



SUPPORTING DISTANCE EDUCATION' CANDIDATES IN ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR LEARNING PROCEDURES

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Summary

Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) offers significant benefits to adult learners. It reduces the gap between educational programmes and the labour market and provides learners the possibility to shorten their prospective study programmes (Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel, & Jochems, 2008). APL however requires adequate support of the learners that engage in APL. This study firstly describes which support possibilities could be useful and efficient for APL candidates in a distance education context and secondly evaluates the implementation of such a model for efficient support.

With regard to the different phases that can be distinguished in APL, appropriate support is available in forms of embedded and personal support. An overview of the highest benefit of support as well as support efficiency is provided. Elaboration of efficient support with high benefit in APL in the context of distance education is presented.

Introduction

Students of the Open University of the Netherlands choose conscious for a specific study. They like to have a deepening on one of the educational subjects and want to learn new knowledge and skills. However, acquiring new knowledge and competences is not always a conscious process. During work, exploring projects, collaboration, reading books and watching documentaries people are learning. Becoming conscious of this informal and non-formal learning and recognition of this learning attributes the motivation in starting or completing educational programmes.

Since 2006 the Open University of the Netherlands (OUNL) offers people the opportunity to recognize prior informal and non-formal learning (Joosten-ten Brinke, De Craene, Lemmen, Van den Boomen, Slangen, & Voncken, 2009). This is done by a so called Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) procedure. APL is a procedure in which candidates' prior learning in relation to a certain standard is assessed, independent of the environment in which the

learning took place (Joosten-ten Brinke, 2008). APL supports the lifelong learning paradigm which recognises similarities between experiential (i.e., non-formal and informal) and academic learning, and that possible differences between the two can be readily overcome (Harris, 2006).

APL offers significant benefits to adult learners. It reduces the gap between educational programmes and the labour market and provides learners the possibility to shorten their prospective study programmes (Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel, & Jochems, 2008). APL however requires adequate support of the learners that engage in APL. This paper firstly describes support possibilities being useful and efficient for APL candidates in a distance education context and secondly evaluates the implementation of such a model for efficient support.

Support in APL

In general, APL consists of four phases. In the first, information phase, the institute provides information about APL possibilities and its procedure. In the second phase of evidence-gathering, candidates collect evidence about their prior learning to support a claim for credit with respect to the qualification they want to achieve. In the third, assessment phase, assessors review the quality of the candidate's evidence using set assessment standards. The final phase, recognition, involves verification of the assessment outcome through, for example, the issuing of credits. Candidates intending to start an educational programme then receive a study advice. Figure 1 reflects these phases schematically.

In all the phases of APL, different kinds of support can be given to APL candidates, such as manuals, worked-out examples, frequently asked questions or a tutor. A distinction can be made here between embedded and personal support. Embedded support consists of techniques incorporated in printed or electronic instructional material, such as examples, FAQs and elaborated criteria (Martens & Valcke, 1995). Personal support is support given by a person, for example a coach, a tutor or a study adviser. This personal support can be given in real time or asynchronously either in a group or individual (Macdonald & McAteer, 2003). A combination of support types has proven to be helpful to learners (Mason, 2003). Appropriate types of embedded support are the website, frequently asked questions, manuals and printed materials. Relevant personal support types in APL are e-mails to individuals, face-to-face contact, telephone conversations and general information session. These personal support types can be elaborated by the use of more topical mediums such as virtual classrooms, telephone conferences and mailing lists.

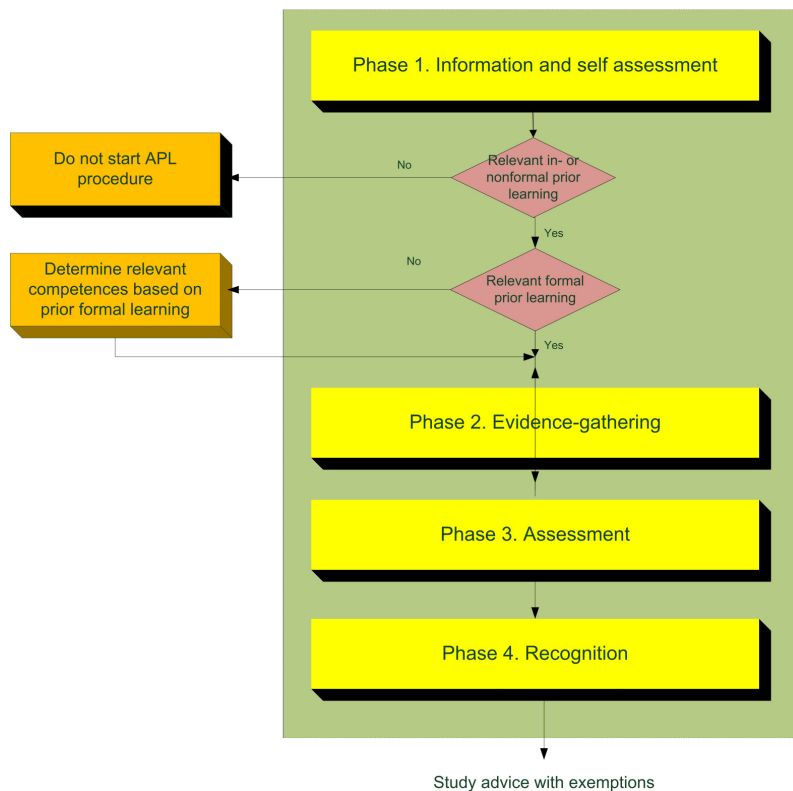


Figure 1. The APL procedure

The most used function of embedded support is to give examples and to find answers on candidates' questions. The most used function of personal support is to discuss, to comment and to solve individual problems.

Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans, & Jochems (2008) suggest a framework for APL support. This framework is constructed on the basis of a focus group meeting with tutors, discussions with experts on online support and interviews with APL candidates.

This framework implies in the candidate-profiling phase, general information sessions could be held once or twice a year with the possibility for face-to-face conversation. Embedded support in this phase should consist of at least an APL manual and a self-assessment instrument to test whether the procedure is likely to be meaningful. The self-assessment instrument supports an important step in the first phase. An online instrument gives candidates the opportunity to estimate their APL possibilities grounded on a small set of questions. Based on the result of the self-assessment, candidates can decide to continue or stop the procedure. For candidates who like to finish a degree at the OUNL, we advise at this point to start first with a procedure for exemptions based on formal learning. The self-assessment should be available for free at a APL website. Also a list with frequently asked questions and already in this phase good and bad examples of portfolios with clarification will give support to candidates.

In the second phase, that of evidence-gathering, the support is centred around the portfolio composition. A portfolio is used to underpin evidences that prove the mastery of competences. Candidates describe their competences and underpin these in a structured way by using a STARRT methodology. The STARRT methodology implies that candidates describe their prior learning by giving the **S**ituation of their learning context, the **T**asks they have fulfilled, the **A**ctivities in this task and the **R**esult of these task activities. After that, they **R**eflect on their prior learning and explain why this prior learning is **T**ransferable to the standard. Candidates have especially problems to prove the level of their competences. An example of good support for this is giving worked-out examples. In this phase, personal support should preferably consist of discussions about examples of evidence. Embedded

support can include a mind-manager system with a portfolio format and strong versus poor examples; a 'how to compose a portfolio' manual; the opportunity to electronically seek and present analogous cases, and a list with frequently asked questions. In addition, instead of a face-to-face workshop on portfolio composition, we propose using a more efficient virtual classroom workshop. This could be offered a few times a year, with candidates from all over the country applying by email.

In the assessment phase, different instruments are used to assess the candidates' competences. First, the portfolio is assessed by two assessors. If the assessors need more information to form an opinion the portfolio assessment is followed by an assessment conversation. By analogy with the structure in the portfolio the assessment conversation is also structured with the STARRT methodology (see Figure 2).

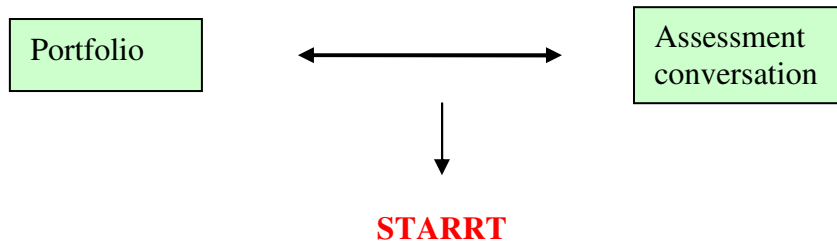


Figure 2: Analogy between the structure of the portfolio and the assessment conversation.

With goal-oriented questions based on the aspects of the STARRT methodology, assessors assess the competences of the candidates. When needed, assessors may use other kinds of assessments. They have to inform the candidate as soon as possible of these additional assessments. These additional assessments should take place before the assessment conversation, to use the assessment conversation as the final assessment. In the assessment phase, personal support should comprise an individual, face-to-face conversation based on the assessment criteria and former assessment results. Embedded support should consist of a list of assessment criteria, an elaboration of assessment protocol, examples of good and bad portfolios for competence assessment, and an overview of assessment results jurisprudence.

Finally, in the recognition phase, the assessors should fill in the APL form in which all the mastered competences of the candidate are given based on the results of the assessments. This form can be used to translate the mastered competences towards a study path. In this phase, questions can be answered by way of personal emails; embedded support should include examples in which recognition was and was not given, descriptions of standard recognitions and the phase itself, and graphic overviews of the educational programme.

Based on the comments of APL candidates, we suggest providing them with the email address of a tutor available to deal with interim questions. Some contact opportunities can also be gleaned by way of the virtual classroom. The constant possibility for personal email contact for interim questions is an important requirement for the candidates.

Conclusion

Staff members of an APL provider (APL tutors and educational scientists), APL candidates and a group of experts on online support discussed the possibilities of both embedded and personal support in APL. The investigation of the support possibilities led to a support model. With regard to the different phases that can be distinguished in APL, the results show that all participants expect support particularly in the phase of gathering appropriate evidence. From the staff members' perspective, embedded support is most appropriate and many types of support provisions are recommended. APL candidates prefer a combination of embedded and personal support, whereby the type of personal support can be limited to telephone and email support. The latter is preferred because of its personal, to-the-point and time

independent character. An overview of the highest benefit of support as well as support efficiency is provided. Unfortunately, the highest benefit is not always the most efficient.

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