balancing Responsibilities
There is a consensus among the research collaborators confirming the learners' utmost struggles in ODL completion was attributed by to managing their responsibilities as parents and professionals or work related issues. Adult female learners often felt burdened by taking care of children and other family members at the same time as working and continuing their education:

> *Like many of my female friends who are studying here, I am also a*
> *working mother . . . studying and taking course is a sacrifice, of*
> *course, because, you know, some days you may not be able to do it,*
> *having other chores to do, and more...*

Eleena was overwhelmed by the demands of her young children and her work as a secondary school teacher teaching science subject:

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> *Sometimes I questioned whether my timing to return to higher education was the right time...having 3 children, with the eldest is 8 and youngest is 3 years old and a six year old is tough....children, family, and my job each consumed a lot of my time and energy.....if I was not determined, I would have failed big time.....nobody knows except my hubby that I constantly cry just to cope.....tough, my husband job demands him to be at the bank almost 12 hours each day...that only means that I have to take care matters pertaining to our children, their activities and all..*

However, things started to change for better when Eleena's husband was able to join one of the local universities in the northern state of Malaysia. With his new job specification as a tutor, Eleena husband was able to help Eleena with children and other demanding activities. Eleena further commented:

> *When studying or pursuing a degree, you need all kinds of support. The closest to you is your spouse...and when my husband quit his job at the bank and became a tutor, it was a great change....of a sudden I had much more time to study, read and be more focus.....my heart seems to be beating at a normal rate if you know what I mean....and so that pushes me to work harder to complete my study......I love my husband and children*

With her husband taking over some childcare duties, she was able to complete her degree. Nevertheless, she thought that finishing her degree might have been easier had her children been older.

It was found that Sharon and Fuziah also struggled with family obligations and increasing professional responsibilities. They had administrative roles in addition to being a senor clerk and executives. In summary, all three learners had lots of responsibilities and daily routines that they have to undertake almost each day on top of the cores and challenges they have to perform and endure as ODL students. In most cases, they all reported that their tenacity is also attributed to wanting a better life for themselves, children and family. That in part kept them going.

### Frustration with Course Tutors

According to research, ODL learners rank tutor presence as significantly important (Dzakiria, 2003, 2004; Ibrahim & Silong, 2002; Keller, 1987; Walker, 2002). When faculty interaction is infrequent, the rate of learner satisfaction is low (Herbert, 2006). All respondents found that tutors' limited interaction hindered their ability to understand course expectations, and sometimes frustrating:

> *Interaction is core to our success...and if you have a tutor that delays or never reply your emails...it's frustrating " (Fuziah)*

In another remark, Sharon suggested that insufficient feedback or responds on assignments weakened learners' potential to learn:

> *I think as students feedback is paramount...how do you know whether you have performed or did something wrong....feedback equals learning...*

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Though all three learners interviewed had overall positive experiences with their ODL course tutors, they felt some instructors had low expectations:

> *Generally the tutors are great, but not perfect...quite often you have one or two that just do not have the best qualities in them...not caring, not sincere and hopeless as a tutor...* **(Fuziah)**

> *There are tutors who just don't care about you....they come, teach and go...what can you do?* **(Eleena)**

In summary, in any ODL institutions, there are many good, effective tutors. But, there are also those that need continue training to enhance their teaching and facilitating skills in ODL. Tutors play an important role to students' learning, and must continue to improve the role they play. This study elicited that there are tutors who are disengaged, and caused frustrations among learners. Such negative experiences must be minimized.

Consistent with other research (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001; Kramarae, 2001), all three learners found traditional classroom setting preferable to their ODL context because in-class learning allowed for more social interaction and almost immediate feedback.
A surprising finding of this study was that a strong face-to-face preference appeared negligible when compared to other barriers. Participants did not think their preference was a significant obstacle. Feelings of frustration, anxiety, or disappointment were perceived as greater impediments to their education.

### Emotional Impediments
Pursuing ODL was a novel experience to all three learners, but one that comes with many emotional anecdotes. Sharon, Fuziah and Eleena all have reported of having emotion swings in their pursuit of study completion. There have been many great moments and equally so they have been moments that just frustrate them as ODL students. Quite often, being female adult learners naturally they were concerned about being able to manage the demands of their ODL coursework and felt overwhelmed by the number of assignments, tests, and all the other responsibilities in their lives and communities. Sharon for example inserted the following in the conversation:

> *There have been many occasion that I just do not know where to start and what to do first....I needed to be calm, think, reflect....but what was most important is I needed to be good in managing time and my hectic schedules...*

Between all three learners, similar consensus was felt and they all seemed to agree that scheduling or structuring they lives well around their students' demands is vital to their tenacity and success.

### Technology Is Not a Silver Bullet
Sharon, Fuziah and Eleena also found technology to be a major challenge. Sometimes, the learners could not always gain access to the Internet:

> *Internet access is important....and when I could not get into the internet again and again, there is this feeling of great frustration*

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*because you simply cannot learn or be interactive with your friends or tutors (Fuziah)*

*Some regards Perlis and Kedah as kampong (rural)…in many ways they are wrong, but in terms of technology infrastructure that may be correct….unless you have a strong and working internet or Wi-Fi services in your home, there are not many those modern coffee shops you can go to like in KL or Petaling Jaya or Penang (Eleena)*

**With persistence, all three learners were able to gain access to the Internet. Some technical problems, however, were less well defined and therefore less easy to solve:**

**You just cannot trust technology 100%....they work, they can also fail you….then we will find ourselves in trouble…..familiar? (Sharon) The thing with ODL and technology…and be alone in your learning…sometimes it's getting the message. The right understanding is difficult…the interpretation of facts and knowledge… (Fuziah)**

**Sharon later posited:**

*To start with…I just don't like things with buttons, and keyboards…they frightened me….and I do that….making mistakes ….and that makes learning or even registering for new course I had to do it carefully….,*

**In many ways, higher education has evolved and continues to change. The advancements of technology have dominated higher education and its deliverables. All stakeholders in HE must be willing to adopt change and re-learn the new skills and know-how to function effectively in ODL (Dzakiria & Walker, 2003). The same goes to ODL students as suggested by Eleena:**

**I have seen many of my female friends who drop put because they were scared with the new ways of learning…even hearing all these technical abbreviations like LMS, and others just make them nervous…I think we all have to admit that in order to learn in ODL we cannot wait for people or institution to change or educate us in how to learn…but we must ourselves make effort to learn, re-learn….and to ask. That I think is the way forward…**

**This was also supported by Sharon:**

*I think….but I am not sure if everybody agree, our ODL system is good. It caters for all students….imagine if the institution use all on-line and all-technology….I think some or many of us may like it, or dislike it….but when they have the e-learning component, then they have the f2f, then they also have the hard modules…so we are ok….As long as such flexibility is around, all type of learners…male or female can learn….*

**In many instances, technology is useful and has helped the learners to learn. However, technology as evident in this study could be a possible barrier to learner. It is an**

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enabler to learning, but certainly not a total solution to learning. It requires training, learning and skills.

## CONCLUSION

Findings suggested that variables supporting the female learners' continued enrollment played a greater role than those impeding persistence. The female adult learners generally seemed to take a pragmatic view of the positive and negative factors affecting their ODL. It is possible that the relative brevity of their program shaped their positive perspective and the continuous motivation to complete their ODL pursuit. Often times; the three learners also experience a higher level of appreciation, and of frustration with their ODL experience. Results from this study and the literature indicate that further research is needed to investigate to what extent other factors may support or hinder ODL tenacity of female learners who have full-time jobs, as well as family and community responsibilities. Future research could explore both institutional and demographic variables that may significantly influence adult female learners ODL success in higher education in Malaysia. Additional research could investigate how disparities in professional and economic status affect adult female learner's ability to pursue higher education degree via ODL in Malaysia and other countries for comparative studies.

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## BIODATA and CONTACTADDRESSES of the AURHOR

**Dr. Hisham DZAKIRIA** is presently a Post Doctoral fellow attached with Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, Canada. With a desire to learn and to respond quickly to maximise personal growth to contribute effectively in chosen career path, Dr. Hisham completed his Doctor of Philosophy in Professional Development majoring in Open Distance Learning. He continued to train himself with technological advancement in ODL through on the job experience and training. Obtained a Masters of Arts in Linguistics with a Minor in Communication, two bachelor degrees from Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada majoring in Education and Applied Linguistics. Over the last 10 years, Dr.Hisham has conducted various training job for the government and private sectors in Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. These include on the job training that focuses on e-learning, ODL Support System, Adult learning, Teaching English as a Second Language, English as a Second Language, English for Language Learning, English for Specific Purpose, Communication, ICT in education, CPD courses, HR related programmes which include: Change; Strategic Planning, SWOT analysis, 360 Degree Change; and others. He has also conducted and completed consultancy projects under Asia Bank of Development for various government bodies in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia. He has also conducted consultancy projects with Commonwealth of Learning for UNHCR on evaluating On-line Writing Courses. He has developed knowledge and skills to offer educational techniques, tools and experience on ODL, Open educational Resources, CPD, Profiling distance learners and their learning styles. Hisham has also successfully completed many academic research and consultation projects within given deadlines, and managed to publish his work with the international academic community via successful publications in high ranking international journals i.e. Open University, Cambridge, MJDE,, TOJDE, MOJITechnology, The QROJ etc.

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