

# FACTORS AFFECTING ADULTS' DECISION TO STUDY IN ADULT HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE STUDY STUDENT OF GUANGZHOU HUASHANG VOCATIONAL COLLEGE

Haihang XU<sup>1</sup> and Pongpan COMPAN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Accountancy and Finance, Walailak University, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand; 786476157@qq.com

<sup>2</sup> School of Education, Walailak University, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand; pongpan.co@wu.ac.th

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## ABSTRACT

This study takes students from Guangzhou Huashang Vocational College as examines to explore the factors affecting adults' decision to study in adult higher education. The study identified six factors based on motivation theory, behavior theory and the PRISM-T model: Pathway to a better life, Reflective learner, Institutional support, Synchronizing learning earning and living, Match with an academic reputation, and Time out of school. Data were collected via questionnaires from 397 adult graduates using stratified random sampling. The results showed that all six factors in the conceptual framework were statistically associated with adults' decisions to study in adult higher education. The strongest influence came from "Synchronizing learning, earning, and living," followed by "Institutional support" and "Pathway to a better life." The findings provide actionable insights for school administrators to improve enrollment strategies and enhance the quality of adult higher education programs. However, this study also has certain limitations, as the sample is limited to a single institution sample of adult higher education (short-cycle courses) students who have recently graduated from Guangzhou Huashang Vocational College. Future research should expand the sample and incorporate qualitative methods for deeper insights.

**Keywords:** Adult Higher Education, Adult, PRISM-T Model

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## INTRODUCTION

Adult higher education, as a high-level and important part of China's adult education and also an important component of China's higher education (Zhong, 2022). However, in the development of adult higher education, there are problems such as low class attendance, students finding substitutes, poor public impression and the traditional view that it is a money-for-diploma programme and is of a lower grade than general higher education (Deng, 2011). As a result, the Chinese government has introduced a series of policies that have made the entry threshold for adult higher education higher, fewer institutions and majors available for students to choose from, increased costs due to changes in the mode of study, and stricter graduation requirements (Xu, 2024), which have had a great impact on students who want to enroll in adult higher education.

However, China's adult higher education enrolment is instead rising. In 2024, China's adult higher education enrolment reached 4,454,878, an increase of 1.24% over the previous year (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024b). The reasons behind this phenomenon, which seems to have arisen out of the normal expectations of the public, will have a direct impact on the educational reform in schools. In the broader context of change in adult higher education, there are few studies exploring the factors influencing adults' participation in adult higher education. Adult higher education (short-cycle courses) students are both students and adults with multiple social roles (Li, 2020). There is also a gap in research that focuses solely on this particular group of adults.

Based on the above background, this paper takes motivation theory and behaviour theory as the basis of research. It investigates and researches the decision of fresh graduates of adult higher education (short-cycle courses) from Guangzhou Huashang Vocational College to study in adult higher education (normal courses), aiming at exploring the factors influencing adults' decision to study in adult higher education. And in the process of the study, the problems that exist in the process of organising adult higher education in colleges and universities are uncovered, so as to provide school administrators with more targeted and practical suggestions.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

### Research Theory

**Motivation theory:** Motivation is determined by a complex interplay of internal and external factors, and focusing on individuals' motivation profiles, construal of situations, and metacognitive monitoring and control of goal pursuit may shed more light on the moment-by-moment decisions people make in daily life (Hattie et al., 2020).

**Behavior theory:** Theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, and self-determined behavior predict an individual's intention to engage in a specific behavior at a particular time and place (Le et al., 2022). The intention and behavior of adults to participate in adult higher education are rooted in the belief that enrolling in adult higher education will lead to specific achievements in knowledge, qualifications, and employment.

### Adults' Decision to Study in Adult Higher Education

Adult is a person who has left the role of a full-time student and taken on the responsibilities of being a social worker, a parent, and a spouse (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Adult higher education is essentially a type of compensatory education that provides an educational pathway for adults who have not been able to pass the college entrance exams or who have not been able to pursue higher education for other reasons (Guan & Abbas, 2021). This form of education, provided by colleges and universities, combines online teaching as the primary mode with offline teaching as a supplementary mode to train students, ultimately awarding graduation certificates and degree certificates, although adult higher education (short-cycle courses) does not involve degree conferral and thus does not issue degree certificates (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024a).

Adults' decision to study in adult higher education mainly refers to the form of education in which adults who are already working, based on the needs of personal career development, social interaction and personal interests, and by comprehensively considering their own life experience, learning needs, goal setting and strategic planning, choose to take the adult college entrance examination and obtain the qualification for enrolling in the form of higher education in the form of "non-full-time" organized by ordinary colleges and universities.

### **Affecting Adult Higher Education Decision Factors**

The factors that affect adults' decision to pursue adult higher education are not the effects of a single motivation to learn or a single barrier to learning; they are closely linked (Wang, 2004). Miller (1967) proposed a motivational model that adult education participation depends on the degree of consistency or conflict between individual needs and social situational forces. This model recognizes the multidimensional nature of adult education participation in decision-making, including the interaction of positive and negative factors. Apt (1978) identified four main factors based on Miller's theoretical model of adult participation or non-participation in education: self-development goal, affective barrier, career goal, and situation barrier.

Based on previous research, Stein and Wanstreet (2006) developed the PRiSM Decision Model, highlighting four decision factors: Pathway to a better life; Reflective learner; Synchronizing learning, earning, and living; and Match with an academic life. Stein, Wanstreet and Trinko (2011) empirically validated the PRiSM model and extended it to the PRISM-T model by adding institutional support and time out of school as two factors affecting adult enrolment.

The literature suggests that an adult's decision to participate in adult higher education is a complex process involving the interaction of multiple factors. Adults continually assess the costs of enrolment versus the benefits of improving their life path, considering the potential to enhance career prospects, increase income levels, and improve quality of life through higher education (Broek et al., 2023); they reflect on the impact of academic readiness, including confidence in their ability to learn and past educational experiences, etc., on current decision-making (Bellare et al., 2021; Osam et al., 2017); balancing study with work and family obligations requires flexible arrangements and employer support to sustain work-life-education equilibrium (Morris et al., 2022); they consider their potential fit with academic life, which includes interest in academic programs and the value placed on academic reputation (Broek et al., 2023; Stein & Wanstreet, 2006); and they will also consider the resources and support services provided by educational organisations whose institutional support has a significant impact on learners' decision-making (Li, 2020). Finally, adults also reflect on their time away from school, i.e. the length of time since their last formal education and its impact on current decision-making, which may affect their ability to learn and adapt to a new academic environment (Aruğaslan & Uysal, 2021; Owusu-Agyeman, 2016). These studies identify factors that influence adults' decisions to pursue higher education, and their findings are consistent with the components of the PRISM-T model.

Although existing research has focused on the factors affecting adults' decision to study in adult higher education, the definition of adult higher education is still vague in various countries (Hou & Wang, 2020). Most of the research subjects are students of higher education, continuing education, or adult education, which differ from the characteristics and needs of adult higher education students in China. This leads to the fact that the existing research results are difficult to fully apply to the field of adult higher education in China. In China, Deng (2011) conducted an in-depth exploration of the learning motivation and influencing factors of adult higher education students in his research. The research results revealed that the learning motivation of adult students mainly focuses on seeking career development, and is also influenced by internal factors such as personal interests and external factors such as social expectations. Chen (2017) found that adult higher education medical undergraduate students at

Anhui Medical University and Wannan Medical College have generally higher learning motivation compared to regular full-time medical undergraduate students, and are significantly positively correlated with learning outcomes, learning environment, and general self-efficacy. These studies mainly focus on learning motivation, not all influencing factors, and the research is relatively old. In the context of the reform of adult higher education, their reference significance needs to be explored. Finally, no one has ever conducted research on the unique adult group of adult higher education (short-cycle courses) students.

Based on the classification of the PRISM-T model and combined with the studies of other authors, the following factors affecting adult decision to study in adult higher education:

***Pathways to a better life*** refers to adults' assessment of the cognitive, economic and social status improvements that may result from the decision to study in adult higher education, i.e. that the decision to study in adult higher education may improve their income levels, social status and career opportunities (Broek et al., 2023; Lövdén et al., 2020).

**Reflective learner:** refers to an adult reflection and assessment of his or her own learning abilities and past academic experiences to decide whether or not he or she is ready to re-enter the higher education environment (Fletcher & Tyson, 2020).

***Institutional support*** refers to adults' expectations of the support and services provided by an educational institution when deciding whether or not to study in adult higher education, including ease of course scheduling, reasonable time to completion, availability of technical support, and opportunities to interact with other students (Bellare et al., 2021; Siarzynski-Ferrer & Pillar, 2021; Udovichenko & Tymchenko, 2023).

***Synchronizing learning, earning and living*** refers to adults assessing their ability to balance learning, earning and living when deciding to pursue adult higher education, with adults making the decision to participate in adult higher education when they believe they can balance all three (Fletcher & Tyson, 2020).

***Match with an academic reputation*** refers to adults' perceptions of the academic reputation and accreditation of adult higher education and the potential impact of that reputation on their career development (Stein et al., 2011).

***Time out of school*** refers to the years between formal education completion (e.g., high school, college, etc) and pursuing adult higher education (Stein et al., 2011). Longer periods of time out of school may mean that a long period of career build-up has made their need for further study clearer, and it may also mean that they have resolved other important matters in their lives and are thus more energised to commit to a long-term study programme (Englert, 2018).

### **Hypothesis and Conceptual Framework**

H1: Pathway to a better life is statistically associated with affect adults' decision to study in adult higher education.

H2: Reflective learner is statistically associated with affect adults' decision to study in adult higher education.

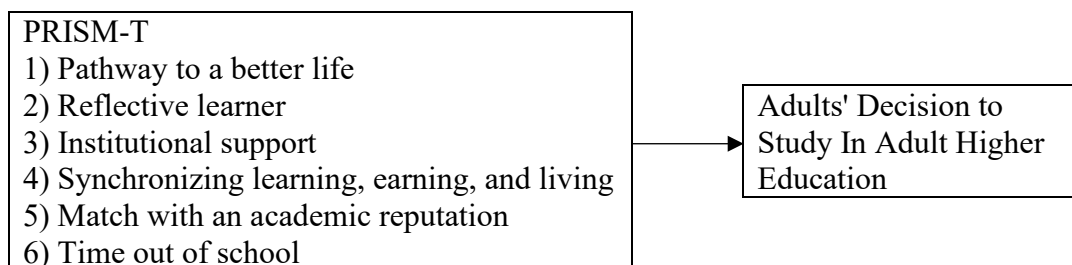
H3: Institutional support is statistically associated with affect adults' decision to study in adult higher education.

H4: Synchronizing learning, earning, and living is statistically associated with affect adults' decision to study in adult higher education.

H5: Match with an academic reputation is statistically associated with affect adults' decision to study in adult higher education.

H6: Time out of school is statistically associated with affect adults' decision to study in adult higher education.

This study builds a conceptual framework based on motivational and behavioural theories and the PRISM-T model. As shown in Figure 1



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study explores factors influencing adults' decisions to study in adult higher education at Guangzhou Huashang Vocational College. The research employs a quantitative approach, using a questionnaire based on the PRISM-T model as the primary data collection tool. The questionnaire is divided into four parts: personal information, decision to study in adult higher education, affecting factors based on the PRISM-T model, and open-ended questions for recommendations. The section on affecting factors uses a 6-point Likert scale, while the decision to study in adult higher education uses an 11-point Likert scale.

The study population consists of 16,074 adult higher education (short-cycle courses) current graduates from the college. A sample size of 396 is calculated using Yamane's formula, with stratified sampling applied to ensure representation across different majors.

Data collection was carried out online through questionnaire star software, 440 questionnaires were distributed and 397 valid questionnaires were recovered, with a recovery rate of 90.23%. The data analysis process involves descriptive statistics to summarize responses, correlation analysis to assess relationships between variables, and regression analysis to determine the extent of each factor's influence on the decision to study in adult higher education. The results aim to provide actionable insights for school administrators to improve enrollment strategies and enhance the quality of adult higher education programs.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistical Analysis of the Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

This study surveyed 397 adults, including 153 males (38.54%) and 244 females (61.46%), with a high proportion of females. In terms of marital status, 211 people were unmarried (53.15%) and 186 were married (46.85%). There were 156 people with minor children (41.56%) and 232 people without minor children (58.44%). The number of respondents in each major professional category was finance and business (55.16%, 219), followed by public administration and services (19.14%, 76), electronics and information technology (9.07%, 36), civil engineering and construction (6.55%, 26), medicine and health (4.53%, 18), equipment manufacturing (3.02%, 12), tourism (1.76%, 7), and transport (0.76%, 3). The results showed that the average age of the respondents was 28.647 years old, indicating that the respondents were mainly a group of people who made further choices for the adult college entrance examination after a certain amount of work experience, and the survey subjects were in line with the current situation. The average income is 5336.292 RMB, which is in line with the current income level of the general public. The average working years is 8.061 years.

### Frequency of Adults' Decision to Study in Adult Higher Education

Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of responses on a scale from 0 to 10. The highest frequency (22.4%) corresponds to the value 5, followed by 10 (13.6%). Values 0 and 4 also show notable frequencies (11.3% and 8.3%, respectively). Cumulative percentages indicate gradual accumulation, reaching 100% at the maximum value. The mean score of 5.314 (SD = 3.037) suggests a neutral overall tendency, with moderate dispersion around the midpoint. The distribution reflects a concentration around central values (e.g., 5-7) and a secondary peak at

10, implying polarized responses among some.

**Table 1** Adults' Decision to Study in Adult Higher Education

	Frequency	Percentage	Effective percentage	Cumulative percentage
0	45	11.3	11.3	11.3
1	14	3.5	3.5	14.9
2	15	3.8	3.8	18.6
3	26	6.5	6.5	25.2
4	33	8.3	8.3	33.5
5	89	22.4	22.4	55.9
6	39	9.8	9.8	65.7
7	39	9.8	9.8	75.6
8	23	5.8	5.8	81.4
9	20	5	5	86.4
10	54	13.6	13.6	100
total	397	100	100	

Mean = 5.314, Standard Deviation = 3.037, Level = Neutral

### Descriptive Statistical of Affecting Adult Higher Education Decision Factors

Table 2 presents the mean, standard deviation, and interpretation of variables related to adults' decisions to study in adult higher education. Overall, respondents show a relatively high level of agreement with items related to "Pathway to a Better life" (mean scores ranging from 4.411 to 4.741), indicating a strong belief in the positive impact of adult higher education on their lives. The "Reflective learner" category reveals a slightly agreeable tendency, with mean scores between 3.851 and 4.396, suggesting that respondents acknowledge their ability and confidence in completing adult higher education. The "Institutional support" items also receive a slightly agreeable response, with scores from 3.980 to 4.295, reflecting respondents' moderate satisfaction with institutional support. The "Synchronizing learning, earning, and living" items have mean scores between 3.834 and 3.995, showing a slightly agreeable attitude towards balancing education with other life aspects. The "Match with an academic reputation" category has scores ranging from 4.139 to 4.345, indicating a slightly agreeable level concerning academic reputation and personal capabilities. Lastly, the "Time out of school" items have scores from 3.975 to 4.179, suggesting a slightly agreeable perception of the impact of time away from school on the decision to pursue adult higher education.

**Table 2** Mean, Standard Deviation and Interpretation of Related Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	Level
<b>Pathway to a Better Life</b>	4.629	1.099	Agree
Enhancement of one's social status and identity	4.411	1.233	Agree
Enhancement of personal knowledge and skills	4.705	1.170	Agree
Gain personal growth and self-realisation	4.668	1.196	Agree
Obtaining better development or increasing the level of income	4.741	1.170	Agree
<b>Reflective Learner</b>	4.130	1.050	Slightly agree
Confident to participate in adult higher education	4.189	1.199	Slightly agree
Have the required study skills	4.108	1.221	Slightly agree
Have an interest in learning new knowledge and skills	4.396	1.104	Agree
Willing to sacrifice personal leisure time	3.851	1.322	Slightly agree
<b>Institutional Support</b>	4.095	1.113	Slightly agree
Timing of graduation meets needs	3.980	1.335	Slightly agree

Variables	Mean	SD	Level
Course times and locations meet demand	3.998	1.323	Slightly agree
Learning communities offered are important	4.129	1.146	Slightly agree
Technical support from the school is helpful	4.295	1.083	Slightly agree
<b>Synchronizing Learning, Earning, and Living</b>	3.931	1.183	Slightly agree
Balance study and work	3.992	1.264	Slightly agree
Balance study and family responsibilities	3.912	1.287	Slightly agree
Financial situation supports participation in learning	3.834	1.321	Slightly agree
Balance study with other major life	3.995	1.208	Slightly agree
<b>Match with an Academic Reputation</b>	4.231	0.999	Slightly agree
Academic reputation of the educational institution	4.139	1.049	Slightly agree
Practicality of the programme	4.227	1.094	Slightly agree
Quality of the programme	4.217	1.063	Slightly agree
Market-recognised academic certificates or degrees	4.345	1.103	Slightly agree
<b>Time Out of School</b>	4.083	1.039	Slightly agree
Gained a wealth of experience in the professional world	4.149	1.064	Slightly agree
Established a good support network of family or friends	4.030	1.141	Slightly agree
Solved child rearing and other life issues	3.975	1.183	Slightly agree
Have time to think about their career	4.179	1.090	Slightly agree

### Correlation Analysis of Affecting Adult Higher Education Decision Factors and Adults' Decision to Study in Adult Higher Education

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among various factors related to adults' decision to study in adult higher education. The data show that all factors were significantly and positively correlated ( $p < 0.01$ ) with the decision to attend. Specifically, "Pathway to a better life" (0.536), "Reflective learner" (0.607), "Institutional support" (0.673), "Synchronizing learning, earning, and living" (0.677), "Match with an academic reputation" (0.629), and "Time out of school" (0.648) all positively influence this decision. This implies that as these factors increase, so does the likelihood of adults pursuing higher education. Moreover, these factors are interconnected, with each pair showing a significant positive correlation, indicating a complex interplay that jointly impacts the decision to study in adult higher education.

**Table 3** Correlation analysis results

	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	Y
X1:Pathway to a Better life	1						
X2:Reflective learner	0.530**	1					
X3:Institutional support	0.539**	0.659**	1				
X4:Synchronizing learning, earning, and living	0.491**	0.707**	0.810**	1			
X5:Match with an academic reputation	0.546**	0.639**	0.691**	0.706**	1		
X6:Time out of school	0.515**	0.605**	0.731**	0.753**	0.717**	1	
Y:Adults' Decision to Study in Adult Higher Education	0.536**	0.607**	0.673**	0.677**	0.629**	0.648**	1

### Regression Analysis of Affecting Adult Higher Education Decision Factors and Adults' Decision to Study in Adult Higher Education

Table 4 shows the regression analysis results for adults' decisions to study in adult higher education. The adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.554 indicates that the predictors explain 55.4% of the variance in the decision to study. All predictors significantly influence this decision ( $p < 0.05$ ). The model

is valid with a significant F-value ( $p < 0.001$ ) and no multicollinearity issues ( $VIF < 10$ ). Among the independent variables, Pathway to a better life (X1) shows a significant positive impact on the decision to study in adult higher education, with a standardized Beta coefficient of 0.147 ( $p = 0.001$ ). This implies that adults who perceive higher education as a pathway to a better life are more likely to enroll. Reflective learner (X2) also has a positive impact, with a Beta coefficient of 0.106 ( $p = 0.037$ ), indicating that self-assessment and confidence in one's learning abilities influence the decision. Institutional support (X3) demonstrates a significant positive effect (Beta = 0.164,  $p = 0.009$ ), suggesting that supportive educational institutions enhance the likelihood of enrollment. Synchronizing learning, earning, and living (X4) shows a positive impact (Beta = 0.183,  $p = 0.007$ ), highlighting the importance of balancing education with work and personal life. Match with an academic reputation (X5) has a positive effect (Beta = 0.117,  $p = 0.032$ ), indicating that the reputation of educational programs influences decisions. Time out of school (X6) also positively impacts the decision (Beta = 0.170,  $p = 0.004$ ), suggesting that the time away from school affects readiness to return to education.

**Table 4** Regression analysis results

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	t	p	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Standard Error				Tolerance	VIF
Constant	-5.072	0.518		-9.785	0.000**		
Pathway to a better life	0.407	0.117	0.147	3.432	0.001**	0.618	1.618
Reflective learner	0.342	0.146	0.119	2.258	0.020*	0.433	2.309
Institutional support	0.485	0.170	0.178	2.863	0.004**	0.287	3.479
Synchronizing learning, earning, and living	0.469	0.172	0.183	2.969	0.007*	0.250	3.997
Match with an academic reputation	0.336	0.166	0.110	2.454	0.043*	0.377	2.654
Time out of school	0.449	0.167	0.154	2.075	0.008*	0.342	2.921
$R^2 = 0.564$ , Adjusted $R^2 = 0.557$ , $F = 84.033$ , $p < 0.001$ , D-W = 1.875							

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Taking the students of Guangzhou Huashang Vocational College as the research object, this study delves into the six factors of Pathway to a better life, Reflective learner, Institutional support, Synchronizing learning, earning, and living, Match with an academic reputation, and Time out of school on adults' decision to study in adult higher education. The results of the study indicated that all hypothesized factors were statistically associated with affect adults' decision to study in adult higher education.

Notably, synchronizing learning, earning, and living, and life emerged as the strongest predictors (Beta = 0.183), highlighting adults' priorities in balancing education and existing responsibilities. This is consistent with the qualitative feedback from adults with low enrollment intention, who listed lack of time and financial constraints as the main obstacles, and family obligations were also one of the obstacles for some people. This is consistent with the findings of Morris et al. (2022), who found that adults must satisfy both work-related and private life-related factors before they choose to continue their education. When there is a conflict between study and work, most people still prioritize work. Because only when the economic problem is solved can they afford to pay tuition. Family affairs not only take up the study time of adult higher education students, but also consume their energy in learning. This is also the reason why most adults with low enrollment intention give up adult higher education - they cannot synchronizing learning, earning, and living in a limited time.

Pathway to a better life was the influencing factor with the highest mean value, and the main motivation for adults was to get better career opportunities or improve their income level by getting an adult higher education qualification, which is also consistent with the qualitative



feedback from adults with higher intention to enrol. Also, reflective learner (having the confidence to learn, having the ability to learn, having an interest in learning, as well as being willing to sacrifice personal time) were one of the important influences. This is also consistent with Fletcher and Tyson's (2020) research on participation in adult education, emphasizing the role of career opportunities and self-reflection. However, scepticism about the market recognition of qualification certificates inhibited some respondents' willingness to enrol. This reflects systemic problems in the Chinese adult education system, where certificates are often perceived as inferior to traditional degrees.

Institutional support ( $\beta = 0.178$ ) is the second highest relative influence factor. Adults are more inclined to choose institutions that offer flexible scheduling, technical support, and learning communities. This aligns with van Rhijn et al. (2023), who noted that flexible learning arrangements and support services can significantly enhance adult participation in higher education.

Based on the six affecting factors of PRISM-T, for school managers, they want to further improve the quality of adult higher education and promote the effect of enrollment. The details are as follows: First, the school should combine the rules of adult higher education, make full use of the Internet, big data and other technical means, and organize research on the needs of the industry and enterprises for adult higher education talent training, so as to better align the project with the market demand. Secondly, schools should focus on emerging industries, livelihood areas, and the "Double Hundred Action Plan" to optimize the layout of majors, so that students can choose majors that are more in line with their interests and career plans. Thirdly, schools can enhance the market recognition of adult higher education graduation certificates by strengthening teaching management and supervision, standardizing teaching organization and implementation. Fourthly, schools should innovate their educational and teaching models, promote digital transformation, adopt more flexible online and offline blended learning methods, so that students can learn anytime and anywhere, and improve their learning flexibility and autonomy. Fifth, schools should establish diverse scholarship and financial aid programs to alleviate students' financial burden and attract more outstanding students to apply. Sixth, schools should actively establish cooperative relationships with enterprises and set up off campus teaching points within the enterprises to provide convenient learning opportunities for employees by delivering teaching to their doorstep.

This study extends the application of the PRISM-T model to adult higher education in China and explores the factors that influence adults' decision to study in adult higher education. However, there are limitations to this study. The sample was limited to recent graduates of adult higher education (short-cycle courses) from Guangzhou Huashang Vocational College, who already had some knowledge of adult higher education, which may not be fully representative of all potential adult learners of adult higher education (normal courses). Future research should expand the sample to cover a more diverse group of adult learners and incorporate qualitative research to delve deeper into the enrolment decision-making processes of adults from different backgrounds.

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