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**Accreditation of Prior Learning within the Lifelong Learning Discourse: Exploring the Drivers for Change at the University of Mauritius**

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**ABSTRACT**

Within the whole discourse about globalisation, and its ramifications on workplace skills, lifelong learning takes prominence as a key skill to cope with the changing environment. When we discuss about lifelong learning, recognising prior learning and experience of prospective learners gathers great resonance as practitioners acknowledge the other routes to acquiring knowledge.//

The Strategic Plan of the University of Mauritius (2015 to 2020) and the *Vision and Strategic Orientations of the University of Mauritius (2018)* also endorse APL though ventures in that direction remain timid. In fact, the very academic profile of the students admitted in traditional programmes, especially at undergraduate level, is not creating the urgency to adopt APL. Students are fresh secondary school leavers who compete to secure a seat at the UoM. With free tertiary education since 2019, competition to secure a seat at the UoM is even more strife.//

This study explores, using exploratory research and multi-lenses approach, the motivations of the private sector to engage in APL and lifelong learning as well as demographic trends in Mauritius. The study reveals that despite the fact that on the supply-side of APL, the momentum has not been exploited fully, the drivers for APL and lifelong learning are present. The demographic trends show an ageing population calling for the need to address now a different profile of learners: learners with prior learning and experience who may not all satisfy existing and conventional entry requirements but who need to engage in lifelong learning and retraining to remain productive. The interviews carried out and current projects in the pipeline at the UoM reveal that the private sector has already embarked on the process of retraining and reskilling of its existing personnel and are supportive of APL and lifelong learning. The findings thus point towards new opportunities for the UoM in terms of new target audience, and innovative practices through APL. //

It is hoped that through this study, the UoM will be in a better position to expand its APL ventures and bring about the necessary paradigm shift in its admission procedures, teaching approaches and assessment methods to better accommodate and tap prior learning and experience of the lifelong learners. // Paper ID 105

Keywords: lifelong learning, accreditation of prior learning, responsiveness to industry

**INTRODUCTION**

Within the whole discourse about globalisation, and its ramifications on workplace skills, lifelong learning takes prominence as a key skill to cope with the changing environment. When we discuss about lifelong learning, recognising prior learning and experience of prospective learners gathers great resonance as practitioners acknowledge the other routes to acquiring knowledge.

The University of Mauritius Strategic Plan 2015-2020 (UoM, 2015) and the “Vision and Strategic Orientations of the University of Mauritius (2018)” (UoM, 2018) also endorse APL though concrete ventures are still timid. In fact, the very academic profile of the students admitted in traditional programmes, especially at undergraduate level is not creating the urgency to adopt APL. Students are fresh secondary school leavers who need to compete to secure a seat at the UoM. With free tertiary education since 2019, competition to secure a seat at the UoM is even more strife, with the seats being allocated to the most qualified candidates.

Despite the fact that on the supply-side of APL, the momentum has not been exploited fully, the drivers for APL and lifelong learning are present. This study proposes to study demographic trends and current projects from the private

sector at the UoM and how these are paving the way for the UoM to have more presence in the field of lifelong learning/retraining and in the process, adopt APL.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The last decades have witnessed the development of policies and practices regarding the accreditation (or recognition) of prior (APL) learning all around the world. Alternative terms include Recognition of Prior Learning, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning, with certain nuances in meaning depending on the institution implementing it. Broadly, **APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning)** refers to the formal identification, assessment and acknowledgement of the full range of an individual's skills, knowledge, competencies, capabilities and work ethos obtained through formal, informal, and non-formal learning, inclusive of on-the-job experience as well as life experience. Though it was first adopted in the field of vocational training in the 1990's, it soon made its way into higher education: for admission purposes and also to broaden access to higher education for those who would normally be debarred entry due to conventional and sometimes, rigid entry requirements in universities (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015).

### Why APL?

The growth in the adoption of APL mechanisms, either to access programmes when candidates lack the traditional entry requirements, or to seek exemption in module/s or to move to higher levels in programmes, is a sign that it brings in its trail many benefits – to the individual, to the employer, to the training institution and to society as a whole.

At the individual level, APL connotes with empowerment of the employee. It is about recognising that even though people left school early when they joined the workforce, their experiences are accounted for and recognised so that these persons can join programmes that would have been traditionally inaccessible to them because of rigid entry requirements. According to Garnett & Cavaye, 2015, RPL/APL is seen as a way of recognising lifelong learning and enhancing social inclusion by providing access to academic and vocational qualifications to those who might otherwise be excluded by lack of formal qualifications or the demands of work. This paradigm shift from education to learning implies that learning occurs through different routes. By recognising other routes of learning, pathways are created for people to learn and work at the same time, continuously improving their qualifications and where learning “outside the university” is also given due recognition. Some countries, e.g., France, move beyond the notion of granting access through APL to actually awarding complete degrees through either the formal route or through validation of the ‘professional activities and experience’ of experienced professionals.

At the industry/employer level, rapid technological change, shorter product life cycles and intense global competition are changing the business environment of firms, (Wright *et al.*, 2008). Employees need to access training opportunities to reinvent and upgrade their skills quickly to keep abreast with latest technology, and maintain and improve their productivity. Employers/industry need to be supportive as they stand to gain from agile and dynamic staff who are constantly reinventing themselves.

Universities also face a number of challenges: the growth in new knowledge, increasing costs and funding problems, and pressure from society to drive economic growth. Moreover, the University is no longer seen as a place where we talk about knowledge for knowledge sake but knowledge has to be directly related to the environment /societal needs. Hence, it is argued that the expansion of higher education (HE) and the Bologna Process “*reframed the political debate and placed the smooth transition from school-to-work and the employability of graduates at the forefront of education policy*” (Schomburg & Teichler, 2011). Universities have to groom graduates for the world of work and address issues related to employability and job creation so as to contribute to economic growth. This implies that “business as usual” will no longer do. Increasingly, universities are pressured to meet standards on that employability (Suleman, 2016, p: 170) since they are not only seen as the bastion of knowledge creation but also that of preparing graduates for the world of work. What is interesting with APL is that it works the other way round by bringing back to the University learners’ skills and competences developed over years of experience and exposure at work and mainstreaming them into a system of education where they get the opportunity to further improve their qualifications. Retraining these experienced professionals can be one of the ways of addressing skill shortage and reskilling needs due to ever-changing business environments and the effects of globalisation. The interaction with the class/peers/tutors then become a rich learning ground where the students can share their wide experience and validate their experience against the ‘academic’ concepts, and theories. The Faculty members also get new perspectives from the ‘practitioners’. Hence by promoting pathways, through APL, we tap into that wealth of knowledge that these people can bring in class. Garnett & Cavaye (2015) discuss about intellectual capital that represents an organisation’s primary assets in a

knowledge economy. They argue that for individual knowledge to become organisational knowledge and contribute to intellectual capital, it has to be recognised by the organisation. APL can help the individual to promote his/her individual knowledge and the organisation can exploit this knowledge once it is recorded, for example, through the APL reflective portfolio, hence contributing to the individual's and organisation's "productive capability". Moreover, APL resonates well with concepts like learner autonomy, and high order cognitive skills.

It is clear from the literature that society - including higher education institutions, and the employers, should support APL to recognise the value of such alternative learning routes to ensure that no one is left behind and that opportunities are created for lifelong learning.

#### APL and University of Mauritius

Accreditation is a concept that has been discussed at the UoM over the last 15 years. Academic and Administrative staff from the Faculties, Centres and the Admissions Office were trained by an APL expert in 2008. A draft policy paper with input from all those concerned was even prepared. In 2010, a pilot exercise was carried out for APL under a project "National Logistics Training Plan" for the programme Certificate/Diploma/BSc (Hons) Logistics Management, thanks to funding from the 'Agence Française de Développement'. After the pilot phase, the project was not implemented mainly due to change in leadership at the University of Mauritius.

In the UoM Strategic Plan 2015-2020, under its objective, "*To promote industry-university interactions and mutually beneficial exchanges for quality training*", mention is made to "*Develop a policy of recognition of prior learning*" (UoM, 2015).

In 2018, the UoM was approached by local companies operating in strategic sectors of the country (import and export, textile) to implement APL. Consequently, there are currently two programmes that have been designed with an integrated APL component to address those candidates who may not have a formal qualifications (for instance, School Certificate/O'Level) but have over 5 years of relevant experience.

It is to be noted that the concept of admitting 'mature' and experienced students at the UoM is not new. Mature students are those over 25 years old and having 5 years' experience and not meeting part of the entry requirements. Students do not need to submit a portfolio but they may be interviewed by a panel (UoM, 2019).

## **METHODOLOGY**

An exploratory approach has been used for this paper given the dearth of articles on the matter being discussed, that is, the drivers for change at the level of the university. Also, exploratory research has been seen as most convenient to address the "what" question and to set the foundation for further study.

The research questions are:

1. Based on statistics, what are the prominent signals, namely demographics that are pointing towards changing student profile entering higher education?
2. Is there a difference in how the Private and Public sectors view APL?

Sources of data were

1. Literature review based on the body of research on APL.
2. Primary sources of data were mainly from the interviews of the different stakeholders. The interviewees were selected based on purposive sampling: they have been involved in policies or projects related to APL at the UoM, they are HR managers or officers in the private and public sectors involved in recruitment and training of staff, and is a representative of parastatal body that fosters skills development in Mauritius at national level:
  - Public sector (employer and trainer's perspective): 5 interviews were carried out. The representatives of the public sector (Employer) who have been interviewed are from core service providers in Mauritius and are involved in the training of staff. One of the interviewees has already approached UoM for APL-related projects, where they have explicitly expressed the request that training to be designed for its staff has to be built on existing skills and experience of its staff and APL be used to validate that prior learning. The

UoM representative (Trainer) interviewed was among the pioneering team for the pilot exercise on APL in 2010.

- **Private sector:** Four interviews were carried out.
- The people interviewed from the private sector are from the organisation that represents exporters of the country and from the textile sector, a pillar of the Mauritian Economy.
- **Regulator:** One interview was carried out

The anonymity of the respondents were preserved and they were informed that the interviews were being undertaken within the context of the Commonwealth of Learning Conference.

3. Secondary sources of data included data from Government statistics, UoM statistics, Strategic Plans, Annual Reports and websites of companies involved in various projects at UoM. These sources of data on local statistics (demographics, education) helped to identify societal signals that have an impact on strategic-decision making.

Triangulation through the different sources of data provided the multiple lenses to explore the subject under study: Employer, regulator, trainer, and hence ensured reliability.

One perspective that was missing was that of the learner: however this perspective was not probed since APL is being implemented and there is no student who has completed an APL process yet.

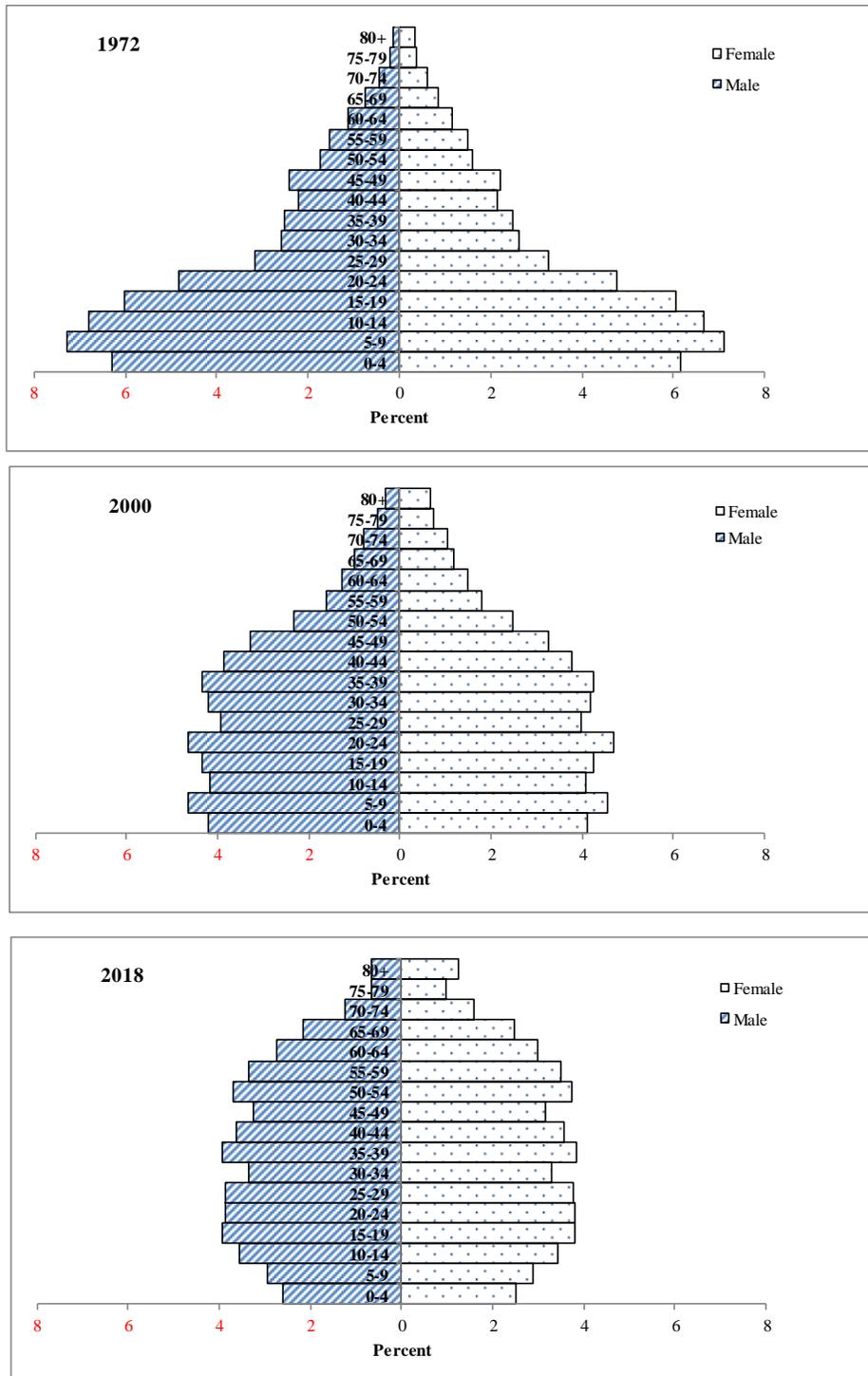
Since the researchers were closely involved in APL, either through training received or by implementing this APL project at UoM, care was taken to ensure that during the interview, interviewees were not influenced. Interviewees were completely free to comment, and the questions asked were as broad as possible to enable researchers to get rich data that were not contaminated.

## **DATA ANALYSIS: ANALYSING DATA USING MULTIPLE LENSES**

### **Reading the local signals from Statistics**

#### Demographics

- Mauritius has a population of 1,265,637 comprising of 626,261 males and 639,376 females (2018).
- It has an ageing population, with a dependency ratio of 408.3 for 2018.
- There is a fall in the number of children under 15 years of age in the population.
- Over time, the population pyramid has shifted from wide base to shrinking base and thickening body, showing an ageing population (Figure 1).

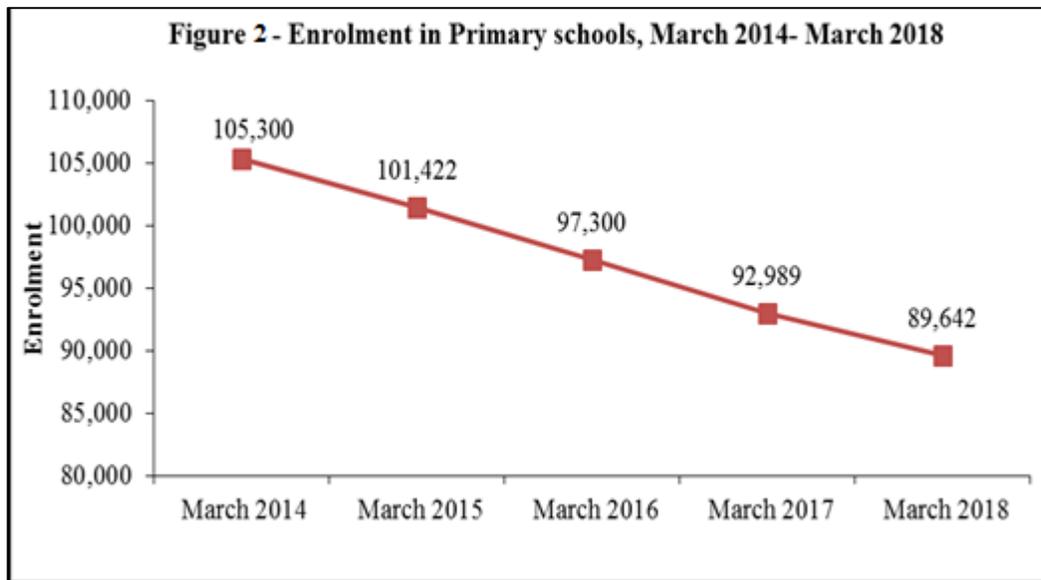


**Figure 1: Population Pyramid: 1972, 2000, and 2018**

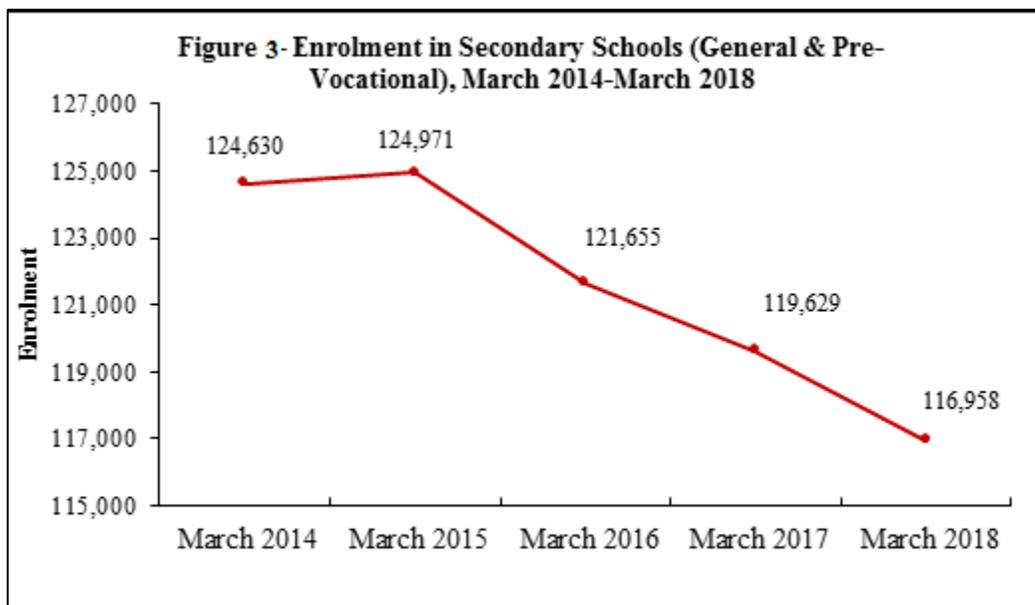
(Source: Republic of Mauritius Portal. (2019). *Population and Vital Statistics*. Retrieved from [http://statsmauritius.govmu.org/English/Publications/Pages/Pop\\_Vital\\_Yr18.aspx](http://statsmauritius.govmu.org/English/Publications/Pages/Pop_Vital_Yr18.aspx))

- Changing demographics have a definite impact on trends in the field of education. Figures 2 and 3 below show the decreasing enrolment in primary and secondary levels of education, reflecting the declining fertility rate and

ageing population. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (tertiary education enrolment as a percentage of the population aged 20 to 24 years) for 2017 is the same as in 2016, that is 46.6%, showing stagnation.



**Source:** Republic of Mauritius Portal. (2018). *Education Statistics*. Retrieved from [http://statsmauritius.govmu.org/English/Publications/Pages/Edu\\_Stats\\_Yr18.aspx](http://statsmauritius.govmu.org/English/Publications/Pages/Edu_Stats_Yr18.aspx)



**Source:** Republic of Mauritius Portal. (2018). *Education Statistics*. Retrieved from [http://statsmauritius.govmu.org/English/Publications/Pages/Edu\\_Stats\\_Yr18.aspx](http://statsmauritius.govmu.org/English/Publications/Pages/Edu_Stats_Yr18.aspx)

## Data from Interviews

Based on interviews carried out with the representatives of public and private sectors (the lenses) as detailed under “Methodology” we now analyse the data theme-wise:

- **Awareness of APL:** All the participants interviewed seemed well acquainted with APL, except for one interviewee from the public sector who at first thought that APL means accreditation of courses. One interviewee defined APL as a mechanism that *“gives a person entry to university, job market, builds self-confidence of a person, improves mobility of people, helps to fulfil aspirations of people, brings better articulation across main stream and TVET”*.
- **Budget:** Both sectors have a dedicated budget for training, whether in-house or with local and foreign service providers.
- **Recruitment:** For the public sector, recruitment exercise is centralised under the Public Services and Disciplines Forces Commission and the Council/Boards of the parastatal institutions. For the private sector, skills employers look for include competences and skills that move beyond academic qualifications.
- **Benefits of APL:** They all argue that where work experience is recognised, staff will be more motivated to learn at a higher level, with the country benefitting from a more educated workforce which combines “hands on training and learning”. APL is linked to increased productivity and economic growth and candidates also stand a chance for promotion. Moreover, it has been argued that though with experience employees can move up the professional ladder, they will eventually reach a point where qualifications will fetch them further promotion. This is where APL brings in the advantage to the Employee by giving him/her a route to further improve his/her qualification, whilst validating learning at the job. This was seen as part of staff welfare and also to ensure higher productivity and economic growth.
- **Constraints:** Compared to the public sector, very few constraints have been highlighted by the private sector, namely that learners processed through APL may have difficulties coping with the class and some more individual attention may be required. As for representatives from the public sector, they argue that in the local context, APL might work for the “Private sector” but it might be wrongly used on the public sector unless there is appropriate legal framework. There is acknowledgement that RPL is already working well for blue collar jobs (carried out by the Mauritius Qualifications Authority) and that it can be extended in other areas. They also anticipate the public sector as less flexible than the private sector in embarking on APL and hence awareness on how it benefits employee, employer and country in general should be carried out. However, they also argue that the UoM should do some internal capacity building to ensure that staff are trained in APL and that procedures are straightforward to ensure timely and effective implementation of APL at the UoM. Moreover, they see that Senior Management of organisations should champion the case for APL implementation and adoption. It was also argued that there is lack of information and the proper infrastructure locally, to scale up to more sectors (apart from blue collar jobs). APL is seen as a threat to employer who risk *“to lose good employees when they are qualified”*.

One representative of the public sector mentioned that the Pay Research Bureau Report of 2016 (PRB, 2016) did mention APL but no progress has been made in the public sector.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on statistics and interviews, the following observations and findings can be made:

### 1. Ageing population

With no natural resources, and a lot emphasis being placed on human capital, ageing population in Mauritius is a source of major concern. Given this context, people will need to be able to reinvent themselves over their career. Also, those who had previously been left out of the educational system will have to be scooped back through upgrading programmes and formal qualifications so that they can continue to make a contribution to society. It seems then that the Private sector is ahead by not relying only on those who exit school systems for recruitment purposes; by turning internally to its own staff members who have wide relevant experience and by giving them training to reinvent themselves professionally (through APL or other mechanisms), they

are empowering their own staff who, in a couple of years, become better assets to the company, combining academic qualifications and work experience.

2. Having the senior management as the champion for APL helps. In all the APL-related projects with the private sector, candidates are sponsored and given release from work.
3. The “feeders” of the tertiary education (Primary and Secondary levels of education) are dwindling. With globalisation, local tertiary institutions, including the UoM, is facing competition from all directions. Given the shrinking and highly competitive market, the UoM will have to operate differently. To Pucciarelli & Kaplan (2016), “*business ethos and practices are becoming acceptable in HE*”. Hence, for UoM, when the profile of the “clients” on the market is changing and there are new rivals on the market, it has to innovate with new “products” and services. APL is a way of finding new niche markets by recognising that there are other routes to learning. Moreover, the University will stand to gain from the experience that these people bring in the class.
4. Despite the mention about APL in the PRB Report (PRB, 2016) and in the UoM Strategic Plan (UoM, 2015), ventures have been timid. But having these included in official documents provides the leeway for UoM to initiate APL in projects with the private sector and parastatal bodies. It is hoped that the success in these projects will drive the UoM to have APL mainstreamed in its rules and regulations.
5. The interview process, with discussion being more dynamic with the representatives of the public sector than the private sector, is revealing: it seemed that the private sector did not need any convincing argument in favour of APL. They have already embraced the winds of change. The phrases like “productivity”, “economic growth” and “welfare” kept recurring in association with APL. The public sector representatives, while being convinced of the benefits, clearly state that obstacles are bigger for adopting APL in their sector, and acknowledge a change at national/policy level is required prior to introducing APL.
6. They all made a case for more sensitisation of APL to help in its acceptance, and implementation eventually.

## **CONCLUSION**

APL brings in its trail new promises and momentum in the whole discourse about University-Industry Collaboration. It is seen as validating and accrediting other paths for learning, outside of the class. This represents a paradigm shift as the University is no longer the “sage on the stage” as far as imparting of knowledge is concerned. It is also a mechanism that empowers the employee, and contributes to improved productivity to industries and economic growth, through reskilling and lifelong learning, more so, within the context of ageing population as it ensures that all its population are properly trained through various mechanisms and routes to training.

The Private sector seems ready to engage in APL-related projects. The UoM and the country in general, has to join the bandwagon before global rival training providers offer new avenues to the local population.

## **FURTHER RESEARCH**

Further research can include how traditional universities need to relook at their whole internal process (admission, assessment, mode of delivery, training of staff etc.) so as to address the new profile of students entering the system as APL students. It is important also to gauge whether there are misconceptions or preconceptions about APL students that are hampering the adoption of APL in the public sector.

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