

**Best Practices in
Prior Learning Assessment Recognition
(PLAR)
Final Report**

Prepared for:

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Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help of many individuals, whose contributions we would like to acknowledge.

First, thanks to the PLAR practitioners who took the time to willingly share their perspectives on PLAR through telephone interviews and provide samples of their processes and procedures.

Second, thanks to the students, who were willing to share their life and school experiences through the telephone survey.

Finally, thanks to the staff at Barrington Research Group for collecting the information and putting this handbook together:

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Best Practices in Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) Final Report

Introduction

Alberta Advanced Education and the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) required that information on PLAR at Alberta post-secondary institutions be collected and summarized in order to inform policy development in this area and to develop a coordinated prior learning assessment strategy based on current best practice. The primary objective of this research study, conducted by Barrington Research Group, Inc. (BRG) was to document best practices among Alberta's post-secondary institutions regarding prior learning assessment in order to inform policy development in this area.

The concept of best practices captures the hope that systematic comparative evaluation of different programs, or program components, will yield conclusions about which are most effective and therefore are *best*. Although the idea is attractive, substantial difficulties exist in identifying a practice as best. Comparisons can be difficult when programs have different goals, serve different populations with varying degrees of need and include different elements in implementations. It is important to be quite specific in asserting a best practice best for whom, under what conditions, for what purpose, in what context, with what evidence, using what criteria, and compared to what alternatives?¹

Initially, it did not appear that there would be enough material to develop a handbook of best practices and during early discussions with practitioners a picture of PLAR emerged as being in a developmental phase. They were reluctant to claim their work as best practices. However, once the materials were collected and reviewed, it became apparent that there was indeed extensive work being conducted in this area in Alberta, with the documentation to support it. Much of the material collected related to PLAR was obtained from post-secondary institutions' web sites and calendars. Samples were collected and are provided in the PLAR Best Practices Handbook.

To date, 34 people have been interviewed (29 institutional representatives and five students). All these individuals either work with PLAR or have direct experience with the process. They include community and private college personnel, staff at Athabasca University, and students. During the interviews with post-secondary PLAR representatives, we requested relevant documents as samples of best practice. A document review template was developed to ensure that the documents were reviewed in a standard and consistent manner to identify PLAR practices, standards, and policies and procedures. A targeted literature/ Internet search was also conducted to obtain documents as appropriate. In all, 67 documents were reviewed.

Project Methodology

Qualitative Approach: This study used a qualitative approach in order to cast as wide a net as possible to collect information about current PLAR implementation in Alberta. As a result, findings

¹ Matthison, Sandra (editor) (2004). *Encyclopedia of Evaluation*. California: Sage Publications, pp 32-32.



are not standardized but simply reflect information that the researchers were able to obtain through a variety of means. Collected data was analyzed by theme.

Study Limitation: The main study limitation is that information about PLAR in Alberta may exist which the researchers were unable to access either because an appropriate individual was not identified or contacted, or because those who did respond may not have mentioned a specific topic. As a result, the study findings should be interpreted as a broad-brush representation of PLAR today.

Data Collection Matrix (DCM): The DCM guided the development of the study's Work Plan and linked research questions and indicators with specific items to be covered in the document review and PLAR representative and student interviews. This cross-referencing system helped to keep our research focused and manageable and provided a documented common understanding of the scope of the research prior to undertaking any data collection activities. The ACAT Advisory Committee approved the matrix and a copy of the DCM is provided in Appendix 1.

Document Review: A document review template was developed which included elements such as the name, type, author, and source of the document, and where it fit within the Data Collection Matrix designed for the study. The template was designed to ensure documents were reviewed in a standard and consistent manner. A copy of the document review template is in Appendix 2.

Protocols: The PLAR Representative and Student interview protocols were developed and submitted January 14, 2005 to the ACAT Advisory Committee on PLAR for review. Feedback was collected and incorporated into the design of the tools and the final questionnaires were completed on January 31, 2005. A cover letter explaining the purpose and need for the project was drafted for distribution to the list of post-secondary PLAR interviewees. The letter was approved by ACAT and was sent electronically to 29 potential participants on the Institutional PLAR Contacts list on February 3, 2005. The process of contacting participants by telephone and/or email to schedule interviews began right away. The finalized study interview protocols are provided in Appendix 3.

Interviews: The interviews began February 7, 2005. The protocols were pilot tested during the initial interviews. Table 1 below lists the names of people who were interviewed and/or contacted for this study. During the interviews with PLAR representatives, through the use of a "snowball" technique, the names of some students who have been successful/ not successful with PLAR were obtained. Five students were sent a preliminary letter outlining the purpose of this study, and were contacted by telephone or email for an interview.

Once the interviews were underway, preliminary findings raised some questions about the extent to which there would be enough materials available for the proposed Handbook. The initial interviews were conducted with registrars and PLAR policy makers. To ensure a fuller picture of the implementation of PLAR in Alberta, the researchers expanded their contact list to include program coordinators and faculty members/ instructors with first-hand PLAR process and assessment experience. It was hoped that more documents would be obtained using this approach. In addition, it would be possible to describe PLAR procedures based on interview notes if no formal documentation was available. This new approach was successful and a number of examples of best practice were identified. The interview period was extended to March 31, 2005 to respond to this study design change.

The data gathered from the post-secondary PLAR representative and PLAR student interviews were primarily qualitative in nature. Qualitative data from the interviews, as well as data from the



review of PLAR in practice were analyzed in N-Vivo using traditional content analysis techniques. The data was grouped according to main themes and codes were determined through consultation with the Data Collection Matrix.

Report Preparation: Two reports were prepared as a result of work conducted in this study. The PLAR Best Practices Handbook was prepared based on findings of the literature review and on the opinions of practitioners and students who were interviewed during this process. The Handbook provides the following information:

1. Best Practices Study Recommendations for PLAR in Alberta
2. Glossary of Terms Related to PLAR
3. Summary of Best Practices Study Findings
4. Learners' Frequently Asked Questions
5. PLAR in Practice
6. Sample References and Databases for PLAR
7. Sample Web Resources for PLAR
8. List of PLAR Contacts in Alberta

This document is the study's final report. It provides an overview of planned study methods and a brief description of study activities. It serves as an accountability piece; the main energies of the researchers were focused on the preparation of the PLAR Best Practices Handbook which, it is hoped, will be circulated widely.

Project Summary

The focus of this study was prior learning from 'previous experience' as opposed to transfer credits from previous education. These two terms are defined below:

- **PLAR** is an assessment process that considers learning gained through experiences other than taking formal credit courses including: work, self-directed study, community work, non-credit courses, on the job training, corporate training programs or life experience.²
- **Transfer Credit** is based on successful completion of studies at an Alberta post-secondary institution. Students receive transfer credit, where appropriate, upon admission to an educational program in another Alberta post-secondary institution.

Though both types of prior learning are closely tied together, they were considered separately in this study. In addition, Foreign Student Equivalents or the assessment of the credentials of students from other countries, although related to this issue, were not included in the study.

Two different levels of PLAR implementation emerged in the discussions with respondents. They included:

- Overall institutional policies on PLAR, and
- Practical application of the PLAR process.

Sixty-two percent (18 of 29 respondents) stated their organization had PLAR policies in place and 37% (11 of 29 respondents) did not have policies in place at the time of the interview or the

² Retrieved March 17, 2005, From http://www.mch.ab.ca/programs/policies/default.php?calendar_section-21:



policies were under review. In policy statements, PLAR was defined broadly to include a wide range of non-formal learning and experience that could be assessed through this process. The actual implementation of PLAR was described differently.

Larger post-secondary institutions, such as Mount Royal College, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT), Grant MacEwan College, Red Deer College, Lethbridge Community College and Athabasca University, offer PLAR extensively to a wide range of courses and programs. Size is not the only determinant of the level of PLAR offered at institutions in Alberta; the type of program is also critical. PLAR tends to be less available in liberal arts programs than those related workplace skills.

The systems in place for implementing PLAR were described as efficient and effective by 86% (6 of 7 respondents) of practitioners interviewed at these institutions. But even in this context, 71% (5 of 7 respondents) of those interviewed felt there was still considerable work to be done to improve implementation and assessment processes. Seven (24%) of the respondents interviewed were from smaller post-secondary institutions. Of this group interviewed, 71% (5 of 7 respondents) did not feel they had the capacity to offer a full range of PLAR and 57% (4 of 7 respondents) did not feel that PLAR was worth the effort. The group did not get many requests for PLAR (2% a year) and they did not actively promote the service.

PLAR was described as not a widely accepted practice with respondent's institutions. Of the respondents interviewed, 88% (30 of 34 respondents) were strongly in favour of prior learning assessment but 72% (23 of 29 respondents) reported that PLAR was not universally accepted among staff and administrators at their post-secondary institutions. Fifty-two percent (15 of 29 respondents) reported institutional attitudes were that PLAR was a drain on resources and 62% (18 of 29 respondents) reported their personnel thought PLAR lowered academic standards.

Respondents were requested to describe best PLAR practices. Table 1 below provides information collected for the study, including the contact people, PLAR institutional highlights and comments. The table does not present a comprehensive description of PLAR activities in post-secondary institutions in Alberta but identifies discussion topics that were the focus of the interviews, presenting the perspective of personnel actively involved in either the policy or the implementation of PLAR or of students who directly experienced PLAR.



Table 1 PLAR Assessment and Review Study Interview Summary

Contact	PLAR Highlights	Comments
Susan Mackenzie, Registrar Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD)	PLAR policies have been tabled at Academic Council for the time. Challenge exams are not offered, however, studio and portfolio courses are. A student received a full semester's credit for working as a photographer in New York.	Limited interest in PLAR; 75% of students come directly from high school. Emily Carr School of Design in Vancouver is an excellent PLAR role model for ACAD.
Geoff Peruniak, Associate Professor of Psychology and Coordinator of University Certificate and Career Development Athabasca University	PLAR policies and procedures are well defined. Athabasca University is a pioneer in the area of PLAR for Universities. Being a distance educator necessitates developing course competencies.	Each discipline has its own parameters, history, and tools of assessment. It is important not to standardize what constitutes acceptable practice but allow for interpretation and flexibility. What constitutes evidence is different for every one. More research and work needed in this area.
Dr. Dietmar Kennepohl, Associate Vice President Academic Centre for Learning Accreditation Athabasca University	PLAR policies in place. Most courses can be challenged at Athabasca. Requests for PLAR on the rise. A three-credit portfolio course is offered. Looking at an undergraduate certificate in Environmental Practice. Course will have an education component plus require five years experience. Outcomes will be based on industry standards. PLAR will play a role.	Important to do PLAR the right way so the process is credible and transferable across institutions. Portfolio assessment process conducted by three faculty members. Rigorous process. Very little written in academic literature. We need to do more research.
Johnathan Hawkins, Assistant Registrar Augustana Faculty, University of Alberta	Augustana is now part of University of Alberta.	Does not offer PLAR.
Darla Devnich, Registrar Canadian University College Lacombe	No PLAR policy in place. Very few requests. Assessments done on a case-by-case basis. Described two successful PLAR examples.	It can be difficult to assess liberal arts college programs with regard to prior learning.



Table 1 (Continued) PLAR Assessment and Review Study Interview Summary

Contact	PLAR Highlights	Comments
Keith Black, Registrar The DeVry Institute of Technology	No PLAR policy in place. Conducts less PLAR than before due to growing younger student population and changes in policies. Do offer computer challenge exams.	Head office in the United States sets policies and procedures. Unlikely that PLAR will be implemented extensively.
Jane Friesen, Chair of Human Services Grand Prairie College	PLAR policies in place. Requests for PLAR are recent. Early Childhood Education and Teacher Assistant Programs discussed in detail as an area for PLAR.	Students get overwhelmed when you tell them that the onus is on them to prove their learning, but using course objectives simplifies the process. PLAR might be useful as a tool to increase enrolment.
Kathy Harper, Assistant Registrar Grande Prairie Regional College	Formal PLAR policy in place. The PLAR process is smooth and timely. Described PLAR in the Early Childhood Development, Human Services and Rehabilitation Services areas.	Some administrators see PLAR as a tuition loss. Need a champion within the institution to promote PLAR from within.
Karen Heslop, Chair Rehabilitation Practitioners Program Grant MacEwan College	Formal PLAR policies in place but not well understood and supported across the College. Described the use of PLAR in a successful Rehabilitation Practitioners Program. Has conducted PLAR at the organization level on-site.	PLAR can get a learner hooked on training and that could lead to lifelong learning. Not everyone supports PLAR as a credible process.
Stefanie Ivan, Associate Registrar Grant MacEwan College	PLAR policies in place. All programs offer PLAR (76 programs). The PLAR process is highly decentralized: content experts determine the process and this works well.	Reviewing policies in light of granting degrees might lead to changes. PLAR is important and should be put in the forefront.
Carol Theberge, Executive Director of Student Services Keyano College	Just revised PLAR policies. Working with Syncrude on a variety of courses that will include PLAR: Business Office Administration, Environmental Technicians Working on competency based course outlines.	College Staff are concerned that PLAR will reduce full time equivalencies. Personnel shortage in Fort McMurray. Had two people on staff trained in PLAR at Red River College, but they are no longer here. Do not encourage portfolios; there is no capacity to assess them.
Glenn Keeler, Registrar The King's University College	No formal PLAR policy in place. Offer limited PLAR challenge exams and award credits for practicum courses.	Deals mostly with transfer credits.
Rick Toews, Registry Officer The King's University College	Challenge exam offered for computer competency. Also a PLAR credit was awarded for non-credit sign language course.	PLAR is not requested that frequently.



Table 1 (Continued) PLAR Assessment and Review Study Interview Summary

Contact	PLAR Highlights	Comments
Charlene Bonar, Acting Registrar Lakeland College	Formal PLAR policies and processes. Three PLAR programs discussed: Personal Support Aid, Petroleum Industry Certificate of Training and Office Administration.	Industry and the college recognized the need to validate on-the-job training and work experience. Worked with industry; the College developed a self- assessment instrument using comprehensive course outlines agreed upon credentials and validators.
Sue Huffman, Curriculum Consultant Lethbridge Community College	Comprehensive PLAR policies in place. Technically most programs can include PLAR but in reality not all have the capacity to do so. Three programs described that include PLAR: Early Childhood Education, Rehabilitation Studies, Wildlife Enforcement Officer.	Has recently upgraded the website to include clear definition of PLAR and the process involved in challenging for credit.
Shelly Rennie, Records Clerk, Registrars Office Medicine Hat College	PLAR Policies are in place. Learner can challenge most courses in theory but in reality only a few are requested. PLAR process works smoothly and quickly.	PLAR is a perk to offer the students.
Elaine May, Collaboration Articulation Administrator Mount Royal College (MRC)	Formal PLAR policies and administrative processes in place. All programs can be challenged through PLAR but the limit is 2 courses per discipline. Outcome based courses at MRC enable the process.	The system works smoothly and fairly quickly. The administrator facilitates the process, faculty assess the learning and the records clerk conducts the clerical aspect. If MRC moves to university status, the PLAR system may need to change.
Marion McGuire, Program Director, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Research Project, Faculty of Health and Community Studies Mount Royal College (MRC)	Policies in place. MRC has a research program to develop processes to train nurses, which involves PLAR. The Nursing Program is based on competencies, clinical practice and demonstrating performance.	Faculty willing to do assessments. Difficult to develop an assessment process for the first time. University level courses must assess/ demonstrate the appropriate depth of knowledge or critical level of thinking.
Don Yurchuk, Registrar and Dean of Admissions Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT)	Formal PLAR policies in place. PLAR is included the NAIT Business Plan. PLAR offerings are extensive. The flexible process allows different students to be assessed by different processes, even within the same program.	PLAR should be widely accessible to all students interested and free of charge.
Neil Lang, I.S.P. Bachelors of Applied Info Systems Tech Internship Coordinator and Computer Systems Technology Assistant Program Chair Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT)	Formal PLAR policies in place. Extensive PLAR offerings.	A problem with computing and other high tech courses is that work experience has to be fairly recent. Programming prior to 2000 or even 2003 would not really cut it, except perhaps an Introduction to Programming Course.



Table 1 (Continued) PLAR Assessment and Review Study Interview Summary

Contact	PLAR Highlights	Comments
Shelley Wilkinson, Coordinator of Human Services Programs, Director of Teacher Assistance Program, Northern Lakes College	PLAR Policies in place. Discussed Teachers Assistance Program. More PLAR in the part-time area. Offer challenge exams and portfolio assessments for practicums.	Working to improve the standards.
Paula Carson, Coordinator, University Studies, Northern Lakes College	Currently working on the PLAR policies. PLAR available for some practicum courses in Social Work, Practical Nurse practicum, Teaching Assistance Program, Forestry Technician Program.	The majority of learners in the Teaching Assistant Program are low income, single parents with dependents, often aged 35 years and older. PLAR is very important to this group to build self-esteem and save them time and money to obtain accreditation.
Linda Cust, Associate Registrar, Student Services and Records Olds College	A formal PLAR policy and process are in place. Offer a basic computer Course with a PLAR test in the first four days of class. If students pass, tuition is returned and credit is granted.	Institutions need to sort out their PLAR processes systems are different across the province.
Bev Biggeman, Coordinator of Learning Enhancement Centre, Olds College	A formal PLAR policy and process are in place. Developed a system of course competencies into an electronic database. Competencies broken down into units then broken down further into number of hours of instruction all connected to the work place.	Some programs are easier than others to conduct PLAR. Course competencies need to be well defined and connected to work skills.
Bev Moghrabi, Registrar Manager Student Services Portage College, Lac La Biche	Not all programs can grant PLAR. Pre-hospital Care and Education Assistant Programs now offer PLAR, can receive credit towards the practicum. Students requested to fill out a skills competency resume about learning they are demonstrating.	Small number of PLAR requests. There are time constraints involved in assessing for short-term courses. Refer students to Northern Lights College and Athabasca University because they have portfolio courses.
Louise Jewkowica, Assessment Coordinator, Red Deer College	Formal PLAR policy in place. Learning Contracts described as a tool for PLAR. Introduction to Computers course is modularized and some of the modules can be assessed by PLAR.	The College mindset is to be in favour of PLAR but the economic reality is that there are other financial priorities. Sees PLAR as an excellent recruitment and retention strategy.
Gwen Nienkirchen, Registrar, Rocky Mountain College	Call PLAR credit for Learning under experience. Not many requests. PLAR in Human Services areas such as child and youth care. Volunteering with a daycare centre could serve as field education component for a practicum.	Students value the fact that previous experience is validated and recognized.

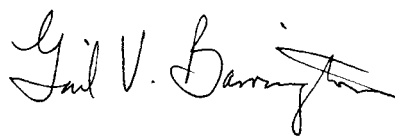


Table 1 (Continued) PLAR Assessment and Review Study Interview Summary

Contact	PLAR Highlights	Comments
Dr. Bob O'Reilly, Vice-President, Academic and Dean, St. Mary's University College	No PLAR policy in place. Conducts very little PLAR. Has a competency test for computers.	Puts the institution to great expense. Intensive work to write an exam. PLAR is not economically feasible.
Amanda Roberts, Supervisor of PLAR Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT)	PLAR policies in place. In theory learner can request PLAR in any program offered. Some Departments do not support PLAR and see it as a losing venture, reducing FTEs. SAIT received training from Red River College, Manitoba, in portfolio assessment.	Efficient system in place should take three to five business days unless there is some unforeseen issue. Like to see an Alberta PLAR plan with a CD describing institutional policies for distribution to learners.
Joan Fraser, Assistant Registrar University of Alberta Edmonton	Formal PLAR policy unclear. Has the capacity for offering challenge exams. PLAR also available to individuals in the Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) PLAR can be used for advanced standing toward this certificate. Up to 50 of the 100 elective credit hours available.	PLAR does not play a significant role at the University at this time.

Thank You

Barrington Research Group, Inc. has appreciated the opportunity to be involved in this important project documenting best practices in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in Alberta. If you have any questions regarding either this document or the PLAR Best Practices Handbook, please feel free to contact me at gbarrington@barringtonresearchgrp.com or at (403) 289-2221.



Gail V. Barrington, PhD, CMC
President and Project Director



Appendix 1 Data Collection Matrix



Data Collection Matrix

The Data Collection Matrix (DCM) presented below summarizes the approach planned to determine Best Practices in Prior Learning Assessment. The DCM is used to guide the development of the Work Plan and to link research questions/ indicators with specific items to be covered in the document review and PLA representative and student interviews. This cross-referencing keeps our research focused and manageable so that we use valuable resources to collect the most pertinent information. The DCM provides a documented common understanding of the scope of the research prior to undertaking any data collection activities.

Table 2 Best Practices in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLA) Data Collection Matrix

Evaluation Objectives		Evaluation Questions	Methods of Data Collection
Background to PLAR	1.1 To determine how Alberta post-secondary institutions define PLAR.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What terminology is used by post-secondary institutions in reference to PLAR? b. Do post-secondary institutions refer to transfer credit as PLAR? 	Interviews with Post-Secondary PLAR Representatives Document Review
	1.2 To understand the PLAR policies of post-secondary institutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What policies do post-secondary institutions have in place regarding PLAR? 	Interviews with Post-Secondary PLAR Representatives Document Review
PLAR Implementation	2.1 To determine how post-secondary institutions implement the PLAR process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Is PLAR administered on a course-by-course or program basis? b. Which programs/ faculties most often have a PLAR component? c. What types of limits do institutions put on PLAR credit? d. How is PLAR credit recorded? e. What is the policy of instructions regarding PLAR transfer credits? f. What factors need to be present to increase access/ recognition for individuals with PLAR? 	Interviews with Post-Secondary PLAR Representatives Document Review
	2.2 To examine staffing related to PLAR at post-secondary institutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How do post-secondary institutions structure the PLAR coordinator position? b. What type of training does this coordinator receive? c. What sort of training or tools are available to PLAR assessors? d. Do PLAR assessors receive honoraria or in-kind recognition? e. How is PLAR promoted amongst post-secondary faculty? 	Interviews with Post-Secondary PLAR Representatives Document Review
	2.3 To determine future potential for PLAR.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What evidence exists to suggest that the demand for PLAR will increase/ decrease? 	Interviews with Post-Secondary PLAR Representatives Document Review



Evaluation Objectives		Evaluation Questions	Methods of Data Collection
Intended and Unintended Results	3.1 To determine the impact of PLAR on learners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How has PLAR increased educational access for learners? b. To what extent has PLAR provided a path for further employment for learners? c. To what extent has PLAR changed learners' career directions? 	<p>Interviews with Post-Secondary PLAR Representatives</p> <p>Interviews with PLAR students</p>
	3.2 To determine the impact of PLAR on post-secondary institutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How has PLAR affected course and program registration? b. What percentage of institutions' PLAR activity involves working with employers? c. To what extent are PLAR credits transferable across programs, institutions, and regions? d. What other impacts has PLAR had on post-secondary institutions? 	<p>Interviews with Post-Secondary PLAR Representatives</p> <p>Document Review</p>
	3.3 To determine PLAR best practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. What best practices could be shared from other PLAR programs across Alberta? b. Given changes in the labour market, how can PLAR be transformed to better serve Alberta needs? 	<p>Interviews with Post-Secondary PLAR Representatives</p> <p>Interviews with PLAR students</p> <p>Document Review</p>



Appendix 2 Document Review Template



**Best Practices in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)
Document Review Template**

Document Details:

Code number:	
Title:	
Author:	
Publishing Information:	
Document Reviewed By:	
Date Reviewed:	

Type of Document:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Post-secondary institution PLAR policy manual
<input type="checkbox"/>	Internal post-secondary institution forms
<input type="checkbox"/>	Internal post-secondary institution evaluations
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other types of documents

Items Addressed in the Document:

1. Background to PLAR

- Post-Secondary institutions definition of PLAR**

- Post-secondary institutions policies in place regarding PLAR**

2. Post-secondary institutions implementation of PLAR

- PLAR implemented on course by course or program basis**



PLAR credit transcribing/transfer

Ways to increase access/recognition to individuals with PLAR

PLAR staffing

Future potential for PLAR

3. Intended and Unintended Results

Effect of PLAR on learners' educational access

Effect of PLAR on learners' employment/career directions



Effect of PLAR on learners' employment/career directions



Appendix 3 Interview Protocols





Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer

Best Practices in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Invitation to Participate

The Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT), an independent committee reporting to the Minister of Advanced Education, is developing a **prior learning assessment and recognition strategy**. Right now these assessment processes vary considerably across the Province and are not well understood. Barrington Research Group in Calgary has been contracted by the Council to prepare a PLAR Best Practices Handbook by talking with current practitioners and students about their experience in this area, and by collecting and documenting current PLAR best practices in Alberta's post-secondary institutions.

Your name was identified by ACAT as someone who could provide some information about the implementation of PLAR at your institution. A representative from Barrington Research Group (BRG) in Calgary will contact you regarding your participation in this important study and to arrange a telephone interview time that works with your schedule. The interview will be conducted by Colleen McCracken, a Researcher at BRG, and should take between 30 to 45 minutes. We will be happy to provide a copy of the interview guide in advance if you wish to review it before your telephone interview.

The Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer has approved this research study. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, *please contact Marilyn Patton, Executive Officer, ACAT*, at Marilyn.Patton@gov.ab.ca or (780) 422-9021.

If you have any questions regarding this survey or the way it is conducted, please contact Dr. Gail Barrington (Project Manager) at info@barringtonresearchgrp.com or (403) 289-2221 or Colleen McCracken (Researcher) at cmccracken@barringtonresearchgrp.com or (403) 289-2221.

Thank you very much for considering our request,

Lucille Walter, Chair
Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer





Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer

Best Practices in Prior Learning Assessment and Review (PLAR) PLAR Practitioner Interview

Hello, my name is Colleen McCracken. I am calling from Barrington Research Group in Calgary. We contacted you earlier about the Alberta Advanced Education / Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) Prior Learning Assessment Best Practices Project. Did you receive the information we sent you? Can we conduct your interview now? I appreciate your taking the time to talk about your experiences with PLAR at your institution. The interview is fairly detailed and should take between 30 to 45 minutes. Can we begin? *[If yes, continue. If no...]* Can we schedule a better time to speak?

Callback Time: _____

Please keep in mind that your participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions that you choose not to, and that you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time. All opinions that you provide will remain confidential because the results will be reported in summary fashion only. Alberta Advanced Education Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer has approved this research study. If you have further questions about this research, please contact **Marilyn Patton, Executive Officer, ACAT**, at Marilyn.Patton@gov.ab.ca or (780) 422-9021 or **Dr. Gail Barrington (Research Director)** at info@barringtonresearchgrp.com or (403) 289-2221.

Let's start by confirming your contact details in case I need to call you back to clarify or confirm any of the material we discuss today:

Name:	
Date:	
Institution & Department:	
Position:	
Length of time in position:	
Length of involvement with PLAR at your institution? Elsewhere?	

(For Researcher Only)

- Has provided student names and phone numbers
- Has offered to provide documents for the manual



1.0 Definition of PLAR

1.1 How does your institution define PLAR?

1.2 What kinds of courses, credentials, activities, experiences or products are included in this definition?

Probe:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> University courses | <input type="checkbox"/> Continuing education/extension certificates/courses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public college courses | <input type="checkbox"/> Technical institution courses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Practical training/work experience | <input type="checkbox"/> Private institution courses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Workshops | <input type="checkbox"/> Correspondence study |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer activities | <input type="checkbox"/> Hobbies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Challenge examinations | <input type="checkbox"/> Standardized tests (e.g., TESOL) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Portfolio assessments | <input type="checkbox"/> Travel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Published papers | <input type="checkbox"/> Transfer credits |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Foreign student equivalent | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional examinations (e.g., CA) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (describe) | |

2.0 PLAR Policy & Implementation

2.1 What policies or guidelines does your institution have in place regarding PLAR?

Probe:

- Are these policies formal / informal?
- Are policies written on an institution or department basis?

2.2 How do learners find out about PLAR and access PLAR information?

Probe:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Word-of-mouth | <input type="checkbox"/> Instructors/professors |
| <input type="checkbox"/> College/university calendar | <input type="checkbox"/> Newsletters |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Website | <input type="checkbox"/> Student union |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Counseling office | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (describe) |



2.3 Which methods have you found to be the most effective in informing learners about PLAR?

2.4 What kinds of PLAR-related supports or other materials are available to clients wanting to access PLAR at your institution?

Probe:

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Written material | <input type="checkbox"/> | Counseling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Courses | <input type="checkbox"/> | Other (describe) |

2.5 Which programs or faculties at your institution have a PLAR component?

2.6 Approximately what percent of learners in your institution receive PLAR-related credit?

2.7 How are PLAR credits awarded at your institution?

Probe:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> On a course-by-course basis | <input type="checkbox"/> On a program by program |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A block of credits awarded into a program | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (examples?) |

2.8 How are PLAR credits recorded at your institution?

Probe:

- No special indicator
- Appears as a regular college/university course offered
- Appears as advanced/transfer credits with PLA identifiers
- Appears as advanced/transfer credits without PLA identifiers
- Other (examples?)

2.9 Does your institution limit the amount of PLAR credits awarded in any way?

2.10 What is your institution's policy regarding PLAR transfer credits to/ from another institution?



2.11 How can learners requesting PLAR credit have better access to your institution?

2.12 How can recognition for learners receiving PLAR credit be increased at your institution?

3.0 Staffing for PLAR

3.1 Who is responsible for coordinating PLAR at your institution? Who else is involved?

Probe:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> A coordinator who oversees all assessments | <input type="checkbox"/> A department/faculty head |
| <input type="checkbox"/> A professor within a department/faculty | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (examples?) |

3.2 [If there is a Coordinator position...] In what administrative unit is the Coordinator position located?

3.3 What type of training do the Coordinator / Assessors/ other staff receive regarding the implementation of PLAR? What materials are used to support that training?

3.4 Do staff who implement PLAR receive any recognition for their role?

Probe:

- Considered part of their current job description
- Receive honoraria,
- In-kind recognition or
- Other incentives (describe)

3.5 How aware are faculty members at your institution about PLAR as an option for learners?

3.6 How is PLAR promoted among the faculty at your institution?

- Drawbacks?



4.0 Impact of PLAR on Institution

4.1 Has PLAR had any impact on course or program registration at your institution?

4.2 Do you have any contact with employers because of your work with PLAR?

Probe:

What kind of contact? How much?

4.3 Has using PLAR resulted in any benefits to your institutions?

Probe:

- Any drawbacks or problems?
- Other impacts (e.g., in terms of time, funding)?
- Surprises?
- Side effects?

5.0 Impact of PLAR on Learners

5.1 Have you conducted any client evaluations of PLAR? If so, what were the results?

5.2 Do you think PLAR has increased educational access for learners?

Probe:

Why or why not? Explain.

5.3 Has PLAR had an impact on learners' employment/ career direction?

Probe:

- Describe those impacts.
- Any benefits?



6.0 Future Potential of PLAR

6.1 Do you think that the demand for PLAR will increase or decrease over the next five years?

Probe:

What evidence supports your view?

6.2 Given the changing labour market, what recommendations can you make for the future development of PLAR in Alberta?

6.3 In your opinion, what conditions need to be present in a post-secondary institution to foster the use of PLAR in helping students reach their education goal?

7.0 Best Practices in PLAR

7.1 What do you think constitutes “best practice” in PLAR?

7.2 At your institution, what aspects of PLAR do you think are done particularly well?

7.3 Can you share any written material on your PLAR policies or practices for inclusion in the Best Practices Handbook we are preparing?

Probe:

- What documents?
- Means of obtaining copies?
- Other communications required?



7.4 Would you consider acting as a resource contact and have your name listed in the Handbook?

7.5 Can you identify one or two learners from your institution students, who have either benefited from PLAR or who found it to be a barrier to their education / career, whom we could contact for an interview?

Probe:

- Would you be willing to contact them to see if they will participate in our study?
- Communications required to complete this identification process.

7.6 Can I call you back to confirm, clarify or add to the information collected today if the need arises?

Probe:

- Let me give you my contact number in case you want to call back with any additional thoughts later.

Thank you very much for participating in this study!





Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer

Best Practices in Prior Learning Assessment and Review (PLAR) PLAR Student Interview

Hello, my name is Colleen McCracken and I am calling from Barrington Research Group in Calgary. We are doing a study for Alberta Advanced Education on **prior learning assessment** and your name was provided to us by *(name)*_____ at *(institution)*_____ as someone who might be able to share their experience with us. This survey should take about 10 minutes.

Do you have time to complete this survey now? *[If yes, continue. If not...]* When can I call back?

Callback Time: _____

Before we begin, let me assure you that the opinions you provide will be kept confidential and will only be reported in summary form with no identifying facts attached. I can provide you with more information about the *Freedom of information and Protection of Privacy Act* or a contact name about this study if you would like. If you are not able to answer a particular question, let me know and we will go on to the next one. Remember that you have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Do you have any questions about this study?

Let's start with your contact details.

Your Contact Information

In order to compare your results with others surveyed, could you please tell me your...

Name:	
Date:	
Program:	
Institution	
Location:	



1.0 Experience with PLAR

1.1 Can you tell me about your request for prior learning and assessment at _____ institution?

Probe:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> When | <input type="checkbox"/> What faculty/ program |
| <input type="checkbox"/> What was the request? | <input type="checkbox"/> Number of courses or credits? |

1.2 Please describe your experience.

1.3 What was the result of your request?

Probe:

- Did you receive credits?
- Did you apply these credits to your program?

1.4 Overall, was this a positive or a negative experience?

Probe:

- Were there any benefits?
- Any problems?
- Were you satisfied?

1.5 Did your experience with PLAR help you move ahead in/ into your program of choice? Why or why not?

1.6 Did your experience with PLAR help you move ahead on the path to your chosen career? Why or why not?

Probe:

- Did your experience with PLAR have an impact on any career decisions you have made since?
- Was your continued employment/ future advancement dependent on your achieving a credential?
- Did access to PLAR make it more feasible to achieve this credential?



1.7 Do you have any suggestions for improving PLAR?

1.8 Are you working or at school now?

Probe:

Is it in a related field?

Can I give you my contact number in case you want to call back with any additional thoughts later?

Thank you for participating in this study!

