

DO I MATTER? DISTANCE LEARNERS' EXPERIENCE OF MATTERING

Nur Maizura Lin*

nurma218@uitm.edu.my

Department of English Language and Linguistics
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

Noor Ahnis Othman

noorahnis@uitm.edu.my

Department of English Language and Linguistics
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

University mattering is a type of societal mattering where learners feel that they matter to other people at their university, the feeling of significance to other people as well as being depended upon. Mattering consists of five distinct constructs, and they include awareness, importance, reliance, ego-extension, and appreciation. The objectives that outlined this pilot study are to investigate distance learners' experience of mattering with their peers and academic advisors at their higher learning institution. Respondents in this study consisted of distance learners of a public university in Malaysia coming from semester two onwards. In this qualitative research study, respondents were interviewed based on Schlossberg, LaSalle and Golec's themes in the Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Postsecondary Education or also known as Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Higher Education. For the purpose of data collection, semi structured interviews were conducted via online and findings in this study showed the differing experiences of mattering coming from both genders. The findings are further discussed in this paper. Implications of this study are also mentioned for future reference.

Keywords: Mattering, distance learners, higher learning institutions

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning began its inception in the Malaysian higher learning institution landscape back in the 1970s. Its introduction has provided many opportunities for adults to either continue or begin their undergraduate or postgraduate education. Year by year the enrollment in distance education increases and many publics as well as private higher learning institutions are offering distance learning as one of their modes of learning.

Distance learning, also known as distance education, uses various technologies and online platforms for the purpose of teaching and learning between learners and their lecturers. Besides that, learners themselves also use these platforms for communication with one another. A global survey conducted by Chegg.org in 2021 discovered that 78 per cent of Malaysian tertiary learners preferred learning via online as opposed to the conventional face-to-face learning if higher learning institutions could reduce their tuition cost. This shows a favorable inclination towards learning via online due to its strengths. Among the many strengths of distance learning include flexibility (Katane, Kristovska, & Katans, 2015; O'Lawrence, 2005; de Oliveira, Penedo, & Pereira, 2018), convenience (Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017) and easy access for the learners (de Oliveira et al., 2018; Siti Sarah & Issham, 2011).

Nevertheless, despite the many advantages of distance learning, it has brought about some challenges for adult learners. One of the disadvantages of distance learning is less interaction with peers as well as the feeling of isolation (Fojtik, 2018; Israel, 2018; O'Lawrence, 2005; Sadeghi, 2019). Besides that, another disadvantage of distance learning for adult learners is that they do not get to interact much with important figures at their faculty (Fojtik, 2018) such as class lecturers, tutors and academic advisors or mentors. Several studies discovered that having advisors do help adult learners while studying (Hayter, 2015; Israel, 2018; Spaid-Ross, 2015). When learners do not interact much with their peers or advisors and only work on their own, this can lead to the feeling of insignificance or not mattering to their peers. Mattering is seen as an important aspect for learners regardless of age at learning institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rosenberg and McCullough established the concept of mattering in 1981 and there are two types of mattering which are societal mattering and individual mattering. University mattering falls under societal mattering and other examples of societal mattering include mattering at the workplace, in a team or in an organization. Individual mattering on the other hand is where a person feels that he or she matters to a peer, parent or spouse. The theory of mattering and marginality was introduced at higher learning institutions by Nancy Schlossberg in 1989 (Sullivan, 2019). There are five dimensions of mattering (refer to Figure 1), and they are awareness or attention, importance, reliance, ego-extension and appreciation. Awareness or attention is where a person feels that he or she is getting the attention needed from other people. Importance on the other hand is where a person could sense that he or she is integral in another person's life or a group of people's lives. Reliance is where one knows that there are others who depend on them. Next, ego-extension is when a person feels that other people (those that they are closely connected to) have similar emotions or reactions based on their current situation. Lastly, the feeling of

appreciated by others completes the five dimensions of mattering. Several studies in the western countries have applied the theory of mattering to understand their learners better (Hayter, 2015; Sullivan, 2019; Ost, 2021) and others. Hayter (2015) in her study investigated on non-traditional students' experience of mattering and marginality at a private learning institution. Sullivan (2019) on the other hand looked into international students experience of mattering at Rowan university while Ost (2021) investigated behind the number of graduate students' attrition cases at a higher learning institution.

Framework of the Study

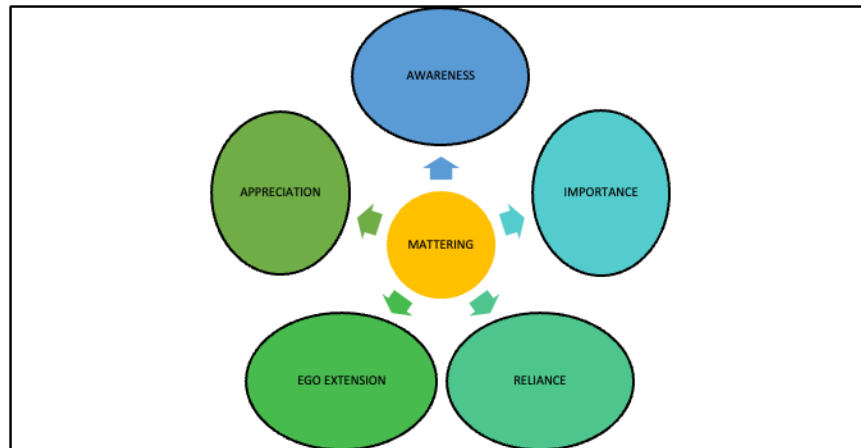


Figure 1: Five Dimensions of Mattering

Mattering to Peers

According to Schlossberg, Lassalle, and Golec (1990), merging mattering into students' learning experience could promote positive learning experience for them. This could accelerate learning which could lead to growth in learning as well as self-development. In the western setting, several studies have investigated mattering with regards to peers at higher learning institutions. Based on a study conducted by Hayter (2015), it was discovered that having a good rapport with peers led to academic success. Not only that, having a good relationship with peers also created lifelong friendships between one another and promoted collaborative learning in the classroom. Spaid-Ross (2015) discovered that when learners engage well with their peers it fosters friendship with others. Despite the number of learners who feel that they matter to their peers, on the contrary there were those who do not feel that they matter to their peers and one of the factors behind this was because of the age gap. In another study by Klug (2008), students felt that they matter to their peers especially when their peers recognize and see them as a point of reference. The feeling of being able to help their peers made them feel appreciated by their peers.

Mattering to Advisors

Academic advisors, counselors and mentors play an integral role at a university. Some of their roles include providing academic advice to learners, listening to any problems that learners are facing, helping with study skills issues and others. A plethora of studies have looked at mattering in the advising setting at higher learning institutions especially in western countries. In a study conducted by Burgos (2021), it was found that more than 50 per cent of the respondents agreed

that they felt a sense of mattering to their counselors or advisors. Burgos conducted a study which involved students coming from economic and disadvantaged backgrounds and each student was assigned an advisor when they enrolled at the university. In another study by Dandridge (2018), where it investigated on African American undergraduate students' perceptions of mattering at their university and it was discovered that at least 75% of the respondents found that the role of advisors gave a positive impact to them, and this showed that the university is committed in ensuring that their students feel important to the university. The respondents found their advisors helpful and knowledgeable. However, in a study conducted by Hart (2017), it received a mixed response. Some of the respondents felt that their advisors took the time and made extra effort to accommodate their time for them. Unfortunately, for some respondents they felt that their advisors gave the wrong advice and a respondent even mentioned that his or her advisor changed several times and another respondent mentioned that having to meet the advisor after office hours was a hassle.

At present the number of studies on mattering at the Malaysian higher learning institutions is still scarce (Francis & Lau, 2020) and there is a need for more studies to be conducted on mattering. Therefore, this exploratory study seeks to investigate on mattering among online adult distance learners in the local higher learning institution landscape based on the following objectives:

1. To investigate online adult learners' experience of mattering with their peers and
2. To investigate online adult learners' experience of mattering with their advisors or mentors

METHODOLOGY

This study applied the qualitative research method where interviews were conducted for the purpose of data collection. The construction of the interview questions in the study used Schlossberg, Lassalle and Golec's (1990) Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Postsecondary Education which is also known as Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Higher Education as a guideline. Semi structured questions were constructed to investigate distance learners' experience of mattering with a focus on their peers and advisors. Interviews were conducted for the purpose of understanding the lived experiences of mattering among the said learners.

In this study, learners coming from semester one were not included as they are still at the familiarization stage with the campus grounds, facilities and services provided by the university. Only learners coming from other than semester one were chosen due to their familiarity with the university's environment, facilities, services as well as having gone through at least a semester or of learning with their lecturers and got to know their course mates as well. Prior to the interview, each respondent was given some background information about the study and a consent form was given once the respondent agreed to be interviewed. All interview questions were prepared in both English and Bahasa Melayu and were sent to experts in the field of translation in both languages mentioned. Bilingual interviews were conducted via online and analyzed based on the two focus of this study which were mattering to peers and advisors. According to Lavrakas (2008), bilingual

interviewing is defined as conducting interviews by interviewers with the ability to speak more than one language. Bilingual interviewing is conducted for the purpose of gaining cooperation from sampled respondents and to gather data from these respondents. Lavrakas (2008) also pointed out that it is common to carry out surveys or interviews in the native speaker’s language especially in countries where the citizens come from diverse backgrounds. Halai (2015) highlighted in her study that in today’s world it is common to find respondents who prefer to use his or her mother tongue when illustrating their viewpoints. Hence, before each interview session begins, each respondent was informed that they could respond using both English and Bahasa Melayu during the interview. All collected data were analysed based on the study’s two research objectives.

FINDINGS

The two research objectives stated below shape the findings and discussions of this study. The following are the two research objectives:

1. To investigate online adult learners’ experience of mattering with their peers and
2. To investigate online adult learners’ experience of mattering with their advisors or mentors

Below are the findings to support research objective 1

Question 1: As distance learners, do you think that having friends is important?

Table 1

Respondent 1 (male)	Respondent 2 (female)	Respondent 3 (male)
Definitely. Good relationship with friends is important.	Very important. Very very really really need friends. Cannot live alone or make decisions alone.	Ooo sure sure it is really really important.

Based on Table 1 above it could be seen that all the three respondents agreed that having friends is important for distance learners. One of the respondents even highlighted that one cannot live and make decisions on their own. The findings from this question are similar to past studies that looked at students’ feelings of mattering with regards to their peers at higher learning institutions.

Question 2: In what way does it help or assist you?

Table 2

Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
It helps with ice breaking process maybe because going into degree with zero friends, knowing no one it’s kinda hard for me to break the ice	I have a group of friends ... very comfortable with. Dari awal lagi ada satu group, dah jadi macam bestfriends (from the beginning there’s already	Let’s say I don’t have time to do this part, (referring to assignment) other coursemate can help to cover that part unutm siapkanla (finish up)

<p>with someone that I haven't seen physically. ...the start of the semester, you kinda clueless ...and then sometimes regarding the online students ... a lot of the university's info sometimes announcements or like important that we have to discover it ourselves, so if we do not have our own peers to remind, we can feel very left out. Most of the time the text is assignment related. Even after studies not sure if we'll keep in touch.</p>	<p>a group and we have become bestfriends). Kitaorang dah ada macam role kitaorang (each of us has a role that we play). Distribute tugas (distribution of tasks), editor for all the tasks and yang pandai teknologi (one that is good with technology).</p>	<p>assignment.</p>
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Referring to Table 2 above, all three respondents provided differing views on how their friends help them. Based on the information shared by respondent 1, it is evident that having friends could help him in a number of ways. For example, to get information and to discuss assignment matters. Not having friends would resort to loneliness and be left out by friends. Respondent 2, on the other hand, has a group of friends that she is very close with. According to her, their relationship is more like best friends as each person has a role to play in the group. As for the third respondent, having friends help him to complete assignments if he was unable to do so.

Table 3

Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
<p>The bond between classmates is different for part timers and we come from different states. ...do not have close bond due to the distance and the interaction is more like acquaintance.</p>	<p>Selesa (comfortable) Senang nak bekerja (easy to work with).</p>	<p>Interaction among us is the best. Semua (all of us) sporting, macam (like) they are really helpful when assignment semua bekerjasama (all assignments we work together), kita nampak effort masing-masing (we see each other's effort). Semua bagi sumbangan (Everyone contributed). (Referring to working on assignments)</p>

Table 3 looks into the three respondents' interactions with their peers. Based on the findings above there have been mixed responses from the three respondents. Based on the question with regards to interactions with friends, we could see that respondent 1 did not have a close interaction

with any of his friends as compared to respondents 2 and 3. Respondent 1 felt that the interaction was more like acquaintances. On the contrary, respondent 1 felt comfortable with her group of friends and it made it easy for her to work with her group of friends. Similarly, respondent 3 felt the same as respondent 2. He used the word ‘best’ to describe his interactions with his friends. As a result, he was able to work well with his friends to complete assignments as everyone contributed to the work and each person put in effort in completing assignments.

Question 4: How do your friends make you feel?

Table 4

Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
It is more for academic. I cannot really say like friends.	We matter with each other. If tak dapat subjek yang sama feel sad (if we do not get the same subject, we will feel sad).	Most of the sports science students are boys, more like brotherhood like that. We just talk tapi bila (but when) lecturer masuk kita baru sembang (enters then we wil discuss) serious sikit (serious matters). We just like to go lepak-lepak kedai maka ataupun pergi tengok bola dekat stadium (we just like to hang out or go to the stadium to watch football). My opinionlah macam orang penting dalam group (In my opinion, I am like an important person in the group). They are concerned about me.

Based on Table 4 above, respondent 1 only mentioned that he did not feel the connection between him and his peers as friends. This is because he felt that the interactions were more academically inclined. Respondent 2 on the other hand, experienced differently than respondent 1. She felt that she mattered to her friends. She and her friends would feel sad if they did not get the same subject. As for respondent 3, he felt the relationship between him and his friends was more like brotherhood. Their topics of discussion range from academic to non-academic. Besides that, they also spent their time both inside and outside of the classroom setting. He even felt like an important member in the group and that his friends were concerned about him.

Below are the findings for research objective 2

Question 1: Have you ever been assigned to an academic advisor or mentor?

Table 5

Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
At our faculty, my faculty we have someone that we can rujuk (refer to). I forgot what it's called. What was the term? But if I have anything to ask, I will rujuk(refer) to him. I am not sure if that qualifies as an academic advisor or not. But I am unsure.	So far tak ada (we don't have).	As I remember as a distance learner I'm never been to assist with the advisor. Never assigned.

Based on Table 5 above, respondent 1 was unsure if there was an academic advisor at the faculty. However, there was always this one person that he refers to whenever he has questions. Although he was unsure of the role of the person at the faculty, he refers to that person when he has questions. Respondents 2 and 3 clearly stated that they have never been assigned to any academic advisor before.

Question 2: In your opinion, as a distance learner, do you think that having an academic advisor or mentor would be helpful?

Table 6

Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
It would be good if I could discuss other matters besides academic. ...depends on the students if they want to discuss and the discussion must be initiated by the students themselves. We do not want to take each other's time. With us part timers if we can have a session with our academic advisors maybe we can get our messages across so that the university can listen to us part time students what is lacking in regards to our studies. It matters a lot to have an academic advisor while studying.	Yes, it would be very very helpful miss because sometimes saya nak tanya (I would like to ask) bukan dalam (not related with) certain certain course or subject. ...mungkin (maybe) saya nak tanya dari bahagian lain (I would like to ask from other departments). If faculty provide sorang (one) untuk (for) each student an advisor mesti (surely) very very helpful for the student. It matters for me if we can have one academic advisor.	As a distance learner because most of the student may live outside the campus like me campus in Shah Alam and some of students is from Terengganu, from Johor, so faculty advisor macam tak sesuai sangat la (like in appropriate) untuk (for) distance learner because anything question, they just ask lecturer. Lagi satu (Another thing) advising ni kita tak tahu skop mengajar tu ... takut tak kena dengan advisor tu (we do not know the teaching scope of the advisor). Most of the distance learner is like sudah matang (mature)

		sudah pandai manage masa masa sendiri (able to manage their own time). Advisor ni macam untuk student full time (is like more for full time students). Distance learner semua dah bekerja (all are working), semua dah banyak (all of them have a lot of) experience handle boss, client any other people tak perlukan advisor (do not need an advisor). They can manage themselves.
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Based on the second question with regards to mattering to academic advisors, respondent 1 stated that having an academic advisor would be good for part timers as academic matters could be forwarded to the university. Besides that, topics other than academic could be discussed with an academic advisor as well, if the student himself or herself mentioned the matter. Respondent 2 is of the same opinion as respondent 1 where she felt having an academic advisor could help with matters other than academic. She strongly believes that if a distance learner is given an academic advisor, it would really matter to them and that it would really be helpful. Conversely, respondent 3 did not see the need for an academic advisor. He is of the opinion that due to the different location of distance learners; he didn't see the accessibility for distance learners and advisors to meet to discuss matters. Another reason is because he believed that an academic advisor may not be able to address academic questions due to different area of expertise. Respondent 3 also highlighted that due to age and working experiences of distance learners' hence, they are seen as mature learners who do not need an academic advisor to discuss matters. This is because as working adults, these learners must have dealt with people coming from different level of management.

DISCUSSIONS

Based on the findings of research objective 1, it could clearly be seen that there have been a mixed set of opinions on mattering with regards to peers among the distance learners. However, all three respondents agreed that having friends is especially important for distance learners as it could assist them in many matters. This similar finding was also mentioned in other past studies conducted by Nur Maizura (2022), Hayter (2015), Spaid-Ross (2015) and Klug (2005). Although respondent 1 had a dissimilar experience with friends compared to respondent 2 and 3 but all three agreed that having friends helped them with their assignments. In addition, respondents 2 and 3 have a closer relationship with their friends where they feel at ease when communicating with one another. Respondent 1 felt the relationship with one another was more like acquaintanceship however, respondents 2 and 3 had a closer bond with one another and felt that they matter to their friends. It could be inferred here that due to the closeness; it helped respondents 2 and 3 to work on assignments with ease.



Figure 1: Mattering to Peers Subscale and Findings of the Study

Referring to the second research objective, respondents 1 and 2 both felt that having academic advisors assigned to distance learners would be beneficial and it mattered for the learners especially when it concerns academic aspects. However, Respondent 3 had a contrasting view as he felt that distance learners are adult learners therefore, they do not need one. The findings mentioned are similar to Hart's (2016) study. Adult learners are described as mature learners who carry different responsibilities (Nur Maizura, 2022) which include work, family responsibilities and personal time (Pappas, 2020). Hence, due to the experience of being able to manage different responsibilities, adult learners are seen as capable of handling matters on their own. Besides that, it was discovered that the faculties did not assign any academic advisor for distance learners as two respondents mentioned that they have never been assigned to one while one respondent was unsure if he has been assigned to one.

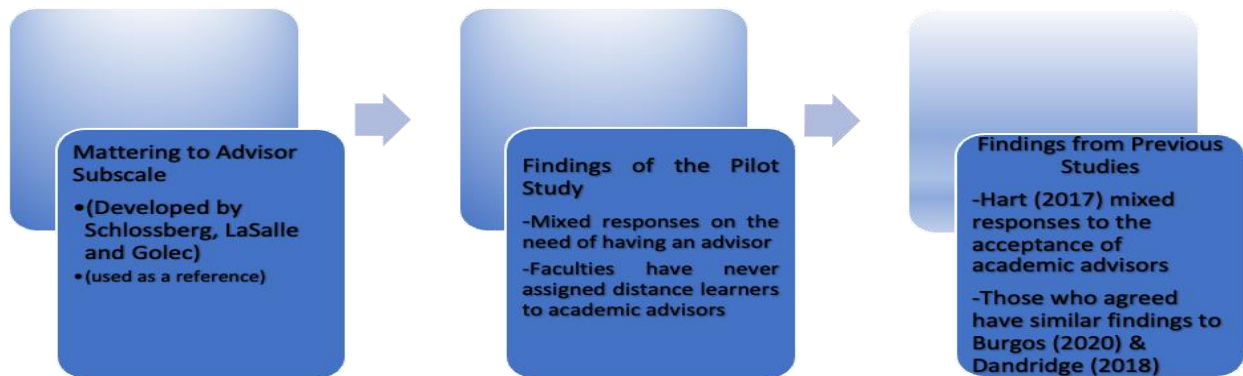


Figure 2: Mattering to Advisors Subscale and Findings of the Study

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As we shift towards a seamless education globally, the education for adult learners in higher learning institutions should resonate similarly too. Less barriers would assist them to complete their degrees and keep them from feeling marginalized. Hence, universities should consider the feedback and suggestions provided by distance learners as ways to improve the learning experience of distance learners so that they feel mattered to the campus community. Firstly, to promote better relationships among distance learners, collaborative group activities or tasks could be encouraged by class lecturers during learning sessions. The time allocation for teaching could be reduced and more allocation be given to group activities or discussions during lessons. Secondly, assigning distance learners to their own academic advisors would be a positive step as these learners could discuss matters that are important to them with their advisors and to provide distance learners the assurance that they are significant and that their well-being is important.

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Authors' Contributions

This study has added literature to the area of Mattering based on Malaysian Educational landscape.

About the Authors

	<p>Nur Maizura bt Lin is an MA holder in TESOL from the University of Western Australia. She is currently teaching at Akademi Pengajian Bahasa UiTM. As an educator she has taught both diploma as well as degree students. She has written a number of journal articles as well as took part in innovation competitions.</p>
	<p>Dr Noor Ahnis Othman has more than 34 years of experience in teaching English as a second & foreign language and to speakers of other languages (TESL, TEFL, TESOL). Her area of interests include cross-cultural & intercultural communication, professional communication and applied linguistics.</p>