



ADVANCING

PLAR

IN ALBERTA: AN ACTION PLAN

October 2008



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Advancing PLAR in Alberta : an action plan.
ISBN 978-0-7785-7516-0

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“PLAR can be a powerful tool to engage learners to access further education and training which prepares them for the new generation economy.”

Purpose of Action Plan

People learn in many different ways and in many different places. In addition to the formal learning that occurs in traditional classrooms and post-secondary institutions, valuable learning also occurs in workplaces, family businesses and regular daily life. What is learned informally or experientially is often the same or similar to what may be learned in traditional formal learning environments. There are many reasons why recognizing experiential learning is a viable educational option, more so in today's economy than ever before. Savings of both time and money can increase the efficiency of the post secondary system by freeing resources. Increased levels of learners' personal satisfaction and self-esteem contribute to additional and more avid learning and a more highly-motivated workforce. Traditional barriers to adult learning are diminished. Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) provides a process for the integration of experiential and non-formal learning into learners' educational journeys.

PLAR is a process of identifying, assessing, and recognizing skills, competencies, and knowledge of individuals learned by informal, non-formal experiential or formal means. PLAR can be a powerful tool to engage learners to access further education and training which prepares them for the next generation economy. PLAR can be beneficial to all Albertans but is particularly beneficial to people who have not previously identified themselves as learners; people with informal learning gained through life, work and training; immigrants; and, individuals transferring among learning providers, across provincial boundaries, or across professions (see Appendix A). PLAR also benefits the post-secondary system because it reduces the amount of time a learner is in the system and thus reduces system costs.

Need for Action Plan

PLAR practices currently exist in the majority of Alberta post-secondary institutions and are particularly prevalent in areas like apprentice training where the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board provides advanced standing in apprenticeship programs with prior learning and work experience. It also recognizes individuals as fully qualified if they meet the prior learning assessment process outlined in the Qualification Certificate Program. Since 1998, over 9,700 individuals have had their skills and competencies recognized through the Qualification Certificate Program. PLAR is also increasingly being recognized both provincially and nationally as an important tool in educational and employment systems to aid in increasing post-secondary participation rates and meeting current and future labour market needs.

However, there is varied understanding among the public, post-secondary institutions, employers and community organizations about exactly what PLAR is and how it can be utilized effectively in Alberta's advanced learning system. In some instances there is also concern about the quality and consistency of PLAR practices and a resistance to developing PLAR initiatives further until these issues are resolved. At the same time, Alberta prides itself on having a learner-focused advanced and community-based adult education system that values the needs of all learners and the skills and competencies they possess.

An Action Plan will begin to help alleviate these concerns by providing structure, guidance and established processes in order to support the learner as they make transitions into and out of the advanced education system and the world of work.

“Alberta prides itself on having a learner-focused advanced and community based adult education system that values the needs of all learners...”

Policy Direction

The PLAR Action Plan responds to policy directions for the advanced education system identified in the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework and the Alberta Access Planning Framework. Specifically, the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework puts in place an environment to support:

- Innovative and flexible learning opportunities are developed to help build an educated society;
- Partnerships and collaboration among institutions and community learning organizations;
- Access strategies to allow Albertans to build strong learning foundations and build on existing skills and knowledge; and
- A system that responds to economic and social needs.

Specific to PLAR, the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework identifies enhancing learner pathways as key consideration and indicates that strategies need to be developed to enable recognition of prior learning, knowledge, competencies, and experience.

In addition to the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework, Advanced Education and Technology identifies the need to support PLAR initiatives in the following key documents:

Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce, Alberta government's workforce strategy, identifies developing and implementing programs in support of PLAR as a key policy action.

Connecting Learning and Work Strategy, cross-ministry initiative supported by the departments of Education, Advanced Education and Technology, and Employment and Immigration, identifies PLAR policies and programs as important tools to enhance learning and work transitions.

Access to the Future Act, 2005, legislation to promote access, calls for enhanced support for the recognition of prior learning at post-secondary institutions.

A Learning Alberta, review of post-secondary education in Alberta, recommends developing a framework that supports the assessment of prior learning and expands the ability of institutions and employers to recognize prior learning.

Building Vibrant Learning Communities, framework and action plan to increase support and collaboration for community learning and literacy programs, recognizes the need for increased strategies to enable access to PLAR services.

Literacy Action Plan, plan to further literacy initiatives in Alberta, identifies the need to develop mentorship abilities of community adult learning providers through professional development on prior learning identification, assessment and portfolio development.

Additionally, the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) has been a long supporter of PLAR and encourages increased support and capacity for PLAR initiatives among Alberta's post-secondary institutions so that learners do not have to repeat learning. This is a key strategy in ACAT's 2008-11 Business Plan.

Scope of Action Plan

This document outlines an Action Plan for advancing PLAR in Alberta. The Action Plan provides Advanced Education and Technology with priority actions to benefit learners by supporting the full potential for PLAR in the advanced education system and the community-based adult education system. The Action Plan contributes to furthering the vision of Campus Alberta by encouraging increased access to learning and collaboration among learning providers.

The Action Plan has as its overarching goals to:

- support a quality, learner-centered system;
- foster a culture in support of all learning;
- facilitate and enhance learning and work transitions; and,
- increase participation and access to continuous education, particularly for under-represented learners.

This Action Plan also identifies a set of outcomes to be achieved, and proposes a number of actions to implement.

The focus of the Action Plan is purposefully narrowed to that of the advanced education system and community-based adult education providers within the mandate of Advanced Education and Technology. In the future, the scope of the Action Plan should be expanded and aligned with the work of other government departments, and in particular with Alberta Employment and Immigration's work on foreign qualification recognition.

The development of the Action Plan has been informed by feedback solicited from key stakeholders of the advanced education system and experts in the PLAR field.

Action Plan

Goal

Albertans will benefit from greater access to quality prior learning assessment and recognition practices.

This goal recognizes that recognition of previously acquired skills, competencies, and knowledge is a key component of facilitating continued lifelong learning and work, and for living in a healthy and prosperous society.

Guiding Principles

The following principles guide the outcomes and actions that will achieve the goal.

PLAR practices in Alberta will demonstrate quality and excellence: The identification, assessment, and recognition of individuals' skills, competencies and knowledge acquired through formal, informal, non-formal, and experiential learning should be rigorous and maintain the excellent standards of Alberta's advanced education system.

PLAR practices in Alberta will be learner-centred: PLAR practices should be efficient, relevant, effective and accessible for learners.

PLAR practices in Alberta will promote access: Access to PLAR should be readily available throughout Alberta. Such access will increase aspirations for learning and participation in further learning, particularly for under-represented learners.

PLAR practices in Alberta will reflect flexibility: PLAR mechanisms should be flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of individual learners as well as those of institutions. Such flexibility is designed to accommodate the learner while still maintaining quality standards.

PLAR practices in Alberta will integrate and align with Alberta systems: Working collaboratively, community-based providers, post-secondary institutions, industry, and professional associations should foster an integrated and responsive learning culture that enables transitions into and across provincial learning systems and into the labour market and portability of learners' PLAR credits.

PLAR practices in Alberta will be sustainable: Recognizing previously acquired skills, competencies, and knowledge contributes to an affordable educational system by reducing duplicative learning and accelerating completion of studies. Integrating PLAR best practices will ensure cost-effective and stream-lined educational opportunities for learners, employers, and institutions.

Key Outcomes

To achieve the overarching goal, four key outcomes for the Action Plan have been identified.

- A. ***Increased Information, Awareness and Support for PLAR*** – to build broad support for valuing and recognizing previously acquired skills, competencies, and knowledge, and to raise awareness of the benefits and opportunities of PLAR across multiple sectors.
- B. ***Quality Assurance for PLAR*** – to provide clear direction for the development of agreed upon quality assurance policies, practices and processes for identifying, assessing, and recognizing previously acquired skills, competencies, and knowledge.
- C. ***Increased Capacity of the System to Engage in PLAR Practices*** – to enhance the ability of community-based learning organizations and post-secondary institutions to engage in PLAR practices.
- D. ***Connection of PLAR Providers and Services*** – to increase individuals' access to learning opportunities by creating and strengthening alignment between and within the advanced education system, the community adult learning system and the labour market.

Action Strategies

The following proposed actions will work to achieve the goal and outcomes identified in the Action Plan over the next three years and into the longer term. Wherever possible, implementation of the actions will build upon existing provincial and national best practices and will allow for ongoing stakeholder input.

The following actions are organized by the outcome they will fulfill. Under each action short and long term activities have been identified. Many of the actions are interdependent and will need to be implemented in a coordinated and phased approach.

Outcome A: Increased Information, Awareness and Support for PLAR

Action #1 – Communication

Develop a broad provincial communication strategy to increase awareness of the benefits of identifying, assessing, and recognizing previously acquired skills, competencies, and knowledge.

Short-term activities

- Initially target communications strategy to post-secondary institutions and community adult learning providers to provide them with information on PLAR, its benefits and the resources available.
- Promote Alberta’s participation in PLAR initiatives at the national CAPLA (Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment) conference in Banff from October 19-21, 2008.

Long-term activities

- Once quality assurance practices are developed (see Action #3) and greater capacity for PLAR is developed within the advanced education system, expand target of communications strategy to learners, employers and the general public.

Action #2 – Information

With the support of the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT), develop a resource database to increase access to information on PLAR, including best practices provincially, nationally and internationally.

Short-term activities

- Develop resource database and house on ACAT website.
- Conduct research project to update the 2005 Best Practices in PLAR document.

Long-term activities

- Identify other research projects on best practices that will assist the advanced education system in providing high quality PLAR service to learners.

Action Strategies

Outcome B: Quality Assurance for PLAR

Action #3 – Quality Assurance

With the support of the PLAR Committee and ACAT, support the development of quality assurance practices for PLAR, including quality assurance practices for identification, assessment, and recognition processes. Standards should build upon national and international expertise.

Short-term activities	Long-term activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compile information and analysis on existing national and international quality assurance practices and where necessary conduct new research. • PLAR Committee to lead development of quality assurance practices for Alberta (see Action #4). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support increased collaboration with industries and professional organizations to ensure quality PLAR practices are consistent with existing standards. • Promote the development and use of quality assessment tools for the advanced education system to use in assessing and awarding PLAR credit.

Outcome C: Increased Capacity of the System to Engage in PLAR Practices

Action #4 - Stakeholder Committee

Support the implementation of a mechanism to increase capacity of the system to engage in PLAR practices

Short-term activities	Long-term activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a PLAR Committee modeled after ACAT's articulation and sub-committee structures with representatives from: ACAT, post-secondary institutions, community adult learning providers, government, learners and other stakeholders as identified. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the development of a Campus Alberta Prior Learning Assessment Network (CAPLAN) as a networking mechanism.

Action #5 - Professional Development

Support professional development and training of staff and volunteers within the community adult learning system and post-secondary institutions in recognized PLAR practices.

Short-term activities	Long-term activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver training to a cohort of potential PLAR practitioners within the advanced education system, with particular emphasis on colleges and community adult learning providers initially. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a professional development fund to support future and ongoing training needs.

Outcome C: Increased Capacity of the System to Engage in PLAR Practices

Action #6 – Identifying Barriers

Examine key funding issues and other barriers for post-secondary institutions, community adult learning providers and learners to fully utilizing the potential of PLAR.

Short-term activities	Long-term activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With the support of the PLAR Committee, ACAT and the Ministry, identify the key funding issues and other barriers (e.g., portability of PLAR credits, academic control, faculty workload etc). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop recommendations and strategies to address and mitigate identified barriers.

Action #7 – Data and Indicators of Success

Develop accountability mechanisms to count and track PLAR learners in the advanced education system to document mobility of those learners and document institutions’ use of awarding PLAR credits.

Short-term activities	Long-term activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using the Alberta Student Number and other existing data sources, develop a data model that will gather current data and trends on PLAR learners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop new data gathering mechanisms if needed. Produce report profiling PLAR learners and institution’s use of awarding PLAR credits. Based on data findings, develop indicators to measure success and any recommendations for improvements.

Action #8 – Centre of Excellence

In alignment with the Roles and Mandates Policy Framework, identify a PLAR Centre of Excellence within the advanced education system with a mandate to further PLAR in Alberta, through such methods as: developing supports for learners to assist them through PLAR processes; exploring best practices; conducting research; portability of PLAR credits; and ensuring knowledge transfer on PLAR practices, issues, policies, and programs.

Short-term activities	Long-term activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define mandate and scope of PLAR Centre of Excellence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify PLAR Centre of Excellence. Provide funding support to the PLAR Centre of Excellence to fulfill defined mandate.

Action Strategies

Outcome D: Connection of PLAR Providers and Services	
<p>Action #9 - Community Capacity</p> <p>In alignment with Building Vibrant Learning Communities and the Literacy Action Plan, support the development and implementation of pilot projects with key community adult learning providers to increase learners' access to community-based portfolio development.</p>	
Short-term activities	Long-term activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify up to three pilot sites and provide seed money to support coordinators in doing portfolio assessments. Conduct formative evaluation to inform the potential roll-out to additional pilot sites. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In alignment with the Literacy Action Plan, provide support to additional community adult learning providers. Evaluate the effectiveness of community-based PLAR practices in assisting learners with access and transitions into advanced education.
<p>Action #10 – Provincial Coordination</p> <p>In collaboration with other government departments, ensure alignment of government-supported PLAR policies and strategies and facilitate greater transitions between learning and work.</p>	
Short-term activities	Long-term activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create cross-ministry committee to align work of Advanced Education and Technology with other provincial departments. Develop relationships with additional stakeholders impacted by PLAR, including: industry, employers, and professional associations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore the development of a provincial PLAR Action Plan.

Evaluation

Qualitative and quantitative indicators of success will be defined for each of the actions. Wherever possible, success will be measured by how the action has benefited learners. Formal evaluation of the success of the specific actions and their implementation will be conducted within 5 years of the commencement of the Action Plan.

Appendix A: What is PLAR?

What is PLAR? – Definition, Components and Benefits

Definition

There are many ways to define PLAR. For the purposes of the Action Plan, a broad, encompassing definition is used.

PLAR is a process of identifying, assessing, and recognizing skills, competencies, and knowledge to facilitate the transfer of these skills, competencies, and knowledge of individuals into further learning and work. Skills, competencies and knowledge, may be acquired through formal, informal, non-formal, or experiential learning gained through work experience, training, independent study, or volunteer activities.

PLAR acknowledges that individuals develop valuable skills, competencies, and knowledge through informal, non-formal, and experiential learning, as well as formal learning. PLAR processes provide mechanisms to identify, assess, and recognize those skills, competencies, and knowledge. PLAR serves to increase access and participation, raise aspirations for learning, enhance and expedite transitions into learning and work, and assist in ensuring efficient and effective use of resources by working to eliminate duplicative learning and accelerating completion of studies.

Examples where PLAR may be utilized include:

- Capturing an individual’s independent learning that is equivalent to the skills, competencies and knowledge that person would have learned in a high school or post-secondary course;
- Capturing individual’s on-the-job training that is akin to the skills and knowledge they would have gained through a formal program;
- Recognizing a person’s foreign credential that is equivalent to a local credential required to qualify that person for a professional license; or
- Recognizing credit for a course a learner took at a private provider that is equivalent, but non-transferable, to an accredited institution.
- Converting non-formal learning acquired by an individual into advanced standing for that person in a post-secondary program.

Components of PLAR

The following points provide information on the types of components that may make up a PLAR experience. Individuals do not necessarily participate in each of the components nor do all post-secondary providers, community adult education providers, organizations and professional associations, as it depends on the services they each provide.

- **Guidance & Counseling** – Accessing and navigating PLAR services is not a well known process, nor is it an easy process for learners to understand.
 - Guidance and counseling services provide learners with the awareness that PLAR exists and could be beneficial to their situation and then provides the supports necessary to navigate the complex system.
 - For learners, this is the moment that engages them and may make the difference of whether they pursue further studies or not.

- **Identification** - Identification and value of learning, wherever and however it occurs. This stage encourages individuals to identify themselves as learners and raise aspirations for pursuing more formal learning opportunities.
 - Although not limited to this method, identification is often done by having an individual develop a PLAR portfolio that identifies the skills, competencies and knowledge they possess.
 - For learners this can be a very powerful tool as it helps them express the considerable attributes they have developed throughout their life and helps them to identify the areas that are their strengths.
- **Assessment** – Selection and comparison of learning relevant to desired learning and work outcomes.
 - The methods that might be used to assess prior learning as compared to desired outcomes include assessment of educational documents; portfolio review; demonstration or challenge processes (i.e. written/oral examinations, projects, assignments, performance observation, skill demonstrations, simulations and product assessments); standardized tests and program review.
 - For learners, this can be a very comprehensive and time-consuming process.
- **Recognition** – After assessment is complete, credit or advanced placement may be awarded in a formal learning environment for skills, competencies, and knowledge that people have gained in other learning environments.
 - Awards may be offered, where appropriate, for post-secondary credit or credential or for employment and career development.
 - For learners, this is a very validating time as all the hard work has paid off and formal recognition is awarded.

Benefits of PLAR

Having PLAR practices in place has benefits for both individual learners and society.

Individual:

- Building individuals' self-awareness of their skills and knowledge, their self-confidence in their capacity to succeed in learning, and their desire and willingness to participate in continued learning.
- Improving employment fit, which enhances business performance, job satisfaction, and employee retention.
- Providing opportunities for individuals without formal credentials to demonstrate required skills, competencies, and knowledge for advanced education entry or placement requirements;
- Identification of individual learning gaps and career development needs;
- Identifying skills, competencies, and knowledge for training and education received outside of Canada or identification of bridging programs that may be necessary to take to get recognition;
- Eliminating duplication of learning, and enhancing affordability by reducing the cost of education and training for individuals, employers, and the advanced education system.

Society:

- Increasing post-secondary participation and closing educational attainment gaps
- Increasing access and participation of adult learners;
- Maximizing workplace skills and knowledge and gaining a better understanding of workplace training and learning needs;
- Supporting a more integrated learning system that captures and enhances the value of all learning.
- Decreasing education/training and retraining time for earlier engagement or re-engagement in the workforce.

Intended Audience – Who will benefit from increased access to PLAR?

Anyone can benefit from PLAR, but research indicates that specific groups with the most to gain from increased learning recognition include:

1. People who have not previously identified themselves as learners
 - For example: non-high school completers, and other unengaged groups which are under-represented in the learning system.
 - The unengaged learner will be encouraged to enter their learning path if they are fully aware that their lifelong learning is respected, measured and accredited to avoid wasting time and resources.
2. People with informal learning gained through life, work and training
 - With Alberta's strong economy many people are entering the workforce early and foregoing a post-secondary education. Should the economy falter or those people wish to develop more formal skills, Alberta's advanced education system must be prepared to accommodate larger numbers of learners wishing to return to learning with skills, competencies, and knowledge acquired in the labour market.
3. Immigrants
 - Alberta continues to see increases in immigrants coming to the province who have skills, competencies and knowledge that need to be recognized in order to facilitate their entry into the workforce or further learning or training. Although there are mechanisms in place to evaluate the validity of formal credentials, immigrants would also benefit from recognition of their non-formal learning and experience.
4. Individuals transferring among learning providers, across provincial boundaries, or across professions
 - These individuals have already identified themselves as participating in further learning and are seeking recognition of their formal credentials; however, they would also benefit from having all of their skills, competencies and knowledge identified and possibly recognized in order to reduce duplication of effort.

Appendix B: Current Use of PLAR Nationally and Internationally

Internationally

Prior learning assessment and recognition is present within the educational and training systems of many countries worldwide. For example, the United States' Council for Adult and Experiential Education (CAEL), a multi-institutional organization, has been successful in achieving wide-spread adoption of PLAR at post-secondary institutions through their marketing and information dissemination efforts. Globally, PLAR implementation tends to be concentrated in particular disciplines and occupations, notably Health Sciences, Human Services, and Business Education, and is also practiced in Teacher Education and Law & Justice Studies.

Nationally

PLAR policy frameworks and strategies have been developed in several jurisdictions across Canada. Strategies range from specific industry-focused skills development to more general assessments of capabilities to enhanced individual employment and educational outcomes. For example, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Quebec have comprehensive PLAR frameworks in place and Nova Scotia has established a Prior Learning Assessment Centre. Formal PLAR policies and supports in Canada tend to be more widespread at the community college level than at the university level.

Alberta

In comparison to most other jurisdictions in Canada, Alberta lacks an integrated and comprehensive approach for PLAR. Alberta does have one of the strongest, most well-established transfer systems in the country for recognizing formal credentials, but is falling behind its provincial counterparts in recognizing the full spectrum of skills, competencies and knowledge of its learners. This well-established approach to formal credential recognition provides Alberta with a solid foundation for moving forward to further recognize non-formal, informal and experiential learning.

Some of Alberta's advanced education system already practices PLAR, including:

- the provincial transfer system - as a foundational principle, the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) stresses that students should not be required to repeat previous learning experiences and transfer credits should be awarded for recognized skills;
- the apprenticeship and trades training system - the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board provides advanced standing in apprenticeship programs with prior learning and work experience. It also recognizes individuals as fully qualified if they meet the prior learning assessment process outlined in the Qualification Certificate Program. Since 1998, over 9,700 individuals have had their skills and competencies recognized through the Qualification Certificate Program.;
- post-secondary institutions - two-thirds of post-secondary institutions have indicated that they have established their own PLAR policies;
- community learning organizations - including those that support the integration of immigrants into Albertan society and the labour market; and, some professional organizations.

