

## **Flexible Entry: Enculturation of the Lifelong Learning in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

This study discusses the role of flexible entry as a tool in cultivating the lifelong learning in Malaysia. Open University Malaysia (OUM) was the first private institution of higher education to be granted approval by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to implement flexible entry and recognition of prior learning policies in Malaysia in February 2006. Flexible Entry is an alternative path to gain entry into OUM academic programs through less stringent requirements as compared to traditional requirements set by conventional universities. Conventional universities require applicants to meet strict requirements in order to enrol into any program. Due to high-set requirements, they can hinder many from obtaining higher education.

Keywords: Lifelong learning; flexible entry

### **INTRODUCTION**

Lifelong education means education resulting from integration of formal, non-formal, and informal education so as to create ability for continuous lifelong development quality of life. Learning is therefore part of life which takes place at all times and in all places. It is a continuous lifelong process, going on from birth to the end of our life, beginning with learning from families, communities, schools, religious institutions, workplaces and etc. Lifelong learning is a valuable pursuit for its own sake. It keeps you connected with the world around you, makes you a more complete person, and helps you enrich the lives of your friends and family members. It's easy to lapse into a routine after you graduate from high school or college and launch your career, and many people think of learning and education as things you pursue when you're young. Nothing could be further from the truth, and it's never too late to take up a new hobby, start learning about a new topic, or learn a new skill. Open University Malaysia In order to cultivate the lifelong learning concept in Malaysia, OUM was the first private institution of higher education to be granted approval by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) to implement flexible entry and recognition of prior learning policies in Malaysia in February 2006. Flexible Entry is an alternative path to gain entry into OUM academic programs through less stringent requirements as compared to traditional requirements set by conventional universities. Conventional universities require applicants to meet strict requirements in order to enrol into any program because requirement levels may be set too high, they can hinder many from obtaining higher education.

Institution of higher learning should have an evaluation system to encourage lifelong learning. Currently the Open University Malaysia (OUM) has an evaluation framework which considered working experience as an entrance requirement. This initiative has encouraged working adults to continue learning to enhance their knowledge and skills. Besides, human capital development would be a decisive factor as Malaysia bridges the income gap with developed countries amid stiff global competition. Some countries have successfully retained their top talents due to their ability in adopting the right strategies and mechanisms by focusing on the strengths selected industrial sectors and simultaneously had developed training and human resource development and skill enhancement programs and talent database to ensure that relevant human capital could be produced. Malaysia would continue to make changes and improve its education system in the development of human capital to cater to the needs of industries and the country.

### **THE JOURNEY OF FLEXIBLE ENTRY IN OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA**

The School of Lifelong Learning (SOLL) was established to manage the implementation of Flexible Entry and Recognition of Prior Learning policies at OUM. OUM opened its doors to the first intake of Flexible Entry in September 2006. Flexible Entry is an alternative path to gain entry into OUM academic programmes through less stringent requirements as compared to traditional requirements set by conventional universities. Conventional universities require applicants to meet strict requirements in order to enrol into any programme. Because requirement levels may be set too high, they can hinder many from obtaining higher education. Flexible Entry is a means to overcome such stringent regulations and requirements as it takes into consideration every applicant's prior learning and work experiences for admission into an academic programme at OUM. Flexible Entry is

available for all Bachelor's and Master's Degree programmes except the Bachelor of Nursing Science and research-based Master's programmes.

At OUM, open entry offers an alternative route for admission into a university programme with less restrictive entry requirements compared to conventional entry criteria. It leverages on the individual's prior learning acquired through formal/informal training, life or work experience and compensates for the lack in academic qualifications. All learners at OUM, irrespective of their means of admission, will receive the same learning services and assessments until they graduate. There will not be any bias in terms of quality or services for one admission path over the other.

Admission through open entry must satisfy the criteria outlined by the Ministry of Higher Education; namely age and academic qualification. Candidates who wish to pursue an undergraduate programme must be at least 21 years of age on the year of application and possess a minimum PMR/SRP/LCE qualification or its equivalent. For programmes at the Masters level, candidates must be at least 35 years of age and possess a minimum qualification of STPM/HSC/A-levels or its equivalent. (Code of Practice for Quality Assurance the Open Entry Admission System, National Accreditation Board, 2006). Candidates must also possess prior learning experience in the programme of interest as well as pass the Open Entry Assessment conducted by the university. These stringent measures undertaken were necessary to ensure adherence to the national guidelines as well as quality in the assessment mechanism.

Tremendous improvements to the assessment methods have been ongoing so as to better reflect it learners' experience, readiness, interest and motivation to pursue a programme. The Open Entry Assessment comprises of an Entrance Test and an Aptitude Test. Candidates must pass both tests before they are allowed to enroll into the OUM programme. Despite its stringent rules and rigorous processes, the number of open entry candidates has increased from 208 in 2006 to more than 2,000 learners in 2009. The effectiveness of open entry is reflected by the increasing number of enrollment, increasing re-registration rate from one semester to the other as well as improvement in learners' performance.

Since the flexible entry programme is offered to those who do not have formal qualification with working experience, the criteria for Flexible Entry as determined by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education are as in Table 1 and Figure 1 respectively.

Table 1: Criteria for flexible entry

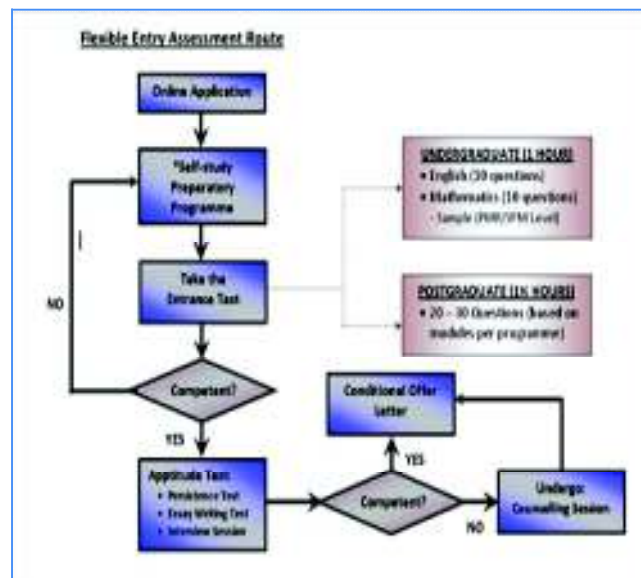


Figure 1: Flexible Entry Assessment Route

(Source: <http://www.capl.oum.edu.my>)

OUM holds the philosophy to democratise and make education accessible to all and this may be the reason for OUM to be the first university in Malaysia to adopt the flexible entry system in the country. It enables admission opportunities for adult learners who possess vast working experience but yet lack the minimal

qualifications to enter into a university programme. Open Entry was launched by the Minister of Higher Education, YBhg. Dato' Mustapha Mohamed in May 2006 and has since registered more than 2,000 learners at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels via flexible entry. Despite the increasing number of enrolment through open entry, these learners are often perceived to have lower persistency level and performance compared to their normal entry peers. These learners may lack some basic skills, such as language and numeric competencies that are fundamental to their academic progress. It is crucial to ensure that they are able to cope in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment and are able to sustain their motivation and commitment throughout their study programmes. Hence, their ability to cope with the demands of the academia and pressure to perform at par with their peers becomes the subject of interest to the institution.

#### **THE BLUEPRINT ON ENCULTURATION OF LLL (2011-2020)**

Currently, lifelong learning initiatives are carried out by various Ministries as well as agencies in the country. MOHE emphasizes great importance in lifelong learning initiatives. There are five categories of institutions under MOHE and they are community colleges, polytechnics, public universities, private universities and university colleges and private colleges. As of December 2010, there are 70 community colleges including their branch campuses, 30 polytechnics, 20 public universities, 47 private universities and university colleges including five foreign universities branch campuses and 392 private colleges (MOHE statistics, 2010).

Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia noted that LLL through distance learning, e-learning, workplace and part-time learning will become an integral entity to support Malaysia's human capital development and the nation's knowledge and innovation-based economy (MOHE, 2007). To implement the lifelong learning agenda of the country and to assist the government in transforming the nation into a high income economy by 2020. MOHE has taken the initiative to embark on a Blueprint on Enculturation of LLL for Malaysia: 2011-2020. The lifelong learning issues and challenges included in the blueprint are as following

- Cost effectiveness
- Accountability
- Inadequate mechanism and infrastructure for effective implementation of LLL programmes
- Leveraging on technology
- Recognition
- Benchmarking with international best practices
- Absence of a full-fledged lifelong learning policy
- Lack of monitoring of LLL programme at the national level
- Lack of awareness and participation in LLL programmes
- Inadequate financial support for lifelong learners
- Inadequate mechanism and infrastructure for effective implementation of LLL programmes
- Overlapping LLL activities programmes

There are four blueprint strategies assimilated in the lifelong learning blueprint.

- Strengthening of the mechanism and initiatives of LLL through the establishment of the National
- LLL Committee to formulate policy and provide an enabling environment to move LLL agenda for the country as a whole
- Providing awareness and promotional LLL programmes to the general public through catchy jingles or tagline and enticing the general population via incentives and funding mechanism
- Ensuring sustainability of LLL programmes via appropriate recognition and accreditation which include recognition of prior learning experience, quality assurance and establishment of credit bank for LLL programmes
- Providing strong support learning system to encourage individuals to participate LLL programmes.
- The lifelong learning is bounded with the following blueprint principles of the lifelong learning blueprint:
- Enculturation of LLL is a national agenda and to be the third pillar of human capital development
- Maximum impact and complementarities

#### **CONCLUSION**

In order to strategize and target skilled and knowledge-based workforce for the new decade, lifelong learning is an important agenda in the 10<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (10MP) and recognized as the third pillar of human capital development. 10MP has succinctly mentioned that for the country to develop and retain a first-world talent base.

Lifelong learning will play an important role in upgrading the skills and capabilities of the existing workforce. Malaysia took the initiative to build the lifelong learning blueprint in order to cultivate this learning concept to its nations. However, as nation's enculturation lifelong learning, the underlying policies and the mapping of education route have to be clear in order to produce a world class graduates for the country. Besides that, due to the concept of lifelong learning, we need to map a suitable route for those who are keen in furthering their studies but do not hold the minimum requirement to do so. Following, OUM is given the task to draw the map of flexible entry for these candidates. With this, the objective of Vision 2020, to achieve zero illiteracy rate would be a step closer.

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