

## **PLAR WORKSHOP, May 16, 2007**

### **Session on Developing a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Policy Framework: What We Heard**

#### **Background Information:**

On May 16, 2007, the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) and Advanced Education and Technology hosted a workshop for champions and practitioners of PLAR to come together and share best practices. As part of the workshop, Advanced Education and Technology had participants separated into focus groups and sought input into the development of a PLAR Policy Framework for the advanced education system.

The following questions were asked and a summary of the overall feedback received is provided. This feedback will assist Advanced Education and Technology to move forward in developing its PLAR Policy Framework.

#### **1) Do the issues and challenges identified represent key priorities for Alberta? What other challenges might be facing Alberta?**

- There is a lack of a common understanding, knowledge, and definition of PLAR.
- There is a challenge in communicating the benefits of PLAR (i.e. portfolio development).
- There is a challenge for universities around specifying outcomes for courses:
  - Need for programs/courses that acknowledge prior learning.
  - Different courses have varying assessment tools.
  - Institutions do not have clearly defined course outcomes.
- PLAR holds significant benefits for filling employment/skills gaps, but there is a need for a strong liaison and collaboration among post-secondary institutions and employers.
- Workplaces have an important role in communicating and promoting PLAR, and providing access to PLAR services, activities, and information.
- Implementing pilot projects requires support and participation from across multiple sectors and stakeholders.
- The government needs to support PLAR by providing resources and incentives.
- Quality assurance is a key challenge:
  - Need to have a standardized training process.
  - Need to have support and involvement of licensing and professional regulatory bodies.
  - Need to develop national standards and appropriate measurement outcomes.
  - Need to build infrastructure and secure institutional buy-in of PLAR.
- Targeting learner and under-represented groups:
  - Aboriginal - First Nations colleges need enhanced support systems for learners, such as daycare, language supports, etc.
  - PLAR for immigrants holds significant benefits, but language issues are a barrier.
  - High-school leavers are a potential learner group that could benefit from PLAR.

**2) In what areas might Alberta experience the greatest benefits from implementing a PLAR framework? Where could we have the greatest impact?**

- General employment:
  - PLAR holds potential to create an integrated approach to skills and competencies between industry, professional bodies and post-secondary institutions. This would create a comprehensive system.
  - Employers and workplaces should engage in raising awareness and promoting PLAR.
  - Need to encourage the energy sector and oil fields/other employers to educate high school early leavers.
  - With a change in the booming economy, we could see many workers wanting to access a post-secondary program of study; PLAR can help with facilitating entry.
  - Need for portfolio development mechanisms and funding incentives for employers.
- Health & trade occupational sectors:
  - Address labour shortages by enhancing capacity for professional certification.
  - At the same time, we need to ensure healthcare programs are not decreasing clinical or classroom time.
- Non-formal learning:
  - Create a learning culture by recognizing and valuing all learning experiences.
  - Raises confidence in an individual's ability to learn and develop aspirations for post-secondary education.
  - Provides benefits to the learner and other stakeholders in recognizing alternative learning strategies.
  - Opens doors to under-represented groups and learners in rural communities.
- Focus on the learner:
  - Community-based adult learning partners could have a role, particularly in portfolio development.
  - Common application system could be a technical tool for PLAR services development.
  - Developing a provincial portfolio system can build a foundation for national portfolios.
  - Need to work with entry mechanisms and access points into the post-secondary system (this would support enhancing access for mature students and/or workers).

**3) What barriers or impediments does Alberta face in implementing a PLAR policy framework?**

- Limited knowledge of PLAR:
  - Need to be clear on what we are trying to achieve through the use of PLAR.
  - Not enough knowledge and understanding of the PLAR process.
  - Need to educate learners, institutions, faculty, and employers through a clear definition of PLAR.
  - Need to recognize guidelines and standards.
  - Need multi-sectoral groups, such as in Ontario and Quebec, to enhance communication, raise awareness, and promote collaboration and synergy.

- Funding and expenditures:
  - Use of full-load equivalent measure to count students may present a barrier.
  - Current funding models do not encourage post-secondary institutions to implement or enhance PLAR services.
  - Need for incentives and support for continual training of PLAR practitioners.
  - Learner fees need to be appropriate or they could deter learners from engaging or completing the PLAR process.
- Likelihood of buy-in from industry, employers, and post-secondary institutions:
  - Benefit from health fields that are currently pushing for greater acceptance and use of PLAR.
  - Manitoba's grassroots approach is an example of a process that helped to facilitate buy-in of PLAR practices.
  - Need to communicate the rationale and benefits of PLAR to enhance likelihood of buy-in.
  - Need to address quality assurance to gain support. Have *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning* standards as a foundation.
- Academic attitudes towards acceptance of PLAR:
  - Assessments based on competencies, rather than credentials, present a major shift in thinking and processes for institutions.
  - Need to shift thinking that PLAR credits are "free" and notion that learners have not "worked" for the credits.
  - Need to recognize credentials have a shelf-life and there is more value in recognizing current competencies.
  - Methods of recording PLAR credits on transcripts could limit access to future programs of study and lifelong learning.
- Diversity of post-secondary institutions:
  - Institutional diversity means processes will be different.
  - Different levels of institutional resistance to implementing PLAR.
  - Level of status-based competition between post-secondary institutions which could negatively impact their acceptance and use of PLAR.
- Communication:
  - Importance of communication between post-secondary bodies and professional bodies is important when considering acceptance of PLAR credentials within a regulated field of study.
  - Communication strategies to promote PLAR must recognize the fact that not everyone has access to computers or the internet.
- Learner awareness:
  - Need for appropriate and effective marketing and streamline processes.
  - Need to have straightforward processes which are culturally adjusted for learners (i.e. First Nation Colleges use strong foundations that are grounded in culture, self-esteem, and confidence to promote education).
  - Charge minimal fees to learners for assessments.
  - Need for mechanisms to direct potential learners, including newcomers, to PLAR services.
  - International students are challenged to receive credits for prior learning, resulting from cultural acceptance and lack of knowledge of traditional system.

- Assessment system:
  - Recognition needed among institutions, employers, provinces as well as within institutions.
  - Needs to be part of a national system to eliminate mobility and access barriers across provinces.
  - Need for consistent assessment standards.
  - Need for clear requirements for granting credentials.
  - Evaluating the success of PLAR should utilize both qualitative and quantitative methods.
- Integration:
  - Need to keep in mind that PLAR is relatively new, and recognize the real impact on current structures and processes.
  - Concerns around how to integrate inside the classroom if PLAR and non-PLAR learners are not at the same place.
  - Workplace, institution and government all need to be on the same page.
  - Need for mechanisms to facilitate sharing of best practices of PLAR processes.
  - General Education Diploma credential is insufficient. There is a need for an alternative and accepted route to recognize competencies and subject areas of strength, both by post-secondary institutions and professional bodies.
  - Need for a “Mutual Recognition Agreement”, such as the one currently being used for nursing in the northern territories government.
  - Requirement of cross-ministry coordination to ensure policies are aligned.

#### 4) Other

- ***Suggestions for increasing knowledge, understanding, and awareness of PLAR:***
  - Course outcomes are identified by institutions and are available to assist PLAR assessments.
  - Profile success stories of PLAR credential recipients in institutional newsletters.
  - Profile PLAR services in institutional calendars.
  - Build on experience on those working on PLAR.
  - Utilize/coordinate with current mentorship programs.
- ***What should be covered in the draft policy framework?***
  - Specific initiatives for funding and providing incentives for PLAR.
  - Framework should identify research and communication initiatives to enhance academic acceptance of PLAR concept.
  - Suggestions on how to communicate and publicize current PLAR activities.
  - Suggestions on how to enhance cooperation and collaboration among jurisdictions and provinces, including sharing information on best practices and agreements for portability.