

# Revisiting the MHE: Measuring Adult Learners' Experience of Mattering at Higher Learning Institutions

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## ABSTRACT

The Theory of Mattering and Marginality was introduced in the higher learning institution landscape by Nancy Schlossberg in 1989. The first three constructs of mattering were initially constructed by Rosenberg and McCullough in 1981 and later extended to five constructs by Rosenberg (1985). Mattering highlights the feeling of being significant, indispensable, and valued by other individuals. Schlossberg introduced Mattering at higher learning institutions with a specific focus on non-traditional learners, also known as adult learners. The theory consists of five dimensions: awareness, ego-extension, importance, reliance, and appreciation. One of the well-established instruments to measure non-traditional learners' experience of mattering is the use of the Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Higher Education. This conceptual paper stems from a study conducted on distance learners' experience of mattering at a public higher learning institution. One of the significant findings is the additional aspects that could enhance the current instrument, which will be further discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** Mattering, Distance learners, Adult learners, Theory of Mattering, Online learning

## INTRODUCTION

Studies on mattering in the Western higher education landscape have gained prominence over the years. Flett (2022) highlighted that students who feel that they matter to their higher learning institutions performed better in their academics and achieved better results in their exams. These students were seen as more resilient, confident, and positive. This conceptual paper stems from a research study conducted on the experience of mattering among online distance learners at a local higher education institution. The study explored the undergraduates' experience of mattering based on five different aspects, which are peers, faculty members, administrators, academic advisors or mentors, and the multiple roles that these students carry with them as distance learners. The mixed methods study utilized the theory of mattering by Schlossberg as its theoretical framework, and the Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Higher Education (MHE) were used as the instrument to collect data for the qualitative part of the study. One of the recommendations of the study is the potential to extend existing measures to capture aspects that may be overlooked in the current instrument. The current instrument consisted of five different aspects, as stated earlier. However, an insightful finding based on a study conducted discovered three aspects that were deemed to be necessary to be added to the instrument. The three aspects warrant inclusion are mental health, technology, and online learning.

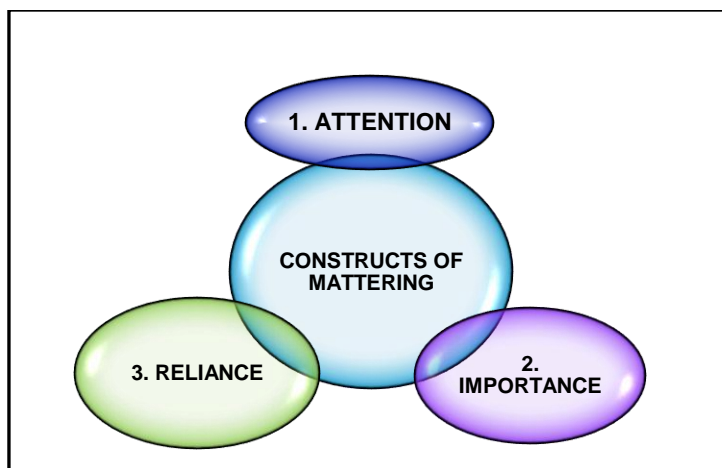
## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Evolution of the Constructs of Mattering

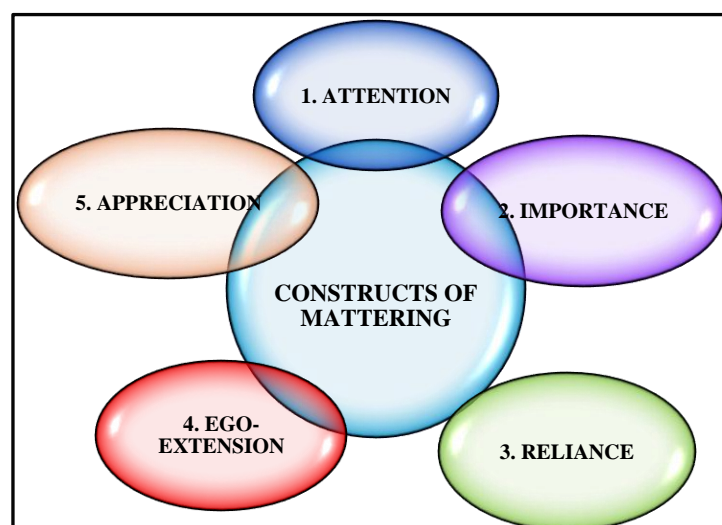
According to Flett (2018), mattering is an important aspect of a person's well-being, as it reflects the feeling of being valued and cared for by others. In addition, it is also a feeling where a person feels significant and important

to other people (Flett et al., 2019). He further mentioned that, as humans, we will always need to think that we matter, as it can have an effect on us. Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2021) concurred with Flett (2019) and added that it will make a person feel more confident and reciprocate the same actions. Conversely, not feeling that one matters can lead to negative effects.

Three constructs of mattering were first established by Rosenberg and McCullough in 1981, and they are awareness, importance, and reliance. Awareness is when other people realize our existence. We feel seen and recognizable. Importance, on the other hand, is where one feels the object of interest or concern by a group of people or an individual. People would invest their time and energy in us. Last but not least is reliance. Reliance is where one feels indispensable as others depend on them. The feeling of being needed shows that one matters. In 1985, Rosenberg expanded this conceptualization by adding two constructs. Ego extension and appreciation were added to the three earlier-mentioned constructs. Ego extension is when a person feels that other people or an individual experiences similar emotions and reactions to them. This could be the feeling of happiness or sadness, for instance (Flett, 2022). Appreciation is when an individual feels that his or her contributions or assistance are appreciated or bring significance. Figure 1.0 below shows the evolution of the constructs of mattering.



**Three Constructs of Mattering by Rosenberg & McCullough (1981)**



**Five Constructs of mattering by Rosenberg (1985)**

**Figure 1.0: Evolution of the Theory of Mattering**

## The Application of the Theory of Mattering in Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions

In 1989, Schlossberg introduced mattering in higher learning institutions with a specific focus on non-traditional learners. She felt that non-traditional learners need as much attention as traditional learners do, since these learners transition themselves into the learning environment differently compared to the traditionally aged learners (Lyness, 2003). It is from the establishment of the transition theory that she then introduced the theory of mattering and marginality at higher learning institutions.

In Malaysia, the number of studies on mattering is still scarce. However, research on mattering in the higher education landscape has increasingly emphasized its role in shaping students' psychological well-being, social connectedness, and academic engagement. Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality has provided the foundation for many of these studies, underscoring the importance of students feeling valued within their institutions for both full-time and part-time students, and this includes distance learners.

A study conducted by Hao and Prihadi (2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on off-campus learners' experience of mattering, found that students who perceived themselves as important to others and to their learning institution experienced better well-being. This means that learning can still take place even though the learners were in isolation, as long as they feel that they matter. A similar finding was also discovered in a study conducted by Kam and Prihadi (2021), where students who felt that they mattered to others were less likely to compare themselves to others and would accept themselves unconditionally.

In another study, Foo and Prihadi (2021) investigated how mattering contributes to happiness through the mediating roles of social support and optimism. It was found that students with greater overall well-being felt valued, and this in turn gave them stronger social support. Due to the feeling of mattering, these individuals performed better in their academics and achieved personal success. Findings from Yeo and Lau (2020) concurred with Foo and Prihadi (2021).

A more recent study by Lin (2023), discovered that feeling mattered brought about positive outcomes. Although some respondents felt the contrary with regard to certain constructs of mattering by Schlossberg (1989), overall, the respondents felt that they mattered, and it helped them to achieve academic success and complete their studies.

The findings from the studies demonstrated that mattering can affect learners in many areas and is significant to them, regardless of whether they are full-time or part-time students. Mattering is seen as a key component in understanding students' learning experience better. Another significant point that could be highlighted is the scarcity of studies conducted on mattering in higher learning institutions. Some of the earlier mentioned studies pointed out that more studies need to be conducted on mattering among university students (Lin, 2023 & Yeo and Lau, 2020).

### The Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Higher Education (MHE)

The earlier sections of this conceptual paper have focused on the five constructs of mattering and the past studies that have applied the theory of mattering at higher learning institutions in Malaysia. These two sections have provided the foundation to better understand studies on mattering in Malaysia. This section focuses on the Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Higher Education (MHE). The MHE was developed by Schlossberg et al. (1989) with a focus on non-traditional learners. The purpose of the instrument is to look into non-traditional learners' experience of mattering at their higher learning institutions. The five scales in the instrument are peers, academic advisors/mentors, faculty members, administration, and multiple roles. The first scale looks into learners' experience of mattering with their peers. It is to see how much they matter to their peers and how it affects them. Next, the academic advisor/mentor scale, on the other hand, looks into learners' mattering experience with their academic advisor/mentor. Learners will need to reflect on their personal experience when communicating or consulting with their academic advisor/mentor. Moving on to the next scale is the faculty members. This scale measures learners' experience of mattering based on their interactions with their lecturers. Their interactions include those during online and face-to-face learning sessions. The administration scale looks into learners' feelings of mattering when they deal with the staff at their administration office. Last but not least,

there is the multiple roles scale. Since non-traditional learners hold many responsibilities, this scale is to see how the university as a learning institution understands them as learners juggling multiple responsibilities. However, based on a study conducted by Lin (2023), investigating the experience of mattering among online distance learners at a higher learning institution, it was discovered that the three additional scales should be added to the instrument by Schlossberg (1989). This will be discussed in the following section.

## DISCUSSION

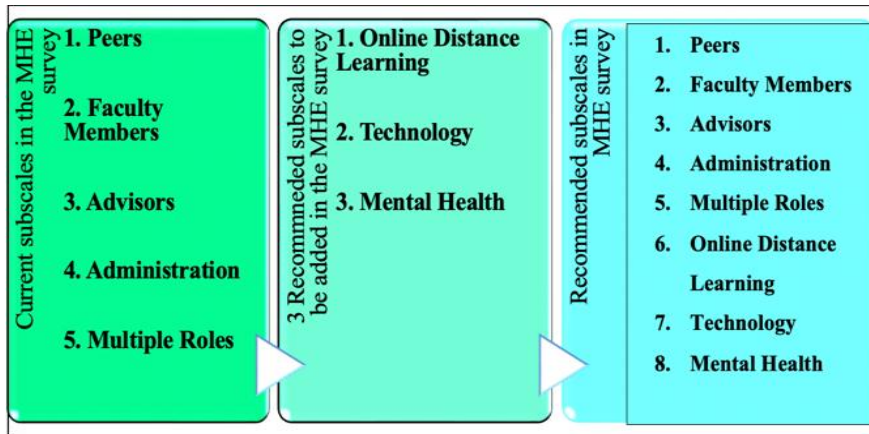


Figure 2.0: Three recommended scales to be added to the MHE Survey

The Figure above shows the recommended scales to be added to the MHE Survey based on a study conducted on distance learners. Based on the findings of the study, it was discovered that three aspects were repeated multiple times, and they are having fully online lessons, knowledge about using the learning management system, and learners' mental health. These aspects were seen as integral, as understanding online learners is as important as understanding full-time learners. Although the instrument developed by Schlossberg, Lasalle, and Golec in 1989 was intended for adult learners, however, some modifications are deemed necessary due to changes in time and environment.

According to the study by Lin (2023), distance learners need better assistance when it comes to using the learning system. They felt that it mattered to them that more attention needed to be given since they are older learners compared to the full-time learners. Hence, including a scale on the learners' experience of using technology would be useful, as they are distance learners and most of their learning time is spent online rather than face-to-face. This scale would be useful, especially when one investigates distance learners' experience with the use of technology.

Another aspect highlighted was conducting fully online lessons. It mattered to the respondents that they had been given the option to only have fully online lessons. This was due to their personal financial constraints and personal accessibility. Incorporating a scale that looks into learners' experience of mattering in having online classes can help administrators and instructors plan better and fulfill learners' needs.

Last but not least is a scale that looks into distance learners' mental health. As mentioned earlier, distance learners have fewer contact hours compared to full-time learners, and they do not meet their peers on a daily or weekly basis. Hence, it is a different learning experience for them. Therefore, they are alone and on their own compared to full-time learners. Understanding their feelings and emotions as adult learners is important and can be useful, as it could influence their learning experience

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, based on the study conducted by Lin (2023), the Mattering Scales for Adult Students in Higher Education survey is still valid; however, some modifications need to be made to ensure it remains current and updated with today's online adult learners. It is hoped that with the new scales, an in-depth understanding of mattering among online adult learners can be captured for the betterment of higher learning institutions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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