

# Initial Experience in Implementation of Open Entry and Recognition of Prior Learning in OU Malaysia

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## **Abstract**

Malaysia is one of the first developing nations to introduce the *Open Entry and Recognition of Prior Learning* (RPL) in its education system. Open University Malaysia (OUM) has taken the challenge to provide lifelong learning opportunities and greater access to education through this mode. Traditionally, the entry to higher learning was limited and based on academic qualification criteria. However, with the new mode of entry, experiential learning is acknowledged and accepted as the qualifying requirement. This paper reports on the importance of Open Entry and RPL in enhancing knowledge society and an initial experience of implementing these initiatives in OUM. It also looks into the processes and procedures applied for executing the national agenda. The analysis here will be useful to establish guidelines for effective implementation of open entry and recognition of prior learning in countries, which have common context as in Malaysia.

## **Introduction**

Human capital is one of the key factors in building a competitive position in a knowledge-based economy (OPP3, Malaysia 2001). It is well recognised that education is critical for enhancing human capital development. "...(T)he theory of human capital is the concept that acquisition of more knowledge and skills raises the value of a person's human capital, thereby increasing their employability, income, potential and productivity" (McIntyre, n.d.). The transformations occurring in global economy is influencing higher education, demanding for competent knowledge-economy workers. Under the human capital theory, investment in education, training and employment scheme can enhance skill levels (Fitzsimons, 1999), thus transforming the nation's human resource competency into knowledge society.

Nevertheless, it is appalling to note that less than 15 per cent (UNESCO, 2003) of the Malaysian working adults have formal qualification of tertiary education. Similarly, this pattern was also observed in some South-East Asian countries, where both Thailand and Indonesia showed less than 10 per cent and 5 per cent of their working population (aged 25 to 64 years) with tertiary education respectively.

The current higher education institutions in Malaysia simply do not have the capacity to cater for the high demands of education needs due to the various constraints inherent in the system. The resources (i.e. professors and space) are limited as long as the conventional system remains as the only source of higher education. A significant majority of the population especially those who missed their chance at entering university after schooling, do not meet the minimum entry criteria set by higher learning institutions. In addition, there could have been other various reasons that would have prevented them to pursue higher learning such as due to family constraints or unfavourable economic background. In spite of that, it is pertinent to take note that these are individuals with life and work experience, and could be keen to enhance themselves. Nevertheless, their career progression is hampered by lack of accredited qualification. Hence, should the national human resource potential be limited to less than 20 per cent?

Table 1: Distribution of the population aged 25 to 64 years by highest level of education attained

Country	Year	No Schooling	Uncompleted Primary	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary	Tertiary (type B education)	Tertiary (type A) advanced research programme	Unknown
Malaysia	2002	8.3	a	28.7	20.7	31.1	a	11.1	a
	1995	14.1	A	34.5	19.8	25.3	a	6.2	a
Thailand	2003/04	4.2	43.1	21.0	10.5	8.8	3.0	9.1	0.3
	1995/96	5.5	63.0	11.1	6.9	5.8	1.8	5.8	a
Indonesia	2002/03	7.2	12.1	38.9	18.3	19.3	1.9	2.3	a
	1995/96	13.3	25.4	34.8	10.1	13.3	1.7	1.5	a
Australia	2003	A	A	A	38.0	31.0	11.0	20.0	a
Canada	2003	A	A	6	11.0	40.0	22.0	22.0	a
Japan	2003	A	A	A	16.0	47.0	17.0	21.0	a
Korea	2003	A	A	14	13.0	44.0	8.0	22.0	a
U.K	2003	A	A	A	16.0	56.0	9.0	19.0	a
USA	2003	A	A	5.0	8.0	49.0	9.0	29.0	a

Note: Post-secondary non-tertiary is included in upper secondary education  
a – not available

Source: OECD/UNESCO WEI (2005).

### Third Outline Perspective Plan and Ninth Malaysia Plan

Both the Third Outline Perspective Plan (OPP3) and the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP), aggressively promote the theme of building 'knowledge-based economy' through human capital development. Several initiatives in addressing human capital development were undertaken in the 9MP, among others are by supporting education and training. This is significantly shown in government sector expenditure, where the largest share of 21 per cent (MYR42.0 billion) was allocated for education and training out of the total MYR200.0 billion ( 9MP 2006-2010).

### Two of the Initiatives: Open Entry and Recognition of Prior Learning

For the first time in Malaysian history, with the mandate from the Ministry of Higher Education, Open University Malaysia (OUM) has opened up its doors to Open Entry and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) of the formal and in-formal learning experience. The risk of growing mismatch of job and the qualification of the workforce, provides good justification and a timely juncture of introducing Open Entry and RPL in Malaysia. Besides OUM, UNITAR and Wawasan Open University College has also recently received the call to contribute in these initiatives. Education systems are made as the pathways to align with national economic imperatives with the influence of the government policy (Raffe, 1998). Most of the developed nations showed at least 20% (Table1) of their population with tertiary education. It will be interesting to find out if this could be one of the contributing reason for increasing the number of graduates in the country, while Malaysia is heading towards a developed nation status.

### Why Open Entry?

The advent of lifelong learning has made Malaysia re-think about education opportunities provided in the current system. "A system of lifelong learning will be promoted to ensure that workers can continuously upgrade their skills and knowledge in order to remain relevant in the environment of rapidly changing technology and work processes as well as to nurture a learning society" (OPP3, Malaysia, 2001). In accordance with these efforts, the government has lowered the entry requirement for the degree programmes through the gate-way of Open Entry.

OUM refers the term Open Entry as:

A pathway to a degree programme without fulfilling the usual entry requirements set by the higher institutions all this while.

For an example, to access to an undergraduate programme, an applicant only needs to possess PMR qualification (10 years of formal learning) as compared to SPM qualification (12 years of formal learning/ equivalent to 'O'Levels) for the normal entry. In addition, the candidate must be at least 21 years old and has working experience. Even the postgraduate programme is given the levy in entrance with the condition the candidate has the STPM qualification (14 years of formal learning/ equivalent to 'A'Levels). Besides that, the applicant must also be 35 years old and has relevant working experience. This is in contrary to the earlier requirement that need a bachelor's degree before being eligible for enrollment into a master's degree programme.

The obvious potential benefits of implementing Open Entry:

- there are lesser barriers for admission to a degree programme as compared to the normal entry requirement;
- it provides wider access to education, hence more individuals will have lifelong learning opportunities in gaining knowledge;
- the employability of the individuals increase, as well as offers for better paid jobs;
- it provides a new channel for developing human capital; and
- it is a way to enhance knowledge society that will contribute in the building of knowledge-economy.

### **Why Recognition of Prior Learning?**

Besides Open Entry, RPL is another means of providing lifelong learning options. Now, Malaysians can obtain formal qualification of their learning via experience. Learning just does not happen within the four walls of a classroom. It can be acquired through life or work experience, on the job, at home or in the community through the various activities, tasks, formal and informal trainings, readings, and travellings. These are forms of lifelong learning of an individual that can be acknowledged in the form of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

In this paper, RPL is define as:

An assessment by OUM of the learning experiences gained by the applicant either through formal or non-formal means for the purpose of entry into the academic programmes or for obtaining prior learning credits from the courses offered.

Often, Open Entry and RPL are inter-linked to one another, but it should be clearly noted that the former is an entry path to the university whereas the later is an application of attaining credit for the learning achieved owing to experience or knowledge. One may apply for Open Entry but may not have the necessary experience to earn the prior learning credit through RPL. On the other hand, any learner in the undergraduate or postgraduate programmes, can apply for RPL for their learning realised via experience.

Among the possible advantages of RPL include:

- an alternative qualification earned for course(s) regardless how and where the learning occurred (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.);
- does not require to re-learn the course(s) again, hence avoids duplication of education and training;
- less time and cost spent for learning (Barker, 2001);

- obtain formal qualification for specific skills and abilities owned by individuals;
- encourage lifelong learning skills, particularly through self-assessment and career planning (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.);
- improved wages due to recognised higher skill levels (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.);
- an increase in the formal qualification levels in the society, leading to increased level of social capital (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.); and
- increase in knowledge-economy competitiveness resulting from more highly skilled work force (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.).

### Processes in Open Entry

The Open Entry processes for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are simplified in Figure 1. The candidate's application is assessed to determine whether the candidate is eligible for direct access into the programme or requires to show his/her competency in the learning outcomes of selected courses called Qualifying Courses, which are subjects of the programme. The faculty analyses the application to settle on the mode of assessment that will be taken by the candidate. The assessment methods are: registering and learning the *Qualifying Course*, preparing the *Portfolio*, and taking the *Challenge Test*. The candidate may request for the appropriate mode of assessment. The results of the assessment will determine whether the candidate is able to register to the chosen programme.

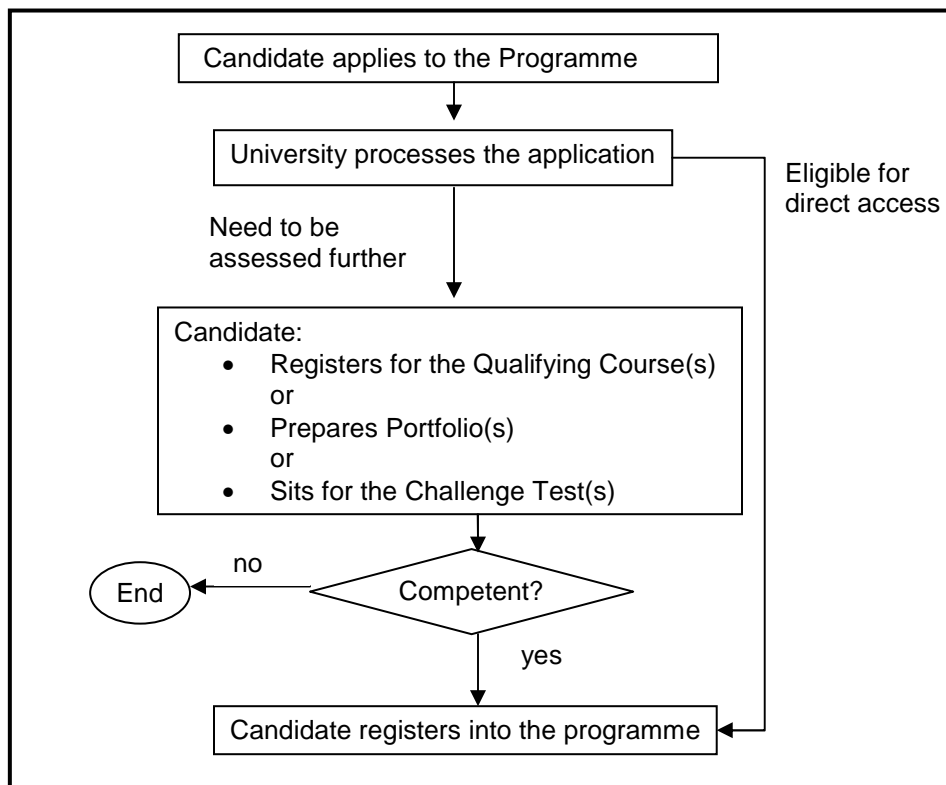


Figure 1: Open Entry Process for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes

### RPL Procedures

Figure 2 is a flowchart of the RPL procedures in OUM, however, there is no RPL application received at this point of time. Existing learners may apply for the RPL for more than a course.

Learners must provide evidences of their claim, and are further assessed on their competency using a suitable assessment modes (i.e. Portfolio or Challenge Test). Proving the competency level, will grant the credits or more commonly known as Prior Learning Credit (PLC) for that course(s) and the candidate needs not learn it in the programme.

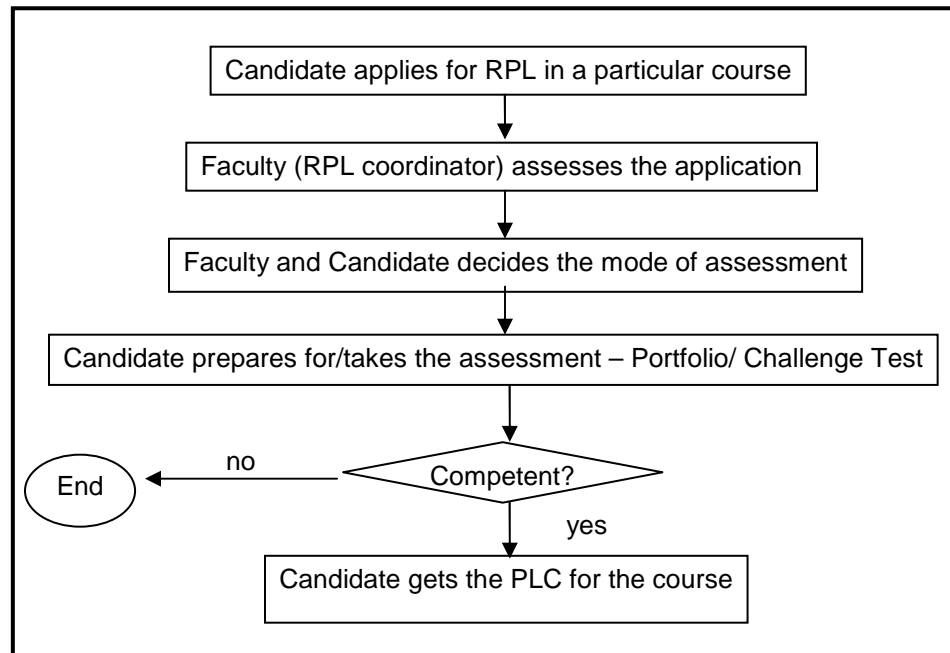


Figure 2: RPL Procedures

### Issues, Challenges and Lessons Learned

Although, the first intake of Open Entry is in September 2006 and RPL is yet to be put into complete operation, OUM has gained considerable amount of experience in the early stages of implementation of Open Entry. Key issues and the challenges faced by OUM during the process include the following:

- Clear directions
- Shift of paradigm
- Model of Open Entry
- Policies
- Quality assurance
- Entry criteria
- Assessment methods
- Student support
- Planning
- IT Support
- One-to-one mapping to course (subject) for RPL
- Acceptable time gap of learning

This paper provides a brief discussion of these topics in an effort to share the lessons learned.

#### Clear directions

The first step in setting up Open Entry and RPL is to understand the philosophy of these modes. It is very crucial that the processes and procedures to be carried out are clearly outlined. This is to avoid frequent changes in policies, risking reputation, waste of time and money. The top down

direction in the institution should be properly planned for effective execution. Most essentially, never underestimate the importance of disseminating and sharing of information.

### **Shift of paradigm**

The whole idea of Open Entry and RPL is new to Malaysia. Obviously, there will be prejudice on these modes of acquiring qualification. There is a need to change society mind-set of it. Numerous promotions and public awareness campaigns were conducted to seek public trust in these newly formed approaches and to communicate the services and benefits of Open Entry and RPL. Society needs to be enlightened on the quality issues that both Open Entry and RPL do not compromise in the quality or standards of education.

In addition, doubts among the academicians (such as – how could someone with a lower academic qualification study and pass the programme when even those who come in with higher qualification tend to fail badly? – how is it possible to equate the learning outcomes with experience?) need to be addressed too.

### **Model of Open Entry**

Open Entry to different institutions means differently. The parameters or the entrance requirements and the policies vary too. It is vital that an institution should adapt the most appropriate model that suits best to local context and culture. Before a system is “picked and plugged,” the capabilities and resources of the institution must be considered thoroughly.

### **Policies and guidelines**

Proper policies and guidelines on the standards and procedures should be clearly drawn earlier. It will serve as a guide in the implementation process. For instance: Are all programmes eligible for Open Entry? What percentage of a programme can be claimed for RPL? The policies and guidelines should be updated simultaneously as the implementation is in progress, to prevent miscommunication and confusion in the later state. It will serve as a reference point.

### **Quality assurance**

There is a concern for the quality of the standards and credentials of Open Entry and RPL. The Open Entry's and RPL's policies, processes and assessments must be explicitly included in the institutional quality assurance processes, to assure all stakeholders on the integrity of the academic standing and outcomes (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.).

### **Entry criteria**

Even though, an applicant does meet the minimum entry standards, but it is still ambiguous if he/she had acquired the right amount of learning through his/her experience. It can be a daunting task to determine the mode of assessment especially in the case of postgraduate applications.

### **Student support**

It is pivotal to plan and develop a suite of strategies to support learners. Types of supports deemed necessary includes: the development of Qualifying Courses, determine the appropriate teaching and learning support, types of courses eligible for RPL, assistance in preparation for RPL application, information needs of the learners, learning skills, etc.

### **Planning**

Like any projects, the initial launching of Open Entry must be planned thoroughly by listing the key activities and its deadlines.

### **IT Support**

Institutions should optimise the use of IT in its operating processes (i.e. recording student data, churning notification, etc) for efficient and effective outputs. Manual work will only delay processes and cause lack of student information management. IT could also be used to track student application movement between the departments in the university.

Although RPL is yet to take its full bloom, some of the impending challenges are:

### **Assessments for RPL**

The common assumption is that the candidate is able to demonstrate his/her learning in accordance to academic assessment methods. Will the candidate be able to take a test or write his/her learning in the manner required out of him/her? "For students with little experience in academic communities, the struggle to develop an effective voice through which to 'speak' the discourse, whether in writing, or in class, can be lengthy and difficult" (Northedge, 2001).

Can the academicians (assessors) assess the tacit knowledge? Candidates "may be unaware of what they already know and the extend to which they know" (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.). Language skills too can be a barrier for the candidates in describing their knowledge (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.). Do the assessors have the necessary experience to evaluate the candidate? It is pivotal to train the assessors in the assessment skills of prior learning. A database on knowledge management could be handy in matching the right assessor to the candidate.

### **One-to-one mapping to course (subject) for RPL**

It is not possible to have straight matching of trade qualification and skills with the university courses. How much of experience is equivalent to a particular course? Candidate must be able to "match their own learning and provide evidence for, the way in which they have met the stipulated learning outcomes, competencies or standards" (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.) against a specific course.

### **Acceptable time gap of learning**

The other perception is that the candidate can remember what has been learned, even if it was a long time ago. Is this possible? How much gap of time from the point of receiving and presenting knowledge is acceptable?

## **The Way Forward**

While Malaysia prepares towards the new era in human capital development, OUM will continue contributing in this course by being the powerful driver of Open Entry and RPL. Despite of the challenges faced, there is no question of reversing. OUM will carry on striving to develop the knowledge and skills of it's academicians and the administrative staff for the purpose of assessing the prior learning of the candidates and the handling of the whole operational processes. RPL is another component of flexible learning in the present OUM's blended teaching and learning methodologies, encompasses face-to-face tutorials, online learning and self-managed learning through the print modules. To acclaim prominent standards in RPL, OUM need to "participate in, contribute to, and learn from, international RPL projects, and countries that are developing national RPL policy frameworks and implementation projects" (AQF Advisory Board, n.d.). and persistently enhance quality in all processes. The other inventiveness is to collaborate with corporate bodies and/or industries in developing their employees. Apart of all that, strategies need to be developed to encourage Malaysians to be interested and partake in their personal development via Open Entry and/or RPL.

## **Conclusion**

The fact remains that introducing both Open Entry and RPL is a way forward into Malaysian education system. OUM has created an avenue in democratising education with wider access to learning and lifelong learning prospects. This enables the transformation of a community's potential to a knowledge society, however, the implementation of Open Entry and RPL cannot be considered autonomously of other strategies in this endeavour.

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