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## Adult Learners' Perceptions of Barriers that Delay their Degree Completion at K University

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Kouassi N'Guessan Vincent De Paul

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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2023

Abstract

Adult Learners' Perceptions of Barriers that Delay their Degree Completion at K  
University

by

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MS, Walden University, 2017

BA, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2005

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2023

## Abstract

As the population of adult learners increases in higher education institutions across the globe, recent studies demonstrate that they face barriers that delay their advanced degree completion. Although K University (pseudonym) had discussed this delay among its adult student population, no studies or interventions had been proposed to address the problem. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the adult learners' perceptions of personal and institutional barriers that delayed their degree completion at K University. Johnstone and Rivera's theory of internal and external barriers was the conceptual framework used in this study. Data collection was based on semistructured personal interviews with 10 purposefully selected adult learners who studied at K University from 2013 to 2021 and graduated with a delay. Akinyode and Khan's five steps for analysis led to these themes: The training of the adult educator, support systems for adult students, and dysfunctionalities within the university, among other barriers. The findings revealed that the entire staff lacked the skills and competence to support adult learners in their academic and administrative challenges. A professional development to create and sustain a successful Professional Learning Community (PLC) was proposed to help the staff address these institutional barriers collaboratively. Faculty, administrators, and adult learners may benefit from the outcome of this study through the collaborative effort to support adult learning within this university and similar higher education institutions with nontraditional learners across the country. Also, the PLC could help universities support adult learners in their journey toward successful and timely degree completion, thus, motivating them to be more efficient agents of social change.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this body of work to my friend and brother, Prof Amon Paul N'Dri;  
thank you for your support and for believing in me.

## Acknowledgments

I acknowledge that this research project would not have been possible without the support of my brothers, the Marist Brothers of the Schools. I thank God for blessing me with these marvelous companions who always supported me with their prayers and presence; they helped me overcome the personal and institutional barriers that could have significantly delayed my degree completion. I also want to thank my committee members, Dr. Crystal V. Lupo and Dr. Kathy M. Zientek. Having both women in this doctoral journey has also been a blessing to me. I will remain ever grateful for their guidance, insights, and challenges throughout this academic experience.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

The growing number of adults with busy professional lives enrolling in college to earn an advanced degree has become a global phenomenon. Recent research has even identified them as the new majority in higher educational institutions across Africa (April, 2021; Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2018) and the western world (Gaebel et al., 2021; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; MacDonald, 2018). This ever-increasing population of nontraditional students has created many challenges for these learners and the higher institutions where they study. Gopalan et al. (2019) and Bellare et al. (2021) argued that barriers to degree completion are the main challenges that higher institutions and their adult learners encounter in their academic journeys. This study addressed the personal and institutional barriers to advanced degree completion faced by the adult learners at a single university, which will be called “K University” in this study.

At K-University, there is evidence that these adult learners encounter personal and institutional barriers that cause significant delays in their degree completion. According to the Director of Professional Development of CFC (personal communication, January 2021), adult learners have admitted that personal and institutional barriers explain the delay they face in their journey toward degree completion. In the internal assessment and evaluation report (K University, 2019), the Director added that most adult learners complete their program later than the expected two years required for their advanced degree. This personal communication and the evaluation report are further attested to by some documents from the database of K University. The evaluation report also

mentioned a circular (Cir. MEN/ No245/ 2018) from the Ministry of Higher Education (Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur). The document recognized adult learners as the new majority in colleges within the country and advised all universities to find interventions against the poor graduation rates and the delay in degree completion.

### **Rationale**

The latest data from the registry office (2019) indicated significant delays since opening of the adult learning section (The Center of Lifelong Learning or “Centre de Formation Continue” (CFC)) at K University in 2013. For that initial year, 45 adult learners registered for the two-year post-graduate program; 29 (64.44%) were able to graduate after four years. In 2014, the second batch of 13 students experienced more delay; three students (23,07%) completed their advanced degree after 5 years in 2018. The other 10 students (76,92%) had not completed their degree in 2020 and were still registered as continuing students. Table 1 illustrates the delay in degree completion at the CFC by showing the number of students beyond the two-year completion from 2017 and 2019, before the Covid 19 pandemic, which provoked the temporary closure of K University.

**Table 1***First Two Batches of Adult Learners at K University*

Graduating	2 years after	3 years after	4 years after	5 years after
2013 - 2017 (45 students enrolled)	0	0	29	
2014 - 2019 (13 students enrolled)	0	0	0	3

Further evidence from the same data (Registry Office, 2019) revealed that the delay began in the first year for one-third of the adult learners enrolled in the two-year advanced degree program. In 2019, 31,03% did not complete their first year and did not sit for final examinations. It is, therefore, evident that the final year groups will experience more delay since K University did not adopt an alternative to the brick-and-mortar teaching and learning but closed the CFC for two years when the Covid 19 pandemic hit the country.

These delays have been discussed by the academic council (2020) and the management board of the university in their end-of-year evaluation meeting. According to the Vice-Rector, there have been discussions about reducing adult learners' delays when completing their advanced degrees at the CFC. The meeting minutes mentioned an awareness that these delays should involve addressing adult learners' personal barriers and other possible barriers at the institution level. This awareness did not move K University to find practical solutions to reduce the personal and institutional barriers their adult learners face. Further, there are no studies on barriers provoking adult learners' delay in advanced degree completion.

From 2016 to 2019, from the 54 project studies from students in the department of education and sociology, none tackled the problem of personal or institutional barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion. Finding ways to ensure the timely completion of adult learners' advanced degrees is still a practical problem at K University. This project study addressed a problem revealed as a gap in practice in the local context. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the personal and institutional barriers that delay the adult learners' degree completion at K University.

### **Definition of Terms**

The terms in this section are the common concepts and notions used throughout this project study. They are also common to the language of higher education and adult learning specialization in which this project study falls.

*Academic Support Services:* This phrase is a term that refers to several education services that higher institutions provide to reduce the challenges that learners face in their academic journey. Osborn et al. (2019) viewed the support services as “academic interventions, coaching, supplementary instruction and tutoring to impact student success” (p.9).

*Adult Learners:* In the literature, the term “adult learners” takes into account terms like nontraditional students, matured, veterans, seniors, and, more recently, “post-traditional” (Urban & Jirsáková, 2021). Adult learners represent students above the age of 25 with “one or more of the following characteristics: they are older when entering tertiary education, attend part-time education, work full-time, are financially independent, or have dependents” (Urban & Jirsáková, 2021, p. 2).

*Barriers:* This term represents the difficulties or challenges at the personal or institutional level that adult learners encounter in their academic journeys. Barriers represent experiences in the adult learners' lives that stand as obstacles to timely degree completion. Rabourn et al. (2018) described barriers as constraints or "unique circumstances that adult learners face" that influence their success. In the context of adult learners, Karmelita (2020) further explained by stating that barriers are "various influences that impact adult learners' transition" (p. 67).

*Degree Completion:* In the context of higher education and adult learning, this term refers to the adult learners successfully attaining their graduation. According to Remenick (2019), degree completion for adult learners implies their ability "to persist and to graduate too" (p. 124) through their many challenges and barriers.

*Traditional student:* Learners who are less than 25 years old are considered traditional students. However, beyond the age factor, in a college setting, "the traditional student has parents who are able to pay for college; can (afford to) live on campus; is unencumbered by children, and thus does not require employment to afford tuition" (Bahrainwala, 2020, p. 251).

### **Significance of the Study**

This qualitative project study addresses a local problem about the personal and institutional barriers that delay adult learners' advanced degree completion. In focusing on the sub-Saharan African context, this study will add to the body of research in the field of adult learning in Africa, which is insufficient (Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2018; Tolliver et al., 2018; Wolhuter, 2019). The findings will reveal adult learners'

perceptions of the barriers that delay their advanced degree completion. The meaning of these barriers will generate recommendations that could help policymakers and higher education institutions to draw strategies that support and promote successful adult learning in the country. Therefore, this study is essential for social change because, after the timely completion of their degrees, with their acquired skills and competencies, these adult learners will return to their workplace and communities as more competent and skillful agents of positive social change.

### **Research Questions**

At the time of this study, the significant problem among adult learners at K University was that they faced personal and institutional barriers that delayed their degree completion. Although past and recent research has demonstrated that adult learners who attend higher education have unique needs and face barriers that delay their degree completion (Coffman & Draper, 2022; Heller & Cassady, 2017; Popov & Shestakova, 2022; Rabourn et al., 2018), K University has not addressed the barriers that cause those delays. With the purpose of exploring the personal and institutional barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion, a basic qualitative research study was selected in line with the following two questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are adult learners' perceptions of personal barriers that delay their advanced degree completion?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are adult learners' perceptions of institutional barriers that delay their advanced degree completion?

## Review of the Literature

The aim of the literature review was to do a comprehensive synthesis from the current conversation about the personal and institutional barriers that adult learners face in their advanced degree completion. The literature included studies in the form of peer-reviewed articles on the barriers that adult learners face in higher education. Following the conceptual framework and the research questions, I focused on the personal and institutional barriers adult learners face in their advanced degree completion. Therefore, the review incorporated the framework, the background information, and the two broad categories of barriers: personal and institutional. The terms that I used to search the database were: *adult learners*, *barriers to degree completion*, *adult challenges in higher education*, *personal and institutional barriers of adult learners*, and *difficulties of nontraditional learners in college*. The terms intrinsic, individual, and situational were also used for the personal barriers, while extrinsic, external, and situational referred to the institutional barriers encountered at the University.

The Walden University library was the primary tool for searching sources related to the topic. For each search box line, I utilized the synonyms suggested by the system. In the first search box line, I inserted “adult learners OR adult students OR mature students OR nontraditional students.” In the second box, I used “barrier OR obstacle Or difficult\* OR challenge.” In the third box, I used “student perceptions Or student beliefs Or student impression Or student views OR student attitudes. I added a fourth box for “project study” to have more specific and related results considering the nature of this research.

The Walden University library offered a variety of higher education journals with scholarly articles, some dissertations and theses relating to the topic, encyclopedias, handbooks, and dictionaries that guided the search for relevant materials and references. In addition, I searched databases like Education Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, and Academic Search Complete to locate relevant literature. I also used Google Scholar, which is incorporated in the Walden Library. It facilitated the finding of abundant recent literature and full texts related to barriers delaying adult learners' advanced degree completion.

The literature search resulted in 70 articles, and saturation was reached when entries across sources became repetitive, and the concepts and themes were recurring in any additional literature about the topic. All the articles found from the search related to either personal or institutional barriers, thus aligning with Johnstone and Rivera's (1965) theory of external and internal barriers, which served as the conceptual framework for this study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In a national study of participation, Johnstone and Rivera (1965) presented the different barriers to adult education. From a potential 10 clusters of barriers they found, the authors developed two broad categories of barriers: external, or situational, and internal or dispositional barriers. The external barriers represent influences that people cannot control because they are external to the individual. An example of these external barriers is the cost of the program. The internal or dispositional barriers are, in addition to

external ones, barriers that reflect the personal attitudes or mindsets, such as the thinking that one is too old to learn.

Although later research from Cross (1981) and Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) would add a couple of barriers, institutional and informational, to Johnstone and Rivera's categories, barriers always relate to the person either internally or externally. Cross' (1981) institutional barrier represents systems within the institution that discourage the learners and prevent them from persisting or completing their degree within the allocated time. That institutional barrier that she presented could be external since it is a challenge that comes from outside of the adult learner. Even the barrier that Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) added to Cross's barrier and called informational barrier category could also be classified as internal or external. The informational barriers occur on account of the learners' unawareness or lack of information about educational activities. These barriers could be considered external if the institution communicated poorly to the learners.

Therefore, for this project study, I categorized adult learners' barriers to degree completion into two broad clusters, personal and institutional. Considering the other forms of barriers as either personal or institutional, I aligned the findings in the literature to the conceptual framework. Thus, the internal barriers to adult learners' degree completion would be personal and include the terms: intrinsic, psychological, motivations, personal challenges, personal dispositions. The external barriers to the adult learners' degree completion are, in this project study, the institutional barriers or any barrier that emanates from the higher institution where adults study. The terms and

phrases that refer to those institutional barriers include extrinsic, external policies, and informational barriers. Following these two general categories of barriers, I articulated the broader literature review around two main themes: personal barriers and institutional barriers. Before entering into these two themes, it is essential to explore the population of adult learners in higher education within the broader literature.

### **Adult Learners Population in Higher Education**

The phrase “adult learners” appears under different synonyms in the current literature. The search considered these different usages that meant students above 25 and studying to earn a university degree (Spica & Biddix, 2021). The expressions used for adult learners include some phrases such as nontraditional adult learners (Chen, 2017; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Hunter-Johnson, 2017), mature students, or mature-age (Heagney & Benson, 2017; Mallman & Lee, 2017; Saddler & Sundin, 2020; Šestanović & Siddiqui, 2021), seniors (Johnson, 2021) and veteran for much older adults of over 65 years (Lim et al., 2018; Wagner & Long, 2020), and older learners (Cummins et al., 2019). For this project study, I chose to remain consistent with the title and use “adult learners” as a working term throughout the research.

The entire body of relevant literature confirms that the population of adult learners in higher education is growing across the globe. In their literature reviews, Glowacki-Dudka (2019) and Cummins et al. (2019) noted the strong interest among adults to embark on completing a college degree, notwithstanding the many challenges they face in their personal lives. This motivation to learn should justify more research about adult learners in higher education. Furthermore, the literature review that

MacDonald (2018) conducted revealed steady growth in the number of adults enrolling for college degrees in the United States of America (US) and worldwide. In the US, where this rise is more visible than anywhere else, he noted that the National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) projected a 14% rise to 14 million adult learners by 2024. That growing adult learners' population is also attested by the fact that, in 2017, they constituted 78% of the student population that enrolled in for-profit schools (Arbeit & Horn, 2017). The increasing enrollment of adult learners in higher education institutions has remained constant, despite the many personal and institutional barriers they face in degree completion.

### **Personal Barriers**

Personal barriers refer to all the challenges preventing the timely degree completion that relate intrinsically to the adult learners' lives. Johnstone and Rivera (1965) described those personal barriers as being either internal or dispositional. They represent challenges that reflect adult learners' personal beliefs or attitudes towards studying to earn an advanced degree. These personal barriers also include challenges that adult learners face in their personal lives that constitute potential barriers to their success. The literature review identified and explored many personal barriers adult learners face in their advanced degree completion, which are detailed below.

### ***Time Management***

Adult learners in higher education institutions have jobs, family responsibilities, and other activities. They are adults whose lives are busy with these socio-professional engagements; it becomes, therefore, challenging, as MacDonald (2018) mentioned, when

they want to find some extra time for further studies at a higher institution. He argued that since only 18% of adults do not work while studying, time management is a significant personal barrier for adult learners. He described time management for adult learners as a “struggle” because they must constantly manage so many responsibilities alongside their desire to complete their degree on time. As learners with busy lives, this struggle to manage their time has provoked stress among adult learners.

There is evidence in the literature that adult learners in higher education face lots of anxiety and stress due to poor time management. As Lapina (2018) argued, adults’ capacity to cope with stress is a crucial skill they have to learn when they begin to study in college. According to her, stress is inevitable in an adult learning context; however, she suggested that reflective learning helps adult learners develop coping strategies and complete their degrees without delay. Although this project study does not focus on strategies to cope with stress among adult learners, Lapina’s (2018) work shows that stress, when provoked by poor time management, is a personal barrier to adult learners’ timely degree completion in higher education. This idea that stress is a personal barrier is further developed by Adams and Blair (2019). They argued that when learners control time, they achieve better performance and are assured to succeed in their studies. According to them, time is easily controlled by younger learners who are not as busy as adult learners who have many occupations and roles (Adams & Blair, 2019). Their study, therefore, provided some explicit and implicit evidence that time management could be a significant personal barrier delaying adult learners’ degree completion in higher education (Adams & Blair, 2019).

### ***Financial Obligations***

Another personal barrier found in the literature and often associated with time is adult learners' financial commitments. As adult learners must find time for their jobs, families, and children, education means investing more time and money, which, according to MacDonald (2018), constitutes a real challenge for most learners. Although adults who embark on studying for an advanced degree may have the money to pay for their tuition, that money is always an extra expenditure to find. Some extra money for health, food, and transportation may come as an additional cost and turn financial obligations into personal barriers, thus delaying degree completion and success in the adult learners' studies (Hunter-Johnson, 2017; MacDonald, 2018). Financial obligation, therefore, points to family and work responsibility as significant barriers. In the USA, those barriers are regarded as "the two highest-rated barriers for adult learners to return to the classroom" (MacDonald, 2018, p. 160).

### ***Adult Learners' Transition***

There can also be many challenges or personal barriers for adult learners returning to school after many years without academic experience. According to Heller and Cassady (2017), returning to school and transiting from their professional life to higher education can create some deep academic anxiety among adult learners at the beginning of their studies. It was reported that adult learners perceive that transitory moment as a significant psychological barrier (Heller & Cassady, 2017). MacDonald (2018) supported the idea of academic anxiety among adult learners, especially for those who are not familiar with technology and see it as a threat or a barrier in their degree completion.

Older adults who are not used to technology or computers can struggle when they begin to use them intensively in higher education institutions. In West Africa particularly, Tukur et al. (2021) argued that using technology and computers in their studies is linked to the general feeling that studying to obtain an advanced degree will be too challenging for adult learners.

Some adult learners' initial feeling is that it is too complicated for older people to transition from their busy lives to the life of a student. That transitional barrier is what Lapina (2018) discussed in her work. Her studies revealed that adult learners feel demotivated in their transition back to school (Lapina, 2018). The institutions that welcome them could address the fear of not performing well among younger students and the anxiety that comes with it.

### **Institutional Barriers**

Besides the personal barriers, the literature also revealed significant institutional barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion. I analyzed studies directly related to those institutional barriers and other works with a different focus that could be used in the current research. For example, Netanda et al. (2019) emphasized the need to find support interventions to encourage persistence and reduce attrition among adult learners in higher education; however, they recognize that institutional barriers in higher education are the root cause of this need for support intervention. Similarly, Roosmaa and Saar (2017) supported this evidence and argued that higher education institutions across all continents have institutional barriers that delay adult learners in their degree completion.

The literature review included many sources exploring institutional barriers that adult learners face in college. The themes that emerged are course management, which includes course registration, course time and registration process (Hunter-Johnson, 2017); institutional bureaucracy; poor support system; and transition programs. I chose a thematic exposition of the literature rather than a chronological presentation because the themes cut across time, places (Roosmaa & Saar, 2017), cultures, and races (Hansen et al., 2019).

### ***Course Management***

A significant aspect of studies for new students and adult learners returning to higher education is the choice and registration of courses. According to Hunter-Johnson (2017), students can be overwhelmed with the whole process of managing their courses. He argued further that adult learners are often worried because some universities cannot offer the courses they seek (Hunter-Johnson, 2017). Some institutions can only offer them at an inconvenient time or conflicting hours. Goings (2018) supported poor course management and qualified it as an inconsistency within higher education against adult learners' timely degree completion.

Unlike traditional or younger students, adult learners enroll at universities to upgrade their skills and respond to practical needs. Therefore, unavailability of courses and classes at odd hours represent, as Hunter-Johnson (2017), Goings (2018), and Hansen et al. (2019) argued, a significant barrier in the very structure of the University. Hunter-Johnson's (2017) study showed that 34% of the adult learners interviewed identified poor course management as a significant barrier to their degree completion. The participants,

in Hunter-Johnson's (2017) studies believed academic institutions should schedule courses while considering the busy lives of adult learners.

Again, Hunter-Johnson (2017), Goings (2018) and Hansen et al. (2019) demonstrated that not having a variety of programs for adult learners prevents participation and timely degree completion. They also identified methods that are not suited to adult learners as institutional barriers to their timely degree completion. Owusu-Agyeman et al. (2018) supported that idea and recommended andragogical methods in the teaching and learning transaction with adult learners because they have unique needs. These barriers, related to course management, indicate, according to Goings (2018), an "inconsistent institutional support" (p.164) or a lack of support system and bureaucracy (Hunter-Johnson, 2017) that are also significant institutional barriers.

Some universities' long course registration process is the primary evidence of how these lengthy procedures can demotivate and delay adult learners in their degree completion. Hunter-Johnson (2017) considered the complexities related to registration in the institutions as "extenuating factors that also play a crucial role in whether nontraditional adult learners successfully complete their higher education journeys" (p. 175). This particular institutional bureaucracy also relates to course management, calling for institution intervention because it can alienate adult learners. Many researchers (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Heller & Cassady, 2017; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Johnson, 2021; Wagner & Long, 2020) have advocated for a university support system to help adult learners succeed in their degree attainment.

### *Support System*

Robust academic support systems to accompany adult learners in their higher education journey are not standard in most higher institutions. These support systems help students enter their first year, register smoothly, and study better during their entire academic journey. Therefore, support systems should also include transition programs, which a lack of, according to Kallison Jr. (2017) and Jepson and Tobolowsky (2020), constitute the most significant institutional barriers. Although his work analyzes transition programs to help adult learners succeed in higher education, Kallison (2017) also exposed all the institutional barriers related to the poor support systems in higher education institutions. From his studies, the following barriers, among others, could be derived: lack of college knowledge instruction, college readiness curricula, student-directed learning, poor tutoring, and academic advising. These were also described by Ann-Clovis and Chang (2021) as inadequate academic preparation for adult learners within the higher institutions.

Housel (2020) and Hansen et al. (2019) added the unsuitable method of teaching adult learners to those barriers. Using Malcolm Knowles's principle of andragogy, they argued that adult learners, with their unique needs, require methods of delivery that consider their nature and needs. According to Jepson and Tobolowsky (2020), additional needs that institutions should consider are the prior experiences of the adult learners, noting that teaching methods that do not value and incorporate adult learners' prior experiences could delay degree completion. Therefore, as Housel (2020) concluded in his study, Institutions must realize that "providing more effective, relevant, and

individualized instruction to all adults is critical to enhancing their academic achievement and success” (p.14). The lack of methods adapted to adult learners would be an evident major and significant institutional barrier delaying adult learners in their advanced degree completion. These methods could also help boost their motivation and mitigate stigmatization against adult learners, which remains another significant institutional barrier reported in the literature.

Support systems within higher education have been used to support some adult learners who have been stigmatized as they return to school. Mallman and Lee’s (2017) study demonstrated how the higher institution environment could unintentionally encourage isolation and stigmatization of adult learners, arguing that the culture and mode of operating in higher education institutions could ostracize returning adult learners who are no longer familiar with the system and culture. According to Mallman and Lee (2017), the stigmatization and shame of it are institutional barriers that delay adult learners’ degree completion right from their first year.

### **Implications**

This study assessed adult learners’ perceptions of the personal and institutional barriers that delay their advanced degree completion. The purpose was to explore and determine the particular barriers that caused adult learners to be delayed in completion. The findings in the broader literature and participants’ perceptions and identification of barriers could help reduce the delay in advanced degree completion among adult learners (Wong, 2018).

Although the K University opened the adult learning section to allow a growing population of professional adults who wished to complete an advanced degree, the delay in degree completion could demotivate adult learners from enrolling in advanced degrees (Burnell, 2019; Cotton et al., 2017; Saddler & Sundin, 2020). Therefore, finding lasting solutions such as academic support systems, transition programs, and adapted and flexible registration processes to help adults complete their degrees on time is vital to help K University continue the adult program. Furthermore, K University has not addressed barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion (personal communication, January 9th, 2020); thus, this study can raise awareness and encourage the University to start researching solutions to those personal and institutional barriers.

The interviews will provide data that point to barriers directly related to the adult learners at K University. The responses and ensuing results could help the administration identify, set up, or strengthen policies and support systems that tackle those specific barriers. The university could gradually reduce the delay experienced by adult learners in their advanced degree completion. At the end of this study, I propose a project in the form of Policy Recommendations with Details (PRDs). The project is a 15-to-30-page work that will specify the background and evidence of the identified problem. The project will also and ultimately outline the recommendations to K University and other institutions of higher learning enrolling adult learners within the country. Therefore, the PRDs will potentially guide K University and similar institutions to provide customized personal or institutional support to the adult learners, and thus help effect positive social change through their timely advanced degree completion.

## Summary

With the increasing number of adult learners in higher education, barriers they encounter in their advanced degree completion have become a concern for K University. However, the administration has not addressed the problem yet. K University is a public institution with lots of infrastructure and personnel. Nevertheless, there is no academic support system to support the adult learning population. Therefore, this study will provide a more profound understanding of personal and institutional barriers and allow immediate intervention to help adult learners complete their programs within the time frame.

Section 1 presented the problem and the purpose for the study regarding how personal and institutional barriers constitute a significant issue among adult learners studying for an advanced degree. The conceptual framework that I used to operationalize this research is Johnstone and Rivera's (1965) internal and external barriers model. Their framework aligns with this research, as it helps understand the two broad categories of barriers, personal and institutional, that adult learners face in their advanced degree completion. Further, understanding those two types of barriers guides and justifies the intervention through the PRDs. The literature review incorporated the conceptual framework, adult learners' population in higher education, personal and institutional barriers; it concluded with the implication of the research and possible intervention to reduce the barriers to timely degree completion.

Section 2 will describe the methodology used in this project study. I applied a basic qualitative method of research to identify and understand the personal and

institutional barriers that delay adult learners' advanced degree completion. In addition to the methodology, I describe the site, the participants, the type of data analysis used, and the results. Section 3 will include the proposed project's findings in the PRDs mentioned earlier. In the final part, Section 4, I will make some observations about the project and reflect on what I learned in the whole process.

## Section 2: The Methodology

As mentioned in the first section, this study's purpose was to address a problem of personal and institutional barriers delaying adult learners' degree completion at K-University. The two research questions specified the two broad categories of barriers faced by these adult learners. The primary research question related to the learners' personal lives, asking, "What are adult learners' perceptions of personal barriers that delay their advanced degree completion?" The secondary research question focused on the institution where the adult learners study: "What are adult learners' perceptions of the institutional barriers that delay their advanced degree completion?" In this second section, I provide justification for the research design and approach selected for the study. In addition, I provide a detailed description of the 10 participants and information about the data collection strategies.

### **Research Design and Approach**

This project study used a qualitative research design to address the research questions. According to Locke et al. (2009), a qualitative design allows the researcher to understand experiences and meaning "from the vantage point of someone (or some group) who actually experiences that phenomenon" (p. 187). The purpose of this study was to explore and interpret participant perceptions of personal and institutional barriers that delay their degree completion. The understanding of these barriers derives from the participants' experiences and perspectives. In such interpretive description, a basic qualitative approach is the most appropriate study design choice (Thorne, 2016).

The terms used synonymously with interpretive description are basic, generic, general, traditional, or pragmatic qualitative inquiry. A basic qualitative approach helps to discover participants' perceptions and experiences in relation to a practical problem, as is the case in this study. Furthermore, in qualitative research, the focus is on the quality of the experience, as Babbie (2016) stressed. Therefore, the methodology in this study is one that unveils the meaning of the adult learners' experiences of the personal and institutional barriers that delay their degree completion. The basic qualitative approach was the most appropriate choice for this study considering the descriptive work of participants' experiences and perceptions that it involved.

Moreover, as Kahlke (2018) explained, basic qualitative methodology is not based on a particular philosophical tradition like constructivist grounded theory, for instance. For that reason, I rejected the grounded theory, as it also called for large sample when the research topic is "nebulous or broad in scope" (Kahlke, 2018, p. 1). The topic in this project is well-defined and required a smaller number of participants for the interviews; thus, it did not align with grounded theory.

Similarly, I did not choose the narrative approach or the phenomenological one. The narrative approach is best suited for unusual and unique experiences, though it focusses on "what matters from the person's point of view" (Haydon et al., 2018, p. 1). The topic of this project, adult learners' personal and institutional barriers that delay their advanced degree completion, is not unusual but is instead common, as exposed in the review of the literature. In short, the continuity of engagement that is demanded in the narrative approach was not a necessity in this project study.

I also rejected the phenomenological approach because it goes beyond the understanding of participants' experiences. Although it is the preferred methodology in many qualitative research studies in lots of disciplines (Miller et al., 2018; Tuffour, 2017), it remains close to the narrative approach. Tuffour (2017) commented that many critiques have dismissed the phenomenological approach as a method that cannot fully grasp the meaning of what participants express as perceptions or experiences. He stated that "questions have been raised whether it can accurately capture the experiences and meanings of experiences rather than opinions of it" (p. 4).

The basic qualitative approach offered the best way to explore and describe the personal and institutional barriers that delayed the adult learners' advanced degree completion. It enabled me, as the researcher, to discover how the challenges, at the personal and institutional level, impacted each participant in a unique way. That basic qualitative approach allowed a detailed description and thorough understanding following the studying and interviewing of carefully selected participants. As a result, the chosen basic qualitative design was the most effective way to analyze the problem, address the research questions, and provide the most accurate answers.

### **Participants**

Qualitative approaches require the researcher to select their participants carefully so that they can offer meaningful experiences with quality results. Sampling becomes, therefore, the main challenging task in qualitative studies because the size of the population should help reach accurate interpretation of the results (Naderifar et al., 2017). A purposive sample, with the aim of avoiding subjective judgement and bias, helps select

participants that provide quality data. As Etikan and Babtope (2019) explained, in purposive sampling, the researchers select participants that are aware of both the aim and purpose of the study. The selection of participants is also important because their responses will guide the conclusion of the study. As a result, the researcher must have clear criteria for selecting who participates, how they are selected and reached. Besides the procedures for gaining access to the participants, establishing an effective relationship with the participants and ensuring they are ethically protected helps obtain quality and rich contributions (Johnson et al., 2020). The purposive sampling and snowball were used to select participants in this study.

### **Selection of Participants**

The Centre of Lifelong Learning at K University has an exclusive population of adult learners; therefore, I selected participants from among the graduates of that university. A purposive sample was used to conduct this study, with the aim of including only those who could better answer the research questions. Purposive sample, as Johnson et al. (2020) stated, implies that “Qualitative researchers recognize that certain participants are more likely to be “rich” with data or insight than others, and therefore, more relevant and useful in achieving the research purpose and answering the question at hand” (p. 141). In this study, even those who completed their advanced degree without delay could be relevant participants if they experienced personal and institutional barriers in their studies. Snowball sampling helped identify those students who graduated on time despite the barriers they faced.

In addition to purposive sampling, I also used snowball sampling, which could be considered a type of purposive sampling. Johnson et al.(2020) classified it as part of purposive sampling, explaining it as a process through which active participants may refer some additional participants whom they see as knowledgeable in the topic or unknown to the researcher (Etikan & Babtope, 2019). Snowball sampling helps reach participants who may feel uncomfortable sharing embarrassing experiences. Sharing experiences of delay in advanced degree completion is not always pleasant; in this sense, snowballing sampling is appropriate because it is “ commonly used in very culturally sensitive studies” (Etikan & Babtope, 2019, p. 52). The purposive sampling design, coupled with snowball sampling, were, therefore, appropriate for selecting adult learners for the personal interviews. These adult learners had the experience and expertise to provide rich insights and answers to the research questions of this project study.

### **Justification for Number of Participants**

Qualitative studies seek to interpret the quality and depth of the participants’ shared experiences and perceptions. The sample size becomes, thus, crucial in order to gather quality responses to the research questions. Etikan and Babtope (2019) supported that idea by stressing that “getting appropriate and adequate sample sizes of respondents who are randomly selected helps reduce sampling error or biases in researches” (p. 53). Although Vasileiou et al. (2018) argued that a small sample size could threaten or influence the validity of the results, it is also true that in qualitative studies when participants are few, it allows deep inquiry per individual. Therefore, the research review

process informed the decision that 10 adult learners selected purposively would provide deep and relevant responses to the research questions.

The participants for this study were selected from the 31 adult learners who completed their degree, 29 of them in 2017 and 3 in 2018, after a four-year delay for the two groups. The choice of the 10 participants considered their diversities in terms of age and sex. The university allowed access to the respondent files and contacts following the data use agreement, thus facilitating the procedure for gaining access to participants in order to choose the most relevant respondent.

### **Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants**

I emailed a letter to the registrar of the Learning Centre of Lifelong Learning at K-University (see Appendix B). The letter explained the purpose of my project study and described how I would ensure the participants' confidentiality and absolute freedom to participate or withdraw. In addition, the letter clarified that all the participants' data and identities would remain confidential, and that the university would never know the identity of those involved in the study. With all this assurance of protection and confidentiality, K University provided the list and contacts of all the adult learners who enrolled and completed their degrees from 2013 to 2018.

I sent an email and a WhatsApp message to all the participants describing the study and asking for their assistance and collaboration. The communication also included the data collection process with the consent statement, along with my email contact and phone numbers. I ask the participants that if they consented, they could fill out the consent form within a week and send it back through my email and WhatsApp number as

provided. All participants agreed to collaborate in the study; they completed the form and returned it during the week.

### **Researcher-Participant Working Relationship**

Establishing a trusting atmosphere and link between the researcher and participants is crucial for the quality of research. In qualitative research, the quality of the results will depend on the quality of the data collected. The participants' willingness to share their perceptions and how knowledgeable they are about the phenomenon being studied becomes an opportunity when they have a trusting interpersonal relationship with the researcher (Goldstein, 2017). In the case of this study, I informed the participants about the purpose of the research, which was to explore the personal and institutional barriers that delay advanced degree completion. I also explained that the study's findings could inform a project intervention that could help reduce personal and institutional barriers to advanced degree completion among adult learners at K University.

Additionally, I shared with the participants my experience and challenges as a non-traditional student with personal and institutional barriers to my advanced degree completion. That honest sharing, as Shaw and Satalkar (2018) argued, is an important part of establishing a fruitful and truthful researcher/participant working relationship in qualitative research. The participants saw my sharing as a sign of openness, trust and transparency among adults with similar academic experiences and facilitated the working relationship. Further, the genuine participant-researcher relationship facilitated the participants' understanding of their ethical protections, which are detailed next.

## **Ethical Protection of Participants**

The working relationship with the participants prepared and helped communicate their ethical protections, which is another essential part of any research that involves human participants. According to Arifin (2018), that protection, which is attained through the application of appropriate ethical principles, is more crucial in qualitative studies that explore human experiences through interviews or focus groups. In this qualitative study, personal interviews were the data source from which the responses to the research questions were pulled. Thus, it was essential to maintain professionalism by assuring the participants of their protection, freedom to participate, the respect of their rights, and total confidentiality regarding their responses and identities.

I sent the participants a consent form that explained all the aforementioned elements of the ethical protection of human participants. The form helped them understand that, as a researcher, I had their best interest in mind and as a priority. Again, the form clarified their total freedom to withdraw from the study at any time if they felt threatened or disrespected. Additionally, I explained that data collection would be confidential, meaning that every piece of information they gave would be protected out of respect of their privacy, as mentioned in the consent form. The open communication and the consent form assured the participants of anonymity and confidentiality, which, according to Lancaster (2017) and Arifin (2018), remain essential in the ethical protection of participants. Finally, I included in the form my email address and my WhatsApp numbers to allow consenting participants to return the form. I also gave them the email contact of my committee chair and Institutional Review Board (IRB) if they

wished to communicate or inform of any threatening aspect of the whole data collection process. The Walden IRB approval number for my study, which was also provided to them, is 09-16-22-0647089.

To continue ensuring more trust during the data collection process, I sent a WhatsApp message to each participant, assuring them of their freedom to leave the process at any time, even after signing and returning the consent form. These extra cautions and measures demonstrated to the participants my commitment to respecting their freedom, opinions, and decisions during the interview process. I assured the participants that there would be no pressure, coercion or compulsion to give particular views during the interviews, thus ensuring the neutrality of the interviews, as Yeong et al. (2018) suggested in their interview protocol refinement.

The participation was, therefore, voluntary and did not necessitate any payment on my part. After the interview, I offered them a flash disk, a pen and a notebook, as an appreciation for the time given to help in the study. Offering these gifts after the interview was a way of avoiding any influence on participants during their responses. As a result, the participants did not respond to please the researcher. Finally, apart from the risk of influencing the participants' perceptions and responses to the research questions, there were no other glaring risks that could affect the integrity of the data collection process.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection preparation process started after K University agreed to use their data and granted access to the students' files. The Walden University IRB (#09-16-

22-0647089) and this agreement with K University are the required documents sanctioning this study with the authorization to begin the research through the official data collection process. Seeking all the permissions before the beginning of data collection reinforces the protection of the participant and the credibility of the research. Zimmer (2018) argued that authorizations are crucial in data collection as they justify the ethical dimension of any research or study. Therefore, obtaining permission from Walden and K-University legitimized the data collection procedures, which I aligned with the problem, the purpose, and the research questions, as mentioned in this study.

This study is a qualitative inquiry; the data are essentially the experiences and insights that participants share through personal interviews. As Barrett and Twycross (2018) explained, interviews are the most appropriate ways to collect relevant data when conducting qualitative studies. I gathered the data through personal interviews with each adult learner who accepted to be a participant. These one-on-one interviews aimed to answer the two research questions posed in this study. The interviews generated data that I recorded and stored with maximum protection; as Arifin (2018) suggested, all researchers should do in respect of the data protection act. A recording Google application inside my phone allowed me to simultaneously record and transcribe the interviews.

I labeled and stored the collected data on my personal computer with a strong password and kept the machine safely in my office. Additionally, I replaced the name of the participants with numbers to respect anonymity. Thus, the data collection material included the location, the date and time of the interview, the length of the interview, and

the participants' names replaced by codes. Finally, I sent the data collection from the computer to the cloud to avoid losing what was collected. All these data collected through the semi-structured interviews are set to be deleted permanently after three years.

### **Semi Structured Interviews**

In preparing for the personal interviews, I utilized the twelve tips that McGrath et al. (2019) provided as tools to help researchers in qualitative inquiries. Those guidelines helped me prepare as an interviewer by constructing an interview guide to test the questions. Their suggestions prepare the researcher and the participant before, during, and after the interviews, thus making the whole data collection process a more accurate exercise. As advised by Roulston and Choi (2018), in the case of semi-structured interviews. I prepared a list of open-ended questions, as the main interview questions (see Appendix D), that also allowed for more follow-up and probing questions to the participants. The interviews started only after the participants had returned the signed consent form and agreed that the interviews be recorded, whether in person or online.

The interview protocol I utilized in this study comprised seven questions: three relating to personal barriers, three to institutional barriers, and one general question to conclude. I gave each interviewee the freedom to indicate the way they wanted the interview conducted, and they could also choose a convenient location if they wanted it in person. Eight of them decided to have their personal interviews face-to-face at their workplace. One participant had it on WhatsApp, and one preferred to have the interview on Zoom. The participants on WhatsApp and Zoom agreed to activate their video options, thus, allowing direct observation like the in-person interviews. Recent research

from Jenner and Myers (2019) has demonstrated that personal interviews conducted via online video applications reveal deep and rich personal experiences, and are not so different from public in-person interviews, provided participants are free to choose.

The participants felt more comfortable sharing personal and intimate experiences and perceptions because they decided how the interview should be conducted. As many researchers (Tran & Keng, 2018; Whitaker & Atkinson, 2019) have noted, the sharing is more authentic when interviewees are made aware of their freedom of decision throughout the interview process. In this study, the interviewees decided on how to conduct the interview; thus, they created a safe place to express themselves with freedom and honesty. Additionally, before starting the interview, I reiterated to each participant my attachment to protecting their privacy through the confidentiality of the interviews.

I conducted the interviews within 30 minutes to 1 hour, according to the participants' readiness to share more or not. The time allocated was sufficient for all the participants; some took more time than others, although all 10 of them ended their interview within 60 minutes. The participants answered the seven open-ended questions, the first six questions were specifically about the personal and institutional barriers that delayed their degree completion, while the last was more general. That seventh question, *“What do you think the University could do, as action or policy, to help reduce the barriers that delayed your degree completion?”*, gave the participant an opportunity to propose ways that could help the university intervene to reduce the barriers to adult learners' degree completion.

Upon completion of the interview, I stopped the recorder and informed each participant that they would receive a draft of the findings to help check the accuracy and credibility of the study. Further, I informed them that I was ready to discuss any doubt or clarification they could have. All participants received the draft and indicated, via phone, that the finding reflected the experience they had at K University; they were satisfied with the study, its confidentiality, and had no further questions or comments. They knew, as initially stated, that there was no incentive for their participation; however, I expressed my appreciation by thanking them and giving them a flash disk, a pen and a notebook in the end. Finally, I transcribed the recordings and the notes within the 7 days that followed the conclusion of the interviews.

**Table 2**

*Interview Dates and Locations*

Date of Interview	Number Conducted	Location
September 29, 2022	1	Participant's office
September 29, 2022	1	Participant's office
September 30, 2022	1	Online WhatsApp
September 30, 2022	1	Participant's office
October 1, 2022	1	Online Zoom
October 1, 2022	1	Participant's office
October 2, 2022	1	Participant's office
October 2, 2022	1	Participant's office
October 3, 2022	1	Participant's office
October 4, 2022	1	Participant's office

*Note.* The above table is the schedule of the participant personal interview date and locations.

The experiences that the participants shared in this study should help K University explore the personal and institutional barriers that delay the adult learners' degree completion. Additionally, their feedback may guide the project that accompanies my

study to address the problem of personal and institutional barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion at K University.

### **Member Checks**

I used member checks to avoid bias in the findings from the personal interviews. It consisted of having my participants verify the integrity of their experiences during the interview process. As Motulsky (2021) noted, member checks have proven to be the most effective way of ensuring findings are credible and not biased. I sent the recorded interview data draft results to all the participants so that they would review and evaluate their accuracy via WhatsApp and email. I gave the participants the freedom to contact me for further discussion if they found the data unreliable and biased. The 10 participants responded through emails and WhatsApp messages confirming that there was no bias and, therefore, no need for further discussions.

### **Management of Collected Data**

After completing all 10 personal interviews, I transcribed the recorded data and began the analysis stage. In analyzing the data, I used Akinyode and Khan's (2018) five steps that help transcribe qualitative data to be translated into themes. The five analytical steps they suggested after data collection include the following: (1) data logging; (2) anecdotes; (3) vignettes; (4) data coding; (5) thematic network (pp. 166-167).

After the organizing and basic themes had been drawn, I conducted member checking to validate the results through the opinion of the participants and, thus, ensuring accuracy in the findings. The steps helped manage the data collected systematically and comprehensively. The data logging step, also called "data documentation" (Akinyode &

Khan, 2018, p. 166), consisted of an interactive and simultaneous comparison between the data collected and my own ideas and assumption noted in my reflective E-journal. This comparison helps the researcher identify issues to consider during the data analysis, particularly during the next step, called anecdotes.

The anecdotes step is a process of transcribing the data into a story, following the chronological sequence of events. With my observation of the participants' nonverbal reactions, I put each completed interview into a narrative form. As suggested by Akinyode and Khan (2018), I wrote the anecdotes immediately after each interview in the form of a summary of the interviewee's explanation of the subject matter. I gave a different color to each participant in a table I created to guide the coding and thematic steps. These anecdotes facilitated the elaboration of themes at the end of the analysis.

After the anecdotes, following the step called vignettes, I provided every possible detail about the interviews in order to deepen the interpretation of the data. I went beyond the mere description by considering every note I captured in my E-journal. These vignettes, as Akinyode and Khan (2018) stressed, "allow higher level of interpretation beyond mere description, higher sense of understanding about the phenomenon and allow the capturing of themes" (p. 166). The anecdotes and vignettes steps helped me organize the data, interpret and understand it better to prepare for the coding and drawing of emerging themes.

The final steps consisted of coding and finding themes. I used different colors for the coding. I categorized and organized the data into basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes in a form of a network, according to the description of Akinyode and

Khan (2018, p. 171). Then, I applied the emerging themes to the research questions with a list of the participants' answers to facilitate the interpretation of the data. During these final steps of analysis, the researchers' thoughts and intuitions were added to the reflective E-journal. I completed the transcription and reviewed the documents with electronic copies. Finally, I printed the transcripts and sent a copy to each participant using a color-coded file with the purpose of having them check the credibility and accuracy of the findings. I kept the electronic documents in a password-protected file on my personal computer and saved them on a USB drive. I am the only person with access to those files with all the data. All the data, soft and hardcopy, will be completely deleted and destroyed after five years.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

Twenty-five years ago, as a traditional student, I studied for my undergraduate at the university in this study. Again, as an adult learner, I studied for my Ph.D. in philosophy at the adult learning section of the same university. Besides this study experience and relationship with the university, I have worked in educational institutions, assuming different leadership roles, for many years. I worked as a vice principal academic in different high schools and a university college for 17 years, and two years now, as principal of a university college. I have cumulated 19 years of educational experience, with six years in higher education. Although I studied at K-University, I do not have any responsibility or work that currently involves a relationship with the students. However, my status as an adult student and educator created a felt link with the

participants in this study, which I had to be aware of to avoid biases or interference with my ideas and experiences of barriers and delay in degree completion.

As an adult learner with experience of barriers in completing my advanced degree, I was confronted with the challenge of remaining objective and not interfering with the participants' answers and experiences. I controlled my reaction and feelings; I avoided asking them follow-up and probing questions that would compel them to give answers to confirm my thoughts. The awareness of that need for self-discipline helped me remain professional in my role as a researcher when collecting the data. I neither agreed nor disagreed with my participants' experiences of personal and institutional barriers that delayed their advanced degree completion. My opinions and experiences of barriers and delays in degree completion did not surface to influence the participants' responses. The probing and follow-up questions were only aimed at clarifying the participants' experiences shared in their responses. I made sure none of the participants had an active role as students or a job at K-University at the time of this study. My ultimate objective in this study was to remain objective and faithfully present the findings and analyze the data as the participants presented them.

### **Data Analysis**

I conducted the data analysis within the following week after collecting the data. The data analysis stage is crucial in qualitative research, as it helps achieve a major goal in interpretive studies; it provides a deep understanding of the experiences gathered during data collection. According to Azungah (2018), data analysis in qualitative studies exposes a comprehensive report of themes derived from the interviews. As mentioned in

the section entitled Management of Collected Data, I used Akinyode and Khan's (2018) proposed five steps to analyze the data in this study. Those steps include *Data logging*, *Anecdotes*, *Vignettes*, *Data coding*, and *Thematic network* (pp. 166-167).

In the first step, called data logging, I documented and reviewed the collected data. I used the Bixby Application to transcribe the audio into text in Microsoft word for review. Then, I used the office dictation option in Microsoft Word to transcribe the translation I made from the original French to English. Several reviews helped confirm the responses that the participants gave during the interview. Again, I anticipated the thematic network stage by identifying the potential themes that could emerge from the data, as Azungah (2018) recommended. I used those early themes to support the following two steps: The anecdotes and the vignettes. The extra information I observed during the interviews and the stories around the participants' perceptions constituted the anecdotes and the vignettes. As Akinyode and Khan (2018) suggested in their approach, I documented those two steps in my E-journal during the interview process. Therefore, I reviewed the information in the E-journal against the participants' responses to remain objective during the coding process.

Using my E-journal and the organized data I collected, I proceeded to the data coding process. Although I coded the data manually, I also used the Nvivo software to code and count the occurrences of themes in the different responses of the participants. The use of coding software, as Elliot (2018) argued, is recommended in data analysis because of its practicability in making the researcher remember several codes. Therefore, the software helped divide the data with codes in order to organize the data further and

identify themes during the thematic network step. After labelling the different pieces of data using codes with different colors, I grouped them into different categories to keep the data organized.

From the different codes I generated, I grouped similar ones under a banner that represented a category, which is more abstract than a code. As Rogers (2018) explained, categories help find patterns or concepts that can be grouped to narrow down the variety of codes that will enable the development of themes. From the categories, I elaborated the different themes as constructs explaining similarities across codes and categories. I avoided consciously interfering with that theme development process with my biases and personal opinions. Therefore, I elaborated themes free from biases and external influences that did not reflect the participants' ideas.

During the process, I constantly checked any conflict between the participants' ideas and my feelings and prior experiences about personal and institutional barriers delaying advanced degree completion. My E-journal, where I noted my feelings, biases, and reactions, helped me check and code the data without bias. This process of checking the participants' ideas against my biases and conflicting feelings reinforced the study's objectivity, credibility, and validity. Again, the participants checked the themes and did not object to any, showing that the data they gave during the interview were accurate.

### **Ensuring Accuracy and Credibility of Findings**

Robust quality research depends on how the researcher ensures the credibility of the findings and the accuracy of the data. According to Nassaji (2020), the role of the qualitative researcher is to demonstrate that their findings are trustworthy because they

emanate from systematic methods like in quantitative research. He proposed four trustworthiness principles that Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 290) discussed. These norms for trustworthiness include *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *conformability*, which I used to ensure that the themes and the conclusions reflected what the participants shared during the personal interviews.

Focusing on credibility, which, as stated by Nassaji(2020, p. 428), “concerns the “truthfulness of the finding and the extent to which they reflect the reality of the phenomenon being investigated”, I used member checking to ensure the participants’ validation. As mentioned before, I sent the draft result to the participants and asked them questions about the description and the correctness of the themes. Further, I allowed the participant to comment on possible biases of my interpretations. That trustful exchange with the participants made them answer with freedom and objectivity. Each participant was able to identify their inputs within the different themes that I derived from the personal interviews. They all responded that the interpretations were unbiased, as they could confirm that the finding reflected their responses with accuracy. This validation from the participants achieved through member checking was, therefore, the best approach to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the research findings.

### **Limitations**

This study, like any other, experienced some limitations. First, the participants are adults who are reticent and suspicious about the use of new technologies, like android phones and applications like WhatsApp or Zoom. I found it difficult to convince two participants about the safe use of online tools to conduct personal interviews. Biney’s

(2020) studies demonstrated a significant reticence among adult learners in West Africa who do not want to use the online option for any interviewing or further studies.

However, an open discussion with the participants about the wide literature that demonstrate the reliability of online tools helped them understand and collaborate.

Studies on the effectiveness of online interviews from Manko (2020), Domingo et al. (2022), and Wargadinata et al. (2020) convinced the participants to choose the online interview option in confidence.

The second limitation was the translation of some texts, especially the interview questions and the consent form, from English into French. Participants speak only French; therefore, the text had to faithfully reflect the questions, indications, and instructions with clear language. My training as a translator and mastery of the two languages helped me obtain translations that allowed accurate responses from the participants.

Finally, another limitation is in the explanation of the word barrier. Its translation into the French word *barrière* required more synonyms for the participants to situate it in the Ivorian context. Words like challenges or difficulties translated into French as *défis* and *difficultés* are more positive than barriers; they helped participants share their responses and experiences with a better understanding of the interview questions.

## **Data Analysis Results**

### **Findings**

This study aimed to explore adult learners' perceptions of personal and institutional barriers that delayed their advanced degree completion at K University. The following were the research questions that guided the study:

RQ1: What are adult learners' personal barriers that delay their degree completion at K University

RQ2: What are adult learners' institutional barriers that delay their degree completion at K University?

The data collection method was personal interviews of 10 purposefully selected participants. All the participants received an invitation and consent form, to which they agreed before I proceeded with collecting the data. The 10 participants were interviewed and responded to all seven questions as designed in the protocol. The sample chosen for this study included participants with the purpose of having a wide range of diversity in their experiences, programs of study, socio-economic situations, professional life, family status, age, and sex.

With the vast diversity in their experiences, saturation was reached after interviewing all 10 participants who did not offer some more thematic novelties in relation to the research questions. Saturation was reached when the participants had given sufficient responses for all possible themes that could emerge, as Lowe et al. (2018) explained. Further, the repetitive information patterns in the responses also indicated that there was no new information to share and that there was thematic saturation. After all

the participants had been interviewed, I was able to conclude, as Lowe et al. (2018) phrased it, that “the data contained all information necessary to answer the research questions” (p. 192). There was, therefore, no need to look for and interview more participants.

### **In-person and Phone Interviews**

The in-person and phone interviews I conducted with the 10 participants generated the data used to respond efficiently to the research questions. Before beginning the personal interviews, I made sure that each adult learner was eligible for the study. The participants had completed their advanced degree at K University with some delay, and they were all adult learners according to the previously mentioned definition from Urban and Jirsáková (2021). At the time of their studies, they were all above the age of 25, had some financial dependency, and had some responsibility vis-à-vis their families or other dependents. All that information about the participants demonstrated that they could provide effective and accurate answers to the research questions presented in this study.

The 10 participants were enrolled and completed their advanced degrees between 2012 and 2018 at K University. They pursued different programs at the CFC, and all experienced some delay in completing their advanced degrees. Seven of the participants were male students, and three were female students. They all enrolled for their advanced degrees at different moments, with experiences of personal and institutional barriers that delayed their degree completion. Two female and four male students completed their degrees with a 2-year delay; one female and two male students experienced a 3-year delay, and one male student completed his degree with a 4-year delay. The interviews

were in-person for eight participants, five male, and three female students. I conducted a video call interview with the two remaining male students. In accordance with what was promised about protecting the participant's identity and ensuring privacy, the following codes were assigned to the participants. P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10. The 10 participants answered all seven questions in the interview protocol, and no discrepant cases were identified.

### **The Themes**

The data analysis led to the identification of six major themes: (a) Financial struggles, (b) Studies, job, and family life balance, (c) Training of the adult educator, (d) Support systems for adult students, (e) Dysfunctionalities within the University, and (f) Superstition and spirituality. The seven interview questions were aligned with the two research questions. The first three questions were connected and aimed at allowing the participants to share thoroughly about the personal barriers that delayed their advanced degree completion. The following three questions were also designed, in their connectedness, to help the participants express their experiences of institutional barriers that delayed their advanced degree completion. The last question invited general comments and possible interventions from the university or the decision-makers to address the problem of personal and institutional barriers delaying adult learners' degree completion at K University and, possibly, in the whole country. Participants' responses to the last question should help in choosing the genre of the deliverable project in the third section of this study.

The manual coding and the Nvivo coding of the interview transcripts led to the identification of 162 codes which I divided into six major themes in the thematic networking stage. The participants described *Financial struggles* (Les défis financiers) as challenges encountered in finding money to pay high tuition fees at K-University, where adult learners pay six times more than traditional government-placed students. All 10 participants mentioned it as a theme and as the most significant personal barrier in the completion of their advanced degree at K University; it appeared 100% of the time when I coded all the responses. *Studies, job, and family life balance* was also 100% in the coded responses. All the participants expressed how challenging it was to find time to study when they had a busy professional life and a family to care for. They explained that the time spent at their jobs and with their children and partners considerably reduced the time they consecrated on their studies. Following these first two themes, the *Training of the adult educator* accounts for 90% of the responses; Only one participant did not mention it explicitly. The participants commented that most lecturers treated them like traditional younger learners. They expressed that instructors did not show them consideration with regard to their experience and age. They all concluded that the lecturers at K University lacked proper training in andragogy and expressed the need for formation around adult learning and teaching in higher institutions. The participants then directly linked the training in andragogy to the *Support systems for adult learners*. This theme also weighed in at 90%, as nine participants commented on the need for K University to provide specific support and information to adult learners to clarify the entire degree process. According to the participants, the university should give adult-

related support rather than general support to all students. they also stressed that the supervisors should have more meaningful and frequent encounters with them during their capstone phase. The following theme that appeared during the coding stage is *Dysfunctionality within the University*. It appeared 80% of the time in the coded responses of the participants. They described it as a lack of professionalism and proper structural, administrative, and academic organization. according to most participants, the long bureaucracy, the absence of personnel in the offices, and the poor communication about academic programs cause the dysfunction within the university, ultimately causing delays in degree completion. Finally, *Superstition and spirituality* represented 70% of coded responses; most participants stressed the importance of negative energies among families and friends that influence the success of their studies. Research has largely demonstrated that, in many African cultures, there is lots of superstition and the belief that the enemy's negative thoughts can affect one's life plans and projects (Duruamaku-Dim, 2018); the participants expressed it and commented that their religiosity and faith helped them overcome all negative thoughts against them and helped them complete their degrees. They added that discipline, focus, and prayer were the only tools in the face of the negativity that delayed their degree completion. Below is a more thorough explanation of how the data collected from the participants supported each theme.

### **Perceived Personal Barriers**

The interview questions aimed at helping the participants share their perceived personal and institutional barriers that delayed their degree completion. The first three questions focused on the personal barriers that delayed the adult learner's degree

completion: Question (1), What barriers, challenges, or obstacles in your personal life made it difficult for you to complete your degree on time? Question (2), Can you share other personal barriers that stood as the most challenging in your degree completion? and Question (3), How did you feel about those barriers, and would you share about some other barriers that made you feel the same? From the data analysis, it is evident that all participants identified balancing school, job, and family life, with financial struggles as major personal barriers that delayed their degree completion. They also identified superstition and spirituality as personal barriers that delayed their degree completion.

Table 3 outlines the themes that emerged from data analysis RQ1

**Table 3**

*Personal Barrier Themes*

Barriers	Themes
Personal barriers	Studies, Job, and Family life balance Financial Struggles. Spirituality and superstition

***Theme 1: Studies, Job, and Family Life Balance***

Nine participants expressed that the time spent with their partners and children made it difficult to dedicate themselves fully to schoolwork. They explained that putting their studies ahead of family commitments brought disputes and misunderstandings in their couples. P1 said that her husband was the “biggest obstacle” in her studies.

According to her, being away from the family was never accepted by the husband; it led to the breakage of the family. She insisted that “the studies were never accepted by him. We had to divorce. It was very heavy to divorce after 25 years of marriage, but I had to

make a radical choice”. She added that the divorce process “cost more than one year of delay in the degree completion.”

All the participants recognized that they had to struggle between spending quality time with their families and finding time to study. Most of them gave priority to their family and their job, thus, resulting in delayed submissions of schoolwork. P2 lamented about the lack of support from her husband and children, who could not understand that she needed their encouragement and time to study. According to her, “the kids and their dad felt abandoned” whenever she needed time away to attend classes or to study. She also added: “I felt guilty that I was not playing my role as a mother and a wife”. Her family could not understand why she felt she needed to study when she already had a job and a salary. She finally recognized that the lack of support from a husband “who had no idea of what studying for a higher degree was” discouraged her and delayed her degree completion. All other participants also expressed their challenge to balance their studies and their presence with their families. P3 explained that he “had to abandon everything in order to save wife and kids”. He felt his studies were “making it difficult to take care of the spouse”, and he was “less present in the family”. He stated: “there was physical presence but not really present to my wife and kids... I could not continue to be focused and work even though I wanted because my family was suffering”. According to him, “these realities delayed the degree completion”. P5 also described family life as a significant barrier that delayed his degree completion: “marriage and family brought in unexpected things, I was tossed upside down, disturbed in my studies”.

P4, who was the only participant with no partner and children, explained that his busy professional life was the barrier that delayed his degree completion: “I could not juggle between my extremely busy job and research, assignments and studies. I had to delay my studies”. The pressure of giving time to be with the family is what P6 also pointed out as the main barrier that delayed his degree completion. During the interview, he commented in the following words: “dedicating time for your wife and kids is a determining factor in causing lateness in our work”. With his other commitment at his job, he had to neglect his studies and give time to his wife and kids, who kept complaining whenever he wanted to study. according to him, they would ask him questions such as: “what are you doing again? have you not finished studying? Are you opening your computer again?”. These questions, as he commented, represented “too much pressure” in his studies. The other participants also expressed that same “sense of guilt” when the family did not understand and support their study initiative. They used expressions like “I feel guilty” (P5), “you only think about yourself” (P7), “it comes in the form of a guilt” (P8), and “what are you looking for again? (P9)” among other accusing comments. The last participant (P10) who commented that studies were “very difficult for adult professionals” summarized that first personal barrier in the following words: “The family is also a problem; you can’t prevent kids from watching TV. Sometimes, I have to wait late, late, late before reading...and the next day, I have to go to work”. Finally, all the participants described their job and family responsibilities as major personal barriers that delayed their degree completion; they also linked that personal barrier to the financial challenge they experienced.

***Theme 2: Financial Struggles.***

All participants established a connection between their challenges in balancing their studies and family responsibilities and their financial situations. The participants are like all average civil servants in developing countries where salaries barely suffice to afford extra education for adult learners in most cities (Joewono et al., 2019; Nakamura et al., 2019). According to the participants, paying their tuition fees would have been impossible if they had relied only on their monthly salaries. What they earn monthly is dedicated to the needs of their immediate and extended families, as is the case in all African cultures (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10). All the participants resorted, therefore, to bank loans to pay for their tuition and other study-related expenses. When some among them could not obtain the loan on time to pay for their tuition, they had to delay their registration and, consequently, their degree completion. For example, P1, who dwelt a lot on the financial barriers, explained the following: “I took loans upon loans; when the bank refused to give me, I had to delay my registration, and I lost a whole term”. In the same line of thought, P2 insisted on saying: “finances made my studies and life very, very, very difficult; fees are more than what I earn. Debts from the bank strangled me; it was a huge constraint that forced me to stop for some time”. The financial barrier also caused P4 to miss his exam because he could not clear the tuition fees as required by K University before sitting for examinations: “The huge registration fee is not accessible to every pocket. Before exam in July, they (K University) want you to pay everything; I did not have it, so I miss the exam and a full year”. All other participants also expressed how their struggle to find the money for the full tuition was a significant personal barrier that

delayed their degree completion at K University. They all mentioned that most of their colleagues who never completed their degrees attributed it to the lack of finances. For the last participant (P10), the financial barriers represented the most significant: “Every study has a cost; information has a cost; and here, I have to say, the cost is too much. Some of our friends stopped because they could not pay anymore”. With the family barriers and financial struggles, some participants also mentioned the negative thoughts and energies of those who were jealous to see them studying for a higher degree. This personal barrier is what falls under the theme of superstition and spirituality.

### ***Theme 3: Superstition and Spirituality***

Although the participants could not demonstrate with facts, 70% of them expressed that mystical forces were working against the successful completion of their advanced degree. The use of expressions such as “witchcraft is a reality in Africa” (P2, P9), “negative vibrations” (P1, P10), and “mystical aspects” (P3, P4, P8) demonstrated that the participants were superstitious. They were convinced that some people close to them could have mystically contributed to delaying their degree completion. The participants attributed most of their challenges to the “negative mystical influence” (P1, P4, P10) of some people around them who were “happy to see people suffer and not succeed” (P10). They considered negative influence as a significant personal barrier, especially in Africa where, according to all of them, “witchcraft really exists.”

The last participant (P10) took a long-time explaining how witchcraft and mystical powers affected and disturbed his concentration and focus during his studies. Although he was able to “overcome it with prayers”, he affirmed that they represented

serious personal barriers that delayed his advanced degree completion. The other participants also recognized that the belief in superstitions and witchcraft was a personal barrier that delayed their degree completion. However, they overcame that barrier with their “faith and spirituality” (P3, P4, P8). Besides, the participants attributed that personal barrier to the members of their families. A participant (P10) commented, “in African families, studying is an internal and spiritual fight too”. Another (P4) added, “they think you want to prove you are better, you are intelligent. So, they work at discouraging you, breaking you”. Superstition and mysticism are very present in African culture, as mentioned earlier. Although participants did not use facts to demonstrate them, they firmly believed and perceived them as significant personal barriers that delayed their degree completion. Adding to these personal barriers, all the participants expressed that K University, as an institution, presented some barriers that delayed their advanced degree completion.

### **Perceived Institutional Barriers**

The second set of three questions focused on the adult learners’ perception of institutional barriers that delayed their degree completion at K University: Question (4), What challenges or difficulties did you meet at K University, at the beginning, and throughout your academic journey, that you can describe as barriers that delayed your degree completion? Question (5), What aspect(s) stood as the biggest challenge(s)? and Question (6), How did those barriers in the institution make you feel in your academic journey?

The data analysis demonstrated that the participants identified three major institutional barriers that delayed their advanced degree completion at K University. As mentioned earlier, all the participants identified the challenges of insufficient support systems for adult learners, the dysfunctionalities within the university, and the need for adult educator training as institutional barriers.

Table 4 outlines the themes that emerged from data analysis RQ1

**Table 4**

*Institutional Barrier Themes*

Barriers	Themes
Institutional barriers	Support Systems for Adult Learners Dysfunctionalities within the University The Training of the Adult Educator

***Theme 1: Support Systems for Adult Learners***

Among the participants interviewed, nine described how important it was to have support from the University in order to complete their advanced degrees on time. They all expressed that, as adult learners with busy professional lives, some guidance and support from the university was necessary. In their responses and narration of their experiences, they referred to this theme as the support and information to be given to adult learners so as to clarify their entire academic journey. They all explained that because they had returned to school after many years of interruption, it was imperative to receive some guidance, support, and accompaniment to avoid the delay they all experienced during registration and choice of specialization. According to a participant (P1), she “received no support for choosing the right specialization”. She added: “My wrong choice of

specialization provoked a delay because I had to stop for some time. They were not clear about the orientation”. Participant (P8) also explained that K University did not have anything in place to guide the students, and it resulted in a delay at every step: “registration, assignments, exams, the dissertation, resulting in years of delay in our degree completion.”

All the participants agreed that support for adult learners should begin with providing the right information to them. They all commented that “information does not circulate correctly; It does not pass” (P2). Referring to the University, the following comment was added: “they do not tell us things as they are; there is always a little side that is hidden”. The participants regarded this poor communication as a significant institutional barrier that delayed their degree completion. For example, three participants complained that they were delayed because no clear communication was given about deadlines for submission of their project: “nobody knows when to submit or when to receive feedback” (P2) “in fact, we do not know anything” (P3), “even the promised dates and months are never respected” (P5). As the participants explained how the lack of a support system contributed to delaying their degree completion, they all related it to the fact that there were some dysfunctionalities at the level of the University.

### ***Theme 2: Dysfunctionalities within the University***

As mentioned earlier, eight participants identified the dysfunctionalities within the University as major institutional barriers that delayed their degree completion. They all explained that the disorganized structures, the unprofessionalism in the administration, and the mismanagement of academic programs led to confusion that contributed to the

degree completion delays. For example, the first participant (P1) described the registration process at the University as a “scam”. She explained that the University “cheated” her: “I paid and was not put in the right faculty as the University promised”. P6 expressed the same “disillusion” of being put in a specialization he never chose during registration: “they moved me to a specialization I did not want to do; then, I threatened to quit and go to another university...”. The same idea is what one participant (P3), who experienced a one-year delay, expressed in her answers: “the administration delayed us; it was not organized enough”. Further, she accused the university of being the cause of the delay and stressed the lack of structural organization: “they anticipated our lateness and forced us to sign a paper saying we are late one year while we were following the right track”. In concluding her comments, she reiterated the accusation: “it is their fault if we were in this situation. There are no effective rules and policies, and we suffered the delay for that reason.”

Similarly, P5 highlighted in his responses the poor organization of structures within the University and qualified it as a serious institutional barrier that delayed the adult learners from their registration till their degree completion. According to him, the Institution was at fault vis-a-vis the adult learners’ delay of degree completion because they “were all asked to wait before registration, for no reason; that University was never ready, and nothing seems to be well coordinated”. The comments of P6 further elucidate the delay they experienced at K University. According to him, although the Institution managed to solve a few issues when he threatened to quit the University, it remained a disorganized entity that continued to “delay and frustrate” adult learners. He made the

following comment when concluding on Question (4); “it was solved. But, as you can see, institutional barriers remain huge at my University because nothing is organized the way it should be”. All the participants saw the poor organization at K university as a barrier that delayed their degree completion because, at different levels of their studies, it caused them to mark a pause they did not plan. Finally, the participants expressed that the poor organization was necessarily related to the unprofessionalism of the administration staff.

The last participant’s comments indicate all the adult learners’ perceptions of the entire administration at K University: “at the level of the University, I will say that it is not always the best workers that we have at this university” (P10). Like him, the other participants complained bitterly about the lack of expertise and unprofessionalism of the administrative staff in charge of adult learners. Some participants expressed that the staff at K University discouraged them and caused them to complete their degrees with delay. They evoked an absolute lack of respect in the staff/student relationship: “there is no courtesy at all in the administration” (P1, P9 P10), “we never get what we ask for” (P10), “information is never given clearly when you go to their office, and you end up wasting more time than necessary” (P2, P10). Participant 10, who expressed a lengthy complaint about the staff, described them as a “huge barrier delaying adult learners’ degree completion”. He also added: “They are not at their place; they should know that they are part of the whole administration; they should do their job. We should feel that you are part of this administration. If you have this job and you’ve been given this job, that means you should be able to provide the information people want”. He concluded by reiterating

that “all these unpleasant situations delay the adult learners and can push some students to abandon”. All the participants deplored the same professional shortcoming among the teaching staff and highlighted the need to train the staff in the area of adult learning or andragogy.

### ***Theme 3: The Training of the Adult Educator***

The need to train all instructors in the field of adult learning and teaching so as to make them more efficient when teaching and relating with adult students appeared as a necessity, according to all the participants. Only one participant (P10) did not mention the training of instructors in relation to their teaching. He only related the training to the social interaction between the instructors and adult learners. However, more than the other nine participants, he dwelt on the instructors’ poor communication with adult students, which he described as a “big institutional barrier that disrupted the teaching and learning process (...) and delayed the advanced degree completion”.

The participants’ area of interest or specialization is adult learning; therefore, they identified specific aspects of andragogy that most of their instructors lacked when teaching. For example, P1 explained that “experience is central for any adult learner. Unfortunately, the teachers never considered our experiences when teaching”. According to him, there was a need to give all adult learners’ educators practical knowledge on teaching and relating with adult students. As Mahmudovna (2023) argued, experience is crucial among the principles guiding adult educators in teaching adult students. Adult learners value their experience; however, all the participants observed that their instructors could not realize it. Three participants (P3, P5, P6) used the same sentences in

describing their experiences with their instructors: “They do not know what it means to teach adults like us”. The participants were unanimous that their instructors “demotivated” them, “frustrated” them, and “delayed” their degree completion. These words and expressions appeared in all the participants’ responses during the personal interviews. The word “frustration” appeared seven times during the interview with P10.

The participants also commented on the need to give constructive feedback that will encourage and motivate adult learners. According to most of them, the instructors did not possess that basic skill. P9 qualified the instructors’ feedback as “poor”: “I think there is poor feedback, poor feedback method”. P10 shared the same feeling and ideas and stated: “the way feedback is given is disrespectful and poor. These can discourage, and this really for me, delayed me”. The general feeling and experiences of the participants pointed to the need for training the instructors at K University. According to all the participants, the instructors’ lack of training appeared as the most significant institutional barrier that delayed adult learners’ degree completion at K-University.

### **Conclusion**

Section 2 of this project described my data collection process and the analysis approach that helped answer the research questions. I also explained why the basic qualitative research method was appropriate. Finally, I justified using personal interviews as the most effective approach to obtain data and the findings in this qualitative project study. The data analysis led to the identification of the following six themes that I described in detail: (a) Financial struggles, (b) Studies, job, and family life balance, (c)

Training of the adult educator, (d) Support systems for adult students, (e) Dysfunctionalities within the University, and (f) Superstition and spirituality.

Further, in this section, I explained how I chose the participants, a rationale for reaching a preferred number of participants, and how I gained access to them. Again, I elaborated on the importance of researcher-participant relationships and crucial measures for protecting their confidentiality. In the data collection section, I explained the methods used and my role in the research process. I ended section I with a description of the approach in the data analysis and the validation of the finding through member checking. In section 3, I will present the findings of this study in the form of a project.

### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this project study was to explore the adult learners' perceptions of the barriers that delay their degree completion at K University. In preparation for a deliverable in the form of a project to address that problem, I invited the students in the last interview question to propose interventions and solutions that could help the university address the barriers and reduce the delay. The findings of this study show that adult learners believe that their instructors lack basic skills and knowledge in teaching and supporting nontraditional students. Therefore, the participants proposed that the teaching and administrative staff be trained on how to understand, teach, and support adult learners.

After analyzing the data and presenting the findings from the participants' perceptions, I chose to create a professional development 3-day workshop to train faculty and administrative staff at the study site on how to understand, teach, and support nontraditional students in their academic journey through a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Six themes emerged from my research to show that adult learners at K University face personal and institutional barriers that delay their advanced degree completion. Those themes are the following: (a) financial struggles, (b) studies, job, and family life balance, (c) training of the adult educator, (d) support systems for adult students, (e) dysfunctionalities within the university, and (f) superstition and spirituality. The data analysis showed that the participants saw the need for training faculty and administration on how to teach and support adult learners as crucial. Therefore, although

the initial plan as presented in the proposal was to create a Policy Recommendation with Details, I chose to create a PLC to help unite the entire staff in their effort to support adult learning at the study site.

### **Rationale**

Despite the significant delay in degree completion among adult learners at K University, the management has not found any solution to the personal and institutional barriers causing that delay. According to the students who graduated with a delay between 2013 and 2020, the lack of skills in teaching and in supporting nontraditional students represents a major barrier that delays their advanced degree completion. In response, I chose to provide professional development training for faculty and administration that derives from evidenced-based practices from the literature and findings of my research project. A 3-day workshop delivery via a PLC will equip the staff with skills that adult educators require as nontraditional students in higher education.

According to Leslie (2020) and Romijn et al. (2021), professional development opportunities and programs help instructors be more effective for their learners as they acquire and develop knowledge, skill, and attitudes to better support their learners. Therefore, because it supports skill-building (Romijn et al., 2021), a workshop of professional development for the staff was the most appropriate deliverable to address the barriers that delayed adult learners advanced degree completion at K University. With the findings of the research project supported by the data collected, analyzed, and validated by the participants, the professional development program will help the staff understand and better support nontraditional students at K University. As Lester et al. (2020) argued,

when the professional development program is directly informed by the findings of a study, it makes a more positive impact on those benefiting from the training. Lester et al. (2020) further demonstrated that the analyzed data in qualitative studies “offer insights about professional practices within a given context” (2020, p. 95). Furthermore, the participants stressed the need for all staff members to learn how to support students in their academic journey. Because a PLC is a collaborative effort of reflection and practice on how to improve students’ learning experiences (Prenger et al., 2019), it is the most appropriate deliverable to help the entire staff better support adult learners at K University.

A professional development process is more effective when teachers work together to enhance skills that help them be more efficient in the teaching and learning transaction (Admiraal et al., 2021; Sancar et al., 2021). During the workshop, I will expose the perceptions of the participants on the areas of concern they addressed during the data collection process. The participants’ experiences will be the ground for discussions and exchange of ideas among the staff, so as to collaboratively identify attitudes, practices, and actions that will encourage and support the adult learners to complete their degree on time. The first objective to achieve at the beginning of the workshop will be to make the attendees willing to embark on a self-examination of their readiness to change and improve their practice. The literature review should help achieve this objective for the researcher, as well as for the entire staff receiving the training.

### **Review of the Literature Addressing Profesional Learning Communities**

The goal of this literature review was to explore the ways researchers present the creation of a PLC, within the context of qualitative research, which is my chosen deliverable in this doctoral project study. I explored prior research, articles, and studies addressing the history of PLCs, their implementation, and general impact within the field of adult learning and higher education. I included in this review of the literature the background information, the definition of a PLC, and ways to create, implement, and sustain it. I used the following terms in searching the different databases and the Walden library: *professional learning communities, creating/establishing a professional learning communities, successful professional learning communities, PLC and higher education, PLC and adult learners, PLC and nontraditional students, PLC and matured students*. The sources I found came from the ERIC, SAGE, and Education Research Complete databases. Additionally, I explored the vast resources on the Walden University online library with the different higher education journals, and websites like Google Scholar. I reached saturation when, after a search and result from 27 peer-reviewed research articles, the entries became repetitive.

### **Definition and Purpose of a Professional Learning Community**

The literature offers various definitions of a PLC; however, a common element among all the attempts to define a PLC is the idea of working collectively to achieve a common goal. According to Prenger et al. (2019), that common variable among researchers helps understand a PLC as “the collective focus on student learning” that “refers to the mutual commitment of teacher for improved student achievement” (p. 442).

For the sake of this study, I will include the entire staff in this definition since the findings revealed the need for training for teaching and non-teaching staff. Another definition from Ismail et al. (2020) put more emphasis on relationships and collaboration of the PLC with “ five characteristics, namely, caring, trusting, respectful, recognizing and celebrating success” (p. 239).

This study identified the personal and institutional barriers that delayed adult learners’ advanced degree completion. Additionally, the last interview question gave the participants the opportunity to explore possible interventions against those barriers. The findings from the participants’ responses and suggestions indicated the need for a community of support and a necessity to train the entire staff on how to help adult learners be more successful in the timely completion of their advanced degree. It follows that any intervention that supports the community in the form of a PLC should, as Mei-Kin and Abdull-Kareem (2021) argued, include crucial characteristics such as collaborative learning, collective inquiry, reflective dialogue, customized student services, mentoring, advising about programs, and connection with peers and school representatives. The purpose of the PLC was for K University to recognize and address the learners’ concerns about the barriers that delay their degree completion. Further, the PLC could ensure their timely success through the creation of a community of support that will include teaching and non-teaching staff working together to achieve a common goal (Mei Kin & Abdull Kareem, 2021).

## **How to Create a Professional Learning Community**

A PLC is complex in its definition as well as its creation and implementation (Huijboom et al., 2021; Prenger et al., 2019). Adding to its complexity, it is imperative to understand that the creation of a PLC is not a panacea to all problems about the teaching and learning transaction in higher education. However, although they may not solve all problems, PLCs help institutions understand that they should address issues more collaboratively and, thus, more effectively (Louis & Leithwood, 2021; Othman et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2019).

From the mentioned definition of a PLC, its creation requires a committed group of people that understand the importance of collaborating fully with their time, skills, energy and resources to achieve a common goal. Furthermore, this collaboration among people is fostered by a sense of trust among leadership, which is a key condition in creating a PLC (Brodie, 2021). It follows that the leadership within the higher education institution is also essential in creating the PLC, since it is the leader's responsibility to establish trust with their collaborators. Effective collaborative learning will take place within a PLC when members of the organization have developed trust among themselves and confidence in a leader who brings them together to begin the process of creating the PLC. The importance of trust is further highlighted by Haiyan and Allan (2021), who argued and explained that the lack of organizational trust is the biggest threat to the creation and implementation of a successful PLC.

Research has pointed out some essential elements in the process of creating a PLC. Admiraal et al. (2021) identified five clusters of intervention to consider in creating

a PLC that include *a shared school vision on learning, professional learning opportunities for all staff, collaborative work and learning, change of school organization, and learning leadership*. In the context of this project, however, Haiyan and Allan (2021) offered a more elaborate summary of the literature about the characteristics of a PLC. They described the five main traits that a PLC should portray: (1) “shared vision or shared values”; (2) “focus on learning”; (3) “reflection or reflective dialogue”; (4) “de-privation of practice”; (5) “collaborative activities” (Hayson & Allan, 2021, pp. 587-588).

All these characteristics should guide the creation of the PLC among the staff of K University. However, because it is an entirely new concept for the staff, based on these five traits and on the results of my one-on-one interview with the 10 participants, I have identified more steps to strengthen the creation of the PLC, including sharing with the team what a PLC really means, building organizational trust, setting SMART goals, and bringing in some outside help.

Sharing with the team the meaning of a PLC is necessary because although PLCs have been a popular topic in education, they are also highly misunderstood. Therefore, explaining precisely what a PLC is will help the team embrace what it is intended to achieve for the staff and, ultimately, for the adult learners. According to Prestidge (2019), in addition to helping the staff understand and support the project, a clear explanation of the PLC among staff helps build a community of collaborating professionals. It also follows that the team, having clearly understood a PLC as a new way of working

collaboratively to address educational problems, becomes more prepared to develop trust among each other.

Building organizational trust will help the team function with a culture of trust, without which a PLC may not function properly. Hargreaves (2019) argued that collaboration becomes more effective and productive when it is done within a culture of trust. According to him, developing trust is possible when the leaders facilitate open and honest sharing among the team with the vision to positively improve the functioning of the organization. If the leaders do not have the complete trust of the team, it is advisable to bring in some outside help or resourceful facilitator, especially to help set goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, results-focused and timely (SMART). In addition, those goals should help the team evaluate the effectiveness of the PLC.

### **Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Professional Learning Community**

The effectiveness of a PLC depends on how successfully the team can implement some of the characteristics mentioned. According to Hauge (2019), trustful collaboration among team members is necessary to successfully create and implement a PLC. Oppi and Eisenschmidt (2022) supported the same idea in their study and argued that collaboration is at the very core of what a PLC is in its nature and implementation; they described the following characteristics of an effective PLC, according to instructors:

1. Shared and supportive leadership that wants the staff to engage collaboratively in forming and implementing a PLC.
2. Shared vision, values, and goals on the school level in the PLC.
3. Shared personal practice through deeper forms of discussions or observation.

4. Collective learning and application at personal and group levels.
5. Supportive conditions that are both physical and human-related.
6. The impact of a PLC on teachers' instructional practice.
7. Teachers' evaluation of the impact of PLC on students.
8. The role of teacher leaders in developing the PLC. (pp. 4-7)

The findings that were drawn from the participants' responses during the interview align with these key elements that characterize an effective PLC. The participants insisted on the need for training among the entire staff, so that they will collaboratively support the adult learners and meet their needs. During the interviews, all participants mentioned that K University never provided them the information they required. Again, they felt no support from the academic or administrative staff. The participants further argued that the institution never gave them complete information about the syllabus and their academic journey.

According to one participant (P3), K University could not support adult learners effectively because "there were no common rules and policies for staff to follow." In the same line of thought, Participant 5 explained that the "formators did not speak the same language." These institutional barriers that delayed the adult learners' degree completion also reveal the lack of collaboration among the staff. Therefore, a collaborative leadership that wants others to work together to support the learners is the tool that will encourage adults in their academic journey. If the university in this study intends to reduce barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion, they should create a PLC. Within an atmosphere of collaboration, the PLC should promote regular and coherent

communication, shared responsibility, and a common vision that will help understand and address the barriers adult learners face in their degree completion journey.

### **Project Description**

A PLC mobilizes the entire staff in a collaborative plan of training that will equip them with the skills and competence to support their student population as a team. The staff becomes, thus, a co-responsible community of support that work together with their leaders in order to address the unique needs of their learners (MacLeod, 2020). In the case of this study, the most appropriate project that will guide K University into a creation of a successful PLC is a professional development workshop for the entire staff of the CFC. Bringing faculty and staff together will facilitate their collective effort to analyze the feedback received from the adult learners, the findings of this study, and what the recent literature suggests about the establishment of a successful PLC in the context of a University.

The findings of this study are directly related to the daily professional lives of staff and faculty in their relations with adult learners. Therefore, the content of the professional workshop, which is based on this feedback, will make the training more relevant and effective within the university system. Following Malcolm Knowles' andragogy and inputs on adult learning, Dasgupta, (2020) and Qazaqovna, (2023) argued that programs of professional formation are imperative in workplaces because learners' needs are different and skill levels depreciate in this ever-changing and technologically innovative world. Further, the collaborative aspect of a PLC, which is crucial condition for the success of the project, is more evident among adult professional. The workshop

will impart them with “professional knowledge that forms a culture of mutual information-educational communication” (Qazaqovna, 2023, pp. 3250–3251). This workshop will help staff and faculty mobilize all the potential and existing resource to help their learners who are, in Qazaqovna’s words, “adults that want guidance and attention as equal partners in this process” (2023, p. 3251).

### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

A basic principle in andragogy is that adults have lots of experiences which they value, especially in a learning context. Purwati et al. (2022) expanded on experience as one of the six characteristics of adults in the teaching and learning transaction. These six characteristics are the following :

1. Self-Concept
2. Experiences
3. Readiness to Learn
4. Motivation
5. Need to Know
6. Problem-Centered Learning (pp. 88-90).

Therefore, the people within the university will constitute the main resources for this project study. Faculty and administrative staff, as adult educators, with their experiences acquired over the years at K University, are the required asset for the workshops, because they are the first recipients of the training before they translate it among their adult students.

Technology is the other department that is needed to support the entire project. The training and the community of support that the project intends to establish will be hybrid, both online and onsite. In their roles, which we discuss in this section later, each member of the PLC should be able to support the learners both online and onsite. When the technology part is provided, the financial support should be minimal because the majority of the resources already exist in the university system, as this section will explain subsequently. Further, because I will be present in person at the time of the training, for my yearly holiday period, there will be no need to cover any travelling cost or pocket allowance. The workshop could be fully delivered online in case I am not able to travel. In addition, I will email the entire program, presentation and resources that we will work with during the workshop in order to minimize cost and facilitate the whole process for the participants. These dispositions will enable the participants be more prepared, motivated, and involved for the workshop. The 3-day workshop will take place within K University and, thus, facilitate access to the resources like, computers, projectors, rooms, Internet connection, readily available and functional onsite.

The project has the full support of the university because the Director of CFC approved the study. As mentioned in the rationale of this study, the administration of the University is aware that there are personal and institutional barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion. The 10 participants I selected encountered a delay in their advanced degree completion. They, consequently, expressed their desire to address the problem and find an intervention that could reduce barriers that delayed their degree completion. Although faculty and staff were not part of this study, the findings revealed

that the participants mentioned the lack of support from staff as a major institutional barrier that delayed their degree completion. Therefore, staff and faculty will see the need to participate in finding solutions that reduce the barriers that delayed their adult learners' degree completion.

### **Potential Barriers and Solutions**

The establishment of a successful PLC through a professional development workshop has numerous benefits for staff, faculty, and, ultimately, the entire population of adult learners at K University. However, despite its benefits for the recipients, the project might encounter some potential barriers. The first and obvious barrier is resistance from staff and faculty. Any attempt to address the problems of barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion is a new initiative at K University since, as shown in this study, the University has not addressed this problem yet. Therefore, a workshop to establish a PLC that will address the problem will be a major change for the entire staff. As research in the field of organizational change has demonstrated (Kasiaheng et al., 2021; Lewis, 2019; Magnell, 2023), resistance to change is unavoidable among employees when leaders want to introduce and implement new modes of operating. As Kasiaheng et al. (2021) explained, "Resistance to change is the employee's natural reaction to the change process" (p. 364).

This resistance is a major barrier if it leads some recipients to avoid investing their time and energy in the professional development workshop. The lack of employee participation could, therefore, be a second potential barrier which I anticipate. In addition, because the professional development workshop will not be mandatory, some staff and

faculty may be hesitant to take part in it. To overcome these first two barriers that are related, I will start by explaining the reason for the professional development workshop. Honest and open communication and explanation of the reasons and necessity of the project will convince those who resist to understand and take part in the workshop. According to Kasahieng et al. (2021), clear organizational communication about the reasons for the change, and a discussion about people's opinions and reasons for resisting can yield "organizational commitment" and participation in a new project. Therefore, I will educate the recipients on how the workshop will lead them to working collaboratively and be better equipped to support their students needs. Prior to the workshop, I will create a Whasapp group that will facilitate these initial discussions to help everyone feel part of the project. We could also discuss all the materials I intend to use for the workshop and make some adjustments to fit the attendees' preferences.

Finally, technology could be a potential barriers because some older staff members could be reticent to using technology for the training. To address this obstacle, I will set up some prior Zoom or Google Meet virtual interactions to facilitate the use of these common virtual tools that we could use during the training. Besides, I will explain to the recipients how we could realize a social presence, that will encourage collaboration as a necessary condition for the establishment of a successful PLC. All these measures will act as solutions to the identified potential barriers and help staff and faculty be more supportive as I propose a timetable for implementation.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetables**

As mentioned previously, this proposed professional development project, as Haiyan and Allan's (2021) suggested, will present five traits that characterize most PLCs. Their definition of PLC as "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an on-going, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way, operating as a collective enterprise" (p. 587) will be the methodology that will guide this 3-day workshop. Therefore, using the the "shared vision or shared value" (p. 587) as what the workshop should achieve for the University, the steps for the implementation of the PLC will be: create a mission statement, develop a common vision, develop value statements that contain shared values, and set SMART goals that align with the value statements.

The workshop will run for three full days; each day has specific materials and resources that I will send to the participants one week before the beginning of the programme. Again, before the beginning of the workshop, I will share with the management of CFC my research findings that guided the decision to create a PLC. This pre-disposition will have the University approve the workshop and prepare the participants for the interactions they will have during the workshop. As Chung and Chapman (2023) argued, when dealing with adults, the sharing of prior information through constant communication motivates them as they feel involved and see the content as relevant. Furthermore, involving the recipients before the workshop could generate some feedback that could help adjust the timetable according the availability of the attendees.

As prior preparation to the workshop, once management approves the content of the workshop, I will coordinate with the IT department to ensure that technology will be available to facilitate the smooth running of the workshop. I will also work with the University to design a promotional flyer that I will email and send on the group Whatsapp to motivate and invite the recipients of the workshop. With the same idea of collaboration, I will have the university propose an evaluation form for the recipients to fill in on the last day of the workshop, as I will indicate in the timetable.

The aim of the 3-day professional development workshop is to teach employees how to collaboratively create and implement a successful PLC that will help them understand and support their adult learners in their academic journey. I will discuss with the CFC at K University to establish how often the workshop should run throughout the year. Until the PLC is officially established and running, I will recommend that it be run initially every week for one month and, after, once every trimester of the academic year. The three days of the workshop will be, for each day, a full 8-hour workday that will begin at 8:00 am and end at 5:00 pm.

As the staff spends three full days together, they will begin to blend and make possible collaboration which is the most crucial element in creating and implementing a successful PLC. As Bedford (2019) argued, the prior interactions on WhatsApp and the time spent working and reflecting together during the workshop create a sense of community that facilitates a PLC, whether virtual or in-person. Waldman and Blonder (2020) supported that idea as they stated: “For building a mature and strong community of educators, where members are more engaged, share practices, collaborate in their

teaching, and make their teaching public, it is crucial to develop a real sense of community (SoC)” (p.111). According to them, if a PLC is an efficient means to help educators collaborate in supporting their learners, facilitating communication before and during the training among the trainees is even more crucial for the survival of that PLC.

The common vision and mission, which is at the heart of the creation of the PLC, will be possible when there is a strong sense of community among the entire staff participating in the workshop. Common goals and priorities could be developed easily if the participants are able to understand the need to work together with a genuine sense of community. The creation of a PLC, within that sense of togetherness, is, therefore, the most efficient way of supporting the learners at this University because each learner will feel connected to the institution when the teaching and non-teaching staff are also collaboratively connected. The daily timetable provided for the workshop presents the details of what should be realized for each day. At the end of the 3-day professional development workshop, the entire staff will have skills that allow them to effectively implement and sustain a PLC within the university.

**Table 5***Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 1*

Time	Action
8:00 am – 8:30 am	Welcome introduction (collaborative ice breaker )
8:30 am – 9:00 am	Create and enrol participants on Google Classroom
9:00 am – 9:30 am	Review of materials received by email / questions- Answers
9:30 am – 9:45 am	Introductory PowerPoint on workshop content
9:45 am – 10:00 am	BREAK
10:00 am – 12:00 pm	Collaborative activity one Creation of Mission Statement
12:00 pm – 1:30 pm	LUNCH BREAK and preparation of role play
1:30 pm – 2:00 pm	Role play a barrier (student/teacher relationship)
2:00 pm – 3:30 pm	Collaborative group Activity two: Develop a vision that will describe what the Institution would like the PLC to accomplish
3:30 pm – 4:00 pm	BREAK (Buzz group collaborative technique)
4:00 pm – 4:45 pm	Plenary to report on progress and feedback on first two activities.
4:45 pm – 5:00 pm	Wrap up of day 1, Q&A, next steps / program of day 2

*Note:* The Schedule above is the timetable for day one of the workshop.

**Table 6***Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 2*

Time	Action
8:00 am – 8:30 am	Roll call and Welcomback
8:30 am – 9:00 am	Overnight thoughts/feedback and expectations.
9:00 am – 9:45 am	Workshop-related questions and answers
9:45 am – 10:00 am	BREAK
10:00 am – 12:00 pm	Collaborative group activity three: develop statements with shared values, attitudes, and commitment that will make staff achieve the goal of a shared vision (Oppi & Eisenschmidt, 2022).
12:00 pm – 1:30 pm	LUNCH BREAK and preparation of role play
1:30 pm – 2:00 pm	Role play a barrier (admin staff/student relationship)
2:00 pm – 3:30 pm	Collaborative group Activity four: Establishing SMART goals that align with value statements.
3:30 pm – 4:00 pm	BREAK (Buzz group collaborative technique)
4:00 pm – 4:45 pm	Plenary to report on progress and feedback on first two activities.
4:45 pm – 5:00 pm	Wrap up of day 2, Q&A, next steps / program of day 3

*Note:* The Schedule above is the timetable for day two of the workshop.

**Table 7***Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 3*

Time	Action
8:00 am – 8:30 am	Roll call / collaborative activity to conclude
8:30 am – 9:00 am	Overnight thoughts/feedback and expectations.
9:00 am – 9:45 am	Presentation of all group work activities, pictures, and short video clip of everyone's involvement and collaboration.
9:45 am – 10:00 am	BREAK
10:00 am – 12:00 pm	Collaborative group activity for the Implementation of the PLC with the needed resources, activities, and timely meetings, and ongoing professional development training
12:00 pm – 1:30 pm	LUNCH BREAK and preparation of role play
1:30 pm – 2:00 pm	Role play support intervention (staff/student relationship)
2:00 pm – 3:30 pm	Collaborative group activity for Sustainability of the PLC with ongoing support resources needed, action, timely meetings schedule to fulfil, and ongoing professional development.
3:30 pm – 4:00 pm	BREAK (Buzz group informal evaluation)
4:00 pm – 4:45 pm	Plenary to report on progress and feedback on the day's activities
4:45 pm – 5:00 pm	Workshop wrap Evaluation and conclusion

*Note:* The Schedule above is the timetable for day three of the workshop.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of Students and Others**

My role has been that of a researcher during this doctoral project study on the personal and institutional barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion at K University. The responsibilities associated with that researcher's role included data collection and analyses. I also reported the findings that the participants voiced through their shared experiences. The role of the student or participant consisted I providing feedback in answering the interview questions. This feedback helped me choose the necessary intervention against the problem of barriers that delayed adult learners' advanced degree completion.

As a researcher, these roles combined to provide me with the tools to elaborate a professional development 3-day workshop in the form of a PLC. Learning to create and

sustain a PLC could potentially help the entire staff be more supportive of the adult learners when facing the personal and institutional barriers that delay their advanced degree completion. The findings of this study demonstrated that the adult learners needed the academic and administrative staff to understand their unique needs as adults and to support them in their academic journey. Further, the participants stressed that faculty and other staff lacked the skill to support them in class and in the administration. Therefore, the creation of PLC would enable faculty and administration to collaborate in supporting the students in their academic journey, and as teachers, understand the learners problems from a student-centred perspective (Bishop et al., 2019; Meesuk et al., 2021; Sriklaub & Ruengtrakul, 2022; Szeto et al., 2021). A PLC is an essential part of the improvement of educational institutions since “teachers involved in the PLC will have the ability to connect and understand students in the classroom and learn with colleagues. Teachers will have a variety of ideas from information from their students” (Sriklaub & Ruengtrakul, 2022, p. 305). My final responsibility was therefore the creation of a PLC with the aim of training the employees on how to create and sustain a PLC that will support adult learning within the university system. Meesuk et al. (2021) summarized that aim of the PLC in the following terms: “Sharing a student learning focus and gaining consensual agreement on pedagogical issues and making collective decisions on innovative approaches for teaching and learning to improve student learning outcomes” (2021, p. 32). To ensure that this aim, when achieved, could be sustainable, it is essential to plan for an evaluation of this project.

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

The evaluation of a PLC will gauge its success and the possibility of maintaining it as a collaborative tool to support students within the university system as in the case of this study. According to Zhang et al. (2023), evaluating a PLC implemented in an educational institution helps faculty realize how efficient and supportive they are to their students. For this project, the evaluation focuses on how to create and sustain a PLC that support students in their timely degree completion within the university system. The creation of this PLC arose from the feedback that participants of this study provided in answering the interview questions. All the participants emphasized the need to have more support and customized student service that would help them in and outside the classroom as they struggle with the barriers delaying their advanced degree completion at K University. This project aimed to organize a professional development workshop that would bring the entire staff together so as to equip them with the skills to create and maintain a successful PLC as an effective collaborative tool in higher educational institutions. The evaluation focuses on the overall outcome of the project, which I formulated around Oppi and Eisenschmidt's (2022) characteristics of a successful PLC. This means that at the end of the 3-day workshop, employees would have (a) created a mission statement; (b) developed a common vision that described what the PLC will accomplish; (c) developed value statements that contain shared values; (d) set SMART goals that align with the value statements.

The evaluation will use these four elements since the activities of the workshop were aimed at realizing them. I will measure the effectiveness of the workshop through

the achievement of the outcome. The evaluation will seek to know if the employees demonstrate the skills and preparedness to create and maintain a successful PLC within the university system. There will also be an evaluation before and after the workshop that I will send to the entire staff. Using a five-point Likert scale rating, each evaluation point will measure an objective, five for strongly agree and one representing strongly disagree. At the end of the evaluation, I will use the feedback to enhance the components of the training so as to improve on subsequent professional development workshops. Finally, I will share the result and implications with important stakeholders and decision makers at the CFC to help them use it effectively as a tool for positive social change within the university system and beyond.

### **Project Implications Including Social Change**

The project has a double implication for the university in this study. First, the participants gave feedback that helped the university to identify personal and institutional barriers that delay adult learners degree completion. Secondly, this direct feedback resulted in discovering and proposing a solution to the most frequently mentioned barriers. The participant highlighted the need to train faculty and staff to help them support more collaboratively adult learners in their academic journeys towards timely degree completion. Therefore, I chose to conduct a professional development workshop to guide faculty and administrators in creating and maintaining a successful PLC. The implementation of this PLC through a 3-day training may lead to a timely degree completion among the adult learners at the CFC. Thus, the students, staff, and faculty will benefit from the training and support that the training and the PLC will provide.

Another implication that goes beyond the CFC is the positive social change that the timely degree completion of adult learners can bring to society. With a successful and timely degree completion, adult learners will be more motivated to utilize their newly acquired skills and competence. These new graduates will return to their workplaces and communities as more effective agents and positive social change. In developing countries, these trained and motivated adult learners will become competent agents of transformation, not only for their families but also for the entire society.

### **Local Community**

As mentioned previously, the successful implementation of a PLC could result in timely degree completion and positive change for society at large. There could also be social change in the local community. The adult learners in the local community will become aware of the new customized support that nontraditional students receive in their journey to timely degree completion. Then, this reputation could attract other adults to transfer from other universities to ensure they complete their advanced degrees in time, because they will receive support from staff and faculty. Finally, The collaboration and shared responsibilities developed during the training and creation of the PLC will motivate staff and faculty and, thus, produce overall staff satisfaction and retention.

### **Far-Reaching**

Higher education institutions that have adult learners may initiate a partnership with the university in this study so as to create and maintain a PLC through a similar professional development workshop plan. The training programme could, thus, be disseminated among higher education institutions to help achieve timely advanced degree

completion for adult learners in the country. The far-reaching aim of this project is the possibility to provide higher education institutions with information that could potentially reduce adult learners' delay in degree completion as well as promote overall student and staff satisfaction and retention.

### **Conclusion**

In this section, I provided, in detail, a professional development training in the form of a 3-day workshop proposal that the CFC at K University should consider. The 3-day workshop that I prepared emanates from data that 10 participants, who attended K University between 2015 and 2021, conveyed. The workshop guided the staff through the creation and implementation of a PLC with its goals and implications, which I presented. Again, this section has an extensive literature review that included peer-reviewed journal articles. In that review, I discussed the creation of PLCs and their benefits to the teaching and learning transaction in higher education institutions. The research further discussed the implementation and sustaining of a successful PLC. In addition, I provided the necessary resources needed to accomplish the goal within a proposed timeline. A project evaluation plan followed, as well as the potential implications for positive social change in the local and far-reaching communities. The final section that follows will be about my reflection on the overall process. I will also share the lessons that I have learned throughout the development of this doctoral project study.

#### Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

This last section provides reflections about the study. I will present the project's strengths and limitations, recommendation for alternative approaches, scholarship, project development, and evaluation, leadership, and change. I will also reflect on the importance of the work and discuss the implications, applications, and direction for future research. Finally, an overall conclusion to the study will end the section.

##### **Project Strengths**

This project was a professional development training opportunity delivered in the form of a 3-day workshop to equip staff with the skills to create and sustain a successful PLC. The workshop guided the attendees into ways of working collaboratively to find the best practices that support their adult learners inside and outside the classroom. The benefits and strength of a PLC in an educational context are two-fold, as it helps both learners and staff improve. As Namwong (2021, p. 21) stated, a PLC makes educators “collaborate, learn together and reflect teaching practices to apply knowledge obtained for change regarding students’ needs to improve student learning.” This project emanated from the participants’ responses to the research questions. The findings and the project proposed are, therefore, relevant for staff, faculty, and adult students.

One crucial characteristic that describes the strength of this project is the collaborative nature of the activities that led to the creation of the PLC. The entire staff involved in the workshop learned to cooperate in sharing vision, goals, ideas and practices to help the institution support the learners in their academic challenges. Such a project improves communication and collaboration across all departments of the

institution and equips the entire staff with the required skills and competence to efficiently support the students, who are the main clients of educational institutions. Further, because there will be continuous meetings and training to sustain the project, ongoing staff professional formation will become part of the organizational culture of the institution.

### **Project Limitations**

Although professional development is common in higher education institutions, the creation of a PLC was a novelty among staff and faculty at the university in this study. According to Mei et al. (2019), effecting such significant changes within higher education institutions has always been met with resistance among faculty. The main limitation of this project was, consequently, resistance from some staff and faculty. They did not support the initiative and were reluctant to spare three full days in a workshop. Specifically, because the time of the workshop coincided with their holidays, some staff did not see the need to sacrifice their holiday for a workshop for which they would not receive any remuneration.

Another limitation that was linked to staff resistance to change was the difficulty of accommodating all the attendees' schedules. They had different occupations during their holidays, making it challenging to find a professional development schedule that would be convenient for everyone. Finally, although the CFC was satisfied with the project, there was no guarantee that the institution would continue to sustain the project through ongoing training, since the employees were involved in many other activities during their holiday time.

### **Recommendation for Remediation of Limitations**

Although the limitations could jeopardize the project, the prior discussions on the WhatsApp group helped clarify the aim of the project, even for those who were still reticent. As Sieck (2021) argued, seeking to include the resisters by explaining the benefits of the project can lead employees to support that project. Again, I anticipated some reticence; so, I sought the approval of the Director of the CFC and other major decision makers from the administration, who encouraged the employees to support the project. Finally, the fact that the CFC had identified that some barriers were delaying the learners' degree completion helped the institution trust that the project could be a possible solution. Therefore, the presentation of the findings and feedback from participants who were former students who graduated with delay was a major remediation to most limitations of this project.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

Adult learners at K University continue to experience personal and institutional barriers that delay their advanced degree completion. The professional development workshop for the implementation of a PLC was the approach that I selected as the most relevant intervention since it came directly from student feedback. Nevertheless, there could be alternative ways of addressing the initial problem as presented in this doctoral project study.

For one, the CFC could consult some of the specialists in andragogy in the Ministry of Higher Education to have them address the possible barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion. These specialists could organize workshops so as to share

principles of andragogy that would improve the teaching and learning transaction with the adult learners at K University. Knowing the characteristics of adult students should certainly help instructors improve the learning experience and the academic journey, as Purwati et al. (2022) argued.

Another alternative could be for K University to partner with a university in a country with more experience and success with nontraditional students. The CFC could identify an institution that has implemented a successful PLC, or any other project that has helped adult learners feel more supported and be more successful in their studies. Such collaborative initiatives among universities, according to Ferguson and Roofoe (2020), are always beneficial for students and staff. These two alternatives would require more resources and relationships of cooperation with an experienced Public Relations Officer (PRO) working for the university; however, they remain possibilities that could be explored in future research on barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion in higher education.

### **Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change**

This academic journey is the second doctoral journey I have undertaken; it has been in a different language, but I have learned more with regard to scholarship. According to Cleland et al. (2021), although scholarship remains a complex concept, it should be understood as “a process, and iterative journey which requires acquisition of content knowledge, constant critical professional reflection and participation” (p. 825). This lengthy academic journey of writing, reviewing, and rewriting has allowed me to acquire knowledge and solid skills in academic writing. I have grown in the areas of

research and field experience as a scholar-practitioner. The project delivered in the form of PLC illustrates the application of knowledge in the field of higher education and adult learning and constitutes a contribution to scholarship (Milner et al., 2022). With this doctoral work, I have learned to be more critical and open to critiques of my work. I have also learned to apply current knowledge, which, according to Cleland et al. (2021, p. 825), helps in “building a community which benefits from the practice and knowledge of its members.”

I started writing this doctoral project with many ideas and potential deliverables as possible solutions to the problem at K University. Initially, I proposed to write a Policy Recommendation with Details (PRDs) for the university to address the personal and institutional barriers that delay their adult learners’ advanced degree completion. However, the findings from the 10 participants I interviewed demonstrated that, despite their personal barriers, adult learners are more frustrated when instructors and administrators do not understand and support them in their academic journey. A professional development workshop to create a PLC that will help the entire staff support adult learners was, therefore, the most appropriate project for the university to address the problem. The very nature of a PLC, as a collaborative network with co-responsible members of an ecosystem for educational change (Abreu & Nunes, 2020; Armstrong & Brown, 2022), made the project I chose the most efficient way to address the institutional barriers that the participants mentioned.

This workshop also helped me to comprehend the importance of conducting formal, informal, formative, and summative evaluations to ensure the training was

effective and relevant. As a scholar-practitioner and project planner, I learned that sustainability is crucial in any successful project; as Koke and Moehler (2019) argued, only evaluation can help sustain a project effectively. Therefore, I made evaluation part of the entire process; I conducted formal and informal evaluations prior to the workshop, during, and at the end of the three days. Based on the feedback of the attendees, I was able to refine and make the program more relevant. As an example, I included the roleplaying exercise after feedback from attendees who wanted to have a more active role in the workshop. If well conducted, evaluation helps the project planner be a more flexible leader who can implement change easily.

This doctoral project also helped me in my responsibility as a leader and agent of change. The beginning of the project coincided with my new appointment as Deputy Principal Academic; thus, it helped me apply what I was learning since my new workplace was a higher education institution with adult learners. I was able to understand and help my collaborators address challenges that could demotivate or delay adult learners' degree completion. Therefore, this doctoral program, from the perspective of scholarship, project development, leadership and change, has helped me acquire the valuable skills and competence of a scholar-practitioner and an agent of positive social change both in the university and in society.

### **Reflection on the Importance of the Work**

Reflecting on the significance of this work, I realize that the practicality of a research project is what makes it impactful in workplaces and in society. This project work has had a double transformative action that I have discovered as I assessed the

importance of the work. First, as a student in the field of adult education, I have grown in my understanding and conviction about the necessity to promote and support adult education. Secondly, as a scholar-practitioner and leader in higher education, I have acquired immense experience and skills in working with and teaching adults in higher education. This work has given me the potential to impact not only the university but also society as a whole. Furthermore, the creation of the PLC was an insightful experience as I reflected on how to plan activities that would be relevant to the attendees, who are adult learners. As Salite et al. (2021) argued, a PLC helps educators adapt their styles so as to become more supportive of their learners; the workshop helped me deepen my understanding and application of that student-centered principle that I will continue using in future research.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

This doctoral project study has presented profound implications for positive social change within the culture of higher educational institutions, especially for adult learners who have become the majority population in universities (Coffman & Draper, 2022). The deliverable in the form of a professional development training transformed the university staff by providing them with skills and competence to improve performance in their workplace and in society. The attendees have learned to work collaboratively to improve adult learning by fighting the barriers that delay degree completion at the CFC. Furthermore, the implementation of the PLC could be an opportunity for other higher education institutions to provide better support for adult learners within the country.

The professional development training that was provided will be an ongoing process that all departments of the university should include in their mode of operation. The Director of the CFC and the administration of the university should take up the responsibility of making the project part of the academic calendar. The collaborative spirit created within the workshop among the staff will be maintained if the leadership of the university implements the ongoing training plan. Thus, the PLC will continue to be a tool that can address the barriers that delay adult learners' advanced degree completion at K University. Further research on this topic should take a more complex perspective by using a mixed-method approach. Although the qualitative approach allows an in-depth exploration of experiences that produces rich data (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022), the survey of a larger sample might produce more impactful results with. On a broader scale, the findings of a study on a more diverse population could bring more positive change to the university and to society.

### **Conclusion**

In this doctoral project study, I explored adult learners' perceptions of personal and institutional barriers that delay their degree completion at K University. The findings led to an intervention, which I presented in the form of a 3-day professional development workshop to train the academic and administrative staff on how to collaboratively create and sustain a successful PLC. The 10 participants interviewed stressed the need for instructors and administrators to acquire skills on how to more respectfully treat and support adult learners both inside and outside the classroom. The feedback from the participants, the themes that emerged as findings of the study, and the final project should

assist K University in reducing the barriers that delay its adult learners' degree completion. The creation of the PLC through a professional development training will continue to transform the staff into skilled and competent educators who understand, support and motivate adult learners in their journey to timely degree completion.

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## Appendix A: Project Workshop Materials

### Workshop Details: Professional Learning Communities

#### **Learning Objectives**

By the end this training, participants will be able to:

- Create a mission statement.
- Develop a common vision based on what the staff would like PLC to accomplish.
- Develop value statements that contain shared values, common attitudes and perspectives.
- Set SMART goals that align with the value statements to be implemented.

#### **Ressouces and Materials**

- Room/ hall for the workshop
- White board, notebook and writing materials
- Projector
- Internet connection
- Power Point presentation

#### **Steps**

1. Welcome introduction
2. Google Classroom enrolment
3. Review of materials
4. Introductory Power Point
5. Collaborative activity / role play of barrier
6. Report of Group activities

7. Overnight thoughts
8. Implementation / ongoing plan
9. Evaluation
10. Role play of a barrier

**Facilitator's Roles**

- Present material and workshop information
- Facilitate and motivate collaborative activities and interactions

**Participants' Roles**

- Engage on WhatsApp prior to workshop
- Involvement in Q&A session and in collaborative activities during workshop
- Share and help with their rich personal experiences
- Help plan for ongoing formation
- Submit evaluation at the end of the workshop

## Workshop Agenda

*Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 1*

Time	Action
8:00 am – 8:30 am	Welcome introduction (collaborative ice breaker )
8:30 am – 9:00 am	Create and enrol participants on Google Classroom
9:00 am – 9:30 am	Review of materials received by email / questions- Answers
9:30 am – 9:45 am	Introductory PowerPoint on workshop content
9:45 am – 10:00 am	BREAK
10:00 am – 12:00 pm	Collaborative activity one Creation of Mission Statement
12:00 pm – 1:30 pm	LUNCH BREAK and preparation of role play
1:30 pm – 2:00 pm	Role play a barrier (student/teacher relationship)
2:00 pm – 3:30 pm	Collaborative group Activity two: Develop a vision that will describe what the Institution would like the PLC to accomplish
3:30 pm – 4:00 pm	BREAK (Buzz group collaborative technique)
4:00 pm – 4:45 pm	Plenary to report on progress and feedback on first two activities.
4:45 pm – 5:00 pm	Wrap up of day 1, Q&A, next steps / program of day 2

*Note.* The Schedule above is the timetable for day one of the workshop.

## Pre-Workshop Activity

## WORKSHOP SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES(PLC)

Before the beginning of the workshop, Rank your level of understanding of a PLC

1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= Neutral; 4=Agree; 5= Strongly Agree

1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA

1. A PLC will improve collaboration and communication among staff
2. A PLC will equip staff with skills to support the learners better
3. The University has the resources to create and implement a PLC
4. The employees support the workshop and the PLC
5. The PLC will have benefit for the entire university

Give some suggestions that will make the workshop effective for you

How will you utilize your skills after the workshop

### Workshop Day One: Collaborative Activity One

Our first PowerPoint described what a PLC is. Before working into groups, take 5mn and use the box below to write:

- Your own understanding and definition of a PLC
- What you expect to achieve with this workshop

Share these ideas with you group before starting the first collaborative activity.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for participants to write their responses to the prompts above.

### Group Interaction

Once in your group take sometime to introduce yourselves to each other by saying your role and function in the university (Name, Work Title, Departement). After, everyone could share what they wrote in the box before starting the collaborative activity one.

### Workshop Group Activity

**Day One** Workshop Group activity Handout Group Activity One Members

Creating Mission Statement that aligns with K University's purpose

How do we formulate the content?

What are the different suggestions? Which one did the group retain

Write a report to share the process in the plenary

Propose the drafted mission statement

**Day One** Workshop Group activity Handout Group Activity Two Members

Developed a common vision that described what the group would like PLC will to accomplish.

What would you like the PLC to achieve.

What were the common themes during your sharing?

Propose your suggested common vision statement

Report on the process (compilation of all ideas shared)

*Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 2*

Time	Action
8:00 am – 8:30 am	Roll call and Welcomback
8:30 am – 9:00 am	Overnight thoughts/feedback and expectations.
9:00 am – 9:45 am	Workshop-related questions and answers
9:45 am – 10:00 am	BREAK
10:00 am – 12:00 pm	Collaborative group activity three: Develop statements with shared values, attitudes, and commitment that will make staff achieve the goal of a shared vision (Oppi & Eisenschmidt, 2022).
12:00 pm – 1:30 pm	LUNCH BREAK and preparation of role play
1:30 pm – 2:00 pm	Role play a barrier (admin staff/student relationship)
2:00 pm – 3:30 pm	Collaborative group Activity four: Establishing SMART goals that align with value statements.
3:30 pm – 4:00 pm	BREAK (Buzz group collaborative technique)
4:00 pm – 4:45 pm	Plenary to report on progress and feedback on first two activities.
4:45 pm – 5:00 pm	Wrap up of day 2, Q&A, next steps / program of day 3

*Note.* The Schedule above is the timetable for day two of the workshop.

**Day Two**      Workshop Group activity Handout      Group Activity One      Members

Develop statements with shared values, attitudes, and commitment that will make staff achieve the goal of a shared vision (Oppi & Eisenschmidt, 2022).

Value Statements

What were the suggested value statements in the group? Which one did the group choose?

Choose goals that align with value statements

Report on the value statements agreed upon.

**Day Two**      Workshop Group activity Handout    Group Activity Two    Members

Establishing SMART goals that align with value statements.

SMART Goals: *Specific Measurable Attainable Realistic Time-bound*

What were the suggested SMART goals the group elaborated?

What goals did the group choose

Report on the overall process

*Timetable for Workshop Activities Day 3*

Time	Action
8:00 am – 8:30 am	Roll call / collaborative activity to conclude
8:30 am – 9:00 am	Overnight thoughts/feedback and expectations.
9:00 am – 9:45 am	Presentation of all group work activities, pictures, and short video clip of everyone's involvement and collaboration.
9:45 am – 10:00 am	BREAK
10:00 am – 12:00 pm	Collaborative group activity for the Implementation of the PLC with the needed resources, activities, and timely meetings, and ongoing professional development training
12:00 pm – 1:30 pm	LUNCH BREAK and preparation of role play
1:30 pm – 2:00 pm	Role play support intervention (staff/student relationship)
2:00 pm – 3:30 pm	Collaborative group activity for Sustainability of the PLC with ongoing support resources needed, action, timely meetings schedule to fulfil, and ongoing professional development.
3:30 pm – 4:00 pm	BREAK (Buzz group informal evaluation)
4:00 pm – 4:45 pm	Plenary to report on progress and feedback on the day's activities
4:45 pm – 5:00 pm	Workshop wrap Evaluation and conclusion

*Note.* The Schedule above is the timetable for day three of the workshop.

**Day Two**      Workshop Group activity Handout    Group Activity One    Members

Implementation of the PLC with the needed resources, activities, and timely meetings, and ongoing professional development training

Implementation Plan

What were the different suggestions to consider for the implementation of the PLC?

What did the group decide to keep?

Report on the process and discussion

**Day Two**      Workshop Group activity Handout    Group Activity Two    Members

Focus on sustainability of the PLC with ongoing support resources needed, action, timely meetings schedule to fulfil, and ongoing professional development.

What suggestions the group agreed to include in the sustainability plan?

Report on different ideas in the group

Overall report for all Groups

## Post-Workshop Activity

## WORKSHOP SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES(PLC)

Before the beginning of the workshop, Rank your level of understanding of a PLC

1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= Neutral; 4=Agree; 5= Strongly Agree

1SD 2D 3N 4A 5SA

1. A PLC will improve collaboration and communication among staff
2. A PLC will equip staff with skills to support the learners better
3. The University has the resources to create and implement a PLC
4. The employees support the workshop and the PLC
5. The PLC will have benefit for the entire university

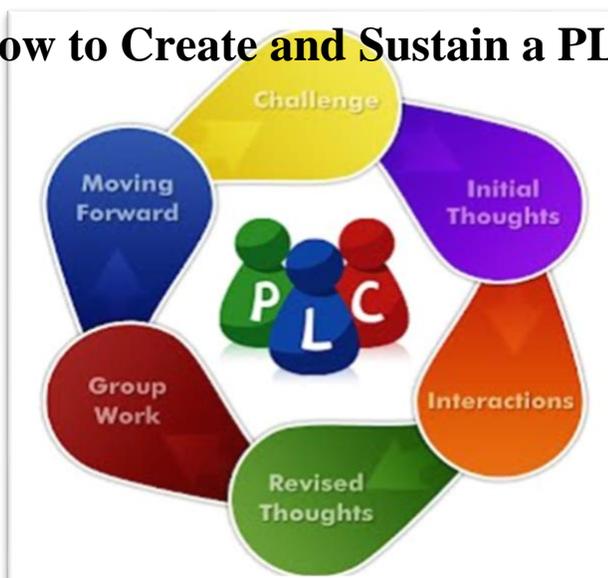
Give some suggestions that will make the workshop effective for you and future participants

How will you utilize your skills the week after the workshop?

Appendix B: Promotional Flyer Emailed to Attendees

## Professional Development Workshop:

### How to Create and Sustain a PLC



#### 3-DAY WORKSHOP (DATE)

- DAY ONE PROGRAMME  
Activities
- DAY TWO PROGRAMME  
Activities
- DAY THREE PROGRAMME  
Activities

#### PLC

We shall learn to create a Professional Learning Community. It is a collaborative effort of reflection, shared experiences and responsibility, consistent communication, and common practices on how to improve our adult students' learning experiences, as they struggle to complete their studies.

LOGO  
ORGANIZATION

**Professional Development  
Workshop Training:  
Create and Sustain a Professional Learning  
Community (PLC)**

**Project Deliverable  
By  
Vincent de Paul Kouassi  
Walden University**

**WALDEN UNIVERSITY**  
*A higher degree. A higher purpose.*

Icebreaker to begin with Introduction and presentation  
Questions around prior preparation and expectation for the meeting

## Background

- There is a worldwide growing number of adult learners in higher education. African context (April, 2021; Owusu-Agyeman et al., 2018) Western world (Gaebel et al., 2021; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; MacDonald, 2018)
- The increasing number of these nontraditional learners creates challenges for the students and the institutions where they study.
- The main challenges are barriers faced by adult learners in their degree completion Gopalan et al. (2019) and Bellare et al. (2021)

Situating the background gives more conviction that the deliverable is needed as a way of addressing a real problem and gap in practice.

## Situation at K University

- At K University (Pseudonym), adult learners encounter personal and institutional barriers that delay their advanced degree completion.
1. Registry Office (2019)
  2. Evaluation Report (K University, 2019)
  3. Personal Communication (2021)
- In 2013, 45 Students, 29 (64.44%) were able to graduate after 4 years.
  - In 2014, 13 students (23,07%) completed after 5 years in 2018.
  - The other 10 students (76,92%) had not completed their degree in 2020
  - In 2019, 31,03% did not complete their first year and did not sit for the final exam

Our adult learners experience significant delays in their advanced degree completion. It is, therefore, essential to identify and address the personal and institutional barriers that cause the delay they face.

K University is aware that there are barriers that delay adult learners' degree completion; however, the problem has not yet been addressed. The findings from my research show that adult learners want the staff to understand them as nontraditional learners; they also want the staff to acquire skills that will help support them better in their studies and the administrative challenges.

Further, the students stressed the importance of academic and non-academic staff working collaboratively to address the barriers they face.

Three themes summarize the barriers: Training of the adult educator, Support systems for adult students, and Dysfunctionalities within the University.

## What are the Goals of a PLC?

- The purpose of the PLC is for K University to recognize and address the learners' concerns about the barriers that delay their degree completion. Further, the PLC will ensure their timely success through the creation of a community of support that will include teaching and non-teaching staff working together to achieve a common goal (Mei Kin & Abdull Kareem, 2021).

I will share the goals and help attendees understand their tasks as they reflect on what the goal of their PLC will be during the collaborative group work.  
I will make references to articles that elaborated on the goals of successful PLCs  
I will insist on communication and communication as basic features of a PLC

## Sustaining a Successful PLC

Research has pointed out some essential elements in the process of creating a PLC. Admiraal et al. (2021) identified five clusters of intervention to consider in creating a PLC that are: *a shared school vision on learning, professional learning opportunities for all staff, collaborative work and learning, change of school organization, and learning leadership*. In the context of this project, however, Haiyan and Allan (2021) offered a more elaborate summary of the literature about the characteristics of a PLC. They described the five main traits that a PLC should portray:

- Shared vision or shared values.
- Focus on learning
- Reflection or reflective dialogue.
- De-privation of practice
- Collaborative activities (Haiyan & Allan, 2021, pp. 587–588)



Insisting of the characteristics of a successful PLC will help the attendee discuss and prepare their work.

The discussions will facilitate the group work and the elaboration of vision and value statements of a successful PLC.

## What is a PLC ?



- working collectively to achieve a common goal.  
According to Prenger et al. (2019), that common variable among researchers helps understand a PLC as “ the collective focus on student learning” that “refers to the mutual commitment of teacher for improved student achievement” (p. 442).

In this slide, I will provide a comprehensive and straightforward definition of a PLC as a deliverable addressing the barriers the students face at K University.  
The definition should appear after sharing what they think a PLC is and how it may benefit employees and students.  
A clear definition will make the group discussion more focused.

## Steps in the Creation of Successful PLC

### A 4-Step Process

1. Create a mission statement,
2. Develop a common vision,
3. Develop value statements that contain shared values, and
4. Set SMART goals that align with the value statements.

The explanation of these steps will guide the groups in their collective work of creating the PLC.

The four collaborative activities will aim at accomplishing each step.

I will take note as each group reports on the steps in order to group the common points.

The PLC will thus be the work of the attendees

## Key Elements in a successful PLC

- According to Oppi and Eisenschmidt (2022) and Hauge (2019), trustful collaboration among team members is an essential condition for creating and sustaining a successful PLC
- Shared and supportive leadership that wants the staff to engage collaboratively in forming and implementing a PLC.
- Shared vision, values, and goals on the school level in the PLC.
- Shared personal practice through deeper forms of discussions or observation.
- Collective learning and application at personal and group levels.
- Supportive conditions are both physical and human-related.
- The impact of a PLC on teachers' instructional practice.
- Teachers' evaluation of the impact of PLC on students.
- The role of teacher leaders in developing the PLC. (pp. 4-7)

In discussing these additional characteristics, the attendees will understand and substantiate more on the 4 steps. They will guide them as they make their collective decision in creating a successful PLC, especially in setting the SMART Goals.

## Group Activities



- Explanation of Activities
- Selection and Break-out into groups
- Discussing and Creating PLC Through the 4 steps
- Role Play the barriers mentioned by the participants

Role-playing the barriers by the participants will help focus on the problem that led to the creation of a PLC.

The content of the PLC will therefore be more relevant.

## References

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- Hauge, K. (2019). Teachers' collective professional development in school: A review study. *Cogent Education*, 6(1), 1619223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2019.1619223>
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## Appendix D: Workshop Evaluation/Survey

You recently completed a 3-day workshop of professional development on how to create and sustain a *Professional Learning Community*. Kindly take some time to complete the following survey that will help me evaluate the experienced we had so as to improve on future trainings.

**1. I am fully satisfied with this training opportunity for professional development at K University.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**2. The idea of creating and sustaining a professional learning community motivates and inspires me.**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

**3. Overall communication among the entire staff is good within the University**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral

- Agree
  - Strongly Agree
- 4. The creation of a professional learning community will improve communication and collaborative engagement among the staff at K University**
- Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
- 5. The creation of a professional learning community will help staff better support adult learners at K University.**
- Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree
- 6. After this 3-day training, I feel I have the skills and competence to create and sustain a PLC**
- Strongly Disagree
  - Disagree
  - Neutral
  - Agree
  - Strongly Agree

**Or do you think more training will be required before the implementation of the professional learning community?**

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7. **The common vision, the mission statements and the SMART goals we elaborated will help create and amaintain a successful professional learning community.**
- Strongly Disagree
  
  - Disagree
  
  - Neutral
  
  - Agree
  
  - Strongly Agree

**Or do you think more training will be required before the implementation of the professional learning community?**

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**Feel free to share additional feedback on this separate sheet of paper.**

### Appendix E: Follow-up Email on Successful Acquisition of Competences and Skills

Thank you again for participating in this 3-day training on how to create and sustain a successful *Professional Learning Community*.

The skills and competences you have acquired will only benefit you and your adult learners if you put them into action. I am confident that you have already started using all that you gained from our workshop to improve on how you support your adult learners.

Kindly provide feedback on how you are doing with the implementation of the PLC at K University. Do that by answering the following questions:

1. How have you put into action the skills and competences you acquired during the workshop
2. How has the workshop helped you better support your adult learners in their academic or administrative challenges.
3. Has the workshop improve collaboration and communication within the University? how?
4. Have you used what you acquired during the workshop in other areas of your professional life? Give some examples if possible.

## Appendix F: Letter of Invitation

*Letter of Invitation to Participate in Research*

Adult Learners' Perceptions of the Barriers that Delay their Degree Completion at  
[REDACTED] University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by (my Name) from Walden University (USA) about the barriers adult learners face when completing their advanced degrees.

The purpose of this study is to explore the adult learners' perception of the personal and institutional barriers that delay their degree completion at [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

You are eligible to participate in this study if you graduated with some delay from [REDACTED].

If you agree to participate, we shall have a personal interview, face-to-face, on the phone, or via WhatsApp, between 30mn to 1hr. This interview contains questions about the personal and institutional barriers that delayed your degree completion. Your responses will be confidential.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you are interested in participating, please see the attached consent form, which contains additional information about the study.

Feel free to contact me at [vincentdepaul.kouassi@waldenu.edu](mailto:vincentdepaul.kouassi@waldenu.edu) or [kouassvin@yahoo.fr](mailto:kouassvin@yahoo.fr) and on the following phone numbers: [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] if you have questions.

Sincerely,

Vincent de Paul Kouassi

## Appendix G: Interview Protocol

Preparation before starting

- **Explain the interview's purpose.**
- **Explain how I will ensure informed consent and confidentiality**
- **Explain how the process/format I will use in the interview.**
- **Let each participant know how long the interview will take**
- **Make sure they know how to reach me after the interview if they want to.**
- **Answer any questions they have, and make sure I ask them if they have questions.**

Preliminary questions: Time spent at K university... type of degree programme

**RQ 1 What at adult learners' perceptions of the personal barriers that delay their degree completion at K University?**

Question 1: What barriers, challenges or obstacles in your personal life made it difficult for you to complete your degree on time?

Question 2: probe: Sharing of other personal barriers and/or barriers that stood as the most challenging in your degree completion

Question 3: probe: How did you feel about those barriers / would you share about some other barriers that made you feel the same?

**RQ 2 What at adult learners' perceptions of the institutional barriers that delay their degree completion at K University?**

Question 4: What challenges or difficulties did you met at K University, at the beginning and throughout your academic journey, that you can describe as barriers that delayed your degree completion?

Question 5: What aspect(s) stood out the most as the biggest challenge?

Question 6: Probe: How did those barriers in the institution make you feel in your academic journey?

Question 7: What do you think the University can do to improve the condition of adult students so that it helps them graduate on time?-

**Comments and questions at the end.**

**Check recording, thank the interviewee, and leave them with my contact for any questions. Promise to send a copy of the findings for member-checking .**

## Appendix H: Permission Request Letter

**MINISTRE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT  
SUPERIEUR, DE LA RECHERCHE  
SCIENTIFIQUE ET DE L'INNOVATION**

**REPUBLIQUE DE COTE D'IVOIRE**

**Union – Discipline – Travail**



**Université Alassane OUATTARA**  
Bouaké

Bouaké, 23 Septembre 2022



**Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Prévention  
En Psychoéducation**

**OBJET : AUTORISATION DE RECHERCHE**

Je soussigné Monsieur SADIA Martin Armand, Maître de Conférences, Directeur Exécutif du Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Prévention en Psychoéducation, autorise monsieur KOUASSI Vincent de Paul, Docteur en Sciences de l'éducation, option Andragogie, à effectuer son étude sur un échantillon d'adultes ayant accusé un retard dans l'achèvement de leurs études.

Ces auditeurs sont tous membres de mon laboratoire.

En foi de quoi, la présente autorisation lui est délivrée pour servir et valoir ce que de droit.

**Directeur Exécutif du LEPPE**

Professeur Armand Martin SADIA  
Maître de Conférences en Psychologie de l'éducation

