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ORIGINAL PAPER

Balancing the books: Understanding the motivations and challenges of part-time students as lifelong learners and "resilient negotiators"

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Abstract

This study examines the motivations and challenges faced by adult learners engaged in part-time study as a form of lifelong learning. It focuses on how they balance competing demands from work, family and study. Applying a theoretical framework of self-directed learning (SDL) and adult learning theory (ALT), the author interviewed 25 part-time students (7 female, 18 male) based in Southeast Asia, all of whom were employed or self-employed. The study identified three core motivations (namely, support systems, personal development and career growth) and three major challenges (namely, balancing responsibilities, time management, and the need for resilience and adaptability). The concept of the "resilient negotiator" emerged as a central theoretical contribution. This idea represents how learners strategically manage limited resources such as time or money, and the expectations of others. The findings of this study have practical implications for universities, employers and policymakers in supporting lifelong learners through the provision of flexible delivery models, supportive policies and institutional incentives. The study contributes to the discourse on adult learning in a post-pandemic context and invites further research with broader demographic and longitudinal perspectives.

Keywords lifelong learning · part-time study · self-directed learning · adult learning theory · career development

Résumé

Équilibrer les comptes : comprendre les motivations et les défis des étudiant.e.s à temps partiel en tant qu'apprenant.e.s tout au long de la vie et « négociateurs/négociatrices résilient.e.s » – Cette étude examine les motivations des apprenant.e.s adultes qui suivent des études à temps partiel dans le cadre de l'apprentissage tout au long de

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la vie et les défis auxquels ils/elles sont confronté.e.s. Elle se concentre sur la manière dont ils/elles maintiennent un équilibre entre les exigences concurrentes du travail, de la famille et des études. En appliquant un cadre théorique d'apprentissage autodirigé et de théorie de l'apprentissage des adultes, l'auteur a interrogé 25 étudiant.e.s à temps partiel (7 femmes et 18 hommes) vivant en Asie du Sud-Est, tous salariés ou indépendants. L'étude a identifié trois motivations principales (à savoir les systèmes de soutien, le développement personnel et l'évolution de carrière) et trois défis majeurs (à savoir l'équilibre entre les responsabilités, la gestion du temps et le besoin de résilience et d'adaptabilité). Le concept de « négociateur/négociatrice résilient.e » est apparu comme une contribution théorique centrale. Cette idée représente la manière dont les apprenant.e.s gèrent stratégiquement des ressources limitées telles que le temps ou l'argent, ainsi que les attentes des autres. Les conclusions de cette étude ont des implications pratiques pour les universités, les employeurs/euses et les décideurs/euses politiques dans le soutien aux apprenant.e.s tout au long de la vie grâce à la mise en place de modèles d'enseignement flexibles, de politiques de soutien et d'incitations institutionnelles. L'étude contribue au débat sur l'apprentissage des adultes dans un contexte post-pandémique et invite à poursuivre les recherches en adoptant des perspectives démographiques et longitudinales plus larges.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on the global higher education landscape (García-Morales et al. 2021; Sá and Serpa 2020; Siegel et al. 2021). For example, the number of part-time and distance learning degree programmes has grown dramatically, as both universities and students become more receptive to online learning (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2021; Lollobrigida et al. 2022; Migocka-Patrzałek et al. 2021). In the United States, part-time enrolment in undergraduate programmes declined by 10 per cent between 2010 and 2021, from 6.6 million to 5.9 million students (NCES 2023). Between 2021 and 2031, however, the figure is projected to increase by 10 per cent, from 5.9 million to 6.6 million students (ibid.). This signals heightened interest in this mode of study, driven by reasons explored in this study.

The literature on lifelong learning motivations and challenges reveals several emerging areas of interest, in particular the roles of career advancement, support systems and learning technologies (Drewery et al. 2020; Ratten 2023). There is also growing interest in examining how approaches to lifelong learning have changed over time (Poquet and De Laat 2021). Research over the past five years specifically focuses on learners' desires to acquire knowledge and skills (Eschenbacher and Fleming 2020; Van Woezik et al. 2020).

Two theories are relevant to this study: self-directed learning (SDL) and adult learning theory (ALT) (Broek et al. 2023; Scholtz 2023). These are significantly linked to motivations and changes across different aspects of a lifelong learner's ecosystem (e.g., workplace, study, family). This study examined how technological and social changes influence the way lifelong learners interact with these theories. This provided

a rationale to explore and investigate how the concepts of SDL and ALT inform our understanding of adult learners' preference for formal part-time learning.

The findings of this study have implications for learners, learning institutions and employers. For aspiring students, the aim is to provide recommendations for individuals to adopt and apply. For universities, an understanding of learner needs can help in the design and delivery of modules and programmes. For employers, it may help to develop policies that enable continuing professional development that enhances employees' self-efficacy as well as overall organisational performance. As organisations face rapid changes, there is a growing need for individuals who are highly agile and adaptable.

For this study, 25 individuals who pursued part-time study at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels were interviewed. Respondents undertook their respective courses while working full-time, running businesses, or caring for their families. They were asked about their motivation for learning, challenges they faced along the way, including how they overcame obstacles, and how the experience has benefitted them in the long term. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) was then conducted on the gathered data, to identify common themes and patterns across the dataset. Further, a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 2017) procedure was conducted to develop a framework that can contribute to theory and practice.

Problem statement

Demand for part-time study has grown significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as higher education institutions (HEIs) have become more receptive to online, hybrid and blended modes of learning (Benito et al. 2021; Iqbal et al. 2022). This development presents an opportunity to conduct further research on the motivations of adult learners who undertake part-time study and understand the challenges that they face in the process (Abd Rahman et al. 2024; Cronshaw et al. 2024). This study explored these issues using qualitative methods, and aimed to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1 *What are the primary motivations driving individuals to pursue part-time study?*

RQ2 *What challenges do part-time students face in balancing work, family and academic commitments, and how do they overcome these?*

RQ3 *How can universities and employers better support part-time learners to enhance their learning experiences and outcomes?*

Literature review

Motivations and challenges of lifelong learners

The existing literature on motivations for lifelong learning indicates career advancement as a significant factor (Drewery et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2022). Many adult learners enrol in part-time programmes to gain additional qualifications, improve their skills or transition into new careers (Kim and Park 2020; Poquet and De Laat 2021). These formal certifications and added skills are seen as essential as they navigate an increasingly uncertain labour market. Furthermore, part-time students report improvements in terms of human capital, identity and social capital, which are associated with improved confidence, skill utilisation and workplace practices (Callender and Little 2015; Yusoff 2022). Recent findings also indicate that autonomous or individual motivation is positively correlated with satisfaction levels among part-time students (Turner 2023). This indicates the value of conducive environments in enabling effective adult learning (Amponsah 2020; Lewis and Bryan 2021). These findings highlight the value of pursuing lifelong learning to enhance professional competitiveness, both in the workplace and in the labour market. Therefore, they may also help predict how such efforts may change as working environments evolve.

While career advancement remains a driving factor in lifelong learning, definitions of employment and work have evolved considerably in recent years. This has been especially observable since the COVID-19 pandemic, with an increased demand for flexible working conditions and career changes (Adekoya et al. 2022; Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy 2021; Vyas 2022), an expansion of entrepreneurial aspirations (Meyer et al. 2021; Ufua et al. 2022) and growth of the gig economy (Mahato et al. 2021; Regan and Christie 2023). Further investigation is needed to explore how these developments may have affected the motivating factors and challenges associated with lifelong learning. These include how learners manage their time, balance work and personal commitments, and finance learning activities.

Another area of interest emerging from the literature concerns the support ecosystems required by lifelong learners. These include financial stability (Tchamyou 2020), access to academic advice (Chukwuedo et al. 2021; Endres et al. 2021) and emotional support (Berduzco-Torres et al. 2020; London 2021). These are key enabling factors that allow students to focus on learning without the burden of considering potential obstacles (Conesa et al. 2020; Hanemann and Robinson 2022). Given the commitment required of part-time students, it is clear that physical and mental wellbeing are critical factors for learner persistence and programme completion. Further research is needed on the evolution of learners' broader ecosystems (i.e., work, family, study) and, specifically, how learners balance the demands of an educational workload with commitments to work and family (Benavot et al. 2022; Burns 2020; Gouthro 2022; Eschenbacher and Fleming 2020; Van Woezik et al. 2020).

There has also been an exponential growth in the use of learning technologies since the COVID-19 pandemic, as universities respond to growing demands

for flexible learning options (Guppy et al. 2022; Ratten 2023). In light of this "new normal" scenario, a review is needed, both of how learning technologies have expanded and how they have affected learner performance (Beck et al. 2024; Gligorea et al. 2023). Furthermore, the convergence of traditional and modern learning modes in the form of hybrid and blended learning at many institutions also invites further exploration (Megahed and Hassan 2022; Singh et al. 2021). Researchers are also exploring how the process is accelerated by the use of technology in other areas of life (i.e., at work and at home) (Calvert and Abadia 2020). Additionally, the recent growth of artificial intelligence (AI) in education (Poquet and De Laat 2021; Rawas 2024) raises questions on impact and performance as well as ethics and integrity (Borenstein and Howard 2021; Garrett et al. 2020; Mhlanga 2023).

Theoretical framework

The theory of self-directed learning (SDL), as first developed by Malcolm Knowles (1975), examines the effort of the learner in identifying learning needs, setting goals, and taking necessary steps to achieve those goals (Nazarianpirdosti et al. 2021; Ricotta et al. 2022). For part-time students, SDL begins with the desire to pursue formal learning while working full-time and applies to the process of persevering on their learning journey despite challenges (Lemmetty and Collin 2020; Zhu et al. 2020). SDL theory presents a framework for observing and analysing how learners surmount those challenges (Colomer et al. 2021; Li et al. 2023; Sukkamart et al. 2023). In this study, based on the author's findings, the interest was on how digital learning has reshaped SDL, specifically for part-time learners (Anthonysamy et al. 2020; Toh and Kirschner 2020). Digital learning has accelerated SDL by providing tools and platforms that allow self-directed individuals to better manage their learning journeys. Learning institutions are also factoring learner motivation into the design of their programmes (Karatas and Arpaci 2021; Loeng 2020). Finally, this study also investigated how age and professional background influence learner motivation and predict success (Hill et al. 2020; Schweder and Raufelder 2022).

Related to SDL is adult learning theory (ALT), which posits that adults are more intrinsically motivated when pursuing learning, whether formal or informal (Abedini et al. 2021; Murayama 2022). For adult learners, life experience is a key resource within the learning process (Fenwick 2003; Rothwell 2020). Thus, the perceived relevance of a subject is essential to learning. These factors were observed among the part-time students who participated in this study, where the sample was composed mostly of adult learners above the traditional university-going age (Burns 2020; Merriam and Baumgartner 2020). Building upon existing research, there are opportunities to study aspects of how ALT can be applied to part-time students. First among these is the issue of relevance, given rapid technological and social changes in the workplace. Second, technology has also influenced the preferences of adult learners, as evidenced in the recent demand for hybrid or blended learning (Chuang 2021; Pang et al. 2021). Third, there is a need to understand the emotional and social aspects of learning (e.g., peer relationships, intergenerational dynamics)

arising from ongoing adult learning research, given the diversity of experiences of interviewees in this study (Hökkä et al. 2020).

Part-time study: historical perspective

The practice of part-time study in its modern form can be traced back to the early 20th century when adult education movements developed in many parts of the world. One example is the Workers' Educational Association in the United Kingdom (UK), which was founded in 1903 to provide educational opportunities for working-class adults (WEA 2024). This was about the same time that universities and other institutions of higher learning began offering evening classes and extension programmes for people who worked during the day and wanted to pursue further education in the evenings (Fieldhouse 2006 [1997]). One of the most significant developments in part-time education occurred in 1969 with the establishment of the Open University in the UK (Peters and Britez 2008; Firat and Bozkurt 2020; Pulker and Papi 2021), offering flexible part-time opportunities for learners of all ages. Towards the end of the 20th century, lifelong learning was increasingly viewed as an essential requirement for professional development, and universities began to offer part-time degree programmes aimed at working professionals (Schuetze and Slowey 2002; Evans and Kersh 2004).

More recently, part-time study has undergone a digital revolution as more programmes are delivered online by universities, including massive open online courses (MOOCs) (Liu et al. 2014; Yuan et al. 2014). This development accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic when the worlds of work and education had to migrate online overnight (Adedoyin and Soykan 2023; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021). Other developments in this space include the emergence of professional certifications and micro-credentials as new forms of accreditation (Ponte and Saray 2022; Rienties et al. 2023).

Research design and methods

This study examined the motivations and challenges associated with lifelong learning through analysis of a selected group of part-time students. The research objective was to understand the wider ecosystem in which individuals who pursue part-time study exist as they navigate their learning journeys.

Data collection

The data analysed in this study were gathered from a sample of individuals who had undertaken undergraduate or postgraduate part-time study in the course of their lives. The sample comprised a total of 25 individuals (7 female, 18 male) aged between 30 and 45 at the time of data collection. All participants had completed a formal degree-level programme in part-time mode, alongside work, family and other personal commitments. Using the convenience sampling method,

participants were recruited from the Southeast Asia region based on the author's professional network at the time of data collection. This sampling approach allowed access to a diverse pool of part-time learners and allowed for in-depth exploration of experiences.

Most of the study participants were either professionals in full-time employment or entrepreneurs who ran their own businesses. All participants were briefed on the study's intent as per institutional ethics requirement. Each participant was interviewed online in a 60-minute one-on-one session, between August 2021 and June 2022, via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Each semi-structured interview (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) was conducted with reference to a set of interview questions (see Table 1). The questions covered a range of issues such as the interviewee's primary motivations for pursuing part-time study, the challenges they faced, and how they overcame them.

Table 1 Interview questions

Sections	Questions
Introduction	• Can you briefly describe your background and what motivated you to pursue part-time study?
	• How did you initially find out about the part-time programme in which you enrolled?
Motivations	• What were the primary reasons for choosing part-time over full-time study?
	• How do you balance your studies with other responsibilities, such as work or family life?
	• Were there any specific career or personal objectives that influenced your decision to study part-time?
Challenges	• What are the main challenges you have encountered in balancing work/study/life commitments?
	• How has part-time study affected your social life or support systems?
	• Do you feel the financial burden of part-time study is easier or more difficult to manage compared to full-time options? Why?
Support systems	• What kinds of support (i.e., financial, academic, emotional) have been most helpful on your journey?
	• Have you received adequate support from your institution (e.g., flexible schedules, tutoring, online resources)?
Institutional and policy factors	• What improvements would you suggest in making part-time study more accessible or manageable?
	• Do you think there are enough resources or programmes in place to help part-time students succeed?
Reflections	• In hindsight, would you have chosen a different path (e.g., full-time study or not studying at all)? Why or why not?
	• How do you envision this part-time degree impacting your future career or personal goals?
Concluding questions	• Is there anything you wish you had known before starting your part-time study that would have better prepared you?
	• What advice would you give to others considering part-time study?

Data analysis

In this qualitative study, two methods of data analysis were applied: thematic analysis and grounded theory. For thematic analysis, the method developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2021) was applied. In accordance with their guidelines, the gathered data were analysed by systematically identifying and interpreting patterns and themes. This approach was ideal for this study as it enabled the identification and categorisation of motivations and challenges. For grounded theory, the method developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (2017) was applied. Using this approach, an iterative process of data analysis was conducted, to allow the proposed theory to emerge. Throughout the process, new data were continually compared to previously collected data to identify emerging trends. This process enabled the identification of patterns in relation to learning motivations and challenges. The tools used for thematic analysis were NVivo and Microsoft Excel.

Findings

Thematic analysis

Three themes emerged from the thematic analysis as key intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for the pursuit of part-time studies: support systems, personal development (intrinsic) and career growth (extrinsic), as outlined in Table 2.

Interviewees cited the presence of a strong support ecosystem as a key enabling factor for the pursuit of formal part-time education. This support might come from immediate family members, friends, or employers who gave them the required assistance to study alongside work (e.g., study leave, financial aid). One interviewee recounted how study leave allowed them to focus on coursework without neglecting work responsibilities. This indicates a need for institutions and employers to prioritise support mechanisms for learners. Interviewees also cited personal development as an intrinsic motivation for the pursuit of formal part-time learning. This awareness was based on the belief that a higher qualification would benefit them both personally and professionally. Interviewees cited career growth as a direct value gained from their learning experiences, especially the way in which new knowledge or skills helped them become better employees and leaders at work.

In relation to challenges, three themes emerged from the interviews: balancing responsibilities, time management, and resilience and adaptability. These are detailed in Table 3.

The interviews revealed that balancing work, study and personal commitments was a major challenge for adult part-time students. This relates to the management of the workload from their course of study, in addition to scheduled workplace tasks, as well as family commitments as parents or caregivers. Time management also emerged as a major challenge. This involves the need to allocate blocks of study time on top of other professional and personal tasks. More often than not, this experience required them to stay up late or get up early and sacrifice weekends and family events. More intrinsically, interviewees cited transitioning back into the flow

Table 2 Motivations for lifelong learning

Theme	Codes	Sample quote
Support systems	Support from family, peers and employer	"My family played a significant role in supporting my decision to pursue a second degree, even though it meant more sacrifices at weekends." – Interviewee 19
Personal development	Lifelong learning drive, personal development goals	"The decision to pursue an MBA came from my desire to grow both personally and professionally, to gain leadership insights that I felt were missing in my current role." – Interviewee 10
Career growth	Perceived value of formal education, career progression motivation, seeking new opportunities, leadership aspirations	"Education has been a game-changer in my career, giving me the skills to rise in both academic and corporate settings." – Interviewee 5

Table 3 Challenges faced by lifelong learners

Theme	Codes	Sample quote
Balancing responsibilities	Balancing multiple roles, work–study–life conflict	"Balancing work, study and family life was tough, especially when I had to miss out on important family events during my MBA." – Interviewee 15
Time management	Time management strategies, institutional support, employer policies	"The most challenging part was time management. There were moments where I felt stretched too thin between my studies, job, and the expectations of my family." – Interviewee 7
Resilience and adaptability	Challenges in transitioning roles, adaptability to new environments	"The ability to adapt and push through was key, especially when facing new challenges in both work and study environments." – Interviewee 24

of formal learning as a challenge. This was specifically in relation to the gradual familiarisation they had to undergo, having been outside the higher education system since completing their undergraduate studies. Most interviewees were on the "back to school" route, having left university approximately five to ten years prior to enrolling again. This transition demanded resilience in the management of emotions, morale and discipline to stay the course.

Grounded theory

Based on the thematic analysis conducted, the identified themes were further developed through three stages of coding informed by grounded theory: open coding (i.e., breaking down data into smaller pieces), axial coding (i.e., connecting the pieces to identify relationships) and selective coding (i.e., developing a central theory). Open coding helped identify key patterns in participant responses, while axial coding connected the patterns to highlight potential links, and selective coding led to a central theme. This approach allowed grounded theory to emerge directly from the participants' lived experiences.

Open coding

In the open coding process, the data were separated into specific categories. The interview transcripts were then reviewed for the themes to be broken down and into smaller codes. The themes were covered under motivations (i.e., support system, personal development, career growth) and challenges (i.e., balancing responsibilities, time management, resilience and adaptability). These codes represented key ideas and experiences shared by the interviewees. From this process, the open coding exercise allowed for the creation of a comprehensive overview of all key concepts without imposing a preconceived framework. The outcome of the open coding is presented in Table 4.

Axial coding

During axial coding, the goal was to organise and relate the open codes to each other in forming broader categories. This involved making connections between the codes

Table 4 Open coding for motivations and challenges

Open coding for *motivations*	Open coding for *challenges*
• Support from family, peers and employer	• Balancing multiple roles
• Lifelong learning drive	• Work-study-life conflicts
• Personal development goals	• Time management strategies
• Perceived value of formal education	• Institutional support
• Career progression motivation	• Employer policies
• Seeking new opportunities	• Challenges in transitioning roles
• Leadership aspirations	• Adaptability to new environments

that emerged from the open coding process and identifying how they interacted. In this process, it became apparent how support systems played an important role in helping part-time students manage time and balance responsibilities. Interviewees with strong family and employer support reported improved ability to juggle multiple roles. Conversely, those who lacked these support systems struggled to meet the demands of their coursework. Connections were also identified between personal development and career growth, as many interviewees described how their intrinsic drive for personal growth pushed them to pursue career advancement, with formal learning as a boosting factor. In terms of challenges, there were strong connections between balancing responsibilities, time management and resilience or adaptive strategies. Specifically, interviewees with challenges had to alter their regular schedule and workflows to adapt to their new commitments through the coexistence of work and study. The key relationships identified during the axial coding phase are presented in Figure 1.

Selective coding

In the final part of the grounded theory process, selective coding was conducted. This involved identifying core categories or central concepts that incorporate all categories. From this process, the concept of the "resilient negotiator" emerged as a central theme, encompassing the experiences of the sampled part-time students. All categories (i.e., motivations, challenges, adaptive strategies) were integrated into this core concept, which describes how part-time students continuously negotiate between conflicting demands of work, family and study, relying on both internal (i.e., personal and career growth drive) and external resources (support systems). This core theory was based on the data gathered and explains the behaviour and strategies of part-time learners in pursuit of formal education. From this exercise, it became clearer how resilience was a key trait that enabled them to adapt and balance their multiple roles. This theory also highlights the dynamic negotiation process required of them with the various stakeholders who coexist within their life ecosystems.

The resulting theory conceptualises the part-time student as a resilient negotiator who successfully balances the demands of work, family and study through resilience, time management and support systems. This theory is grounded in the

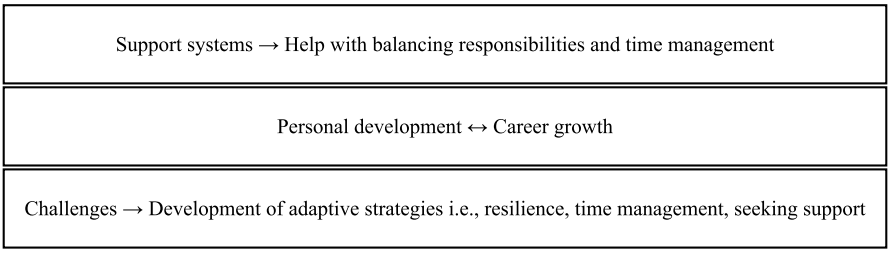

Figure 1 Key relationships identified through axial coding

real-world experiences of the participants interviewed for this study, and provides a framework for understanding the motivations, challenges and strategies employed by part-time learners. This framework is presented in Figure 2.

Discussion

The thematic analysis and application of grounded theory enabled the identification of three *key motivations* of part-time learners, namely: support systems, personal development and career growth. The *challenges* identified were: time management, balancing responsibilities, and personal resilience. These findings were further analysed to develop a grounded theory of the part-time learner as a resilient negotiator, as learners negotiate their way around stakeholders within their life ecosystems (i.e., family, work, study) while also managing limited resources (i.e., time, money). These findings align with the existing literature on the topic, which highlights how career advancement is a primary motivation for part-time study (Drewery et al. 2020; Zhang et al. 2022), and how support systems remain a critical enabler for a smooth learning experience (Berduzco-Torres et al. 2020; London 2021). These findings support the view that lifelong learning plays an important role in personal development and that institutional support is a key enabling factor for lifelong learning.

The depiction of the part-time student as a resilient negotiator is also consistent with the theory of SDL, as intrinsic motivation and internal drive push the learner to

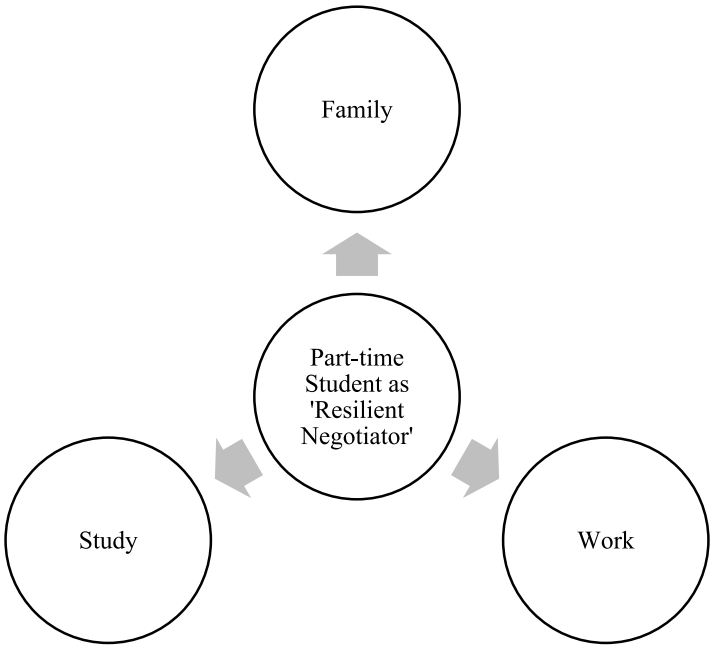

Figure 2 The part-time student as a "resilient negotiator"

pursue learning despite limited resources of time and money (Nazarianpirdosti et al. 2021; Ricotta et al. 2022). The concept also advances ALT by highlighting the constant negotiations that are required across the individual ecosystem (Abedini et al. 2021; Murayama 2022). This negotiation process is mediated by support systems and internal motivations, positioning resilience as a central factor in their success as learners.

The findings of the study provide valuable insights for policymakers, universities and employers. The demonstrated need for strong support systems for lifelong learning should prompt universities and employers to develop policies and practices that leverage the potential represented by the lifelong learners within their student body or workforce. For policymakers, the findings support the consideration of financial incentives such as tuition subsidies or tax benefits tailored to working adults who pursue further study.

For universities, the demand for stronger support among part-time students may provide impetus to extend blended or modular modes of programme delivery. This can be strengthened by the use of learning management systems that are both friendly and intuitive to allow learners to progress at their own pace. Additionally, access to advisory services and peer mentorship programmes could also provide emotional and academic support, consequently reducing the feeling of isolation among part-time students.

For employers, the findings of this study (i.e., motivations of personal development and career growth) elevate the need for supportive policies for learners, such as study leave and financial aid for education, which are already available in some organisations. These policies can alleviate the pressure of balancing work and study, as highlighted by the interviewees. The value gained from this investment might not be immediate, but it promises the long-term returns of having more agile and adaptable employees.

Conclusion

This study investigated how the competing commitments of part-time students require them to manage multiple dimensions of their lives. This requires constant negotiations across multiple stakeholders (i.e., family, employer, HEI) and persistent leverage of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to drive them towards a resilient path of study. These findings present an opportunity for institutions to further capitalise on learners' curiosity and energy. Further, the findings reveal clear opportunities for universities and employers to design targeted interventions that enhance the part-time learning experience.

The findings further strengthen the theories of SDL and ALT which suggest that as lifelong learners, part-time students will find ways around their obstacles to pursue learning success. While this study drew insights from the literature on adult learning motivation, the data are based mainly on the 25 interviews conducted. A complementary survey conducted with a larger sample drawn from more than one geographical region might indicate how the same research questions could be approached from other angles. Thus, future research could consider a larger sample

size, wider geographical coverage, and a longitudinal approach to track the long-term impact of part-time study.

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Data availability Data are confidential but available on request with approval.

Materials/code availability No code was used. Materials are available on request.

Declarations

Competing interests The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics approval The study followed ethical guidelines, including informed consent and confidentiality.

GenAI usage The author used Microsoft Copilot in editing the manuscript.

Informed consent All participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews.

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