

Navigating Career Adaptability: A Heuristic Inquiry into the Experiences of Bruneian Postgraduate Mature Students in Government-Funded Higher Education

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Introduction

This study explores the experiences of Bruneian postgraduate mature students, such as myself, who have returned to university through government-funded scholarships. As Brunei's economic landscape evolves, the need for career adaptability and continuous professional development has become increasingly vital. This research addresses a gap in the literature on mature students in Brunei, offering insights into how further education supports their career growth, enhances their adaptability, and fosters lifelong learning. These findings can help inform policies and support systems that better equip mature students for an ever-changing job market.

1) Objective

The research aims:

- To shed light on the internal and external factors influencing postgraduate mature Bruneian students' decisions to continue education,
- To discuss the impact of their university experiences on their understanding of career adaptability and lifelong learning,
- To determine the types of career support needed in their workplaces to enhance adaptability.

2) Methodology

- This study adopts a **qualitative research approach** under an **interpretivist epistemological framework**, which is well-suited for exploring how mature students construct meaning from their experiences of returning to higher education.
- A **heuristic inquiry research approach** (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985) was employed, allowing me, as the primary researcher, to compare and reflect on my own experiences alongside those of my participants.
- A **purposive sampling strategy** was used to recruit **five in-service Bruneian mature students** who were then pursuing their postgraduate studies in the **UK**.

3) Data Collection and Analysis

- Data were collected via semi-structured one-to-one interviews with participants, as well as from a self-reflective journal which acts as a tool to encourage deeper understanding as to what being in this phenomenon really meant.
- Data were analysed using thematic analysis because it allows for examination of multiple perspectives, brings to light the similarities and differences between these different perspectives and has the potential to "generate unanticipated insights" (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

References and Acknowledgements

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4) Findings

• Reasons for continuing postgraduate studies

Participants/co-researchers had identified a range of internal and external factors influencing their decision to pursue full-time postgraduate studies in the UK, including career progression, love for learning, and personal agency.

• Deeper understanding of Career Adaptability and Lifelong Learning

Participants were found to have already possessed a surface-level grasp of these concepts, but their experiences as postgraduate mature learners, enabled them to explore the deeper meaning and personal relevance of these concepts (Johnston, 2017; Lee et al., 2019; Ismail, 2017).

• Challenges and Resilience

Participants/co-researchers were able to utilize their prior experiences and time management skills, to help them counter the challenges which they have faced and thus demonstrating their strong career adaptability (Chapman, 2017; Zeide & Kalvane, 2023).

• The role of support system

Support from workplaces and universities plays a key role in helping mature students sustain and enhance their career adaptability. Institutional support, particularly for student-parents, fosters an inclusive learning environment that addresses their unique needs (Chapman, 2017)

5) Implication

- These findings can guide governments and career practitioners in providing tailored support for employees and clients, helping them prepare for upskilling and reskilling opportunities. For instance, career coaching sessions can equip employees pursuing postgraduate studies with the resilience and adaptability needed for the experience.
- Employers should also foster ongoing discussions on career adaptability and lifelong learning as essential career management tools, especially in slowly evolving economic landscape such as Brunei.
- Meanwhile, higher education institutions must continuously review policies to ensure inclusivity, particularly for mature students with families.

6) Conclusion

This heuristic inquiry explored the experience of postgraduate Bruneian mature students, who are returning to university as 'in-service' scholarship. Through self-reflection and semi-structured interviews, themes of career progression, personal agency, career adaptability, importance of support and lifelong learning were uncovered. It is hoped that findings from this study would help to improve the kind of career support given to government officials, whose both personal and professional development plans involves upskilling and reskilling as mature students.