

IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK SYSTEM FOR ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (APEL) IN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is a systematic process that involves identification, documentation and assessment of prior experiential learning. APEL has great potentials to widen access and increase mobility for higher education. However, APEL in Malaysia is practically quite unknown in the higher education (HE) sector. There are yet many barriers and this pose a great challenge to implement it in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs). These barriers need to be addressed in order for APEL to be in place in HEIs. Since APEL in Malaysian HEIs, is rather immature, therefore, this research focuses on the development of APEL implementation framework for Malaysian HEIs. This research also identifies the barriers and strategies to the effective APEL implementation in Malaysia. This qualitative research employed questionnaires, which were later triangulated with interviews from 62 respondents comprises staff from MQA and six (6) local universities. Three(3) experts from Unirazak, OUM and MQA were also involved in the interview. The findings of this research indicates that the biggest barrier in implementing APEL system in Malaysia is the assessment system, followed by quality assurance, assessor and APEL promotions. This study also indicates that among the effective strategies are to coordinate advising services from local and international experts and implementing research studies for improvement. Finally, the sustainable APEL implementation framework developed is flexible, interactive as well as user-friendly and consisted of four main phases, i.e. student responsibilities, assessor responsibilities, exemption sub-committee and students (approval and decision).

Keywords: Accreditation of prior experiential learning, APEL implementation framework, quality assurance, assessor, APEL promotions, assesment system, sustainable

Abstrak

Akreditasi Pengalaman Pembelajaran Terdahulu (APEL) adalah satu proses sistematik yang melibatkan pengenalanpastian, dokumentasi, dan pentaksiran pengalaman pembelajaran terdahulu. APEL mempunyai potensi besar untuk memperluaskan akses dan meningkatkan mobiliti dalam pengajian tinggi. Walau bagaimanapun APEL kurang dikenali di dalam sektor pengajian tinggi. Ada beberapa halangan yang menjadi cabaran utama untuk melaksanakannya di dalam institusi pengajian tinggi (IPT) negara. Halangan ini perlu di tangani supaya APEL dapat dilaksanakan dalam IPT. Oleh kerana APEL di IPT Malaysia adalah agak kurang matang, kajian ini menumpukan pada pembangunan kerangka pelaksanaan APEL di Malaysia. Kajian ini juga mengenalpasti halangan-halangan serta strategi pelaksanaan APEL yang berkesan di Malaysia. Kajian kualitatif ini menggunakan soalselidik yang kemudiannya di tiangulasikan dengan temubual daripada 62 responden yang meliputi kakitangan MQA dan 6 universiti tempatan. Tiga (3) pakar Unirazak, OUM and MQA juga terlibat di dalam temubual ini. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa halangan terbesar dalam pelaksanaan sistem APEL di Malaysia ialah sistem pentaksiran diikuti oleh penjaminan kualiti, pentaksir dan promosi APEL. Kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa antara strategi yang berkesan adalah untuk menyelaraskan perkhidmatan penasihatn dari pakar dalam dan luar negara serta melaksanakan kajian untuk penambahbaikan. Akhir sekali, kerangka pelaksanaan APEL lestari yang dibangunkan adalah fleksibel, interaktif dan juga mesra pengguna serta mengandungi empat fasa utama, iaitu, tanggungjawab pelajar, tanggungjawab pentaksir, jawatankuasa kecil pengecualian dan pelajar (keputusan dan kelulusan).

Kata kunci: Akreditasi Pengalaman Pembelajaran Terdahulu, Kerangkan Pelaksanaan APEL, Penjaminan Kualiti, Pentaksir, Promosi APEL, Sistem Pentaksiran, Lestari

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, human capital is the most important investment for the development of a country and core to innovation and productive high-income economy. The National Higher Education Strategic Plan was launched in 2007 to transform the higher education sector and among the aims includes the recognition of lifelong learning through the Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF). One of the key elements that is needed is the recognition of non-formal learning and informal through Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). It seems that at present the questions about its legitimacy are no longer questioned. Nevertheless most HEI in Malaysia are still at 'lost' of how an APEL system should look to be efficient, available and of sound quality. Thus, discussions are now mainly focused on issues related to the way of its implementation and operation. The need for new developments in this matter at the level of higher education in Malaysia is increasingly being raised.

1.1 Problem Statement

Certain barriers and strategies need to be studied and identified so that the universities in Malaysia could implement APEL effectively (Dharam Singh (2009) and Kaprawi (2011)). According to the South Africa Quality Assurance, SAQA (2011), there are problems in determining the most appropriate strategy for effective implementation of APEL system in South Africa. APEL policy and guidelines are still not available in many Malaysian HEIs (Kaprawi, 2011). Hence, there is a need to develop an implementation framework that can be used as a guideline or reference to ensure a systematic and orderly manner of APEL implementation system. Therefore, this study has investigated the barriers and effective strategies for APEL implementation and finally developed a sustainable APEL implementation framework.

1.2 Research Question

The research questions are as follows:

- 1) What are the barriers and effective strategies for the implementation of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in Malaysia?
- 2) How is the implementation framework system for the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in Malaysian Higher Education Institution?

2.0 IMPLEMENTATION OF ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (APEL)

APEL is about giving value to the learnings, skills and competencies people have gained, whether acquired through formal or informal learning. The generic term accreditation of prior learning (APL)

refers to the assessment and accreditation of any form of learning that has taken place in the context of either formal or informal education or during work itself. Similarly, Malaysian Qualifications Framework, MQF (2012) defines APEL as a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation and assessment of prior experiential learning, such as knowledge, skills and attitudes to determine the level at which an individual has achieved the desired learning outcomes, as access to a program of study and/or the award of credit.

For employers, APEL can help them to tailor training more effectively and better match employees to tasks, and avoid duplication of learning. More widely for Malaysia, APEL can also play a role in the human resource upskilling to fulfill the country's need of skilled workers. Currently APEL procedures are most commonly used to support applications for entry to HEIs in Malaysia, whereas its use to support learning is relatively very limited and actual accreditation of prior learning is still uncommon. In those few HEIs that are practicing APEL, it is less available to students wishing to register for courses based in sciences and engineering or vocationally oriented areas. There are also differing priorities and practices in the various HEIs which result in varying student experience of APEL. One of the strategies to the success and effective APEL implementation system is through consultation, brainstorming, networking, cooperation and exchange of experiences between APEL experts from different local and international institutions (DharamSinghet.al., 2011, Van Kleef (2007)). Nevertheless there are many barriers faced by Malaysia HEIs and also most Asian countries where APEL is practically unpopular yet. The lack of information and public awareness is one of the biggest barrier, which are also faced by most European countries (Grazyna, et. al., 2013).

2.1 Models of APEL Implementation

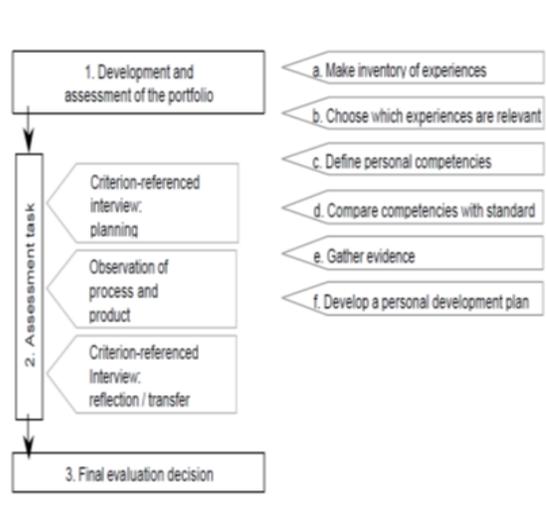


Figure 1 A basic EVCmodel (derived from Klarus and Blokhuis (1997) and Klarus (1998))

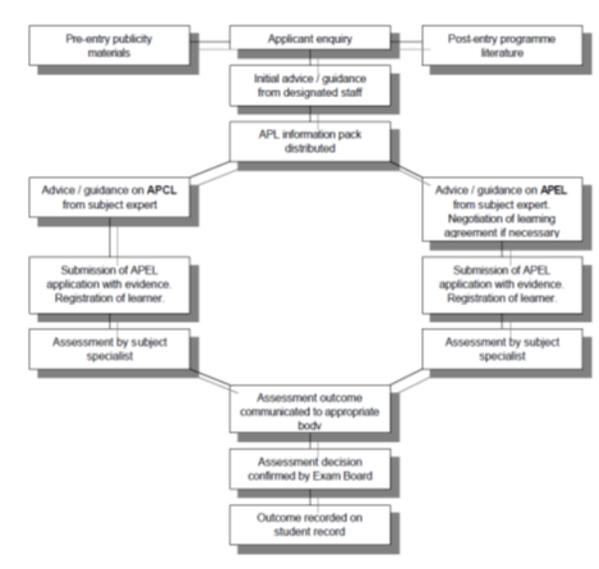


Figure 2 Overview of the main steps in the APL process (from UCAS, undated)

Currently, there are a range of models used by HEIs. Among them are as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2 that shows the basic framework of EVC or APEL used in numerous Dutch pilot project and in the United Kingdom (UK), respectively, to implement the APEL process. It assumes that additional advice and guidance is available to students who submit an APEL claim.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This cross sectional study has used survey method and a modified Delphi study. A key step in using the Delphi Technique is the identification and selection of the panel, since it is the panel's opinions and judgments that determine the outcomes of the study. Individual who are recognized as experts in the area being studied was selected for panel membership (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). In this study Wawasan Open University, Open University, UNirazak, AeU, UKM, UTM and Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) are chosen due to the fact that APEL is implemented in their institutions. This study used purposive sampling method where 62 respondent from 6 universities and one quality agency (MQA). They are considered 'experts' because they are directly involved in the implementation process of APEL and they hold the post of Dean, Head of Department, Director, Deputy Director, Assistant Director, Senior Officers or individuals directly involved in implementing APEL. The researcher opted to use this method because the respondent required, is limited and only involved individuals who are actually specialize in the implementation of APEL system only. The instruments

of this study are questionnaire, interviews and document analysis. All the data that were collected was analyzed by using SPSS Version 17. Interviews were conducted with the Deputy Dean (Student and Quality) College for Open Learning Unirazak, the director of the Institute for Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA) OUM and Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM). The interview data lends support to the qualitative data of this study. The interviews were focused on the key components of APEL implementation in Malaysia in the context of the management, barriers, strategies and the processes of APEL implementation.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Barriers And Effective Strategies In The APEL Implementation

The study showed that the assessment system is relatively perceived to be the most important barrier to the APEL implementation, followed by 'assessor', 'Lack of APEL promotion' and 'Quality Assurance' (Table 1). This findings agrees with Wihak (2006) and Kalz et.al (2008) who found that APEL candidate evaluation system is one of the key issues that often occur in the APEL implementation. Similarly, the task of determining the appropriate assessment model for a candidate is a difficult task and it is not only major obstacle that occurs in the APEL implementation but also a major challenge for institutions. (SiewYick, et.al (2011), Dharam Singh et.al (2011), Kaprawi (2011)). This study showed that public awareness also contributes the most hurdle to the promotional aspects. This shortfalls lead to a lot of misconceptions and distortions of understandings of what APEL actually is. Thus, extensive awareness and promotions could promote social acceptance and trust of this new 'service' of APEL. Other barriers identified are lack of training and incompetence of assessors, and candidate evaluation system which agrees with Bowman (2008), Van Kleef (2007), Wihak (2006) and Kalz et.al (2008)).

This study also identified that among the most effective strategies for APEL implementation is 'inviting APEL assessment experts from within and outside the country to advise the APEL assessors' as shown in Table 1. Dharam Singh et.al (2011) also agreed that APEL assessment experts from within and outside the country should be invited to provide advice in strengthening the assessment system.

4.2 Sustainable APEL Implementation Framework

Since the take up of APEL in Malaysian HEIs is still considered low, HEIs and providers need to come up with a new approach to make APEL a more user-friendly assessment pathway and much easier to understand and cope with. The process need to be structured to minimize time and cost to candidates

and institutions. In the past, candidates, having been given written information about the evidence needed to have their learning or skills recognised, have gone away and collected evidence, which they then combined into a portfolio. To prove their portfolio met the evidence requirements, candidates themselves often mapped their portfolio against the learning outcomes of the programme. With not much guidance and advice, this processes could demotivate candidates.

Thus, this study has come up with a more sustainable and learner-friendly APEL implementation framework which are based on benchmarkings of several HEIs APEL model (globally and locally) as well as using the inputs from practitioners of APEL (through modified delphi study). This improvised framework (refer to Figure 3) gives a more streamlined approach to APEL processes such that it could reduce the

previous heavy reliance on paper-based evidence and gives more options to candidates in gathering their evidence that better match with the learning outcomes. The new sustainable APEL framework has 4 main stages; Student Responsibility, Assessor Responsibility, Sub-Committee Exemption and Students (Approval).

The study has identified that guidance and counseling is an effective strategy. It also indicates that addressing the phase before the formal APEL process by providing greater clarification on the objectives of an APEL is very much needed. This phase is often missing from many other APEL system. Thus, this framework has been designed to accommodate the provision of detailed advice and

Table 1 Mean Scores for Importance Level of Barriers in the APEL Implementation

No.	Items (Factors of Barriers)	Mean Score	Std. Dev	Level of Importance
1	Assessment System	4.36	0.3294	Important
2	Quality Assurance	3.88	0.3948	Important
3	Assessor	4.16	0.4626	Important
4	APEL Promotion	4.05	0.3529	Important

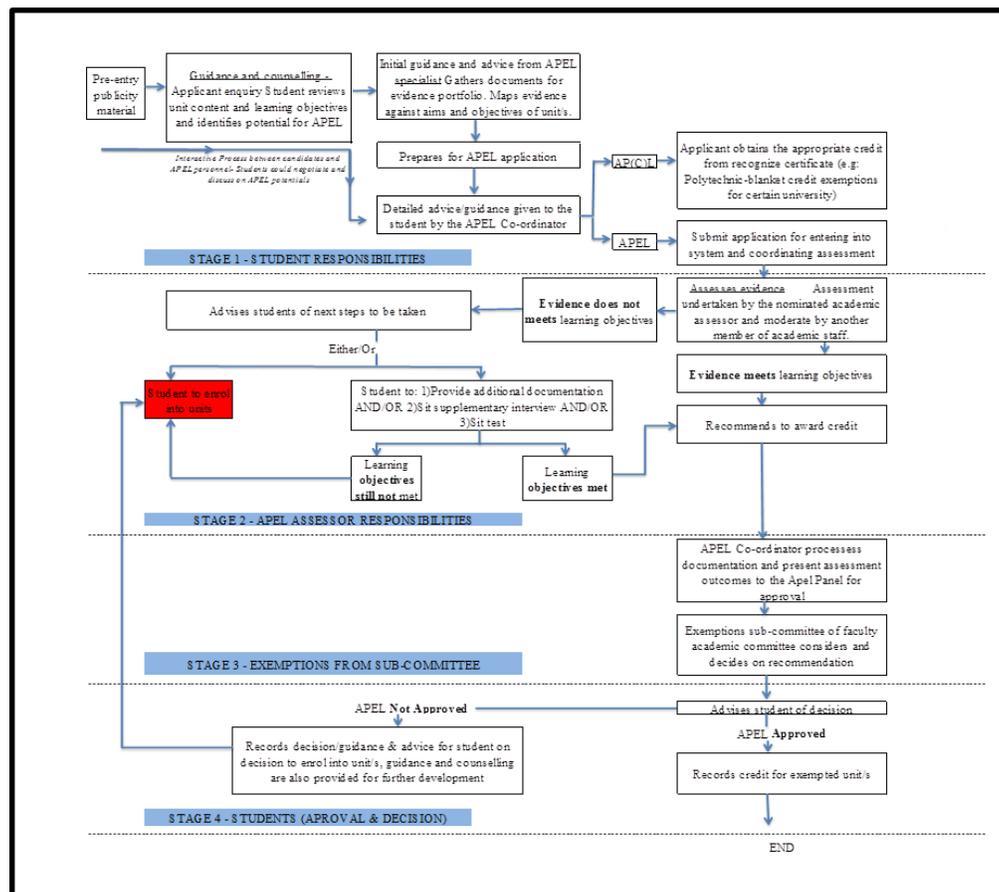


Figure 3 A Sustainable Framework of APEL Implementation For Malaysian HEIs

greater clarification on the objectives of APEL before the formal APEL process (i.e Phase 2). An interactive process of guidance between candidates and APEL personnel will be available all along prior submitting all the documents needed for APEL application (refer Figure 3). These interactive approach is also provided across all the 4 stages and even if the candidate fails to get approval of APEL, advice and guidance are also still available for the candidate to decide in which unit/s to enroll or for future application. As being indicated in the framework, advice and guidance will also be given throughout the whole processes and it is provided by either the APEL specialist or APEL coordinators or both according to the needs. Through the interactive process of guidance, this would build more confidence particularly for those who have limited experience or for matured candidates who have left formal learning system quite sometime ago, and where processes like evidence gathering for a portfolio will seem to be tedious, 'alien' and isolated to them.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The provision of APEL in Malaysia is still patchy and there are still many HEIs with little or no APEL activity yet. Although there exists large barriers across all the Malaysian HEIs, APEL has great potentials especially to technical universities and is relevant in a number of important current policy contexts, which includes: employability; the need to ensure the mainstreaming of TEVT; grant access to education and training; and the need to utilise education and training resources as efficiently as possible at a time of huge demand. MQA should coordinate this effort to come up with a more practical, clear regulations and policy, guidance and advice through research and sharing of expertise from various HEIs locally and internationally. HEIs should established APEL policy and guidelines and integrate it the university's Quality management system (QMS). This new interactive developed framework will be able to support a sustainable, student-friendly and professional practice of APEL by offering a flexible and coherent system of HE. This will benefit particularly those who are working with relevant learning opportunities which enable them to demonstrate their skills and knowledge. There are other approaches to APEL that could benefit HEIs particularly offering TEVT (like UTHM) that is worth for further research. This study nevertheless has contributed to the development of APEL, by sharing experience and providing insights into the structured and interactive approaches needed for successful APEL implementation in the context of Malaysian HEIs. The new sustainable framework developed through this study could provide a basis for a more integrated, national APEL policy and serve as a guideline to realize a sustainable lifelong learning in Malaysia.

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