

Evaluation on Prior Learning Assessment of the Expanded Tertiary Equivalency and Accreditation Program (ETEEAP): Its Implications for Tertiary Education Policy

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This study investigated the prior learning assessment process of Expanded Tertiary Equivalency and Accreditation Program (ETEEAP) in terms of achievement of its goals including evaluation procedure, contents of assessment tools, and outputs of assessment including the suggested courses to qualified applicants. This paper argued that the prior learning assessment process of adult learners toward an entry to tertiary education inadequately measures competencies based on the existing practice of the university. Anchored on micro-analytic approach, two sets of participants namely assessors and directors of the program comprised the fourteen interviewees. Using the qualitative research design, data were obtained through a researcher-made semi-structured interview script and analysis of program assessment forms. Results revealed three emerging themes: initial assessment, document evaluation, and interview or oral presentation. Further, no written competencies were measured and the assessment tools insufficiently capture any competencies in any assessment process. Thus, the suggested courses mismatched with the needed competencies by the applicants. Policy recommendations on the assessment process were made to further enhance the holistic nature of the program.

Keywords: inclusive education, equity education, adult education, prior learning assessment, equivalency and accreditation

INTRODUCTION

The prior learning assessment via the Expanded Tertiary Equivalency and Accreditation Program (ETEEAP) plays a pivotal role in determining whether applicants are qualified to be admitted in the program. Being one of the mandates of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in the Philippines, the fight against illiteracy and to increase access to education for a larger range of people is a global concern. According to empirical studies (Baik, 2013; Singh, 2015; Wihak & Wong, 2011), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in many countries provide equivalence and accreditation for credit transfer, entrance into a college degree program, and mobility for adult learners utilizing their own modality. According to Singh (2015), prior learning recognition leads to admission to academe and shortens the rigors of the present academic program at the tertiary level. Singh (2015) and Wihak and Wong (2011) discovered that assessing

earlier learning obtained informally and non-formally linked to fewer courses being completed for an academic degree in the United States. Similarly, Baik (2013) discussed that in Korea, the Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) established in 1998 promotes the recognition of informal, non-formal, and formal learning oriented toward academic qualifications and embedded in education and training. Its assessment is through competencies and portfolio or document analysis.

In 1996, the Expanded Tertiary Equivalency and Accreditation Program (ETEEAP) was launched in the Philippines. It is an alternative education program passed into law by then-President Fidel V. Ramos through Executive Order No. 330. Various sectors and individuals have sought its assistance since its incorporation into the Philippine educational system. Before being accepted into the program, applicants must pass a pre-oral examination, an oral examination, a portfolio review, recognition, validation, equivalency, and accreditation. Alternative education at the tertiary level faces three persistent issues: (a) lack of program evaluation; (b) lack of assessment tools that clearly authenticate, recognize, and accredit portfolios given by candidates, and (c) lack of formal training of designated assessors toward a certification or perhaps a degree. Limited research in this field has prompted researchers to delve into examining the identified research gaps.

Although more than two decades have passed since the implementation of ETEEAP in higher education institutions in the Philippines, there have been no chronicled studies on its mandates to further assess its impact relative to institutional policies. The authors argue that the traditional tertiary education admission and assessment procedures of adult learners do not measure competencies based on the existing practice of the university. Thus, this exploratory analysis was conducted in a state university in Central Luzon, Philippines.

To further establish and situate the authors' positionality on the topic, this research study aimed to evaluate the assessment processes used in tertiary education and provide inputs to the university's educational policies and procedures. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following research questions: a) how do assessors conduct the assessment of an applicant, b) what are the competencies measured by each process; c) what are the evaluators' considerations in suggesting courses in relation to competencies needed, and d) what policy inputs can be drawn based on results of the exploratory analysis?

RELATED LITERATURE

Numerous studies (e.g., Barr, 2013; Comings et al., 2006; Dryer, 2017; Garia-Aracil & Palmores-Montero, 2010; McGregor & Mills, 2012; Park et al., 2019; Pokorny, 2013; Richard, 2017; Singh, 2015) have sought to provide detailed information on the functions of higher education institutions and how challenges can best be met to benefit adult learners as the end users. In studies conducted by Garia-Aracil and Palmores-Montero (2010) and McGregor and Mills (2012), they posited that higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world address the challenges of making education equitable to adult learners by introducing innovations like alternative education. Barr (2013) mentioned that alternative education can deliver quality instruction to address the needs of students by enhancing their academic skills and competencies. In Canada, Singh (2015) claimed that validation and equivalency, called "Prior Learning Assessment Recognition" (PLAR), accommodates older workers, immigrants, marginalized groups, human resource managers, and counseling practitioners who have little confidence. PLAR is a way to access education and enhance the skills and competencies needed for industry consumption and entry to college for any degree associated with the applicant's current job.

Accreditation as articulated by Comings et al. (2006) is a means to safeguard the stakeholder and public funds. It is a barometer to determine whether a transfer credit is valid and whether an applicant is eligible for federal assistance. To Pokorny (2013, p. 115), "equivalency and accreditation is a means of matching an individual's experiences with institutionalized learning outcome descriptions." Because both an individual's experience and institutionalized learning outcome descriptions are involved, the problem exists at the congruence between the individual's assessed competencies and the contents and level of specifications (Bohlinger, 2013; Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2013).

Singh (2015) articulated that “recognition of prior learning is a process undertaken by learners that involves describing their experiences, reflecting on their experiences, identifying the learning associated with those experiences, defining the learning in terms of given statements of skills, knowledge and understanding, and providing evidences of that learning” (p. 28). Billett et al. (2014), on the other hand, defined prior learning as “the sum of all [an] individual’s competencies, i.e., competencies achieved by formal learning, non-formal learning, and informal learning” (p. 282). The European Council (2012) referred to competence as a way to use knowledge, skills, and personal, social, and/or methodological abilities in work or study situations and professional and personal development. Dryer (2017) and Richard (2017) mentioned that assessment tools are a fundamental aspect of assessment of prior learning so they must be reliable and valid.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

Anchored on micro-analytic method through the lens of goal-oriented evaluation, this qualitative study provides a clear and succinct description of the achievement of the program goal being examined and demarcates a specific process for gauging the level to which the goal is accomplished. To answer the research questions of this study, content analysis related to the assessment of applicants, focus group discussions (FGDs), and one-on-one interviews were conducted.

Participants and Data Source

Two sets of participants were involved in the research study. The first set consisted of the 14 ETEEAP assessors designated by the university president. They include senior faculty recommended by their respective departments based on educational qualification, field of specialization, seminars and trainings attended, and experience. To understand the synergy of the assessment process, these participants were assigned to one of three focus group discussions: Group 1, assessors from the College of Education; Group 2, assessors from the College of Agriculture and Fisheries; and Group 3, assessors from the College of Engineering.

The other set of participants comprises the ETEEAP director and the university registrar. One-on-one interviews were conducted with the Director of Special Education and the University Registrar, who are also part of the assessment process.

The other source of data is the Office of Special Education, or ETEEAP office, where the completed assessment forms and documents of qualified applicants are kept.

Instrumentation

Data were obtained using a researcher-made semi-structured questionnaire formulated based on the research questions. This allowed participants to expound their narration during the FGDs and one-on-one interviews. The self-made questionnaire was validated by two former ETEEAP directors and two previously designated assessors. They confirmed that the questions were appropriate to capture the relevant information from participants.

A document analysis guide was also created to capture systematically the relevance of the retrieved documents in relation to the content, utilization, competency measured, and competency, or courses suggested relative to the minimum competency as required to finish the degree sought.

Data Collection

Through a formal letter to the university president, five years of documents (2015–2020) were requested from the Office of Special Education. Also included in the request was permission to conduct focus group discussions (FGDs) with the designated assessors and one-on-one interviews with the ETEEAP director and university registrar. Assessors were grouped into three based on the degree offerings. FGD was conducted based on their common office hours and availability. The one-on-one interviews with the ETEEAP director and university registrar were done in two sessions.

Data Analysis

Themes were derived based on the document analysis, FGDs, and one-on-one interviews. Content analysis was performed on two types of documents, namely, the applicant's submitted portfolio and the assessment forms/tools (i.e., pre-oral assessment form, portfolio assessment form, and oral or interview assessment form) utilized during the assessment of prior learning of adult learners. The documents requested related to 14 adult learners who applied and graduated via this special education program. The 42 documents were retrieved and evaluated based on content and their relevance to the assessment process, utilization in connection with the attainment of the goal of the program, and competency measured for each document in connection with the qualifications submitted for equivalency and accreditation. In addition, the competencies and courses suggested in relation to the minimum competencies needed by a graduate of the degree were also analyzed.

The data collected from the FGDs and one-on-one interviews were analyzed based on the research questions. The answers were then compared with themes taken from the document analysis. Affirmation and negation of all themes were done.

Initial codes were presented to four experts composed of two former ETEEAP directors and two former assessors who were involved in the implementation of the program. Discussions took place with each of them in conjunction with the documents, assessment process, competencies, and suggested courses in order to derive acceptable themes. Negation and affirmation arose before the final codes and themes had been drafted.

To maintain anonymity, participants' responses are coded as follows: ETEEAP Director (ED), university registrar (UR), Assessor A1, A2, ...An.

RESULTS

The Assessment Process

Three emerging themes were seen as assessment processes, namely: initial assessment, document analysis, and oral assessment.

Initial assessment. Results revealed that the initial assessment was done during the inquiry of the applicant. The process was informal: no assessment tool was used, no results recorded, and no rubric used. The process to determine if applicants were accepted was done verbally or with few supporting documents. Simultaneous with the initial assessment is the preparation of the portfolio, which is based on the application form downloaded from the special education website of the university.

ED: *"... I did the pre-oral assessment. You know, during the pre-oral assessment, this office provided assistance to applicant. With the help of my staff, I guided the applicant to properly arrange the document in the portfolio. That is very important because during document evaluation the assessors need to see that the credentials of the applicant are well prepared. I need to know the basic information about the person.*

UR: *The ED was the one doing the pre-oral assessment. We are involved in other processes such as oral interview and document assessment.*

A2: *As far as I know, we have no record of the results of pre-oral assessment. If there is, then the ETEEAP office may have sent the documents to us.*

A1: *Yes, we have no records. With my almost six years of stint as assessor, I have never encountered or seen any document pertaining to the result of pre-oral assessment.*

ED: *The pre-oral assessment is simply verification whether the applicant has enough evidence and experiences to qualify to the program. That is verbally done by this office. ...we never keep any result of that.*

ED: *Verbal lang na sasabihin na pasok ang credentials nya kaya pupwede sya sa program. (I will just inform the applicant verbally that his/her credentials are okay for admission to the program.)*

A7: *Because it is just an initial one where we may only determine if the person may be accepted in the program or not.*

A8: *And we were not including the initial assessment for the scoring.*

Document analysis. The process is simply a comparison of photocopied documents to the original copy. Upon verification from the applicants that all documents are authentic, the assigned staff marks them as authenticated. All documents are then placed in the portfolio for further scrutiny during the oral presentation.

A8: *I have been an assessor for quite some time, but I never recall a moment where I and my fellow assessors used a tool for equivalency and accreditation to identify which competencies have been achieved and which are not and what courses I shall advise to get to enhance the capability, skills, knowledge, or competencies by the applicant. It's a collegial decision if we have suggestions about subjects and number of units.*

A5: *We were using the application form. We gave corresponding points based on the submitted documents.*

A2: *...the documents in the portfolio were given points based on the maximum points per category.*

A1: *Exactly. We were using the evaluation form, which is basically patterned on the filled-in application form. The only difference is that the evaluation form has percentages or points per category.*

A7: *We call that Form B. The categories there are the same as the items in application form.*

UR: *Yes, it is easy to do the evaluation of documents because we just need to compare the submitted documents to the original ones with authentication. Then points were put to each document.*

A1: *Higher points were given to experiences in the national and international levels.*

A3: *Yes. We just based our decision on the submitted and evaluated documents.*

ED: *This office collated and provided the total score using the summary sheet. All assessors' signatures were affixed there.*

Validation through oral assessment. The last part of the assessment process was the scheduled oral assessment where the documents were scrutinized and validated during the interview. Four to five panelists orally asked the applicants about the documents in the portfolio. During this process, an interview tool was used to determine (1) how competent and eloquent the applicant is in discussing their general, professional and major field of specialization, common or technical in nature; (2) their department as they explain ideas in front of listeners and professionals; (3) how he/she handles tricky questions with conviction; and (4) how determined the applicant is to finish the degree.

Results revealed that the assessors used a document assessment tool for the oral assessment. The tool is almost the same as the document attached to the application form. In the oral assessment, applicants are asked to present prior learning acquired either formally or informally. Results showed that no competencies were recorded in the oral assessment form. Instead, points were awarded based on the criteria in the interview form.

ED: *During the actual oral assessment, we were very critical as to self-presentation of the applicant.*

A2: *Yes, their speaking, of course, knowledge about the many facets of the experiences they went through related to his/her job.*

A4: *The way of treating fellow workers, supervisors, clients, and family. From there, we could determine the applicant's ability.*

A8: *They may also show how to handle difficult questions as they face us.*

A6: *Given the submitted documents, we verified also what were the take-aways of such gatherings.*

A11: *If the applicant was nervous at the time of the oral presentation, we assessors may see that.*

A12: *Yes, because we really need to determine if they were only bluffing us with such credentials.*

A8: *...if the answers to the questions we raised during the interview were close to the information we would like to get, it would be enough for us to decide of the applicant's predicament.*

UD: *...since we would like to know more about the experiences, many of the questions pertain to the experiences in relation to the competencies of the degree applied for.*

ED: *...the competency of applicant may be determined through the oral assessment. We needed to ask the person regarding their knowledge about the seminar/training they attended. In case there were less seminars or trainings attended, his/her experiences in the field may be given elaboration. His/her involvement in the field may give us the assurance that he/she was competent or has knowledge and skills.*

A3: *...for instance, the applicant knew more about crops because currently his/her task in the municipal agriculture office is to look for and attend to the needs of farmers. Then we just needed to identify the areas in crop production that he/she needed to enhance for himself.*

A2: *If ever he had little knowledge on soils, then we would give him the courses we believe would help him/her pass the licensure examination conducted by Philippine Regulatory Commission or PRC.*

Competency Taken From Each Assessment Process

In the second research question, the study revealed two themes, namely: no written competencies in any of the assessment processes and tools that do not capture applicants' competencies.

No written competencies in any of the assessment process. The study found that no stipulated competencies were recorded in any of the assessment tools or in any of the supporting documents submitted for evaluation. Qualifications were given points instead of extracting the acquired competencies from the non-formal and informal learnings.

ED: *We only used assessment tools available in the office. Ours is a point system.*

A1: *Yes, distribution of points especially in document evaluation and oral presentation or interview.*

A12: *...as we looked at the documents, we gave points corresponding to the level of trainings whether it is international, national, or local.*

A11: *Maybe the competencies were not explicitly identified, but as we gave higher points, it means that the persons or applicants were knowledgeable.*

A6: *...the applicants may mention their experiences...our task was to give corresponding percentage or points.*

A8: *So far we have no tools that would be used for competencies.*

Assessment tools do not capture the applicant's acquired competencies. Two assessment tools were analyzed based on their contents. It was found that the tools did not measure any competencies acquired by the applicants from prior learning. The tools have corresponding points to each criterion such as educational qualification, work experience, seminars and trainings attended, and other relevant experiences. However, competencies are not clearly accounted for in the point system.

ED: *...the assessment tools are divided into major parts such as educational qualifications, seminars and trainings attended, and other relevant experiences. All these things have corresponding maximum points.*

A12: *Yes, the higher the points the higher the possibility that the applicant's prior learnings were suited with the degree sought.*

A10: *The relevant experiences of the applicants were reflected in the submitted documents, meaning each document represents experiences that may have learning equivalent to the various courses included in the degree.*

A9: *More often than not such experiences may not be gauged by the tools since we are giving points.*

A4: *...but the points themselves equate to the knowledge of the applicants relative to the degree.*

A11: *Somehow we need clearer tools that explicitly reflect the competencies of the applicants.*

A8: *I believe so. I think we need to work on that.*

Suggested Competencies

Regarding competencies suggested after all the assessment processes and after the assessors had convened, the study revealed only one theme: *suggested courses are not based on the needed competencies.*

Suggested Courses Are Not Based on the Needed Competencies

Because no listed competencies were recorded in the assessment tools after each assessment process, there was no basis for assessing acquired competencies from prior learning. Hence, no competencies were used to compare with the minimum competencies required by the degree program sought by the applicants. The suggested courses were purely based on the suggestions of the assessors. There is no question as to the qualifications of assessors because they are found to be aligned with their respective fields based on the retrieved documents from the Office of Special Education. However, it would be a better practice if in every assessment process the competencies acquired by the individuals are clearly recorded in the tools. In such manner, the competencies to be suggested will also be clearer both to the applicant and the assessors.

ED: *It was not a practice during the assessment to write the competencies in each submitted document. Instead, we put equivalent percentage or point.*

A4: *The accumulated points in the assessment tools are basically the basis for looking at the courses to be recommended.*

A2: *...one thing more, the experts from the department of the degree sought were present during the assessment; more likely, they know what to recommend based on their submissions and during the question and answer portion.*

A11: *...we always make sure that what we recommend is needed by the applicant. It so happened that we have no written competencies in the assessment tools. But we have equivalent points.*

Suggestions as Inputs to Policy

Having unfolded the various findings in this study, the researchers suggest the following as inputs to policy: 1) In the initial assessment, there should be an assessment tool where the minimum competencies are captured. The result will tell whether the applicant is qualified to the degree. 2) A rubric should be used for initial assessment. This will capture the applicant's initial competencies. 3) In the document evaluation, a comprehensive assessment tool and rubric that elucidate the competencies from each attachment in the portfolio should be utilized. Instead of a point system, the assessors should extract and record from each document the acquired skills and prior as a basis for determining what competencies conform to the minimum competencies of the sought degree. 4) Finally, in the oral interview, an assessment tool that captures competencies not included in the submitted document should be utilized. An additional rubric may be used to extract further acquired competencies through the performance of the applicant's present tasks.

DISCUSSION

Although the person who administers the pre-oral assessment may have high qualifications due to academic status, teaching experience, and managerial practice, it is improbable to conduct an assessment without a clear-cut tool that gauges competencies. Dryer (2017) and Pinar and Irwin (2005) emphasized the usefulness of a clear mechanism to assess learners. The assessment process comprises components and elements that are interrelated to one another, hence, results of the pre-oral assessment are also needed. This is useful as a basis for assessors during the subsequent assessment processes. Starr-Glass (2016) posited that an applicant's acceptance to a college degree by equivalency is only allowed if the applicant's prior learning is related to and concurs with the courses and program objectives. Therefore, a record of these linkages is very important.

The study found that the applicants' assembled portfolios played a significant role in their acceptance. The preparation based on categories and sub-categories were vital to the distribution of points by the assessors in the current practice. The total points collected from various categories formed the basis of acceptance. Packaging one's portfolio requires thorough review, painstaking effort, and retrospection. According to Travers (2011), applicants must prepare their portfolio based on the assessors' perspective, e.g., how they will do the assessment, what criteria they will use, which document will be given more weight, and what possible concerns and questions they will ask. The document evaluation tool applied during the oral presentation should also reflect all the experiences of the applicant. Moreover, classification as to categories and sub-categories may help the assessors easily assign appropriate weights and give credence to each document attached as evidence of the claim entered in the application form.

Further analysis revealed components in the tools where a point system is applicable, such as educational qualification, number of years in the service or work experiences, and organizational affiliation. However, the total score reflected neither any competency nor specific skills that serve as a basis for addressing an applicant's previously acquired non-formal and informal learning needs to be clearly enhanced. Based on the empirical data, the criteria for point system itself is found to be insufficient in determining what competencies still need to be developed and enhanced relative to the degree sought. To aptly put, clear provisions in the guidelines on point system would be functional and significant factor in determining how many units and courses the applicant would still need to comply. If the total points earned would solely be the basis, it would likewise imperative to giving corresponding points to each component and sub-component that may help assessors determine the status of the applicant.

The data revealed that the absence of a clear rubric or similar tool to analyze the acquired learning competencies in each document led to just merely assigning points. Nava and River (2016) found that no rubric was used during their worksite assessment, and the tool used is subject to validity and reliability issues. Qualifying certificates as international, national, and local did not yield any acquired competencies. The point system per se did not reflect prior learning, especially for degrees offered by board examination. Wolf and Stevens (2007) and Ragupathi and Lee (2020) emphasized that rubrics set clear directions on how individuals' qualifications should be measured effectively.

The current tool or instrument also is a disadvantage to applicants who just finished high school. The Special Program offering is primarily intended to cater to the needs of such marginalized individuals. However, the categories in the current tool may not allow high school graduates to achieve fair assessment results. There was no clear provisions in the instrument that may be used to offer and acquire implicit learning competencies to measure the applicant's required skills to use in their daily life or regular basis such as technological and linguistic abilities to qualify in the program. Additional criteria for assessment would be imperative to gauge the skills of these marginalized individuals, which cover personal, professional and social competencies that may be required to a graduate of a specific degree. Anyunwu and Reuben (2016) stated that assessment tools must capture more than what the paper can present, e.g., skills, attitude, knowledge, and other competencies acquired informally due to technological advancement and fast-paced living.

Given the observations made and because the document evaluation tool categories may miss important aspects of an applicant's qualification, the procedural selection process stated in the criteria may be inappropriate such as (a) unequal point distribution upon assessment; (b) the over-all total points given to applicants; (c) status of the applicant based on the guidelines; and (d) the supplemental course and number of credit-units to be earned by the applicant. Thus, the process of selection may suggest "skills-mismatch" and would therefore defeat the very purpose of the program.

These tools may be used to grade the applicant in general. Qualification wise, they may not gauge objectively what had been previously acquired by the applicant. Given the fact that they had already submitted pertinent documents and had been already evaluated, the interview must yield competencies not covered by the documents.

There may be other learning, knowledge, skills, and abilities that applicants have acquired from prior learning but for which they have neither certificates available nor translated documents. The evaluation process must be oriented toward inferring such learning. In this case, the interview results would help the

assessors determine what courses would help the applicant in performing his/her job and pass the licensure exam should he/she decides to do so.

On the contrary, the study revealed that these were all done verbally because the tool they were using did not specify what skills, knowledge, abilities, attitude, beliefs, practice, and other competencies were to be measured during the oral assessment. If an applicant was articulate and had a gift of gab, then there was a potential for him/her to leave an impression of intelligence.

CONCLUSION

Recognized equivalency and accreditation of degree-granting units play a pivotal role for adult learners entering tertiary education. Degree-granting departments are instrumental to the conferment of such scholastic achievement under the ETEEAP programs, which require the evaluation of credentials. More so, credential assessment prior to program admission becomes an inevitable process. Credentials are imperative to admitting one's application to the program. Using this tool assists the institution in judging the applicant's academic readiness and competencies wherein double authentication is deemed necessary. Competency validation through oral assessment is one of the very essential procedures. It is assumed that competency validation means that an applicant entering into the ETEEAP program is expected to possess the skills and knowledge required by the course. This procedure provides a routine basis to gauge the applicant's capability in performing specific tasks. However, the issue of short-term academic requirements is more likely to hinder one's acquisition of the minimum learning competencies. Thus, the output of the program seemed inadequate in producing competent individuals as compared to those being honed in a minimum of four or five formative years of learning experiences.

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