THE MILLENNIAL LEARNER: A NEW GENERATION OF ADULT LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Sylvia CHONG
SIM University

Wai Mun LOH
SIM University

Mathangi BABU
SIM University

The key trend predicted to have the most impact on enrolment in higher education is the “changing life cycles as our nation’s population ages”. The fastest growing population in higher education is the Millennial adult student. This is significant as more Millennial learners who have been out of school for some years are turning to higher education institutions to start or complete undergraduate or graduate degrees. Many pursue learning to be competitive in the workforce, fulfil a professional requirement or enrich themselves intellectually.

Since the 1990’s, the Singapore economy is changing from a primarily manufacturing-based economy to one that is information-based. This transformation has had a significant impact on the needs and demands placed on the current and future workforce. This places the Singapore economy in a position of needing to retrain and educate the current and future workforce. The demand for a better-educated workforce will continue to grow. Educating the adult population is seen as a way of constructing a good and prosperous society where there are gains for both the individual and the society. In August 2012, the Singapore government affirmed its commitment to the Continuing Education and Training sector by growing and diversifying the university pathways.

There is a need to better understand and profile this new generation of adult learner who assumes primary responsibility for planning, implementing and evaluating his/her own learning. The profiles serve to remind that higher education in Singapore, as with many other countries, is no longer an 18-to-24-year-old cohort and to understand some of the implications on teaching and learning in higher education.

Keywords: Millennial learner, higher education, adult learning

INTRODUCTION

The profile of today’s higher education student is rapidly changing. A key trend that has a significant impact on enrolment and retention in higher education is the “changing life cycles as our nation’s population ages” (Yankelovich, 2005, p. 8). Higher education students today are multigenerational – Boomer, Gen X or Millennial – they may be single, married or divorced, and they may be full-time employees or may have been out of school for years. The fastest growing population in higher education is the working adult student (Compton, Cox & Laanan, 2006; Finn, 2011). More adults who have left school for some years are turning to higher education institutions to start, continue or complete their undergraduate degrees. With people
expected to live longer, working longer and changing careers, this has led to a demand and increase for skills upgrading through continuing and higher education. Many pursue learning that will make them competitive in the workforce, fulfil a professional requirement or enrich themselves intellectually. Higher education institutions need to address this growing trend to maximise their potential to recruit, enrol and retain the optimal number of students (Hossler, 2011).

Since the 1990’s, the Singapore economy has been going through a conversion from a primarily manufacturing-based economy to one that is knowledge/information-based (Sidhu, Ho & Yeoh, 2014). This places the Singapore economy in a position of needing to retrain and educate the workforce (Gopinathan & Lee, 2011). In August 2012, the Singapore government affirmed its commitment to the Continuing Education and Training (CET) sector by expanding and diversifying the university pathways (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2012). SIM University was identified as Singapore’s 6th university. SIM University caters largely to part-time adult students. As at December 31, 2013, there were 13,369 adult students currently enrolled in UniSIM (SIM, 2014). The University has provided pathways for these students to pursue lifelong learning and higher education while balancing career, family and social responsibilities. To encourage continuing education, the Singapore government made available a range of financial support in terms of bursaries, tuition and government–subsidised loan schemes for students taking up part-time undergraduate SIM University programmes (MOE, 2012).

Adult learners have unique developmental and social characteristics when compared to their traditional counterparts in higher education institutions (Reay, 2002). The adult learner characteristics also contribute to a set of different educational goals and focus. Not only are adult learners’ needs changing, but their learning process is evolving as well. As noted by Merriam and Brockett, there is a need to better understand and know the adult who “opts to assume primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating his/her own learning” (2007, p. 35). The influx of adult learners into higher education in Singapore cannot be ignored, and more inquiries are required. Unfortunately, research on adult learning has been fragmented and inconsistent (Caruth, 2014). The purpose of paper is to find out who are the adult learners in higher education in Singapore as well as to contribute to the research on adult learners in Singapore. Profiling the Singapore adult learner is timely. As the profile unfolds, the need for holistic, well-coordinated approach to understand and support adult learners will be clearer and more targeted. The profiles will also serve to remind that higher education in Singapore, as with many other countries, is no longer an 18-to-24-year-old cohort. Thus, the focus of this paper is twofold.

**TRENDS IN WORKFORCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

Scholarly and policy literature indicate that higher education systems will continue to expand in the next decade (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2010; Finn, 2011; European Commission [EC], 2011). Higher education continues to play a key role in meeting the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of the individual as well as the workforce of the future (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2011). Economic changes with rapid technological advances and globalisation are revolutionising the set of knowledge and skills required for national as well as individual success. This changing economic landscape is putting a premium on a educated workforce who are adaptable, know how to learn and can “manage and assimilate greatly expanded quantities of information” (Task Force on Higher Education...
and Society, 2000, p. 83). Expansions of higher education systems has been viewed as a major policy goal leading to economic growth (EC, 2011).

Since its independence in 1965, Singapore adopted a developmental-state orientation, placing an emphasis on education to meet its socio-economic development needs (Gopinathan & Lee, 2011). The Singapore economy, fuelled by a growth of high-tech industries and economic expansion, developed rapidly at the turn of the century. As a city state, Singapore’s higher education development and policy was affected by both the external as well as internal socio-economic changes. This transformation has had a significant impact on current and future workforce needs and demands (Mok, & Cheung, 2011). As the financial and economic strength of the country grew, so did the demand for an educated and highly skilled workforce. The industrial economy of the early to mid-20th century in Singapore has given way to a knowledge and service economy that demands higher levels of academic and technical knowledge along other skills such as higher-order communication and problem-solving abilities. This knowledge economy with a demand for a better-educated workforce has necessitated the need to expand post-secondary education.

Drivers for the growth in higher education enrolment are fuelled by the conviction that Singapore’s economic future rests upon the development of a skilled, flexible and credentialed workforce (MOE, 2012). A university degree has become an important credential, both for new entrants into the labour force and those already employed. Increasing the higher education cohort is pivotal in addressing skill shortages in key industries and is central to ensuring individual, community and economic wellbeing (McLaughlin, Mills, Davis, Saha, Smith, & Hardie, 2013). A 2007 study by the Ministry of Manpower shows that an extra year of schooling increases a worker’s earning by 13.7% and this is even higher for tertiary education (Davie, 2013).

Singapore’s changing demographics is another factor that is adding further challenges to education (Chong & Cheah, 2010). These demographic trends show fewer young people, declining birth rates, increased life expectancy for aging generations and an increase in the number of non-Singaporean residents (Singapore Statistics, 2013). The statistics show that the current 20 to 24 year group in Singapore is the smallest in the past 30 years, especially when compared with the growing aging population. These demographics shifts, fuelled by a growing knowledge economy will have a direct impact on the educational attainment of the Singapore workforce. Growing numbers of working adults will need more education and training to do well in today’s economy. With the continuous commitment and support of the Singapore government to CET (MOE, 2012), working adults who want to succeed in the present economic climate are pursuing a university education in growing numbers. Higher education must look more closely at how to raise the knowledge and skill levels of the current workforce. Educating the adult population is seen as a way of constructing a good and prosperous society where there are both gains for the individual as well as the society.
HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ADULT LEARNER

There is a growing diversity of students pursuing higher education (McLaughlin et al., 2013). An overview of the enrolment trends in higher education is that about 50% of these students are considered to be “traditional” students, between the ages of 18 to 25 years and are children at the tail end of the baby boomers, with the rest of the higher education students being considered as “non-traditional” (Marschall & Davis, 2012).

Research on adult learners show that they are achievement oriented, motivated by prospects of career advancement and required flexible learning schedules to support their life, work and learning commitments (Berker, Horn & Carroll 2003; Clemente 2010; Reay, 2002). Going back to school also involved a transition towards a redefined identity as an adult learner. Reay’s study of higher education adult learners found that these learners need to balance between “investing in a new improved identity and holding on to a cohesive self” (2002, p. 403).

Berker, Horn and Carroll’s (2003) study compared the characteristics and university experiences of two groups of adult undergraduates. Group 1, students who worked, that is, participants who saw themselves as students first, working to help pay expenses. Group 2, employees who studied, participants who saw themselves as workers first, they were enrolled in university to improve their job prospects. Group 2 were older, had family commitments, worked longer hours and usually had poorer university attendance when compared to the Group 1. The study showed that 68% of Group 2 was at risk of not graduating as compared to 18% of Group 1. Similar findings in another study show that adult students are considerably less likely to complete their programme. Three years after enrolling in an undergraduate programme, almost 50% of adult students left the programme without a degree. Adult learners face different set of challenges to completing their higher education programme. Adult learners return to learning with a variety and range of experiences, both in terms of their working life and educational backgrounds (Kasworm, 2012). In addition to the daily challenges faced by adult learners in higher education, their previous learning experiences may also complicate their higher education experiences.

An analysis of the literature shows that the causal factors for the increase of adult learners in higher education are wide ranging. Deggs and Machmtes (2012) state that the opportunity to progress to higher paying jobs and move up the career ladder have resulted in the increase in number of adults pursuing higher education. The constant changes in the economy and needs of the job market place a demand on people to obtain higher education. One factor is the decline of blue-collar sector in the labour market (Compton, Cox & Laanan, 2006). Additional factors include the growing increase of the female workforce as well as other adults who are facing life transition issues (Clemente, 2010). A more fluid global economy is also characterised by frequent job and career change, which is an important factor in the growing demand for continual learning and skill enhancement. The adult learner faces a myriad of challenges and seeks tertiary qualification for various reasons, some of which are direct consequences of the changing global economy and cultural landscape. With adults constituting almost half of today’s student body, it is important to find out who they are and how we can better support their learning.
Who are these adult learners in Singapore and what are some of the implications on the teaching and learning? For the purposes of the study, the authors examined the demographic profile of 3,817 first-year students from the 2013 intake of SIM University, Singapore, which provided an insight of the adult learner. The following tables and figures show some of the breakdowns.

Table 1.

Demographic profile (gender, marital status, race).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>50.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>49.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3817</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>826</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2991</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3817</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2513</td>
<td>65.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eurasian/Others</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3817</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.

_Distribution of young enrolled students (30 years and below) by designation._

Among the enrolled students 30 years and below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jr/Mid-Mgt</td>
<td>764 (26.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Exec Staff</td>
<td>735 (25.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Managerial Prof/Tech Exec</td>
<td>779 (26.9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.

_Age profile of 2013 enrolment by designation at enrolment & mean years of work experience._

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Non-Managerial Prof/Tech Exec</th>
<th>Jr Mgt</th>
<th>Mid-Mgt</th>
<th>Sr Mgt</th>
<th>Sole Proprietor</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Age</td>
<td>26.63</td>
<td>28.12</td>
<td>27.54</td>
<td>33.17</td>
<td>36.33</td>
<td>33.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std Deviation</td>
<td>5.884</td>
<td>6.222</td>
<td>5.909</td>
<td>7.291</td>
<td>10.030</td>
<td>10.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Yrs of Work Experience (Total)</td>
<td>5.43</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>10.65</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>9.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>1027</td>
<td>856</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2. Distribution of 2013 enrolment by designation at enrolment.

Profile of the 2013 Intake

Highlighted below are the characteristics of the adult learners enrolled in 2013 in SIM University undergraduate programmes:

- There are equal proportions of male and female students and more than three-quarters (78.4%) of the students are single (see Table 1).
- About two-thirds (65.8%) of the enrolment are Chinese. This is followed by the Malays, Indians and Eurasian/Others (see Table 1).
- Majority (87.6%) of the adult students are 35 years old or younger. There are a total number of 2,897 students, three-quarters of the enrolment, who are 30 years old and younger. There are 1,455 students in the age range of 23 to 25 (see Figure 1).
- This group of adult learners is largely at the start of their careers with an average of 6.41 years of working experience. 25% in this group reported that they in junior to middle management positions, another 25% holding non-executive staff positions and another 25% holding non-managerial/technical professional positions (see Tables 2 and 3). Only 1% of these young adult learners are holding senior management positions.
- The above observation corroborates with the cross-sectional analysis of the data by the students’ self-reported job designation. Figure 2 shows that a large proportion of the enrolled students are holding more junior-level or executive-level positions. Close to 79% of the enrolled student population hold the positions of junior to mid-level management, non-executive staff positions and non-managerial/technical professional positions. In addition, most enrolled students holding these positions are younger with their mean age at point of enrolment, that is, between 26 to 27 years old (see Table 3).
DISCUSSION: THE MILLENNIAL ADULT LEARNER

An important finding from the demographics is that although SIM University learners are older than the traditional-aged undergraduate learner, majority of the learners are young adults, 35 years of age or less. The demographics show that the adult learners in SIM University are in their mid-twenties to early thirties and in the early stages of their working lives. In an era where many individuals intend to work at least to the age of 65, these adults are repositioning themselves with the knowledge and skills attained from higher education in the labour market for many years.

These young adult learners, often termed as the Millennial generation, have grown up with computers and are said to have a natural aptitude and high-skill levels when using new technologies. Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) put a date on the Millennial learners suggesting that they were born “in or after 1982” before 2000. The Millennial learners, now no longer children but are young adults, have been characterised as optimistic, team-oriented and technologically savvy. They tend to gravitate toward group activities and collaborative learning. They have a positive attitude and value experiential activities and structure (Oblinger, 2006; Prensky, 2013; Sandeen, 2008). This new generation has “multiprocessing” capabilities, they are accustomed to talking on the phone, watching TV, doing homework, eating, using the computer, listening to music and interacting with someone else, all at one time. The Millennials have also been identified as “native speakers of the digital language” (Prensky, 2013). Tapscott wrote

Traditional approaches to learning are linear. This dates back to the book, which is usually read from beginning to end, as a learning tool. Most textbooks are written to be tackled from beginning to end. Television shows and instructional videos are designed to be watched from beginning to end. But [Millennials] sample surfing the Net, they typically participate in several activities at once…this is not to say that learning environments or even curricula should not be designed. They can, however, be designed in partnership with the learners or by the learners themselves. (1998, p. 143)

Millennials prefer classroom, online and blended learning experiences (Sandeen, 2008), and respond well to feedback and learning technologies when used to support learning (Prensky, 2013). They use computers to create digital files, create and access learning portals, perform Internet information searches, and engage in instant message chats to support learning. The Millennial learners are also driven to be connected more than just being technologically linked. The use of technology is a “doing” activity. They learn best by being active and involved. Technology has become so tightly woven into their workday and personal lives that it is hard for the Millennials to imagine life without it (Baird & Fisher, 2009). Through the constructivist theory, research indicates that the adult learner constructs knowledge for learning advantage and efficiency (Kasworm, 2012). The convergence of learning comes about at the onset of change from teacher-centered learning to learner-centered learning which is a key tenet of adult learning.

Millennials learn through trial and error, so failure is seen as part of learning. Millennials are also not attached to a technology; they are willing to move on to the next software, device and operating system. This is evidence of their ability and willingness to unlearn and relearn (Prensky, 2013). With the real-time connections to world and local events, today’s generation
does not hear about these events later, but in real time as they are happening, through streaming Internet feeds and satellite uplinks. Social interactions need not always be face to face. Since Millennials are connected to world and national events, many have become global thinkers (Baird & Fisher, 2009). For many Millennial students, their world is not just their own close-knit social group.

Millennials, as a group, also see a greater need to attain a degree (Raines, 2002). These Millennial learners may have left school, started working but are now returning back as adult learners enrolled in part-time higher education programmes. Working Millennial students are interested in their career progression and this encourages them to look for learning opportunities that will support their growth and development in their careers (Sandeen, 2008). The new generation of adult learners enter higher education programmes voluntarily and manage their learning around work and family responsibilities. Additionally, they are highly motivated and task-oriented. The Millennial student wants to be part of the education he or she is experiencing (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). This generation is bombarded with information, media and entertainment opportunities, and they want to participate in the education, not just have it told to them or read about it from a book (2005). A related learning preference of the Millennial student is the desire to be part creators of the knowledge (Prensky, 2013). It is not enough just to learn about something; many students want to add to the knowledge they are discovering. They create their own websites and/or blogs. This generation of learners are contributors as well as creators of information and partakers of a body of knowledge. With such easy access to information and images, the creator and consumer roles of learning are blurring (Raines, 2002).

Educational providers and policymakers need to take this variability into account. Understanding these adult Millennial learners as well as the role of aging on their learning processes is one thing, but what about the implications of this information as it pertains to higher education teaching and learning? These learners bring the need for a higher level of awareness in technology and software by their instructors as well as multilevel collaboration to the teaching and learning in their part-time undergraduate programmes. More in-depth investigation of students’ technology practices and research into how these technologies are capable of transforming the adult learners’ social and academic lives is essential.

To enrich its understanding of the learning behaviour of these Millennial learners, SIM University has been actively pioneering strategies in introducing technology, adopting innovative teaching approaches as well as to build up research capacity (SIM University, 2015). Linking technology to learning is made possible through iStudy guides that allow students to download an interactive repertoire of learning resources and activities that can be accessed via any mobile platforms. This has rendered flexibility in students’ learning as an iStudy guide survey administered by SIM University’s Teaching & Learning Centre showed that out of the 484 students who responded to the survey, 86.7% accessed the iStudy guide from home and 34.5% accessed it from the office. In addition, survey respondents reported making use of varied learning activities and resources such as chunked video lessons, written content and formative quizzes, among others. More institutional resources have also been ploughed in to foster relevant andragogical research through the Associate Faculty Champion (AFC) programme and the Innovative Seed Grant (ISG). Under the AFC, select associate faculty carry out year-long education research projects that aims to enhance student learning or achieve specific student learning outcomes while the ISG provides the funding support for innovative teaching pedagogies including those that incorporates technology. Over the next 3 to 5 years, these measures should be able to build up a databank for evidence-based calibration of the
learning styles and needs of the Millennial adult learners as well as build up institutional capacity in SIM University.

In addition to data collection, a thorough review of these practices and instructional strategies in consideration of this new generation of learner is required. Instructors, instructional designers and other professionals working in the design of learning environments for adults must understand adult learning theory as well as the learning characteristics of the Millennial learner. As a result, these higher educational institutions have to adapt their approaches to teaching and learning. As educators, the challenge is to be conscious of the various student characteristics and develop methodology and assessment techniques that allow for flexibility yet adheres to the constructs of the course content.

As exposited by Pedró (2006), new Millennial learners do not present the same profile as learners under the conventional educational systems as their extensive exposure to digital media and technology are likely to have influenced their cognitive competencies, lifestyle choices as well as their expectations of teaching and learning. Should these hypothesised characteristics of a Millennial learner hold true, then a policy implication worth exploring is offering greater customisation in the learners’ learning journey. Such customisation could take the form of a personalised learning dashboard where the learners can pick and choose a suite of learning activities that are suited for their learning styles. For example, learners who take better to visual stimulation could pick and choose video presentations or infographics for their dashboard while experiential learners could choose more formative quizzes or hands-on learning activities. In addition, with the increased availability and accessibility of learning resources, adult educators could also better engage learners through having active online discussions and offering collaborative learning activities.

Moving forward, concerted efforts need to be put in to better understand the phenomenon and needs of the Millennial learners and to study the relevance of these hypotheses with contextualised empirical data. One possible way is for SIM University to build up its databank that collects a variety of data from learner demographics, academic performance indicators, workload indicators, learning behaviour data such as their preferred learning mode (e.g., between structured texts, quizzes, infographics), time spent and learning outcome indicators from each type of learning activity and even data relating to student motivation and effort spent. Building a comprehensive data bank can pave the way for a good ground analysis and triangulation of findings related to the Millennial learners in SIM University that could be fed back into policy revisions or improvements in teaching and learning practices. Though these plans are in its infancy, it marks a good direction for the University to work towards in its support of Millennial adult learners.

Another research area of interest that has emerged is the synergies between the Millennial learners’ learning needs, their aspirations to retain or strengthen their competitive advantage in the job market with the nation’s aims to stay globally competitive. A possible solution for consideration could be the offering of modular courses over a flexible candidature. This allows the Millennial learners to take on courses that are relevant to them at different time points or to ride on new knowledge areas that have emerged. With the advent of technology and improved predictive analysis algorithms, analytics could be employed to help these learners plan their choice of courses and learning journey towards the attainment of their degree. Looking ahead, new variables could be included for evidenced-based decision making, efficient operations and to enhance teaching and learning (Koh and Chong, 2014). Millennial learners could also be notified of upcoming courses that may be of relevance to them based on their demographics that is stored in the system. For SIM University, making use of such data could help it value-
add to its students’ employability in a fast-changing knowledge economy as well as optimise the University’s processes in planning course offerings and sequencing.

CONCLUSION

Singapore needs to maximise the potential of adult learners to face global challenges. Adult learners can support the nation’s efforts to increase global competitiveness, but adult learners need their national institutions to support them in the pursuit of their personal aspirations for credentials and degrees. As the Singapore experiences rapid growth of nontraditional adult students in higher education, educators and institutions will increasingly need to look beyond the traditional youth-centric educational models to better address adult learning needs.

The influx of the generation named Millennials into adult learning has caused an unprecedented shift in the need to review teaching and learning strategies currently used by adult educators, of which a majority are members of an earlier generation. They are in the higher education institution to earn a degree, just as each adult learner did in the generations before them, yet they have brought with them a new way of learning. The learning styles and maturity process contribute to the uniqueness of the adult learner. This uniqueness is affected by the technological, social and culture influences. These will impact and shape the individuality of the people who are today’s adult learners. Adult educators need to consider the context of learning and understand that culture and society shape the adult learner. This consideration is critical to teaching adults and will lead to the transformation in higher education teaching and learning. In order to advance an adult learner-centered focus within these higher education institutions, it is important to have a well-articulated statement of philosophy that embraces these learners. For adult Millennial learners, that includes the overall role of technology in teaching and learning, flexibility, accelerated schedules, compressed classes and affordability.

Minimal research has been conducted on andragogical-based learning, and their impact on Millennial learners in higher education (Caruth, 2014). Millennials are here, demanding their courses have the appropriate content delivered in state-of-the-art technology, using appropriate software, and cooperative learning. They will continue to enter higher education institutions. Researching instructional strategies and their effectiveness in the learning environments of these universities and colleges is crucial for the successful retention of this generation of adult learners in higher education.

Authors

Dr Sylvia CHONG is Associate Professor, President’s Office at SIM University. Her research interests are inter-disciplinary in nature, and include substantive and methodological areas of higher education research. She was Principal Investigator for four successful Academic Research Funding (AcRF) projects and two MOE-commissioned research projects. She has published in international journals and participated in various conferences. sylviachong@unisim.edu.sg

Ms Wai Mun LOH is currently a Project Manager at the Office of the President, SIM University. Her professional interest is in applying and evaluating evidence-based approaches to feedback into policy and programme improvements. She currently oversees the design, implementation and analysis of several studies that aim to better the teaching and learning experiences for adult learners. wmloh@unisim.edu.sg
Mathangi Venkatesh, is a part-time research assistant at UniSIM. Understanding the educational landscape and conducting scan of best practices are her primary area of interest.

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