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Achieving Public Policy Goals with Quality PLAR

Summary

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is being promoted in Canada, by the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) and others, as a means by which to improve education/training and increase access to employment. The CLFDB has undertaken substantial work leading to a stated PLAR policy and national implementation strategy, recommended national quality standards, and a method of quality assurance. The intention is to ensure that Canada's workforce development system in general, and PLAR processes and practices in particular, are effective, efficient and equitable. This paper sets out, first, a conceptual discussion of PLAR and its relationship to labour force development, i.e., how PLAR relates to workforce and public policy objectives; and second, recommended national standards as a means of PLAR quality assurance, i.e., what PLAR practices must be in place to achieve the policy objectives.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is changing how learning is assessed, recognized, and ultimately valued by education and employment systems world-wide. Simplistically, the assessment of acquired learning is, instinctively, the beginning of any learning process. New knowledge can only be learned when it is attached to existing or previously acquired knowledge, and teaching begins with determining the base of skills and knowledge that exists, on an individualized basis, for intended new learning. In this non-formal sense, PLA is neither complicated or revolutionary. However, in the formal sense, the assessment and recognition of prior learning, as both a process and a policy option, is being used to address particular public policy priorities in Canada.

Development and promotion of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) as a national public policy initiative is being lead by the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB). The CLFDB,[1] Canada's national training board, advises on the improvement of workforce training and access to employment, and in this capacity, has identified six public policy objectives that quality PLAR practices and services can positively address, and has created recommended national standards to enable PLAR's contribution to achieving those objectives.

Linking PLAR And Labour Force Development

Labour force development – programs and services aimed at training, labour market information, and access to employment – is a preoccupation of the labour market partners: business, organized labour, the four designated equity-seeking groups, the education / training community, industry sectoral councils, and governments. Their mandate at the CLFDB is to work towards a workforce development system that is effective, efficient and equitable. The concept of PLA was brought to the attention of the CLFDB by the Task Force on Transitions to Employment[2] who saw it as a critical means of enabling individuals to make the transition from school to work and to engage in lifelong learning. A working group was struck to investigate that potential, and their work has becoming an on-going priority of the CLFDB.

After a thorough scan of the PLA environment,[3] considerable discussion and deliberation, and a national consultation process involving all the labour market partners, the CLFDB – through the working group – created a PLAR policy with a recommended national implementation strategy and recommended national PLAR quality standards in 1995.[4] It continues to investigate and

promote PLAR with research projects, a bi-annual national forum, and an information clearinghouse website.[5]   The CLFDB has operationalized the concept of the assessment and recognition of prior learning as follows.

> *PLAR - Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition- is a process of identifying, assessing, and recognizing what a person knows and can do*.

The labour market partners have concluded that the PLAR process can take various forms, and the outcomes can be used for a large number of purposes relevant to goals of individuals, the labour market partners, and society at large.

The Transition Task Force had hypothesized that individuals entering or returning to the workforce or the formal learning system would use PLA/PLAR as a transition tool to identify:

1. current skills and knowledge,
2. the match or mismatch with those that are required for certification or employment, and
3. the most efficient use of their training resources.

Individuals would not have to retrain or restudy knowledge and skills that had been previously acquired either through formal education or experience. PLAR could become a basic part of individual action planning and expanded career and employment counselling services, helping to make better choices for employment and/or training. For individuals, PLAR would also mean increased access to training and to employment as the depth and breadth of their learning was better understood and applied. Within industry, PLAR could contribute to the recognition that the workplace offers valuable learning and training, i.e., PLAR would give value to the skills and knowledge acquired at work. In the workplace, PLAR could minimize employee time away from the job for training, eliminate duplication of learning, reduce financial costs of employer-sponsored training, and create opportunities to facilitate employee career development. For individuals and for the labour market partners, PLAR would result in better use of resources. The CLFDB determined to explore this hypothesis.

International comparisons indicated that, as a sweeping generalization, there have been three fundamental approaches to PLA/PLAR.[6] In Canada and the U.S., PLA -- as it has been known -- has been used largely *within* the established education/training system to accredit prior learning as part of a final academic credential. An individual might be granted some number of credits toward the total number needed to complete a degree or diploma, and not have to take courses that embody skills and knowledge that s/he has already learned. In England, Australia and New Zealand, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has been used largely *outside* the

established education / training system to accredit skills acquisition toward an occupational standard or qualification, i.e., an individual may claim to have acquired some or all of the skills on an occupational qualifications checklist. In Scotland and France, PLA has been used *to connect* the occupational qualifications system with the formal learning system. That is to say, the individual undergoes PLA to determine the mismatch between learning acquired and learning needed or desired. This mismatch becomes the basis for a plan to acquire those skills and knowledge, either through formal training or planned experiential learning. The CLFDB concluded that a national PLAR strategy in Canada should directly accommodate all three purposes, i.e., to encourage and enable the use of PLAR within and between the labour market system and the education / training system to the mutual advantage of both systems and of individuals.

For several years, PLA has been under development within pockets of Canada's publicly-funded and private post-secondary education systems.[7] Typical definitions have essentially limited it to that environment, for example:

♦ *PLA is assessment by some valid and reliable means, by a qualified specialist, of what has been learned through non-formal education, training, or experience, that is worthy of credit in a course or program offered by the institution providing the credit* – the working definition in BC provincial policy[8].

♦ *Prior learning assessment is a process which uses a variety of tools to help learners reflect on, identify, articulate and demonstrate past learning which has been acquired through study, work, and other life experiences and which is not recognized through formal transfer of credit mechanisms. PLA allows the evaluation of past learning against established academic standards so that credit can be awarded by a credentialing body* -- definition used by the Council of Regents of the public colleges in Ontario[9].

The labour market partners concluded that the concept and the practice of PLA should be enlarged to promote the range of possibilities that recognition of prior learning could take. The word "Recognition" was added to PLA to expand and reinforce the purpose of prior learning assessment within the labour market context, based on the following definitions and premises.[10]

♦ *Learning* includes knowledge, skills and values that are acquired through experience or study. Learning takes place in a variety of settings, e.g., formal teaching institutions, paid or volunteer work, travel, hobbies, family responsibilities.   *Non-formal learning* is acquired from life and work experiences. All learning has value. All learning can be assessed and should be assessed in a variety of ways.

♦ *Prior learning assessment and recognition* (PLAR) is the identification, description and judgement of a person's acquired learning at a certain point in time. For example, PLAR could be a challenge examination or a demonstration by an individual that might result in prompt acceptance that the person has the skills and knowledge that s/he claims to have. Alternately, the process could include the development and assessment of a portfolio, i.e., a comprehensive record of learning.

♦ *Assessment* implies a judgement; it begins with a description or demonstration, and concludes with a comparison to some criteria. A PLAR *demonstration* might take the form of a challenge examination, an interview, a product assessment, a standardized test. In the *description* phase of a PLAR process, a person reflects upon his/her life and work experiences, identifies learning, and creates a record of accomplishments and skills – a portfolio, complete with appropriate documentation. The comparison or *judgement* might be a self-assessment, or an evaluation by an organization, against criteria that relate to the purpose of the assessment. For example, the comparison might be to a college course or program if the purpose is to award credit for prior learning; to occupational requirements if the purpose is to secure a position; to a career goal if the purpose is planning for training and advancement.

♦ *Recognition* through PLAR is given for the learning derived from experience, and not for the experience itself.[11] Recognition of prior learning, in the education context, could take the form of formal academic credits, vocational credentials, foreign credential evaluation, or credit transfer.   It might also mean, in the employment context, that a person gets a job for which s/he has the skills and knowledge but not the traditionally-accepted credentials.

In summary, it was concluded that PLAR has the potential to improve not just training but also access to employment for Canadians. More explicitly, this meant developing a national implementation strategy aimed at the achievement of the following six public policy goals:[12] the efficient use of resources, the development of a lifelong learning culture, the advancement of social justice, co-ordinated and coherent labour force development, education and training reform, and the management of change.

Public Policy Goals that PLAR can Address

Goal 1: The Efficient Use of Resources

One goal of a national PLAR implementation strategy is to use existing resources -- time, people, finances and practices -- more efficiently. For example, as a value-added process in the development and management of human resources, PLAR could ensure that:

♦ individuals do not needlessly repeat training and learning;

♦ individuals with skills and knowledge are not excluded from the recognized labour force;

♦ institutions can focus resources on skill and knowledge deficit areas, vis-à-vis economic development in Canada;

♦ employers, including governments, with an inventory of the skills and abilities of potential and actual employees, can benefit in terms of increased productivity by existing employees, enhanced return on investment for training, better value for training dollars spent by employers and employees, and better matches between available jobs and potential employees;

♦ government training programs achieve greater efficiency by targeting actual skill deficits, and greater effectiveness by positively affecting larger numbers of workers and learners.

Resources need to be used effectively, efficiently and equitably. This is not the case when, for example, individuals find that academic credits and employment credentials acquired in one part of Canada are not recognized anywhere else in their own country, that they must re-study knowledge or skills that they have acquired through life and work experience to qualify for formal credentials, that tuition fees and time spent on retraining are at the expense of families, employers and taxpayers. Through a nation-wide application of PLAR, Canadians would be

able to work or study in any part of Canada, transferring their acquired credits and credentials within and between institutions and provinces.

Canadians are experiencing increasing unemployment and underemployment with resulting economic and social costs.   Huge numbers of unemployed and underemployed Canadians would like to apply the reservoir of skills and knowledge that they possess. However, many of those individuals hold either foreign credentials or no formal credentials. Therefore, there is a need for both increased employment opportunities and for recognition of non-formal learning that allows individuals to apply and enhance the skills they have.

Goal 2: Development of a Lifelong Learning Culture

A second goal of a national PLAR implementation strategy is to decompartmentalize working, learning, and leisure. PLAR promotes lifelong learning through the formal recognition that valuable learning can take place in a variety of settings. As well, it serves as a planning tool for further learning as, in the PLAR process, individuals compare their current skills and knowledge with that which they might want or need in the future. Through PLAR, individuals can become more interested in and more self-directed in learning and career choices. Also, individuals learn to recognize their own skill and knowledge development in different life and work settings.

Individuals are increasingly aware of the need to continue learning, formally and non-formally, throughout a lifetime. Knowledge and skill requirements, for active participation in the labour force and in the community, are continually increasing and changing. However, there is no comprehensive, integrated process to help adults to return to the learning system, a system that affords many options, little or no decision-making help, and not enough recognition of prior learning. Therefore, for individuals, there is a need for increased access to learning opportunities; for a more equitable, effective and efficient access procedure; and for support and encouragement to see their plans through to completion. At the same time, PLAR contributes to the recognition that formal credentials are not the only means of accounting for learning.

Goal 3: Advancement of Social Justice

Certain groups of people have had difficulty gaining access to and/or succeeding in the established education / training and employment systems in Canada.   Access issues are

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cross-cut by such social identities as gender, race, ethnicity, disability and class. A purpose of PLAR is to help identify and recognize the prior learning and aspirations of any and all individuals. Fair, bias-free PLAR allows individuals from the designated equity groups greater access to employment or further learning opportunities by bringing them into the pool of those whose knowledge and skills are recognized. A goal of a national PLAR implementation strategy is to provide to all Canadians a means of recognizing their skills and knowledge so they may be able to access whatever opportunities exist where they may use their learning to the maximum of their potential. PLAR should be developed in ways to ensure equality of opportunity for the most disadvantaged. A third goal of a national PLAR strategy, therefore, is to achieve equity in access to and accommodation in training / education and employment for all Canadians.

Goal 4: Coherent and Co-ordinated Labour Force Development

A fourth goal is to improve Canada's labour force development system. This includes examining the relationship between credentials and labour force participation, the proliferation of credentials and their actual value, assessment processes and credentialing bodies, lack of portability of credentials, assessment of foreign credentials, and development of international credentials. It also includes positively contributing to the development of labour market information systems and occupational / skill standards, and the improvement of career and employment counselling services, labour adjustment practices, apprenticeship and training reform.

Goal 5: Education and Training Reform

The education / training system in Canada is a vast network of public, private (for profit and not-for-profit), community-based, and in-house institutions and services of every conceivable size. A nation committed to creating a world-class workforce prepared for the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century must possess an education / training system based on the principles of partnerships, responsiveness, accessibility, relevance, quality, and cost-effectiveness.[13] A fifth goal of a national PLAR implementation strategy is to contribute to the development of such a system in Canada.

To be effective in the labour market context, PLAR requires a national implementation strategy that provides for portability and transferability of credits and credentials. The formal education / training community has primary responsibility for helping Canadians acquire needed credentials and workplace competencies. However, that community is fractured into a confusing array of systems, levels, standards, and types of providers who are often competitors. Credits and credentials acquired in one system and/or province should be recognized in all provinces or systems, and this requires great collaboration and co-operation inside the education / training industry.

Three additional reforms are inherent in the systematic application of PLAR on a national basis. First, an outcomes-based approach to the delivery of education / training is fundamental to the systematic implementation of PLAR. Only by clearly stating the intended learning outcomes of courses and programs can the learning of individuals be compared and judged. Learners have a right to know what outcomes they are being assessed against in education / training programs and in PLAR. Second, a learner-centred approach to service delivery is basic to the systematic implementation of both PLAR and a national PLAR strategy. The application of national Training Standards and national PLAR Standards requires a formal learning environment that is learner-centred, that recognizes and accommodates different learning goals, that provides modularized instruction and variety in learning opportunities, and is flexible to meet the needs of learners and of the labour market. More specifically, if an educational institution is offering PLAR, support systems must be available and adequate for individuals to locate and finish a credential through PLAR, within realistic timeframes and at a reasonable cost. Finally, the education / training industry, like all other Canadian industries, must promote positive change in its own workforce. The human resource development needs inside the education / training community include both skills upgrading, modified preparation programs, and adjustment strategies. All of this requires a significant shift in policies and practices of the current education / training community and the other labour market partners.

Goal 6: Leadership for Positive and Proactive Change

All individuals, groups, and institutions are experiencing change. The change process can generally be managed and should not, unless absolutely necessary, be imposed from the top down or from "outside." Therefore, there is a need to design and encourage positive change that especially involves those who will be directly affected. It may become necessary to impose

change in order that the obligation to achieve equity goals is not diminished or forgotten. A goal of a national PLAR implementation strategy is to contribute to positive and proactive change, in large measure, by pioneering pan-Canadian efforts to link the education / training community together and to the other labour market partners in a national effort. It provides the opportunity for significant organizational development as established agencies and institutions develop new ways of doing things.

In summation, the CLFDB created a recommended national PLAR implementation strategy aimed at achieving these six important public policy goals. The development of recommended national quality standards for PLAR services and practices was seen as the first and necessary step in ensuring that PLAR did, in fact, contribute to the achievement of the policy goals.

Addressing Policy Goals with PLAR Standards

The CLFDB has been engaged in developing a variety of national standards that are:
- ♦ related to the quality of training, counselling and labour market information;
- ♦ developed through consensus decision-making by all the labour market partners;
- ♦ recommended only, with no regulatory mechanisms;
- ♦ futuristic, in that they do not describe the status quo but a preferred future; and
- ♦ from the perspective of the consumers and their advocates.

Standards describe what is acceptable and what isn't; therefore, standards are a standard means by which to implement public policy.

> *Standards govern the design, operation, manufacture, and use of nearly everything that mankind produces. There are standards to protect the environment and human health... There are even standards of acceptable behaviour within a society. Standards generally go unnoticed. They are mostly quiet, unseen forces, such as specifications, regulations, and protocols, that ensure things work properly, interactively, and responsibly.*[14]

Standards, like policies, exist whether they are clearly stated or just generally accepted; however, standards that are not clearly stated often allow too much room for interpretation, confusion and abuse. Fair and justifiable formal standards are often needed to ensure quality of products and accountability of systems. In the view of the labour market partners, this is the value of national PLAR standards. These standards are not intended to supplant institutional or organizational policies; they are intended to be a comprehensive description of best practice in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition. Best practice in PLAR ensures that prior learning

is appropriately recognized so that individuals have access to training and employment. Standards are developed or achieved by one of three methods:[15]

1. by government, though a regulatory process (authority);
2. through the market, on a de facto basis (custom);
3. negotiated through a voluntary consensus process (consent).

The CLFDB process is the latter process, i.e., these recommended national PLAR standards have been developed and recommended by labour market representatives on the Board and its PLAR working group. While the CLFDB has no authority to enforce standards, it has the responsibility to generate recommended national standards that describe best practice and contribute to the achievement of a labour force development system that is effective, efficient and equitable.

The purpose of the PLAR standards is to ensure that PLAR is developed and applied in a effective, efficient, equitable, transparent, reliable and valid fashion across Canada for the benefit of individual Canadians and of the labour market. The following principles comprise the recommended minimum standards for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in Canada.

1. PLAR must be accessible and relevant to people as individuals, i.e., it must focus on the unique needs and abilities of the individual.

2. Assessment and recognition must be of learning (knowledge, skills, and judgement acquired through study or experience), not of experience.

3. The PLAR process must equitable, i.e., barrier-free and bias-free.

4. The PLAR process must be efficient, i.e., make the best use of resources for the individual.

5. The PLAR process must be effective, i.e., it must provide the opportunity for recognition of the prior learning, and it must not hold out false promises.

6. The PLAR process must be transparent, i.e., the individual must know the criteria against which s/he is being assessed.

7. The assessment must be reliable, i.e., it must be against criteria that are recognized and respected by all the labour market partners, e.g., occupational / skill standards, stated learning outcomes, stated credential requirements.

8. The assessment tools and their PLAR application must be valid, i.e., they must be recognized and accepted by all the labour market partners.

9. Individuals assessing prior learning must be trained to perform this task.

10. The assessing organization must provide assessment options, and the opportunity and assistance for individuals to make choices.

11. Recognition awarded through PLAR should not be differentiated from that awarded in the traditional manner.

12. Recognition resulting from PLAR should be transferable and portable within and between organizations and jurisdictions.

13. PLAR must be an option or opportunity, and not a mandatory process.

14. An appeal procedure must be available.

To implement the quality standards, two tools have been developed. Starting with the recommended national Training Standards[16], the Board recognized that one way to implement standards in the absence of legislation or regulation was to urge providers of related products and services – training programs in this first instance – to assess what they provided against the national standards.[17] The method to do that has been called a Quality Audit. The PLAR Quality Audit[18] is a vehicle for implementing the PLAR standards which, in turn, are intended to ensure quality in PLAR products and services. It is, simply, a tool for comparing PLAR services against the recommended national standards.

PLAR services include all those processes and practices that can lead either to advanced standing at institutions for education/training and professional accreditation agencies, or more appropriate placement in the workplace. Such services are provided by some community colleges, universities, private training institutions, professional accreditation bodies, employment recruiters, and human resources offices in the industry environment. The result of the audit is information that service providers can use to improve and promote PLAR services and, hence, training services and hiring practices. Consumers of training have said very clearly that they want both training and PLAR services that are accessible, relevant, efficient and productive. This Quality Audit can determine how well a PLAR service meets consumer expectations. The Quality Audit can be used, as an example, for program/service evaluation, policy design and implementation, strategic planning and organizational development, and comparative advantage and marketing plans.

The second tool is a Consumer's Guide to PLAR[19] – a simplified version of the standards that tell potential PLAR clients what to expect in terms of quality service. It can provide information used by consumers to choose from among the many and varied training and PLAR service

providers. Because the promotion of PLAR is in its infancy in Canada, there is an urgent need to:

1. inform adults about the opportunity represented by PLAR; and
2. encourage them to expect PLAR service that is of the highest quality – i.e., that addresses their personal needs for effectiveness, efficiency and equity.

In conclusion, a great deal is known about PLAR: what learning to assess, how to assess it, what to charge, what organizational supports are required, barriers and advantages to PLAR.[20] If providers of PLAR services can meet the recommended national standards and if consumers of PLAR services know what quality of service to expect, the potential of PLAR to address general public policy goals and specific labour force development goals is achievable. The reality is, however, that there is a very long way to go.

Endnotes:

[1] Information about the mandate, membership, projects and publications of the CLFDB is available at http://www.clfdb.ca/
[2] *Putting the Pieces Together: Toward a Coherent Transition System for Canada's Labour Force* (CLFDB, 1994).
[3] *Prior Learning Assessment: Issues and Opportunities for the CLFDB.* (Barker, 1995).
[4] *Improving Training and Access to Employment Through Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition: National Implementation Strategy and National PLAR Standards.* (CLFDB, 1996).
[5] PLAR website address: http://www.plar.com/
[6] *Prior Learning Assessment: Issues and Opportunities for the CLFDB.* (Barker, 1995). Available from the CLFDB.
[7] *Prior Learning Assessment In Canada.* Report on a survey of PLA in Canada conducted by Robert Isabelle and Associates for Human Resources Development Canada. (Fugate, M., Isabelle, R., and LeDuc, D., April, 1994).
[8] *Prior Learning Assessment: An Inventory Of Activity In BC Post-Secondry Institutions.* (British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfers, 1994).
[9] *Prior learning assessment in Ontario's colleges*. (Council of Regents, 1994).
[10] *Improving Training and Access to Employment Through Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition: National Implementation Strategy and National PLAR Standards.* (CLFDB, 1996).
[11] *Assessing learning: Standards, principles, and procedures.* (Whittaker, U. ,1989; Council for Adult and Experiential Learning).
[12] Excerpted directly from the 1996 policy document.
[13] *Major reforms in training systems in five countries: A review of reforms in Scotland, England and Wales, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.* Paper prepared for the BC Ministry of Skills, Training, and Labour. (Farris, R., 1994).
[14] *Global Standards: Building Blocks for the Future*. (The U.S. Office of Technology Assessment, 1992).
[15] Ibid.
[16] *Training Standards.* (CLFDB, 1995). Available at http://www.clfdb.ca/
[17] *Canada's National Training Standards and Related FuturEd Products/Services.* (Barker, 1997). Available at http://www.futured.com/
[18] Available at http://www.plar.com/
[19] Available at http://www.plar.com/
[20] *Prior Learning Assessment: Issues and Opportunities for the CLFDB.* (Barker, 1995).