Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL): An Alternative Entry Route to Higher Education in Malaysia

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Abstract. In general, all parents, rich or poor, want their children to go to school and receive the best education they can afford. However, in reality, not all children are blessed with this opportunity for many reasons, mainly financial. Studies have revealed that educational attainment is a critical determinant of economic progress (Ariagada, 1986; Barro, n.d; Barro and Lee, 2001; Cole and Geist, 2018; Psacharopoulos and Ariagada, 1986). According to statistics from Human Resources Malaysia 2016, 20.8% of youths (15–24 years of age) and 29.2% of adults (aged 24 to 65) attained the tertiary level of education, indicating that Malaysia still has a lot of room for improve in its economic development. In order to encourage more eligible candidates to upgrade their education level and, at the same time, promote lifelong learning, the Ministry of Education Malaysia launched the APEL (Access) in 2011, as an alternative entry into tertiary education. This paper aimed to compare the academic performance in the undergraduate degree programme between the entrants admitted through APEL (A) and those who came through the standard academic admission route. Although there is extensive literature on the recognition of prior experiential learning (RPL), few researchers have looked at the relationship between entry route and academic performance, especially in Malaysia. A sample of 30 undergraduate adult learners were selected from a private institute of higher learning in Malaysia; and a comparison of their academic performance with standard route entrants in a selected semester was conducted. The study showed that there was no significant difference in the academic performance between the two groups, with adult learners performing as well as the young learners. These findings could help to build confidence in educators and policy-makers in accepting and giving a second opportunity to adult learners to pursue their educational dream.

Keywords: Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), academic performance, lifelong learning.

1   Introduction

Studies revealed that educational attainment is a critical determinant on economic progress (Cole & Geist, 2018; Schanzenbach, Boody, Memford, & Nantz, 2016; Barro & Lee, 2001; Psacharopoulos & Ariagada, 1986).

In many African countries, education, especially the "post-primary education and training" has been recognised as an important pillar to poverty reduction, job-creation, and progression to knowledge-based societies (Singh, 2008).

"While Education for All (EFA) is good, it is not possible to wait for the achievement of universal coverage of primary education, especially as many children and youth in marginalized, and rural and urban contexts, need to develop alternative access programmes for individuals to progress into TVET, skills development and adult and community educational programmes." (Singh, 2008, p.7)

Malaysia has sustained rapid and inclusive economic growth for close to half a century.   In its 11th Malaysia Plan, Malaysia set itself the target of achieving high-income status by 2020.   Fostering lifelong learning and reskilling is one of the developmental objectives.   In the report of OECD (2016), Better Life Index, Malaysia 2016: Economic Assessment, it was noted that Malaysia scored well in some areas such as long-term unemployment (Figure 1), it scored relative weak in area of educational attainment and skills.   Improving education quality and skills training is essential to achieve productivity gains while promoting social cohesion and well-being over the longer term (Koen, V., Asada, H., Nixon, S., Habeeb Rahuman, and Mohd Arif, 2017).

B. Better-life index by sub-indicators

■ Malaysia   ▲ Higher-income OECD   ● Lower-income OECD
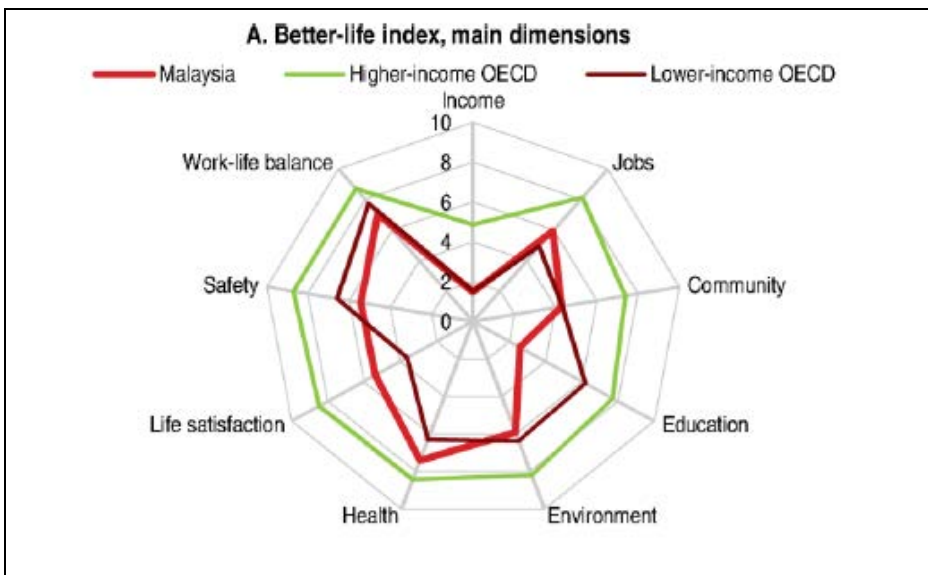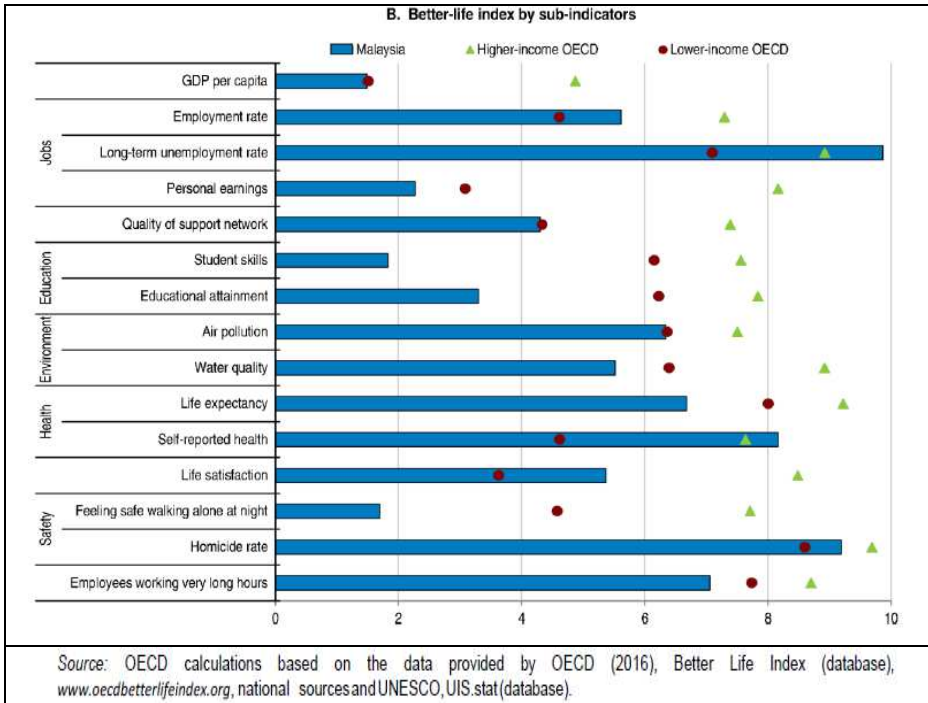
Fig. 1.   Well-being indicators point to further opportunities to foster inclusive growth
(Source: Koen, V., Asada, H., Nixon, S., Habeeb Rahuman, M. R. and Mohd Arif, A.Z.,
2017, p.11)

Thus, lifelong learning has been identified as a strategic shift that will propel Malaysia towards achieving the status of a high income economy and developed nation.

In supporting the national agenda of lifelong learning, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) through its MQA Act 2007 (Act 679), introduced the provision of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in 2011 to provide access and opportunities for individuals to pursue tertiary education.   Through APEL, MQA recognises the value of learning that takes place beyond the formal classroom settings as well as learning that occur throughout work and life experiences; regardless of when, where and how it was acquired.

In another word, through APEL, individuals who have work experience but lack of formal academic qualifications are allowed to pursue their studies at higher educational institutions.   In general, knowledge obtained through formal education and working experience will be both assessed in APEL's assessment.

In Malaysia, APEL has been identified as a pathway to access the various levels of qualifications set under the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF).   Table 1 summarises the comparison between the standard entry and the APEL entry route to the different levels in the tertiary education.

Table 1. Malaysian Qualifications Framework for Standard Entry VS APEL Entry Requirements

Standard entry requirements under the policy of Ministry of Higher Education	APEL entry requirements
Certificate programme - minimum of 1 credit at SPM level	**Certificate (Level 3, MQF)** - 19 years old at the time of application with relevant work experience and passed APEL assessment.
Diploma programme - minimum of 3 credits at SPM level	**Diploma (Level 4, MQF)** - 20 years old at the time of application with relevant work experience and passed APEL assessment.
Foundation or pre-U - minimum of 5 credits at SPM level	
Bachelor's degree - various pre-university qualifications such as foundation programme, A level, STPM and so on.	**Bachelor's (Level 6, MQF)** - 21 years old at the time of application with relevant work experience and passed APEL assessment.
	Master's (Level 7, MQF) - 30 years old at the time of application with at least STPM/Diploma/equivalent, relevant work experience and passed APEL assessment.

(Source : StudyMalaysia.com, 2016)

From the MQA statistics, at the beginning of 2011 until August 2015, 651 candidates applied for APEL. Out of this figure, 211 candidates (32%) choose to apply for APEL assessment at diploma level; 181 candidates (28%) choose to apply for APEL assessment at bachelor's degrees level; and 259 candidates (39%) choose to apply for APEL assessment master's degrees level. During that period, a total of 360 candidates have passed the APEL assessment.

2 Literature Review

Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is part of the Malaysian Government's effort in recognizing the importance of lifelong learning in nation's human capital development and knowledge society to achieve its goals of becoming a developed nation by the year 2020.

In some developed countries, the recognition of prior experiential learning was not new. Garnett & Cavaye (2015) reported that the development of recognition of prior learning (RPL) was started in England in 1980s and in Australia, RPL was introduced in 1992 as part of the national framework for the recognition of training. However, only in the last few years that RPL has become clearly or widely adopted by the higher education industry in Australia.

Bohlinger, S., Dang, K., & Klatt, M. (2016) reported education policy across ten countries including Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, the

Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Switzerland by reviewing, comparing and contrasting policies and practices of prior learning. She identified that prior learning is an umbrella term for any kind of learning outcomes gained in various learning settings. RPL is the process of identifying, assessing and recognising any learning results that were acquired by individuals in different learning contexts outside formal education and training systems. She also pointed out that although many European countries try to make a distinction between formal, non-formal or informal learning and its outcomes, most of the non-European countries are more common in adopting the term 'prior learning'.

UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL) (2013) argued that formal learning is not sufficient to facilitate and utilize the full human potential of any society. It proposed that recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of learning in formal, non-formal and informal settings is an important instrument for comparing different forms of learning, in order to eliminate discrimination against those who acquire competences non-formally or informally. *"In a lifelong learning system, learning opportunities must be made available through all channels: formal, non-formal and informal." (Yang, 2015, p.11).*

Signh and Duvekot (2013) reported that 23 countries such as Netherlands, Norway Denmark, Frances, Portugal, Namibia, Afghanistan, Republic of Korea, etc supported the exchange of experience with RVA systems in the Hamburg Conference organised by UNESCO Institute in 2010.

Report by Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung (DIE) in 2003 recognised that APEL has an important role in development of a learning society. "APEL has the potential to contribute significantly towards higher education by offering a flexible approach to learning, opening up institutions to new groups of learners and developing partnerships with outside organisations." (p.55).

Although many countries adopted the name "APEL", some acronyms are used to differentiate the slightly different things such as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), and Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL). *"APL and APEL are often used interchangeably yet the former refers to certificated prior learning gained in formal learning such as "organised courses, modules, workshops, seminars and similar activities" (Nyatanga/Forman/Fox 1998, p 7). In Australia the process is called Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The 'A' in APEL stands for accreditation in some situations and assessment in other*" (DIE, 2003, p.57-58)

In Malaysia, APEL was introduced in 2015 for admission and credit award in 2016, as a national higher education framework.

APEL is referred to "a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation and assessment of prior experiential learning to determine the extent to which an individual has achieved the desired learning outcomes, for access to a programme of study and/or award of credits." (MQA, 2015).

Asia e University is among the pioneering institutions in Malaysia to implement the APEL admission. This paper attempted to review the acceptance of learners through APEL entry as well as their academic performance compared to the learners through the standard route entry.

3   Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach to analyse the similarities and differences on the academic performance of leaners through a standard entry and APEL entry. A set of questionnaires was sent to students who registered the undergraduate programme Bachelor of Education (Teaching Islamic Studies in Primary School) through APEL admission route.

Questions were grouped into three categories namely, (i) the personal information and background, (ii) what drove these learners to come back to study?, and (iii) who had motivated them to come back to study?. Last but not least, what challenges students faced when they returned to study?

There were 166 candidates applied for the programme in May 2016, 121 candidates registered for the programme. However, along the semester, due to various reasons, 16 of students had withdrawn from the programme and left with 105. In this study, only 57 students returned their survey questionnaires in completeness.

In terms of academic performance, May 2016 semester results were compared between the learners admitted through APEL entry and the standard route entry. Under the authority guidelines, adult learners are only allowed to take up less than nine credit hours per semester. This batch of learners registered for eight credit hours in three courses namely, Academic Writing (MPU3222), Hubungan Etnik/Ethnic Relations (MPU3113) and Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia/Islamic Civilisation and Asia Studies (MPU3222). These courses were the general subjects but were considered as compulsory by the local qualifications authority (MQA). All students in the degree programme must take and pass these subjects.

4   Findings

With 57 returned survey questionnaires, there were 49 females and 8 males respondents in this study, with 37% (21) respondents of them aged below 30, 40% (23) respondents aged 30-40 and 23% (13) respondents aged 41-50.

About 70% (40) respondents have the highest qualification of Form 3 (Lower Certification of Education) and about 14% (8) respondents have Form 5 or equivalent to School Certificate. About 74% (42) respondents indicated that the reason of not able to continue their formal education was due to financial constraints, while another 37% (21) respondents were due the inability to meet the academic requirements. But majority of them had more than 5 years of working experiences. Parents, partners and friends were the ones motivating them to continue to study. The most important reason to pursue an undergraduate degree was to develop higher-level skills for their current profession or extension of knowledge for their current profession

One of the challenges was to manage their studies while working, whereby respondents indicated that they had to spend around three to six hours each week studying at home. Other than finding not enough time to sleep and time to finish assignments, the biggest challenge faced by these learners was the stress in finding a balance between work and study. However, they did enjoy study in terms of gaining new knowledge, feel fulfilling and self- achievement.

For the perception of APEL, majority of respondents agreed that APEL entry had given them an opportunity to come back and study, and was a good option for working adults.   However, when asked whether they would recommend friends to go through APEL entry for those who wanted to study but have no formal qualification, majority of them answered "undecided".   This was quite unexpected and hence, further study would be recommended.

When they were asked about the future plan, 100% of the respondents replied they had only one. They would like to continue to work but at a higher position or start their own business, and 33% (19 respondents) would like to continue their studies.

In terms of academic performance, the assessment consisted of two major components: 60% assignments and 40% examination.   Although assignment submission deadline was set in each semester, students in this part-time mode were given an additional period of two semesters for submission of assignment as well as examination deferment if they so required.   However, if a student had exhausted the two semesters' gracious period, he/she had to re-enrol the course. The practice of "I = incomplete" is the unique feature in the University's assessment system and was implemented in 2017.   The definitions of different categories of "I" are shown in Table 2 based on students' needs over years.

Table 2.   Incomplete Status

Status	AR Absent with Reason (Absent in Exam with reason and submitted Assignment)	ABS Absent without Reason (Absent in Exam without reason and submitted Assignment)
I Incomplete (Non-submission of Assignment and still within the permissible 2 semesters)	I/AR Incomplete / Absent with Reason (Non-submission of Assignment and still within the permissible 2 semesters and absent in Exam with reason)	I/ABS Incomplete / Absent without Reason (Non-submission of Assignment and still within the permissible 2 semesters and absent in Exam without reason)
IE Incomplete & Expired (Non-submission of Assignment and at the expired semester for submission)	IE/AR Incomplete & Expired / Absent with Reason (Non-submission of Assignment and at the expired semester for submission and absent in Exam with reason)	IE/ABS Incomplete & Expired / Absent without Reason (Non-submission of Assignment and at the expired semester for submission and absent in Exam without reason)

Academic status is categorised into the following Table 3:

Table 3. Academic Status

Academic Status in term of Grade Point Average (GPA)	Remark
Completed	Completed all required credit hours of a programme
GS	Good standing i.e. GPA ≥2.0
PS	Probation standing i.e. GPA<2.0
I	Incomplete

Following Figure 2 shows the academic performance of APEL learners' versus the overall learners' academic performance in May 2016 semester.
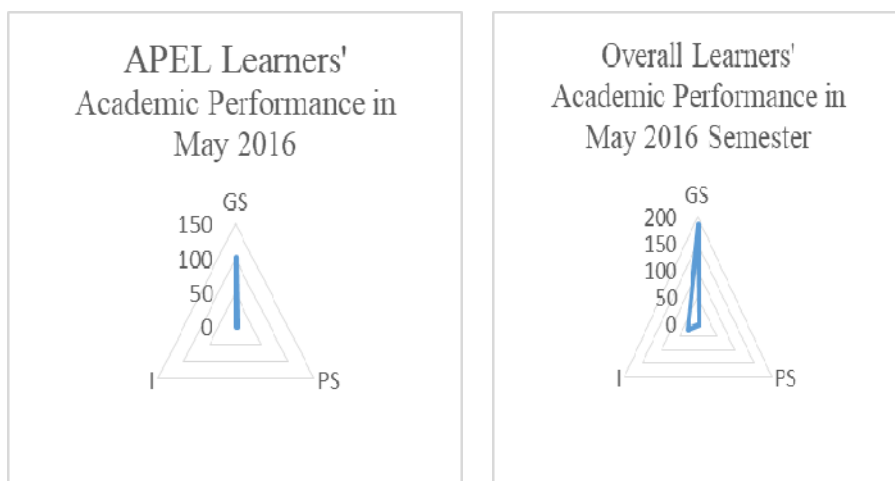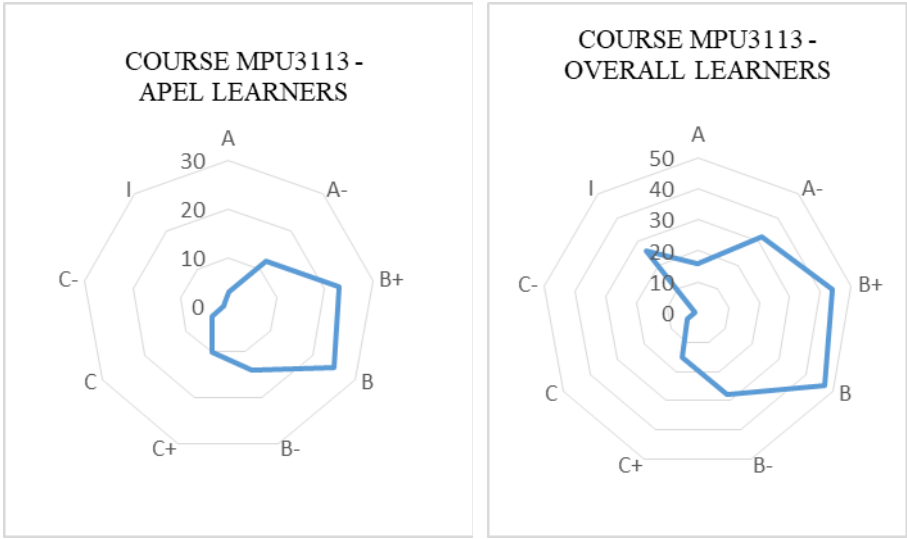

Fig. 2. Academic Performance of APEL Learners versus Overall Learners in May 2016 Semster

Figure 2 indicates that in summary, APEL learners did well with all having "GS" (good standing) in their academic status in the May 2016 semester compared to the overall students' academic performance.

In terms of each course, namely MPU3113, MPU3222 and MPU3123 as indicated in Figures 3, 4 and 5 respectively, more than 90 percentile APEL learners performed better than "C" – the passing grade in all three courses. Overall, about 12% of the learners were not able to complete all three subjects.

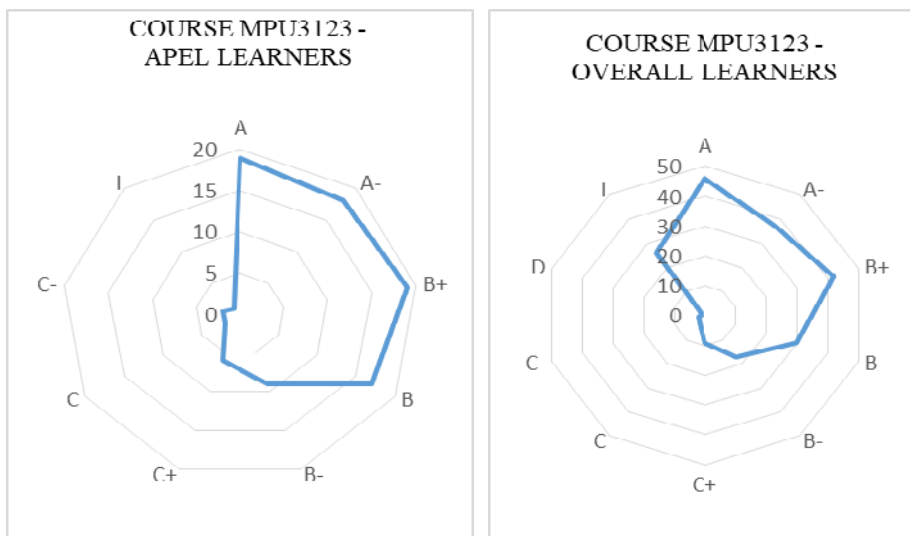The grading scale is attached at Appendix.

Fig. 3. Academic Performance of APEL Leaners versus Overall Learners for Course MPU3113
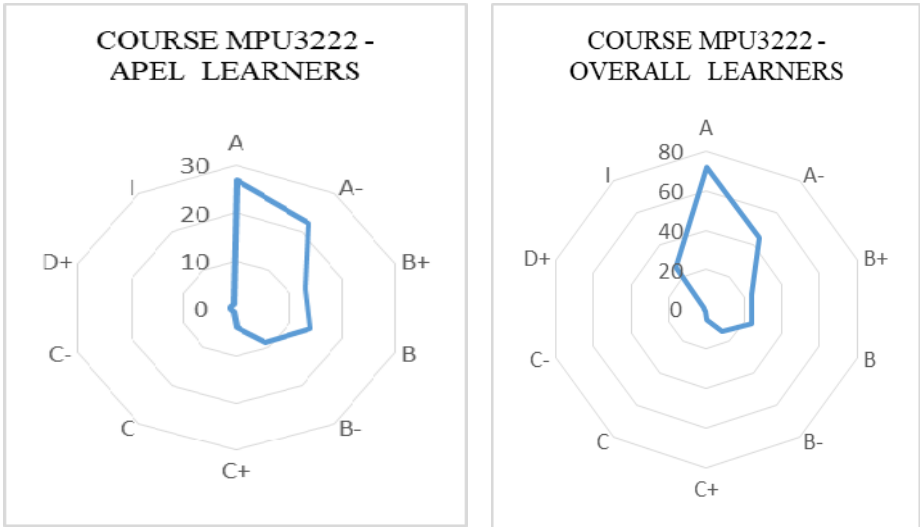
Fig. 4. Academic Performance of APEL Learners versus Overall Learners for Course MPU3222

COURSE MPU3123 - APEL LEARNERS

COURSE MPU3123 - OVERALL LEARNERS

Fig. 5.   Academic Performance of APEL Learners versus Overall Learners for Course MPU3123

5   Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of this study indicate that APEL route entry learners performed no difference from the standard route entry. In fact, some cases even performed better and were able to complete their enrolled courses. Although a more flexible system was adopted by allowing an additional period of two semesters, about 10% of learners were still unable to cope and dropped out along the way for both groups of learners. Regardless of the entry modes, most adult learners, time management was the most important factor, to strike a balance between work, family and social life was not an easy task. They needed self-determination and motivation to carry on. With the technology development, many learners could learn through on-line and study at their own time and own pace. As an educational institution, instructional designers and policy makers should constantly look into the changes and needs of learners to develop a lifelong learning society.

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APPENDIX

Grade System (excerpt from Students' Handbook, p.27)

(1) Grade and Point Values

(a) A student's performance in a subject is indicated by the grade received. The relationship between the grade and the point value is as shown below:

Mark	Grade	Point Value	Status
80 – 100	A	4.00	Excellent
75 – 79	A-	3.67	
70 – 74	B+	3.33	Good
65 – 69	B	3.00	
60 – 64	B-	2.67	Pass
55 – 59	C+	2.33	
50 – 54	C	2.00	
45 - 49	C-	1.67	Marginal Pass
40 – 44	D+	1.33	
35 – 39	D	1.00	
0 – 34	F	0.00	Fail

(b) Passing Grade

The general passing grade in all subjects is a D and above except for MQA Compulsory subjects where the passing grade is a C and above. However the passing grade for each subject depends on the requirements of the School with the approval of the Senate of the University.