

## ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF ADULT LEARNERS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

In 2001 the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) embarked on the recruitment of Adult learners through accreditation of prior learning (APL). This was in recognition that Adult learners who embark on open and distance learning (ODL) have a variety of learning experiences which relate to the world of work which can be incorporated into their degree programmes. The ZOU in recognition of the above philosophy and practice went ahead and admitted students into the counselling degree programme using the APL route. The assumption was that the learner's would achieve personal development and growth through their involvement in APL advisement and assessment. This qualitative study therefore aimed to find out what the APL student's experiences were. Convenient sampling was used to select two the students. An extensive open interview was carried out with them. Lecturers and Administrators were also interviewed to solicit their views on the student's experiences. The findings revealed that the students lacked adequate support. ODL institutions need to improve awareness of APL and support to student.

**Keywords:** Accreditation of prior learning, open and distance learning, programmes.

### INTRODUCTION

This study was on the Accreditation of Prior learning (APL) experiences of Adult learners in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). In 2001 the ZOU embarked on the recruitment of adult learners through APL in the Counselling degree programme. According to Branham (2001) APL is the recognition given to all prior learning which is used to admit mature or adult applicants without the requisite qualification (Maenzanise, Mahlangu and Pfukwa, undated; Rukuni, 2001). The adult learners were those who did not have enough academic qualifications to enter do a degree at a university but were employed or contributing in fields related to the programme of study they wanted to embark on. The nature of ODL especially the 'Openness' of it makes it paramount that such institutions provide opportunities to such adult learners. The study focused on their experiences throughout the process of APL and tutoring. The study was able to capture how adult learners proceeded in gaining access to their chosen programmes of study. Focus was also made on the role of key personnel in the APL procedures.

The ZOU by its nature should have a policy on APL which guides how adult learners without adequate qualification for certain programmes should be treated. In recognition of this the ZOU in 2001 linked up with the University of Derby to develop on APL Regulatory frame work (Nyatanga and Dann, 2001). Rukuni (2001) had proposed that ODL institutions like ZOU should include APL for marginalised learners in line with their mandate. This resulted in a policy which stipulated how the APL process should be implemented in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU General Information and Regulations, 2007; Zimbabwe Open University Accreditation of prior learning (APL) Policy and Procedure, 2010). The

chairperson of the Department of Counselling, Dr Margaret Rukuni initiated the first project by accepting APL applications in her department.

According to Nyatanga and Dann (2001) APL may be used for two purposes; admission to a programme of study, or admission to a programme of study with advanced standing. From the outset the Counselling Department opted for the first option. This option recognized the needs which were inherent in our society. Zimbabwe went through a colonial era which had denied a lot of Zimbabweans opportunities to gain higher qualification (Dube, 2000). With the advent of independence in 1980 a lot of adult Zimbabweans found themselves in various capacities which needed further qualification but with the few universities and colleges they could not get the opportunities. These needed the applicant to have at least five ordinary levels passes to enter a programme of study; but the majority of adults had non-standard entry qualification although they were gainfully employed or had varying responsibilities in the society. Benza (2001) acknowledges that the ZOU came into being to afford such disadvantaged adults opportunities to learn. ODL institutions need to find ways in which they can afford prospective learners the opportunity to self actualize without compromising the quality of their degree programmes. The APL route is the only way that can be done since it has an inbuilt quality assurance component.

Lack of adequate entry qualifications is barring adult learners whose experiences can enable them to embark on university programmes of their choice so as to improve their contribution to society. How can ODL institutions accredit the prior learning experiences of adult learners to ensure that they are on par with those with standard qualification without compromising the quality of the degree programme?

### Conceptual Framework

The ZOU APL model was developed in line with the United Kingdom generic model (Nyatanga and Dann 2001). The Open University (1990), Simasko (1991), Nyatanga, Forman and Fox, (1998) say that most UK institutions follow this generic model. The UK APL model as it is known has six distinct stages; pre entry, profiling, gathering of evidence, assessment, accreditation and post assessment guidance. Figure 1 shows the six stages and their activities.

Stage 1: Pre- entry	→	Marketing of APL / APEL availability of Fliers, brochures, open days, press
Stage 2: Candidate profiling	→	Establish candidates goals, past experiences (initial screening)
Stage 3: Providing evidence	→	tangible evidence candidate gathers to support claim. Evidence normally presented as a portfolio
Stage 4: Assessment	→	Assessors review claim and verify claim as necessary Assessors check Assessors often subject specialists

		make recommendations for credit or recognition
Stage 5: Accreditation	→	Final verification or endorsement by the institution or professional body
Stage 6: Post APL counselling	→	Whether successful or not review experience will be useful

**Taken from Nyatanga L and Dann K (2001)**

### Figure 1: Six Stages of UK APL model

Although the UK APL model does not specify the person who guides the student throughout the stages there is an advisor who is given this responsibility once the candidate has passed through the initial screening. This person ensures that the candidate develops an appropriate and adequate portfolio for assessment (Benza, 2002).

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the current status of APL in the ZOU?
- What have been the APL experiences of adult learners in the counselling department?
- What has been the role of key personnel in the experiences of APL students?
- How can the APL process be properly managed in the ZOU?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is going to focus on the following:

- Current policy and procedures in place
- APL experiences of Adult learners
- Improving the APL system

APL is a process of widening access to university education to all persons regardless of their station in life. APL can then be defined as the crediting of any relevant learning which would have taken place outside the university. In line with the philosophy of providing access to all learners the ZOU embarked on APL with the help of the Derby University.

In 2001 when ZOU began to seriously consider an APL framework they were no Higher Education regulatory systems in place. However, they is now need to take on board suggestion on how all institutions should handle APL, special entry and mature entry. Such considerations must ensure that the institution does not produce half baked graduate who will not make any meaningful contribution to their society. However, the ZOU ensured that the degree quality was not compromised by following a rigorous protocol for those who wanted to use the APL route (Benza, 2002; Maenzanise, Mahlangu and Pfukwa, undated). This was achieved by linking up with Derby University. This was also benchmarked against reputable

regional and international standards like the University of South Africa's (UNISA) recognition of prior learning (UNISA Information brochure 2006, ).

The current ZOU policy on APL indicated in the general regulations stipulate the procedure that must be followed before an applicant is accepted into the regular degree programme. Maenzanise, Mahlangu and Pfukwa (undated) mention what the policy stipulates each member should do. The APL procedure should be handled like all other applicants in the sense that committees meet to consider each submitted portfolio (Benza, 2002). There are advisors who are appointed by the Department from which the applicant would have selected a programme. The advisor is responsible for helping the candidate submit a suitable portfolio (Lamping, 2001).

### **Current status of APL**

Conrad (2011) points out that the area of PLAR or APL is not discipline and cannot at the moment be called a field of study. This is because its parameters are porous as they extend into adult education areas like 'workplace learning, informal learning, assessment, vocational education and foreign credential recognition and training' (Conrad, 2011: 1).

In Zimbabwe it has barely been acknowledged by the various institutions as Rukuni (2001) as proposed that it needs to be incorporated into tertiary institutions. APL process is meant for candidates with non – standard entry qualification who use it to show that they have the pre – requisites and can demonstrate a preparedness to study. Branham (2001) says that APL is recognition of all prior learning that is intentionally organized through courses, modules, workshops, and similar activities and may be either awarded through a certificate or through experienced learning events. Rukuni (2001) says that APL can be a combination of the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) and Accreditation of Prior Certified learning (APCL).

Nyatanga and Dann (2001) say that there are guiding principles of good practice which should be followed and these are the ones which guide the ZOU APL These are that the candidate should make the claim. It is the candidate who makes the claim that they have acquired the knowledge and skills and have the evidence as proof.

APL is about learning outcomes not just experience. The experience of the candidate should translate into what they would have learnt. Thus the learning outcomes derived from the experiences are the focus of the assessment. It is possible that a candidate may have undergone some experiences that they feel is important but may not translate into a significant learning outcome.

Identification of significant learning should come before assessment. It is paramount that before the assessment the candidate should package their learning for presentation. Nyatanga and Luft (1991) identify four stages of the presentation namely;

1. Systematic review of experience
2. Identification of significant learning
3. Synthesis of evidence
4. Evaluation of evidence by assessors.

## **Advisors and Assessors**

Two members of staff are very important to the accreditation of prior learning. These two; advisors and assessors have been alluded to before. Conrad (2011) says the assessors are also called evaluators. The advisors help the candidate construct a portfolio which is submitted to the assessors for evaluation.

The advisor role is basically to guide the candidate in the process of translating the prior learning into evidence. The candidate is helped to systematically review their learning past experiences and construct a portfolio. Some of these may have evidence in the form of certificates, legal documents, personnel records, letters of verification from supervisors; demonstrations as contained on tape and compact disc can also be used. Candidates may be helped in writing assignments or justifications. They also prepare the candidates for interviews, discussion, or demonstrations.

Another role of the advisor is to fully orientate the candidates on the whole APL process and its outcomes.

Assessment is an academic responsibility which is undertaken by the Department and Faculty concerned approved by the senate of the awarding academic institution (Benza, 2002). Two assessors are appointed to evaluate the evidence of the prior learning submitted in the form of a portfolio. Although the assessor is not directly in contact with the candidate it is their role to assess the submitted portfolio for its suitability for the degree programme applied for (The Centre for Education and Work 2002). The assessors compare the content of the prepared material to the university programmes at a similar level and with comparable content. The portfolio contents in the form of essays or other competency packages must demonstrate evidence of knowledge at the level of the programme for which the candidate has claimed credit.

The evidence submitted must be appropriate and acceptable to the university senate, external examiners and regulatory authorities. In order to ensure the above assessors may probe the student's level of knowledge through interviews; additional written or assignment work; examine artifacts or observe performance. The study wanted to find out the applicants' experiences of this process.

## **APL experiences of Adult learners**

In this section I focus on three levels of experiences by adult learners. These are experiences prior to the APL; experiences during the APL process; experiences after the assessment; ratification by the institution's academic senate.

Adult learners who apply for APL have substandard qualifications. In Zimbabwe the standard qualification for a degree programme are a minimum of five ordinary level passes including English language. Advanced level passes are a requirement for most of the degree programme. Most of the APL applicants do not have such qualifications but may have long experience or skills in their chosen fields. For example in the counseling field some may be qualified teachers, nurses, policeman, pastors or nongovernmental workers who may have vast experiential knowledge and skills in counselling members of their community. Studies have shown that such candidates have intrinsic motivation which propels them to do well when given the opportunity (Rukuni, 2001).

Research evidence in Africa is not exhaustive on how these candidates fare during the APL application process (). The British and American models of APL are extensive and require time, as much as a year to

complete the stages (Nyatanga and Dann 2001). It is not clear if most applicants have any resilience to wait for that long.

The assessment of APL candidates undergoes the same committee stages as other academic applicants. These are then placed in suitable programmes in line with their experiential learning. There is need to find out these APL adult learners' experiences of the actual tutorials, and assessment processes once they have been admitted into a degree programme. Dixey (2014) says in the UK, APL practices are many but in Zambia work achievements gained are not recognized. How did the applicants fare in this study?

### **Improving the APL system**

The issue of policy is crucial in the implementation of APL. Policy must address quality and perception issues. How does ODL institution ensure that the APL adult learners will undergo the same intensive programme as other students? The issue of perceptions of the degree programme acquired through APL is also essential to the image of both the candidate and the institution. Policy must allay the fears that the ODL is just issuing out degree to people who do not qualify.

APL experiences of Adults learners need to be documented and the evidence used to improve how ODL institutions implement such programmes. How do students perceive these processes and how can their experiences be used to improve the ZOU APL process and outcomes?

### **METHODOLOGY**

This was a qualitative study using a case study design. Woodley (2004) points out that the qualitative approach enables the in depth understanding of phenomena. If a researcher plans it well they can describe what is really going on in an institution. The case study design had a phenomenological emphasis. Rudestan and Newton (2001) describe phenomenology as an approach which describe and educate the meanings of human experience. In this particular study focus was on the adult learners experiences as they went through the APL process and during the course of study.

Convenient sampling was employed to select the two candidates who initially applied for APL. These two both applied for the counselling degree programme in the Harare / Chitungwiza region. An extensive open ended interview schedule was used with the participants. Lecturers and administrators were also interviewed to solicit their observations on what the students underwent.

There were three interview schedules for the three categories of participants. Data collection was done at the Regional office where the students were registered. Rudestan and Newton's (2001) 7 steps to data analysis and presentation were used and these were:

1. Review of all relevant statements
2. Recording all relevant statements
3. Removing all redundant statements and remaining with key meaningful units of the experience
4. Organise the experiences into themes
5. Merge the themes into a description of the textures and augment with quotation from the text
6. Construct a description of the structure of the APL experiences
7. Create a textual – structural description of the essences of the experiences.



All ethical considerations concerning informed consent, debriefing and publication of results were adhered to in the interview and the report publication. I present and discuss the results in the next section.

## RESULTS

This study focused on two female adults' learners who had successfully joined the ZOU using the APL process the counselling degree programme. Key personnel were identified as Lecturers and Administrators. The results show that the lecturers comprised of advisors and assessors. Administrators were responsible for the processing of the APL application. Using Rudestan and Newton's (2001) 7 steps to data analysis I was able to construct descriptions of the adult learners' experiences. The responses by the Lecturers and administrator helped to confirm their authenticity. The results are presented in the order of the research questions and the generated themes.

### **What is the current status of APL in the ZOU?**

#### *Knowledge of APL procedures*

The adult learners did not have knowledge of the current status of APL upon application. They got to know about it at the time of application. They acknowledged that it was in the students handbooks. This was confirmed by both lecturers and administrators, that they is an APL policy and procedures which are in the general regulations and handbooks. These guidelines show the procedure that must be adhered to.

The process starts with the candidate applying at the Regional Office, this is submitted to academic registry, the department receives the application and appoints an advisor and an assessor, the faculty considers the report which is recommended to Senate for approval. The adult learners have no idea of this process. This at times tends to create apprehension among the adult learners as they have to wait for long periods for feedback.

### **What have been the APL experiences of adult learners?**

The counseling department has been receiving many applications for APL from across the social spectrum. Initially two adult learners were successful, one female and one male. The male candidate dropped out after two semesters of haphazard attendances. The second female joined in 2008. Currently these two are the ones in the programme. Their experiences are presented in two themes; the Application period and the Tuition period.

#### *Application Period: Preparation, support*

Both students became aware of the APL process when they came to apply. They were advised by the administrators to take the APL route since they did not have adequate entry qualifications. It is worth noting that these students had no prior knowledge of APL. They had assumed that because this was an "Open" University then it was possible that anybody can be accepted. The issue of how "open" an institution can be is a subject of many Distance education studies and books (Rowntree, 1992). It is clear that the ZOU has not created awareness among the Zimbabwean community of the APL process. Administrators acknowledged that a lot of applicants tend to shun away once APL is fully explained to them.

These two adult learners were patient since the process can take from six to twelve months to complete. This is because all decisions are made by committees. The adult learners accepted this as indicated by one who said:

“It is rigorous showing that coming up with a portfolio and other processes needs time and should not be haphazard”.

They had to be taught how to construct a portfolio. This required a candidate to sort the kind of proof that is required. This was in line with what Nyatanga and Luft (1991) said concerning how candidates should identify prior learning which should be presented for assessment. Due to lack of written guidelines adult learners felt as if the advisor was always asking for other material just to make it more difficult for them to be considered.

Administrators raised two concerns on the Application period. First they felt that support for the applicant was lacking. This is because departments and faculties have inadequate knowledge on the APL process. One lecturer said this about the prevailing attitude:

“It is not being taken seriously. Departments are not fully aware of what to do. It’s all left with the Director of the Centre for Student Management and the whole process which is not transparent”.

When this was posed to lecturers it was clear that they belonged to three categories of opinions. There were lecturers who believed that applicants with non standard qualifications should be afforded the chance to acquire higher qualifications. Other lecturers believe that their presence tends to affect the quality of the degree as one said:

“Staff shuns this entry system as it tends to lower the degree status if those without O levels are allowed to attain degrees.”

The last group had no idea of what APL was about.

#### *The Tuition Period: support, roles, responsibilities*

Both students experienced challenges in all the areas. The first adult learner took seven years to complete the four year programme. The adult learner was highly motivated and sort help from the lecturers and administrators. However other commitments and financial hardships tended to draw her back. This resulted in too many breaks resulting in her deferring or repeating some courses. However this adult learner was able to pass mathematics and statistics courses, which are usually failed by those who normally have the standard qualifications. The adult learner successfully completed all her courses and graduated.

The other adult learner was in her fourth and final year although she was trailing her cohorts by a semester. Again this adult learner had other social commitments which resulted in the late submission of her assignments including the failing of some courses.

Despite that both adult learners experienced difficulties they requested for support. Lecturers point out that these candidates received support:



“If they require it in line with their needs”

But it is clear that candidate despite using the support system in their programmes they displayed a lack of knowledge of their roles in the whole process. They took it for granted that once one gets a place everything should occur automatically. The administrators and lecturers were in agreement that they were not given enough orientation on their roles and responsibilities.

Adult learners had varying experiences which they brought to the institution. They were uniform in their belief that they should be treated like the other students but what they lacked were communication skills in the other students. For example, the ability to write essays, the propensity to work in groups and the skills in examination taking.

Adult learners felt that they needed as much support as possible. One of the adult learners would even seek for help during after hours. Throughout the process adult learners have had support from friends and relatives colleagues and peers. The adult learners were motivated by the recognition and acknowledgement they got from everybody. They acknowledged that the APL route was a demanding one.

### **What has been the role of key personnel in the process?**

#### *Key personnel*

Adult learners identified administrators, advisors, assessors and tutors as key in their experiences. Because of the help they got from administrators adult learners were able to complete the application forms. But this was not the case for everybody. Those who did not get this support did not return with their completed forms. Although it is not the intention of institutions to accept everybody who applies for APL, unfortunately those who applied do not get maximum support.

One Adult learner acknowledged the role advisors played in preparing them for assessment. Advisors enabled them to put together suitable portfolios. However advisors feel that they needed staff development in the APL process. This would enable them to adequately prepare the candidates.

Adult learners pointed out that they had little contact with assessors. Assessors had little contact with candidates unless they called for interviews or demonstrations. However, the assessor pointed out that they needed training in order to be knowledgeable about the various qualifications offered by different institutional bodies; evaluate and quantify both learnt and acquired experiences; the requirements of the course content which the applicant intends to study.

### **How can the APL process be improved?**

Adult learners suggested that awareness should be enhanced with the community. They also requested more support during the various processes. In response to this lecturers and administrators made suggestions which are captured in table 1.

**Table 1: Suggestions for improving the APL Process**

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise awareness among ZOU members of staff e.g. workshops, induction</li> <li>• Have orientation or a special day to meet all prospective applicants</li> <li>• Inform the public through adverts, road shows of APL</li> <li>• Target potential markets like Prisons, Police, Army, NGOs and farming communities</li> <li>• Staff develop lecturers and administrators on APL</li> <li>• Create bridging courses targeting those youngsters with “3”O levels</li> <li>• Improve quality assurance of the APL</li> <li>• Raise awareness of APL with ZIMCHE, employers, community</li> </ul> |
|---|

In response to the students’ experiences some administrators suggested that APL be extended to post graduate degrees as they said:

“It can also be expanded to cater for applicants for Masters Degree Programmes who might not necessarily hold requisite degrees but have at least a degree in some field”

## DISCUSSION

The finding shows that the current status of APL in the ZOU is not clear. This finding is similar to Conrad’s (2011) comments on the international scene. Although there is a policy in place there is need to synchronise it with the national regulatory authority’s policies.

The APL experiences of adult learners in the counselling programme were varied. Applicants did not get much support during portfolio construction. Hence some dropped out. This was in line with what Nyatanga and Luft (1991) said concerning how candidates should identify prior learning which should be presented for assessment. It also shows that not all students who apply are successful. Adult learners need to be highly motivated and committed if they are to make it. The APL route is not an easy option as mentioned by Mahlangu and Makore-Rukuni (2001).

The role of key personnel in the experiences of APL students was not clearly defined. This is similar to what Nyatanga and Dann (2001) initially did for ZOU. However, staff turnover requires that induction programme include APL policies and guidelines.

The findings indicated that the APL route is not an easy one but can be improved by adequate support from all involved. This is in line with Conrad (2011) who advocates for more debate and creation of literature on APL. The documentation of all the policies and procedures for use by staff and students is therefore paramount in the African context.

## CONCLUSION

The following conclusions were made:

- Applicants had no knowledge of the APL process when they came to the ZOU
- The process of coming up with a portfolio is rigorous
- Participants had varying experiences but agree that more support should have been given
- ZOU personnel are not prepared to implement APL

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study made the following recommendations:

- Awareness campaigns on APL should be carried out in the community to attract experienced adults to take up programmes in their chosen fields.
- Provide training in APL to all members of staff who are involved with adult learners who will have used the APL route.
- Provide support to applicants in the initial stages of APL. Put in place mechanisms to encourage students who may falter due to programme demands or other personal commitments.
- Work with accrediting bodies and employers to ensure the quality of degrees.

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