

**THE FUNDAMENTALS OF HEALTH CARE DIPLOMA AT
MICHENER INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION:
A DECISION-ORIENTED STUDY TO BUILD AN
EVIDENCE-BASED PLAR MODEL**

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Final Report submitted March 3, 2023

This report was produced as part of a project funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), with financial support from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is the outcome of a collaboration between the Diversity Institute and the Michener Institute of Education (MIE) at UHN. It responds to an expressed need to provide PLAR opportunities in relation to a new diploma program at MIE - Fundamentals of Health Care. The program is currently a two-year undergraduate diploma to facilitate entry into 1) the workforce (so ensuring the basics to enter unregulated positions in the labour market) and 2) further study (so ensuring the necessary subject competencies and academic literacies to succeed in academia).

There are several rationales for the development of this diploma with PLAR now:

- Changes in the labour market; the emergence of new currently unregulated labour market roles and functions in which individuals may have experience but require further formal development;
- People wanting to re-enter the health care sector after an absence;
- Internationally educated health care professionals seeking entry to the Canadian labour market;
- Working adults with qualifications who want a career change and/or who wish to enter the health care sector.

The hypothesis is that many students drawn from the categories above could benefit from PLAR to access and accelerate progress through the diploma.

Aim and Objectives

- To offer practical advice to help MIE to design and implement a PLAR process for the Fundamentals of Health Care diploma program (with possible generalizations to other MIE programs in due course)
 - To source, select and assess/evaluate international PLAR and related practices (general and health sciences/health care profession specific);
 - To address all stages of PLAR processes in terms of how they work and what is necessary to implement them;
 - To address PLAR in relation to the competencies/learning outcomes of the program and courses;
 - To identify PLAR practices that work for specific groups of less traditional learners.
- To create an evidence based PLAR model for MIE, incrementally, by:
 - Constructing a shared language and orientation to PLAR;
 - Providing theoretical lenses through which to understand PLAR with special reference to knowledge domains;
 - Raising evidence-based challenges, pitfalls, and cautionary tales;
 - Addressing not only ‘what’ works, but ‘why’ it works, and therefore ‘what could’ work in the MIE context.

Methodology

As longstanding researchers and practitioners in the PLAR field, we were already familiar with the contours of PLAR practices internationally, indeed had a major hand in constructing and researching some of them. We were less familiar with the detail of, and issues raised by, PLAR in the Applied Health Sciences and health care professions. Moreover, our knowledge of the field needed updating.

We undertook a local and international scan to confirm our existing knowledge, and to locate recent developments. This involved a literature search using the following databases: Academic Search Complete; British Education Index; ERIC; Medline; Pubmed; CINAHL; Google Scholar. Resulting literature (academic publications, research reports, and grey literature) was catalogued and organised by ‘PLAR’ + ‘profession’ and/or ‘target groups’ and/or ‘activities associated with PLAR’ (credit transfer, transcript evaluation, bridging etc.,). Based on our own prior knowledge, examples were selected to illustrate interesting and innovative practices.

In addition to the literature search, we conducted web research on the PLAR processes and methods used by health profession regulatory bodies in Canada. Starting with an [Ontario government list of regulated health professions](#), we consulted with Dr. Joy Van Kleef, a PLAR specialist who has worked with many regulatory bodies in Ontario and elsewhere, to identify those professions known to be PLAR active. These included: Chiropody, Dietetics, Midwifery, Naturopathy, Opticianry, Optometry and Physiotherapy. For those professions, we researched PLAR processes in other provinces, as well as Ontario (and internationally where we could). For the remaining professions, we looked at PLAR activities of Ontario colleges only.

Structure of the Report

The report is structured to meet the aims and objectives above. As mentioned, it is a decision-oriented study to build an evidence-based PLAR model for MIE. There are four main sections with subsections. Each section ends on a practical note with *Considerations for Decision Making and Model Building for PLAR at MIE*.

An *Orientation to PLAR* section addresses background and historical aspects of PLAR and introduces some of the complexities. The following section moves to some important issues of *Knowledge, Authority, Power, Qualifications, and Different Styles and Types of Teaching and Learning* as they inhere in PLAR, with ramifications for MIE. *PLAR and the Michener Diploma* moves the discussion to how best to integrate PLAR into the new and flexible diploma program. Some helpful design guidelines are presented. The next section takes a deep dive into *The Main PLAR Activities* providing practical exemplars pertaining to the main functions and roles in PLAR across ‘identification’, ‘documentation’, ‘assessment,’ and ‘certification’. In the concluding *Summary and Recommendations*, we provide an overview of considerations drawn from the PLAR evidence and outline some steps and resources for MIE in the move towards implementation.

2. ORIENTATION TO PLAR

Terminology

PLAR is used in Canada and is therefore the generic term in this report. When directly quoting practices in other jurisdictions the local acronym will be used. A selection of terms is presented in Box 1 (drawing from Duvekot, n.d; Aggarwal, 2015, p.5)

Box 1. Different terms and acronyms used to describe RPL internationally:

- APEL - Assessment of prior experiential learning (some contexts in the United Kingdom)
- APCL – Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (some contexts in the United Kingdom)
- APL - Assessment of prior learning (some contexts in the United Kingdom and New Zealand)
- PAL – Prior Assessed Learning (USA Dietetics)
- PLA - Prior Learning Assessment (USA)
- RAC - Recognition of acquired competences (Quebec, Belgium)
- RCC - Recognition of current competences (some contexts in Australia)
- RL – Recognition of Learning (Finland, particularly in Higher Education)
- RNFIL - Recognition of non-formal and informal learning (used in OECD publications)
- RVA - Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of non-formal and informal learning (used in UNESCO publications)
- RVCC - Recognition, validation, and certification of competences (Portugal and some contexts in Brazil)
- VAE – Validation des acquis de l’expérience (France, French speaking countries in Africa, Switzerland)
- VPL - Validation of Prior Learning (some European countries and organisations such as the vplbiennale.com)
- VNFIL - Validation of non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP and the European Training Foundation)

Definitions

All the terms outlined above encompass similar processes, related to making visible and providing value to the knowledge and skills that individuals have. Two main dimensions can be discerned. One that focuses on the action being carried out - accreditation, assessment, recognition, or validation. The other comprising the learning (acquired competences, prior skills, prior knowledge, learning outcomes or current competences) and another that modifies the nature of that learning (experiential, prior, non-formal, informal). The combination of these different terms and expressions results in a large variety of possible definitions.¹

CAPLA (Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment) offers the following definition:

Prior learning assessment and recognition defines processes that allow individuals to identify, document, have assessed and gain recognition for their prior learning. The

¹ See Villalba-García for a detailed exposition

learning may be formal, informal, non-formal, or experiential. The context of the learning is not key to the process as the focus is on the learning. PLAR processes can be undertaken for several purposes, including self-knowledge, credit or advanced standing at an academic institution, for employment, licensure, career planning or recruitment. ([CAPLA, 2023](#))

We have adopted the CAPLA definition for the purposes of this report. In the post-secondary context of this study, the CAPLA wording adds emphasis to the point that PLAR can be used either for access, credit or advanced standing. That is, applicants may be granted PLAR credits for specific courses or blocks of elective credits. Alternatively, they may have courses waived, with the requirement to take other courses in lieu. In addition, Wihak (2007) discussed the use of PLAR for access and admission to programs for mature students lacking formal qualifications.

Brief History of PLAR

Development in North America

The beginning of instruction shall be made with the experience learners already have ... this experience and the capacities that have been developed during its course provide the starting point for all further learning (Dewey, 1938)

In the English-speaking world, PLAR emerged as an educational practice in the United States after World War II (Keeton, 2000). What started as an experimental pilot project at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey has matured into an established 'movement', complete with theory, communities of practice, and quality standards. A key player in the US was and still is the the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning ([CAEL](#)). Driven by demographic and economic factors, concern for diversity, social justice, and equity,² technological changes in the workplaces, and increasing globalization, PLAR blossomed internationally.

In Canada, Blower's (2000) article provides information on early provincial government initiatives. Quebec was the first Canadian jurisdiction to implement PLAR on a province-wide basis at the community college level, followed sequentially by initiatives in British Columbia (BC), Ontario, Alberta, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. According to Blower, BC adopted the most extensive PLAR system, establishing the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology to support its PLAR initiatives, which represented 'a model of best practices for all of Canada.' (p. 87). In addition, B.C., Ontario, and Quebec adopted PLAR policies for adult learners in secondary schools.

CMEC (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada) commissioned a report (Kennedy, 2003) updating Blower's work with a snapshot overview of PLAR public policies and programs for each of Canada's provinces, as well as information on PLAR implementation at colleges and universities. By 2003, Manitoba and Saskatchewan had joined the list of provinces with

² The majority of PLAR research involves diverse groups recognized by MIE's DIVE. For example, most of the South African PLAR research grew from post-apartheid policy to redress racial disadvantage. Early PLAR research noted that women comprised the majority of PLAR candidates (c.f. Aarts et al., 1999) and early PLAR champions in the academic world wrote from explicitly feminist and anti-racists standpoints (c.f. Michelson, 1999).

developed PLAR policies. Although Kennedy did not identify a specific policy in PEI, the province was described as supporting PLAR ‘in principle’. By 2008, however, Morrison et al. were of the opinion that PLAR development was stagnating in Canada, despite the continued need and economic arguments.

Because education is a provincial responsibility in Canada, the role of the Federal Government in PLAR has been restricted (Blower, 2000). Given its responsibility for employment insurance and immigration, however, the Federal Government became interested in the potential of PLAR to assist with re-skilling of displaced workers and the integration of immigrants into the labour force. Through initiatives from the now defunct Canadian Labour Force Development Board and Human Resources & Skills Development, the Federal level actively promoted PLAR and supported demonstration and research projects including major follow-up surveys of learners (Aarts et al., 1999; Aarts et al., 2003), policy think pieces (e.g., Bloom & Grant, 2001)) and demonstration projects concerning different applications of PLAR (Anonymous, 2004). The Federal Government continues to support PLAR initiatives to assist immigrant Internationally Education Professionals (IEPs), particularly in the health professions, to gain access to regulated professions.

Development in the U.K.

The officially accepted view is that the development of PLAR in the U.K. originated in a series of study trips to the US. A U.K. version of CAEL – the Learning from Experience Trust – was established in the early 1990s, with accompanying pilot projects. The main driver was to address unequal participation in further and higher education. There was an emphasis on access to professional education, to create a more representative labour force in teaching, social work, and so on.

After a series of ebbs and flows, gains in prominence and recessions, largely led by the economic fortunes of the country (see Young, in Andersson & Harris, 2006) the situation now is that every higher education institution in the U.K. is required to have an RPL and a credit transfer policy (they may be combined). Scotland is by far the most advanced of the nation states. There are many reasons for this, but one is that PLAR practitioners have attained more senior positions over time and now exert greater influence on the qualifications and credit landscape more broadly. A selection of Scottish institutional policies is footnoted.³ Box 2 below shows other resources of use to MIE.

Rest of world

The introduction of competence-based education and national and transnational qualifications frameworks in the 1990s accelerated the development of PLAR. There was much policy borrowing. Initially, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa adopted and adapted

³ www.dundee.ac.uk/academic/apel.htm
www.gcu.ac.uk/lead/leadthemes/wideningparticipationandprogression/recognitionofpriorlearning
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/EdinburghNapierRoss_RPL.pdf
www.hw.ac.uk/registry/resources/aplguidancenotes.pdf
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/OUScotland_RPL.pdf
www.st-andrews.ac.uk/staff/policy/tlac/transfer/priorlearning/
www.quality.stir.ac.uk/ac-policy/Recognition.php

approaches from National Vocational Qualifications in England. Nowadays, there is hardly any country in the world that does not have a qualification or credit framework, and hardly any country that is not experimenting with PLAR, with greater or lesser degrees of success (even Bhutan!).

Box 2. RPL in Scotland – Resources, publications, and research

RPL National Framework for Scottish Higher Education, firmly locates RPL within broader developments linked to a more flexible, accessible curriculum, enabling greater participation in HE by learners from a wide range of backgrounds (November 2022)

Guidelines to support the university sector in Scotland develop and implement streamlined, approaches to RPL support and assessment (2014)

Collection of Recognition of Prior Learning case studies - 25 studies from 11 countries showcasing a rich variety of RPL initiatives and providing an important resource for practitioners, institutions and countries looking to introduce, develop, or expand practice and policies relating to RPL (2014) All available at

<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/development-projects/recognition-of-prior-learning>

Quality Assurance in PLAR

The issue of quality assurance in PLAR has been central since the 1990s (Van Kleef et al., 2007). The globalization of PLAR has had the effect of streamlining and standardizing practices according to common principles and guidelines, usually developed collaboratively by practitioners themselves. However, although much has been published on PLAR, and despite a growing number of (inter)national guidelines, there is still ‘no unified repository of RPL tools’ (Israel, 2011, p.2). Rather, there are practices that work well in specific contexts usually following a common series of stages. Currently, formulations of standards that are widely used include:

[CAEL Ten Standards for Assessing Learning](#) (CAEL, 2023)

[European Guidelines for Validating Nonformal and Informal Learning](#) (CEDEFOP, 2015)

[UNESCO Guidelines on the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Non-formal and Informal Learning](#) (UNESCO, 2012)

CAPLA [Quality Assurance for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Canada](#) (CAPLA, 2015)

In this report, we draw from these sources as appropriate in relation to the challenges MIE faces.

Steps in the PLAR Process

CAPLA lays out nine principles to guide quality PLAR practice: Accessible, Consistent, Fair, Respectful, Valid, Flexible, Rigorous, Transparent, and Professionally Supported. These principles will need to be incorporated in all aspects of MIE’s PLAR process.

To structure this report, we have adopted the steps outlined in the European VNFIL (Validation of Nonformal and Informal Learning) guidelines (CEDEFOP, 2015), which place

more emphasis on the very important tasks of providing information, advice, and guidance to candidates throughout the process than CAPLA (2015) does. These steps were also used in the recent [Recognition of Prior Learning Framework for Scotland](#), which incorporates current best practices from around the world.

- **Identification** of an individual's learning...acquired through non-formal and informal learning.
- **Documentation** of an individual's learning...acquired through non-formal and informal learning.
- **Assessment** of an individual's learning...acquired through non-formal and informal learning.
- **Certification** of the results of the assessment of an individual's learning outcomes acquired through non-formal and informal learning in the form of a qualification, or credits leading to a qualification, or in another form, as appropriate.

For MIE, the challenge is how the institution will accomplish each of these steps. Our report provides examples from Canada/US and internationally on how MIE might approach each step, bearing in mind that no two contexts are the same when it comes to PLAR.

Complexities of PLAR

Useful as they are, all guidelines gloss over some of the complexities of PLAR which scholarly research (including our own) has uncovered. Because there are important issues that MIE will need to recognize and address in developing a successful PLAR approach, we address those first as they add depth and efficacy to analysis and choices in the longer term.

Commentators in the 1990s began to critique how the advent of qualification frameworks was reconfiguring approaches to PLAR, and thus began attempts to theorize and better understand a practice that had hitherto been viewed as unproblematically 'progressive'. These changes were frequently undertaken by typologizing PLAR.

Typologies of PLAR

The first typology (a dyad, actually) was produced by Butterworth (1992) and consisted of 'credit exchange' and 'developmental' types of PLAR. The former refers to approaches that involve the *direct matching* of prior learning to outcomes followed by assessment. These approaches were criticized for their instrumentalism. The second in the dyad involves building on prior learning through *reflection* and other support activities prior to assessment; it is more of a learning and learner-centred model.

Harris (1999) extended the dyad into a typology that reflected education debates in South Africa at the time i.e., after the first democratic elections in 1994. Drawing on the four villages of experiential learning⁴ (Weil & McGill, 1990) and on Butterworth (1992), Harris presented four models of PLAR each directed to particular social purposes and implemented through varying procedures in different contexts:

⁴ The four "villages" of experiential learning (EL) are (1) assessment and accreditation of prior learning; (2) EL as the basis for change in postsecondary institutions; (3) EL as the basis for community action and social change; and (4) EL as a medium for personal growth and development.

- Her first model ‘Procrustean RPL’⁵ as the name suggests, only recognises prior learning that fits a certain template, be that a bed or a standard/competence – it is instrumental (as in Butterworth’s credit exchange model).
- Her second model ‘Learning and Development RPL’ is a supported and mediated form of RPL through which candidates learn as they are assessed – it is a model of orientation and induction to formal education as well as recognition (as in Butterworth’s developmental model).
- The third model ‘Radical RPL’ seeks to foreground ‘subjugated’ knowledge and learning from experience – it responds to particular readings of social ‘transformation’ in the South African context at the time.
- Her final model ‘Trojan Horse RPL’ seeks to bring prior knowledge/learning into critical dialogue with formal knowledge and ways of knowing to the benefit of both – it is dialogical.

There are several similar typologies that elaborate the above. They all show different ways of seeing PLAR depending on philosophical paradigm (human capital, liberal humanism, critical radicalism)⁶ and begin to deconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions, for example, claims that it is possible for one single practice to fulfil the requirements of many stakeholders at once: students, higher education institutions, professional bodies, industry bodies, employers, society as a whole – when all have potential or actual divergent social interests. Can PLAR really be all things to all people? Or it is the case that, as British education researcher Trowler (1996, p. 28) argues, unless carefully conceptualized and implemented PLAR ‘require[s] exactly the sort of (socially derived) qualities which have ensured that underrepresented groups remained underrepresented in education in the past.’

Theorizing PLAR

As the typologies show, scholars began to challenge accepted ways of theorizing PLAR. Traditional adult and experiential learning theories, especially those drawing on the Kolb (1984) experiential learning cycle of concrete learning, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation were critiqued on the basis of providing only one way of understanding PLAR i.e., within the cognitive psychology and humanist traditions of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷ Understandings of PLAR were broadened by deploying a wider set of theoretical lenses, from the sociology of education, assessment theory, poststructuralist understandings of education, situated learning theory, complexity theory, cultural and historical activity theory, symbolic interactionism, and Aristotelian phronesis (see Andersson & Harris, 2006; Breier & Ralphs, 2009). Each lens produces a different somewhat kaleidoscopic picture of PLAR and practices.

Considerations for Decision Making and Model Building

- PLAR is a complex and often contradictory set of practices.

⁵ This term was taken from work in Australia by Jones and Martin (1997) who state that: ‘According to Procrustes, a ruler in Greek mythology, everyone could fit into his bed regardless of their size and shape. If anyone was too short, he placed them on the rack and stretched them. If they were too long, he would chop off their feet’ (in Harris 1999, p. 138).

⁶ This is not always a conscious choice of paradigm.

⁷ Wihak and Wong (2008) surveyed university-based programs in Adult Education and found that respondents showed a commitment to PLAR but were not able to articulate any sophisticated theoretical understanding of it.

- PLAR can serve many social purposes.
- Theory is active in PLAR even when not understood or articulated.
- PLAR is not a quick fix, neutral ‘universal good’.
- PLAR can be a learning process as well as an assessment event.
- There is no one-size-fits-all approach: context matters, although general guidelines are a useful starting point.

Importantly, PLAR does not stand outside of ‘perennial questions’ about knowledge, authority, power, qualifications, and different styles and types of teaching and learning (Young, in Andersson & Harris, 2006) to which we now turn.

3. KNOWLEDGE, AUTHORITY, POWER, QUALIFICATIONS, AND DIFFERENT STYLES AND TYPES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Although we now work with competencies, standards, and outcomes the perennial questions outlined in the previous chapter pertain. No one can deny the efficacy of competence-based education and training (CBET) and related career frameworks, especially in the health care professions, but as Salling-Olesen (2000) reminds us, they are not new:

The concept of competency models belongs to the science of measurement. It derives from the process by which psychological tests and opinion surveys were developed in the late 1800s. In the early 1990s, Thorndike proposed that educational and learning objectives be written as discrete, specific statements. This fundamental hierarchical structure for writing tests, surveys, and job competencies is still used today.

Although CBET has been refined over the years, Salling-Olesen alerts us to some of the blind spots that remain, namely that ‘competence is viewed as independent of the specific subject, losing sight of the subject’s relation to the tasks or practices in question’ and that learning is reduced to ‘the dynamics of competence development.’ Harris (2006) argues that knowledge is displaced in CBET, frequently becoming embedded in competence, which reduces its efficacy.

The Knowledge and Curricula Debates

These debates have been the most elaborated in relation to PLAR in South Africa, and in some Scandinavian countries (particularly Finland). For PLAR underpinned (explicitly or implicitly) by experiential learning theory, ‘knowledge’ is not seen as an important or central issue, because prior learning/knowledge can be unproblematically ‘translated’ into academic or other outcomes.

For PLAR underpinned and informed by other theories e.g., social realism in the sociology of education (Young, 2008), knowledge is seen as differentiated by sets of structuring principles. This means that the nature and structure of knowledge in formal education is related to, but not always easily or exactly comparable with the nature and structure of prior (experiential) learning. British sociologist of education Basil Bernstein (1999, 2000) developed analytical concepts to address this differentiation and the subsequent unequal social distribution of ‘powerful knowledge’ (Young, 2008):

- The natural sciences exemplify ‘*hierarchical knowledge structures*’ where the development and structure of knowledge is conceptually cumulative towards ‘more and more general propositions which integrate knowledge at lower levels’ (Bernstein, 2000, p.161) and where there are strong boundaries around the knowledge and associated identities – a chemist, a botanist, an astrophysicist, for example.
- In contrast, the humanities and social sciences exemplify ‘*horizontal knowledge structures*’ where the development of knowledge is less vertical, taking a segmental and additive form consisting of additive specialised languages, perspectives, or schools of thought, with weaker more porous boundaries. In English Literature, for example, the specialized languages of criticism; in Sociology, the perspectives of functionalism, post-structuralism, post-modernism and so on (Bernstein, 2000, p.162).

- Bernstein uses the analytical term '*horizontal discourses*' to refer to knowledge of the everyday, often tacit, multi-layered, context-specific, and context-dependent (within families, peer groups, communities, or workplaces, for example). Horizontal discourses do not have the generalizability and transferability of formal knowledge structures⁸.

We can add two further analytical distinctions – between traditional and newer professions and their respective curricular characteristics (also from the sociology of education, but cited in the PLAR literature):

Curricula associated with *traditional professions* such as medicine, architecture, accountancy, and engineering are heavily reliant (certainly in their foundation stages) on hierarchical knowledge structures, for example, biochemistry, mathematics, or physics, with correspondingly strong boundaries and relative isolation from the world of work.

In the case of *newer professions* such as journalism, management, business studies, communication studies, sports science, and tourism, curricula tend towards less clearly demarcated knowledge boundaries, greater proximity to points of application, and weaker professional identities (Cooper et al., 2018, p.232).

The knowledge and curricula debate in action in Canada and in South Africa

Harris and colleagues' research has addressed these issues in South Africa and in Canada⁹. Two empirical studies focussed on the same question: What are the disciplinary, knowledge domain and curricular conditions under which experiential knowledge can most effectively be recruited and recognised within academic, professional, or vocationally oriented curricula and relevant qualifications? In short, how feasible is PLAR in different curricular contexts?

It is important to re-emphasize that the knowledge concepts (hierarchical knowledge structures, horizontal knowledge structures, and horizontal discourses) are analytical concepts and are not represented exactly in 'real-life'. Their importance lies in the potential they offer to better understand and reimagine real-life. Knowledge differentiation is as much a reality within prior and experiential learning as within academic knowledge, as we will discuss in a later section of the report.

Based on the conceptual framework outlined above, Harris and Wihak (2017) undertook some anticipatory analysis on the likely feasibility of PLAR in selected undergraduate and postgraduate programs at a Canadian university. (See Box 3 below.) It was predicted that PLAR portfolios would be less feasible in academic subjects and professional/vocational programs in the natural sciences. Correspondingly, it was predicted that PLAR would be more feasible in academic subjects and professional/vocational programs in the social sciences because of different knowledge structuring and weaker boundaries. The same with

⁸ It is important to note the 'analytical' nature of horizontal discourses. The term should not lead us to assume that all learning from experience falls into this category. Some of it may do, but much may not.

⁹ This research was concerned with PLAR portfolios; the analyses cannot be transferred directly to other forms of PLAR.

the professions: we hypothesized that programs in the new professions, likely to be closer to the world of work and the everyday, would likely be more amenable to PLAR.

Box 3. Anticipatory analysis: feasibility of RPL portfolios in postgraduate program areas at the South African research-oriented facility

Program → Concepts	Science	Historical studies	Engineering	Health sciences	Business & Mgt	Education	Film and media
Knowledge cumulative or segmental	Cumulative	Segmental	Cumulative	Cumulative	Segmental	Segmental	Segmental
Strength of boundaries	Strong	Strong	Strong - Medium	Strong - Medium	Medium	Weak	Weak
Dominant logic: conceptual or contextual	Conceptual	Conceptual	From Conceptual to Contextual	From Conceptual to Contextual	Contextual	Contextual	Contextual
Proximity to practice	Fair	Fair	Fair to Closer	Fair to Closer	Close	Close	Close
Anticipated feasibility of RPL	Low	Low	Low - Medium	Low - Medium	Medium	High	High

Anticipatory analysis: feasibility of RPL portfolios in undergraduate program areas researched at the Canadian vocationally oriented university

Program → Concepts	Science	Nursing	Business	Social Work	Teacher Education	Tourism	Journalism
Knowledge cumulative or segmental	Cumulative	Cumulative	Segmental	Segmental	Segmental	Segmental	Segmental
Strength of boundaries	Strong	Strong - Medium	Medium	Weak	Weak	Weak	Weak
Dominant logic: conceptual or contextual	Conceptual	From Conceptual to Contextual	Contextual	Contextual	Contextual	Contextual	Contextual
Proximity to practice	Fair	Fair to Closer	Closer	Closer	Close	Close	Close
Anticipated feasibility of RPL	Low	Low - Medium	Medium	High	High	Higher	Highest

SOURCE: HARRIS & WIHAK (2017)

Empirical findings from both studies bore out the knowledge and professions hypotheses *up to a point*, but not entirely. Both confirmations and contradictions are relevant to PLAR and to the MIE diploma program.

Empirical findings and lessons for MIE

First, we offer two *confirmations* in relation to programs drawing on hierarchical knowledge structures, by way of quotations from the data:

- “I think that [the difficulty] would be typical of Chemistry, Physics, Biology, and Geology [...] There are some cases where the students have no hope without having done [Maths] even if they have got other academic abilities (p. 237)
- In a master’s degree in Accountancy, drawing on Economics and Maths, the interviewee argued that ‘foundations are so critical in this field; in some disciplines the foundations are not that critical as long as you can think – if you haven’t read certain literature, you could read it up if you had the intellectual ability to do it – but in these disciplines it would be like putting up the roof without the foundations’ (p. 238)

Secondly, two empirical examples show where our knowledge predictions did *not* hold in relation to hierarchical knowledge structures, due to the exercise of pedagogic agency and counter-intuitive reactions to the cumulative structuring of knowledge in the natural sciences:

- In postgraduate science, the interviewee (a lecturer) claimed that in some paradoxical ways the *explicit* nature of hierarchical knowledge structures makes PLAR easier rather than more difficult, because ‘things are more clear-cut in science – we know what we are looking for’ (p. 236)
- A third year BSc (Nursing) course in Community Development provided a niche for PLAR in an otherwise PLAR-unfriendly program due to [positive] impact of a ‘PLAR champion’ (p. 241)

Thirdly, two *confirmations* from programs drawing on horizontal knowledge structures:

- In an interdisciplinary Transport Studies course: ‘I’m looking for an ability to think [...] someone who, when presented with a problem, can frame that problem – evidence-based reasoning – critical reflection [...] The prior qualification is not always a good indicator’
- In Film and Media Studies ‘people from a wide range of backgrounds can come’, ‘bright lawyers or doctors or accountants who suddenly decide that they really want to tell a story.’ Plus, dispositional attributes such as ‘maturity’, ‘motivation’, ‘rapport’ and ‘creativity’ were viewed as important in assessing an PLAR candidate

Finally, three examples of where, even though the knowledge structure and other factors would seem to favour PLAR, pedagogical agency and administrative policy can work against it:

- In a Technology of Education stream within an M.Ed. program a lecturer recounted how PLAR decisions were overturned by departmental and faculty administrators who viewed it as weakening already weak boundaries, undermining academic rigor, and increasing the vulnerability of the M.Ed. program within a research-led university.
- The restrictive role of individual faculty e.g., where even though a program (in Business and Management) is associated with non-mandatory professional bodies, the interviewee chose to base curricula on the professional body's standards and curricula (which were restrictive for PLAR) (p. 239).

These research findings resonate with much of the general PLAR and health care professional education literature. Three examples will suffice:

- Writing about PLAR in health professions for immigrants, Donaldson (2007) in Israel (2011, p. 9) argues that: 'The skills some immigrants bring [...] may (genuinely) not be as useful to employers as similar skills acquired in (the host country). *Some skills are firm-specific, and for that reason lost with change of job.*' [our emphasis re: the non-transferability of 'horizontal discourse']
- In Physiotherapy: 'You'll need to have studied at least one science-based subject for the top universities, such as Biology, Human Biology, Chemistry, or Physics. Some universities will accept Physical Education or Sports Science. General Studies and critical thinking won't be accepted.' [a science-based new profession]
- In Pharmacy: '[a] deep-level understanding in basic courses is extremely important in promoting good quality learning because these courses usually form an important base for future learning. Inadequate learning in basic courses may have long-term effects that get in the way of learning later in the students' studies' [a science-based traditional profession].

Our research concluded that a range of factors impact on the feasibility of PLAR, knowledge being one of them, and an important one. Others include: the role of professional bodies (restrictive or more flexible), changes in professional regulation such as to graduate entry, the nature of the labour market, institutional policy and practice, curriculum design, pedagogic agency, and the locus of knowledge production (academy, research institute, or industry).¹⁰

It seems to us that some of the Fundamentals of Health Care courses will be more PLAR-friendly than others (mindful of provisos and contradictions, and subject to the closer analysis recommended above):

- Human Anatomy, Human Physiology, Clinical Behavioural Sciences, Introduction to Microbiology, Infection Control and Epidemiology, and Introduction to Microbiology are science-based and in the absence of proactive curricular or pedagogic intervention may be amenable to PLAR only through challenge exams.
- Other courses are likely to have less strong boundaries and more hybrid horizontal knowledge structures which could make portfolio-based PLAR more feasible – Introduction to Health Care Professions and Interprofessional Care, Digital Health,

¹⁰ We can provide further evidence from the research about the factors not referenced in the bullet points above.

Fundamentals of Leadership, Introduction to Public Health, and Introduction to Research Methods, for example.

- The most PLAR-able courses will be Project Management, Introduction to Health Care Management, and Community Based Health Care, as they are likely to be closer to experiential knowledge acquired in the workplace.

Considerations for Decision Making and Model Building

- Knowledge is an important consideration but is not the only determinant of the feasibility of PLAR.
- The distinction between traditional and new professions and associated curricula plays a significant role in determining the feasibility of PLAR.
- Inter-disciplinary programs offer opportunities for PLAR.
- Regulatory and professional colleges can make PLAR very difficult in programs that might otherwise lend themselves to it (for a range of reasons – public safety, conservatism etc.) or conversely, may play an enabling role.
- Even where curricular conditions are largely unfavourable to PLAR, there may be niches of feasibility.
- Pedagogy agency (and the converse) play a role in facilitating PLAR.
- Labour markets that are highly regulated offer fewer opportunities for PLAR.
- The feasibility of PLAR is enhanced when industry-related experiential knowledge is highly prized in the formal education context. Some workplaces are very important sites of knowledge production e.g., the creative industries, technology.
- Institutional mission can encourage or discourage PLAR. Indeed, barriers may be expressed as epistemological when in fact they are political i.e., knowledge acting as a proxy for professional, institutional, or subject vested interests.
- PLAR practices must strike a careful balance between flexibility and maximum accessibility for PLAR candidates on the one hand and retaining the academic rigor, gestalt, and status of the knowledge/profession/program on the other. This balancing act we term ‘optimal inclusion.’ (Harris, 2000).

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

We have not addressed the teaching, learning, and assessment dimensions that flow from our discussions thus far. The need for the higher education sector to respond to diversity affects all aspects of teaching, learning and administration (c.f. Northedge, 2003; Stockhausen & Kawashima, 2003), not just PLAR practices. The more instrumental credit-exchange approaches to PLAR have developed and established specialized *assessment* processes that have largely been accepted in formal education (although not without faculty resistance). In approaches based on knowledge differentiation, no obvious relationship of direct equivalence between forms of knowledge is assumed, so some form of *specialized pedagogy* is usually required.

Although less well understood, prior learning is as differentiated as formal knowledge: ‘complex and specialized forms of experiential knowledge are being produced, circulated and acquired outside the academy in the spheres of work, civil society, politics, community and family life’ (Cooper, Ralphs & Harris, 2018, p. 230). Such learning is typically non-disciplinary or an interdisciplinary hybrid of formal knowledge structures and specific applications in one or more occupational knowledge fields with varying degrees of

generalizability and specialization. Moreover, formal knowledge increasingly spills over and circulates in the everyday - adding to the repertoire.

The concept of *specialized pedagogy* was developed and named in South Africa to refer to helping students recognize and engage across knowledge boundaries during the PLAR process (p. 146). Its nature depends on the candidate's knowledge and the formal knowledge (and other contextual variables) coded into the receiving program. Hence, there is no practical blueprint; specialized pedagogy inheres in the PLAR facilitators needing to 'look both ways'; to have "feet in both worlds" [...] in the world of practice and in the world of science. It is this duality (not dualism) that enables them to understand and engage pedagogically with the hybridized discourses of experiential learning, as well as the more strongly bounded discourses of the academy...' (p.146). Being able to operationalize specialized pedagogy has ramifications for the selection and professional development of PLAR facilitators.

At the University of the Western Cape in South Africa candidates' prior knowledge is first articulated in narrative form as an autobiographical learning history. The pedagogy moves gradually from learner-centred, adult learning practice to knowledge-centred, formal pedagogy aided by forms of 'scaffolding' that increasingly make the rule systems of formal knowledge more explicit and visible. These rule systems include what Toynton (2005, p.108) refers to as:

...the social, cultural, and institutional requirements [of higher education which] normally remain unspoken or unrecognized. In addition to content, disciplines have cultures built around the discursive practices and the nature of the pedagogy (Weiner, 1994) [...] To be a part of a discipline means to ask certain questions, to use a particular set of terms, and to study a relatively narrow set of things' (Giroux et al., 1988: 146). All of these may be alien to the adult learner, not just as new vocabulary but in its very disciplinarity.

The specialized pedagogic space thus becomes a learning community with weaker boundaries between PLAR facilitators and adult learners. The latter are by no means passive in this process. As Salling-Olesen (2000, p. 83) observes to 'transfer' individual and culturally situated competence requires 'cognitive and emotional work' on the part of the learner. Seen in this way, PLAR becomes a process of navigation and mediation of knowledges rather than matching prior learning against standards or outcomes, which may be incommensurate and/or incommensurable. It is argued that specialized pedagogy is a fair way of supporting PLAR candidates who bring different cultures of knowledge to the formal frame and where redress is an imperative e.g., with some indigenous learners. From a social justice/redress imperative it means acknowledging and enacting 'dual origins of epistemological authority' (Cooper & Ralphs, 2016, p.140) and/or working towards some sort of political parity of esteem between different types of knowledge and learning (QAAS, 2022, p. 21).

Over and above the PLAR process and its outcomes, a further aim of specialized pedagogy is to equip the candidate with a meta-understanding of 'narrative *and* academic ways of knowledge' (Cooper & Ralphs, 2016, p.138). Northedge (2003, p.24) offers some useful illustrative examples charting a series of health-related issue across 'everyday discourses', 'professional discourses of care', and 'academic discourses.' Toynton (2005, p.109) provides a further example. Noting how elements of higher-order thinking are a continuous and intrinsic part of everyday thought, the aim [of PLAR] is to raise the candidate's awareness of

that and its importance within a discipline. Ideally, a learner can achieve ‘helicopter vision’ – ‘the ability to view the approaches, products and processes of a discipline from a detached and comparative viewpoint.’ Indeed, in some contexts, PLAR candidates are assessed by criteria to check this understanding. This kind of PLAR journey places candidates in a good position for success in higher education.

Considerations for Decision Making and Model Building

- Some PLAR candidates can progress based on specialized assessment only; others require specialized pedagogy.
- Specialized pedagogy is not a single practice; its efficacy rests on the expertise of PLAR practitioners (advisors and assessors) to ‘know the borders and cross the lines’ (Harris 2004).
- Specialized pedagogy aims to work beyond the taken-for-granted epistemological and pedagogic assumptions that underpin PLAR, to render it more responsive to less-traditional students.

4. PLAR AND THE MIE DIPLOMA

In most instances PLAR is developed as an add-on to an existing program i.e., within the context of pre-existing program and course outcomes, modules, assessments, and the like. The proposed Fundamentals of Health Care diploma presents an ideal opportunity to integrate PLAR at least into the final stages of program design and development, such that it becomes a central pillar of a flexible, adult-friendly program, and an exemplar of lifelong learning. Because this is such a golden opportunity, we provide some evidence-based good practice to support this before moving on to the specificities of PLAR.

There are two further concepts from the sociology of education/knowledge that relate to program and course design that help with this (Bernstein, 2000):

- **Selection** of content i.e., what knowledge, from where, why is it necessary? Does it create unnecessary barriers to PLAR?
- **Sequencing** of content i.e., what comes before what in terms of pre-requisites and ordering of concepts? How can sequencing best serve PLAR candidates, for example, does theory *have* to come first? Does that impede PLAR for access or advanced standing?

A practical example of selection and sequencing in action is nurse education on the U.K. where PLAR is an established activity (Whittaker et al., 2000). It is a *requirement* of all pre-registration nursing programmes. A strategy often adopted is to provide a PLAR module that allows students to be assessed against the whole of the foundation year's outcomes (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2005) whilst simultaneously covering areas of the curriculum in which most students will have little prior experience. (p. 349) This approach is particularly useful where students have similar types of experience (e.g., clinical) and lack theoretical aspects of the curriculum such as bioscience. This is borne out in research by Pryor (2012) who observes how some ENs entering the Bachelor (Nursing) program would have preferred to have received PLAR credit in another area of the BN program rather than first stage science. These observations emphasize echo the danger of missing out foundational knowledge and concepts – the epistemological building blocks for further study. Would it be possible for the bachelor's degree to be sequencing differently to support PLAR and 'optimal inclusion' without losing its 'gestalt'? What is most definitely undesirable is for PLAR (especially advanced standing) to backfire. Research by Northall et al. (2016) reported student apprehension and ill-preparedness for the expectations of university life post-PLAR.

We now discuss our working assumptions about the MIE Diploma.

Architecture and Elements

To investigate integrating PLAR into diploma design as fully as possible, we need to operate from a set of assumptions. From the draft program outline we take the following:

The new MIE Fundamentals of Health Care diploma program offers learners a self-paced, flexible, and fully customizable program to explore and prepare for careers across the health care spectrum. Whether graduates intend to work in health care settings or enrol in further health education, this program provides pathways to a multitude of possibilities.

Key principles are self-pacing, flexibility, and customization to individual interests and needs. This immediately throws up a design challenge/tension: the need to create a program capable of ‘looking both ways’ to the labour market and to further health-related education. How to deal with the likelihood that employers may be more interested in generic or core outcomes whereas more specific outcomes may well be necessary for progressing to further academic study? The knowledge and curricula arguments will come into play here – will some pathways aim to build cumulative conceptual coherence for further study and/or research? Will others be oriented to contextual logic, practice, and the labour market more directly?

Looking both ways is not straightforward. Education academics from Scotland, Howieson and Raffe (2012, p. 378), raise pertinent critical questions about programs that claim to do both. The Scottish Higher National (HN) qualification is a two-year full-time program aiming to prepare students for work or advanced standing within an academic degree. They demonstrate how HN graduates often are ill-prepared for degree study. Indeed, some universities do not accept credit from HN programs because the methods of teaching and learning of the latter do not equip students with the necessary academic skills. The pedagogies of many HN programmes are indeed very different from those of university degrees, a consequence partly of HNs’ vocational aims and colleges’¹¹ mission to provide ‘second chance’ education.

Moreover, to cater for cultural diversity, there will be a need to provide students with structured opportunities to reconcile new learning with their previous educational and cultural experiences and a very different educational philosophy. Course designers may need to rework their teaching philosophies to synthesise cultural understandings and the past educational experiences of potential students. Facilitators can benefit from reflecting on their traditional teaching methods in the context of an inter-cultural student body and multicultural society.

Flexibility is key

PLAR is not the only mainstay of a flexible program. Other features can be designed-in to create an architecture fit for purpose. These include alternative (more open) admissions criteria; articulation arrangements with other stakeholders and programs; work placements/internships; partnerships with professional colleges and employers; formalized fast-tracking opportunities; bridging programs; bite-sized options for gap-filling, and so on. Such an architecture facilitates multiple learning pathways of various shapes and sizes, based on individual learner needs and interests.

One of the most innovative approaches to the development of flexible curricula is the work of the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). In its characteristic proactivity, QAAS developed a set of ‘enhancement and development’ projects starting 20 years ago. Each project comprises a program of activity involving the whole higher education sector in Scotland. Staff and students collaborate to improve strategy, policy, and practice¹².

¹¹ Scottish equivalent of community colleges.

¹² <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/home>

Flexible Delivery was one such project from 2006-08. PLAR or RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning), as it is called in Scotland, formed an important part. Flexible Delivery aimed to further the learner-centred agenda and transform the way higher education institutions address curriculum design and program delivery. While the resources from this work are not necessarily current, the issues remain a priority. Eight downloadable reports are available here¹³. We strongly recommend readers of this report peruse these. There is too much information for us to precis, but an MIE reader will easily identify areas of relevance.

1. *Flexible delivery an overview of the work of the institutional engagement 2004-06*, 13 Oct 2006
2. *Supporting the development of the flexible curriculum flexible entry and flexible programmes*, 12 Dec 2005
3. *Supporting the development of the flexible curriculum: staff development pack*, 19 Dec 2005
4. *Supporting the development of the flexible curriculum: flexible entry resource pack*, 15 Dec 2005
5. *A model for analysis and implementation of flexible programme delivery*, 12 Oct 2006
6. *Accessing Jisc and Higher Education Academy resources to support flexible delivery*, 27 Sep 2006
7. *An evaluation of the use of the virtual learning environment in higher education*, 14 Sep 2006
8. *A practical guide to providing flexible learning in further and higher education*, 05 Oct 2006.

A further project of interest, *Developing and Supporting the Curriculum* ran from 2011-14. A *Flexible Curriculum Toolkit* supports staff and students in the design and review of programs and modules which are pedagogically innovative and responsive to emerging areas of student and employer interest. Box 4 below is the final page (p.25) of the *Flexible Curriculum Toolkit: Viewpoints Handbook*, 24 Feb 2014¹⁴. It provides a handy blueprint for curricular flexibility, and it is interesting to note that RPL, articulation, and transfer comprise quite a small part. It is the whole that is important – PLAR, at its best, is not a bolt-on or add-on practice.

The most useful aid to developing a flexible curriculum is also the most recent and builds on what has been outlined above. Called, *A Toolkit to Support Programme Teams in Enhancing Practice with Flexible Curricula*, it covers:

- Chapter 2 (*Viewpoints Introduction*) – a brief summary of the Viewpoints approach, its purpose and benefits, and how it has been customized to flexible curricula. Viewpoints was a partnership project between the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland and Jisc.¹⁵
- Chapter 3 (*The Flexible Curriculum Toolkit*) – use of the toolkit, the resource available and a recommended flow-diagram, including options for customization.
- Chapter 4 (*Running Workshops*) – how workshops could be run and recommendations for facilitation.

¹³ <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/explore-the-enhancement-themes/flexible-delivery>

¹⁴ <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/explore-the-enhancement-themes/developing-and-supporting-the-curriculum>

¹⁵ <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-successful-student-staff-partnerships/viewpoints>

- Chapter 5 (*Action Planning*) – a recommended process for writing up the workshops and action planning, using a template provided as part of the toolkit.
- Chapter 6 (*Practice Points for Flexible Curricula*) – the key practice point cards¹⁶.

Box 4. Practice points for flexible curricula¹⁷

1 External engagement and partnerships	2 Anytime, anywhere learning	3 Entry, transition, progression, and exit	4 Learning model, personalisation and student engagement
<p>4-8. Engage employers with design and delivery.</p> <p>1-2. Align curricula with employer and learner needs.</p> <p>1-3. Align curricula with sector/employer body needs and initiatives.</p> <p>1-4. Align curricula with professional, regional, national, sector, international standards and changing contexts.</p> <p>1-5. Engage other educational providers and stakeholders with curriculum design and delivery.</p>	<p>2-1. Ensure minimum equitable off-campus access to technologies for all learners.</p> <p>2-2. Provide access to a broad range of on-campus technology enhanced learning tools for learners and staff.</p> <p>2-3. Design curricula with a significant focus on technology-enhanced learning (TEL).</p> <p>2-4. Design curricula specifically to exploit mobile technologies such as Tablets, SmartPhones, e-book readers, and multimedia devices.</p> <p>2-5. Ensure a high degree of digital literacy (DL) amongst learners.</p> <p>2-6. Provide 24-hour access to information, learning resources and support.</p> <p>2-7. Provide flexible access to tutors, peers, mentors, experts, assessors, and other relevant stakeholders involved with curricula delivery.</p> <p>2-8. Provide specific learner guidance and support for flexible learning.</p>	<p>3-1. Provide flexible learning pathways including options for negotiated curricula.</p> <p>3-2. Provide flexible learning pathways including options for negotiated curricula – additional considerations relating to work-based learning contexts.</p> <p>3-3. Provide flexibility in programme timing and progression.</p> <p>3-4. Provide flexible learning pathways through RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning), articulation and credit transfer.</p> <p>3-5. Provide pre-entry information and guidance.</p> <p>3-6. Provide pre-entry support.</p> <p>3-7. Provide integrated flexible induction.</p> <p>3-8. Provide effective support for learner progression and retention.</p> <p>3-9. Develop graduate attributes and employability skills to prepare learners for working and learning in employment.</p>	<p>4-1. Provide flexibility in campus-based teaching via technology-enhanced learning (TEL) techniques.</p> <p>4-2. Personalise learning activities with an aim to create autonomous self-directed learners.</p> <p>4-3. Design social and informal learning activities which exploit online media and support a range of pedagogies.</p> <p>4-4. Adopt open approaches to exploit the knowledge and experience of others and facilitate learner choice.</p> <p>4-5. Design curricula to emphasise assessment for learning to develop learners capable of self-review.</p> <p>4-6. Continually engage in educational innovation, change, and research in flexible curricula as part of quality enhancement and assurance.</p> <p>4-7. Adopt flexible, transparent, and business-like approaches to programme design, development, review, and validation.</p> <p>4-8. Implement protocols of engagement for learners and tutors to ensure compliance with all relevant laws, codes</p>

¹⁶ https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/developing-and-supporting-the-curriculum/viewpoints-handbook.pdf?sfvrsn=7546f681_8

¹⁷ Not all of this table is relevant, but it is useful as a stimulus.

Considerations for Decision Making and Model Building

- MIE has an ideal opportunity to integrate PLAR into the ongoing design of a flexible program which addresses selection and sequencing for ‘optimal inclusion’.
- Creative tensions will likely occur in terms of ensuring that the diploma can ‘look both ways.’
- Flexible curricula (over and above PLAR itself) signal the need for staffing based on support and mentorship for individual students as they enter and navigate the program.
- A flexible program means that PLAR will be an ongoing feature of the diploma (a process not an event) to monitor individual progression and maximize opportunities for prior learning to count throughout, thereby accelerating their progress e.g., students may work with a mentor and keep a learning logbook to ensure they remain aware of their learning process progress towards their goals.

5. THE MAIN PLAR ACTIVITIES

This section of the report addresses the main stages in a PLAR process in detail, illuminating options, best practices, innovations, and cautionary tales from Canadian and international contexts, framed, and guided by the insights and considerations presented in the previous sections. This enables us to present not only ‘what’ works but also to continue to develop the means to understand ‘why’ something works, and ‘what could’ work, thereby helping MIE staff to understand PLAR at a deeper level with greater potential for generalizability in the longer term.

We structure this section of the report according to the EU Guidelines (CEDEFOP, 2015) referred to earlier, bearing in mind that although similar series of steps may be followed, there is no one size fits all in PLAR.¹⁸ The EU Guidelines identify four main stages in the PLAR process: Identification, Documentation, Assessment, and Certification.

Identification

In this initial phase, two kinds of identification go on. First, potential PLAR applicants need to be identified. That is, the institution needs to specify the demographic groups that are likely PLAR candidates and ensure that information is readily available to them. Second, potential applicants need advice and guidance to decide on their goals and whether and what prior learning might be assessable and recognizable.

Providing PLAR information

The identification of PLAR applicants speaks to the need to market or promote PLAR, especially if it is to fulfil its potential to increase access and equity for diverse students. When employed Canadian adults were directly told about having their past learning experience recognized, over 60% expressed an interest in pursuing further education (Livingstone, Rykov & Turner, 2005). Evidence has, however, previously suggested that few adults are aware of the availability of PLAR (Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board, 2002).

After researching the availability of PLAR information on Canadian institutional websites, Wihak (2007) noted that few postsecondary institutions make information on PLAR both easy to find and easy to use. The situation may have improved somewhat over the past 15 years: [Ontario Community College PLAR pages](#) can easily be located through searching ONCAT (Ontario Commission on Articulation and Transfer). Despite the availability of the information, potential candidates may remain unaware of PLAR as a specific process and so not think to look for it.

Harrison (2018), in her study of community colleges in Ontario, reported that the number of students availing themselves of PLAR remains below potential. Leibrandt (2020), in a survey

¹⁸ For example, Salling-Olesen (2000, p.20) offers a broad and over-arching definition of PLAR in which he includes *Clarification*. ‘With different weighting, the [PLAR] concepts cover *clarification* [our emphasis], documentation, assessment, and recognition of competencies acquired during an individual’s working life, leisure, and other contexts. Criteria for documentation and assessment are very different, just as their purpose is different, and depend on what assessment of competencies is to serve.’

of US undergraduate students, found that lack of information about PLAR as the top barrier to access. A recent US survey of college student advisors found that often students are not aware of PLAR options or how to access them (Wesley & Parnell, 2020), and further, over 50% of surveyed institutions did not require student advisors to provide PLAR information. CAEL has recently advocated for both greater PLAR marketing and PLAR marketing specifically targeted to reaching minority groups facing completion and opportunity gaps (Klein-Collins et al., 2020).

At many institutions in both Canada and the US, a central office (Admissions/Advising or a dedicated PLAR office) can provide information on PLAR and how to access it, but the student is required to seek out a faculty member, who will later play the assessment role, to determine whether the student should proceed. While effectiveness in reaching and supporting students with PLAR is likely to vary within this approach, it is worth reiterating that the number of PLAR assessments remains far sub-optimal. Low numbers suggest that putting the onus on individual students and faculty members to make the Go/No Go decision about PLAR, without support from PLAR experts, is not a best practice.

Accessible and clear information is identified as good practice in international guidelines, as is providing support to potential applicants in deciding whether to pursue PLAR. In 2021, QAAS published *Recognition of Prior Learning: An International Scan* covering Australia, USA, Canada, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, Singapore, South Africa, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. What follows in this sub-section of the report draws on that scan, with added links and additional information of best practices from our review of the literature and new developments.

Most higher education institutions surveyed by QAAS provided web-based information and initial guidance for students, typically including definitions of PLAR; how it can be used; amounts of credit that can be claimed; the application process and requirements; how the application will be assessed; the costs of the process, and any arrangements for appeal. This information, often repurposing institutional PLAR policy, is frequently located on the student pages. There are differences between institutions in tone and presentation with some providers conveying information in a more engaging, encouraging, and optimistic way than others. Some examples from the QAAS scan:

- James Cook University, Australia, provides an accessible mature students' page with information about the application process and routes into undergraduate study for older students from different educational backgrounds, including those with work and life experience.¹⁹
- The University of Bradford, England, has an adult learners' page which includes case studies of students who have returned to education as mature students, illustrating their experience and different routes into study.²⁰
- Massey University, New Zealand, provides information explaining what PLAR is, who it is for, and what the process involves.²¹

¹⁹ <https://www.jcu.edu.au/future-students/Mature-Students>

²⁰ https://www.bradford.ac.uk/undergraduate/widening-participation/adult-learners/?utm_source=Bradford%20Life%20blog&utm_medium=Blog%20post&utm_content=asking%20adult%20learners%20julia%20%2B%20adult%20learners&utm_campaign=undergraduate%202022

²¹ <https://www.massey.ac.nz/study/admission-and-enrolment/recognition-of-prior-learning/>

- Munster Technological University, Ireland; the University of the Western Cape, South Africa²², and HAMK, Finland, are illustrative of just a few of the universities with dedicated PLAR webpages and information for students. Munster's pages provide dynamic detailed information on how the PLAR process works - including introductory and explanatory videos by specialist staff - and the support available to students. The webpages also include testimonials from undergraduate and postgraduate students who have been through the PLAR process.²³
- The Information Portal of the German Government for the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications is an extremely comprehensive platform offering step by step support for PLAR, including guidance and counselling, across 178 skilled occupations and professions.²⁴

Given the general need for more marketing and promotion of PLAR, a reasonable assumption is that members of less-traditional groups may be uninformed about PLAR and how it can assist them. Wong (2014) pointed out that extra efforts are needed to reach members of underrepresented groups and further, to encourage them to see their learning as worthy of credit. A now dated study suggested that few immigrants were aware of the process or availability of PLAR, despite this demographic group being prime PLAR candidates (Shmyr, 2003).²⁵ This may have changed since some immigrant serving agencies now provide PLAR-related services. For example, BC PLAN (BC Prior Learning Action Network) has a contract with PICS (Progressive Intercultural Services) to document PLAR pathways for labour market entry and career development. Several national associations of health profession regulatory bodies (e.g., Nursing, Pharmacy) are active in providing information to IEHPs (Internationally Educated Health Professionals) on how to become registered in Canada.

With regard to Aboriginal people, the [Indigenous Collective](#) has endorsed the use of PLAR as an exemplary practice in institutions that are serving Indigenous adult learners. The Indigenous Collective itself has evolved from the annual PLAR conferences hosted for more than thirty years by First Nations Technical Institute.

PLAR may potentially attract a high proportion of diverse and less traditional students, if marketing and promotion is designed for that target market. CAEL's (Klein-Collins et al., 2020) study of PLAR in 72 US institutions reported PLAR uptake was higher for Asian, Hispanic, and White students than for American Indian and Black students.²⁶ Although comparable Canadian data is lacking, our experience is that PLAR needs to be promoted to specific diverse groups.

Advice and guidance

Institutional websites usually signpost potential PLAR candidates to designated individuals and/or departments for advice and guidance. For example: Student Support Advisor, Office for Prior Learning Assessment, RPL Unit, Adult Admissions Unit, Admissions Specialists

²² <https://www.uwc.ac.za/admission-and-financial-aid/recognition-of-prior-learning>

²³ <https://www.ittralee.ie/en/InformationAbout/Courses/HowToApply/RPL/>

²⁴ <https://www.anerkennung-in-deutschland.de/html/en/index.php>

²⁵ Based on this evidence, Open Learning --Thompson Rivers University (OL) implemented a process whereby every student entering an OL program received an email to explain what PLAR is and how to apply. Anecdotally, if secretarial shortage meant these emails were not sent, PLAR applications reliably dipped and then re-bounded when e-mailing resumed.

²⁶ Regardless of ethnicity, however, PLA significantly correlated with program completion.

and Counsellors, Transfer/PLAR Advisor, PLAR Coordinator, Adult Learning Advisor. We use the generic term ‘PLAR Advisor’.

The job of the PLAR Advisor is to tailor guidance to individuals’ needs. For some potential students deciding whether to pursue PLAR will be a relatively short and straightforward process. For others, probably less-traditional learners, it is a harder decision to make, and significant advice and guidance will be required.

Hame University of Applied Sciences in Finland has an extremely well-conceptualized research area entitled Lifelong Career Guidance with an emphasis on diversity and internationally educated professionals. Key themes include:

- Guidance for career, studies, and life planning;
- Multidisciplinary cooperation in guidance;
- Participation and agency;
- Culturally sensitive guidance.

These themes are linked to practical examples, including ‘counselling for the future’, ‘careers and competencies for highly educated immigrants’ and ‘multicultural competencies’.²⁷

Guidance and preliminary documentation can be online. The following examples are drawn from an International Labour Organization (ILO) (draft report, 2015). In Germany, migrant candidates are assessed via an employment centre using an online competence system. The preparation for assessment is also online <https://www.myskills.de/en> and <http://my-professional-experience.org/>. There are four #showyourskills instruments introduced in a video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7g8Y4KJkJM0>

1. *Competence cards*, 49 analogue cards used by a counsellor to identify and document the candidate’s personal, social, and further transversal skills. The cards are multilingual (in eight languages) and illustrated in a culturally appropriate manner assessing personal skills (such as decision making), social skills (e.g., communication), interests, and skills such as time management <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/competence-cards>
2. *Career cards*, which are also analogue cards used by a PLAR Advisor to identify suitable occupational domains to be considered for in-depth assessment. These career cards address 30 vocational education and training (VET) occupations that are in demand in Germany. Competence models were developed for each of the 30 by teams of expert professionals and educators. There are 48 sector cards and 30 occupational cards as well as 23 supplemental cards with additional information about the German vocational education and training (VET) system and other relevant information <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/career-cards>
3. *my-professional-experience.org* is an online, self-assessment of the vocational skills that a migrant may have. Thirty VET occupations are assessed using pictures that show job-related activities in fields of the respective occupation. The online self-assessment is quick (five minutes) and designed to check readiness for a more detailed assessment through the fourth instrument. The self-assessment can be guided

²⁷ <https://www.hamk.fi/research/hamk-edu/lifelong-career-guidance/?lang=en>

by an advisor or completed by the candidate working alone. The website is available in six languages and the candidate can download a report on each occupation and the modules within them, along with their own assessment of how much they do on a rating scale ranging from never → not often → often → very often

<https://www.myprofessionalexperience.org> and
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1aUem_Hr1xA

4. *MYSKILLS* is also online self-assessment covering specific and practical job knowledge in 30 occupations. Unlike the previous assessments that evaluated potential and self-perception of competency, this is a far longer assessment that covers 125 – 150 technical questions and takes between three to four hours to complete. The questions (in six languages) assess the candidate's occupational knowledge in a valid and reliable manner (using video scenarios and pictures). This assessment is usually completed in an employment centre and is supervised. The outcome of the test is a report detailing the candidate's practical professional knowledge on each of the elements of the occupation they tested for. These reports are recognized by employers in Germany, and they show explicitly which occupation the candidate can work in and at what level. They also show what skills areas can be developed through training <https://www.myskills.de/en> (This resource can also be used at the documentation stage of PLAR)

Pre-selection workshops can be provided to check level and direction, including formative assessment such as diagnostic tests, readiness tests, and the like. A recent EU report recommends greater use of generic or level descriptors/outcomes in the formative guidance stages of PLAR, with 'clear importance for upskilling pathways, including [...] positive benefits for the individuals - for whom the validation of their past experiences often becomes a central source of motivation to engage in further learning.'²⁸

[Red River College](#) (RRC) in Manitoba, a bricks and mortar institution, has been a recognized PLAR leader in Canada for decades (Blower, 2001). RRC has a dedicated PLAR Advising office that offers regular group information sessions to assist students with the decision whether to engage with PLAR, while assessment is done by faculty members.

In the US, Thomas Edison State College (TESC), a notably PLAR-active institution in New Jersey, provides an on-line [PLA Self-Assessment Guide](#) to assist potential applicants to determine whether to pursue it or not. SUNY [Empire State College](#) (SUNY ESC) provides an excellent example of how to support students with information about PLAR and decision making. Degree programs at SUNY ESC are highly flexible and individualized. Each enrolling student is assigned a discipline-appropriate mentor who supports course planning and other decisions throughout an individual's program. In addition to the mentor-provided support, students have access to online material regarding portfolio preparation, termed [Individualized PLA](#). In addition, the [PLA Planner Student Handbook](#) contains detailed instructions for students to use the institution's PLA software to submit portfolios for evaluation and receive assessment results and feedback.

²⁸ <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2653343605/fulltextPDF/D5F66C80C15E4463PQ/1?accountid=16461>
p.8

In Canada, both [TRU – OL](#) and [Athabasca University](#), which Conrad (2014) identified as the most PLAR-successful universities in Canada, separate the advising and assessment functions in an online delivery context. TRU-OL offers a brief online self-assessment tool so potential applicants can determine whether to pursue contact with the PLAR Advisor for further information and guidance. Dedicated PLAR Advisors provide PLAR information to prospective students and discuss with them, primarily through e-mail, the benefits, and risks of engaging with the process, including saving time and money towards credential completion. Such discussions take place within the context of each applicant’s remaining program requirements, after any transcript evaluation and/or transfer credit processes are complete.

In Canada and the US, transcript evaluation and transfer credit and are considered registrarial functions, separate from and usually preceding any PLAR process. Elsewhere, they may be connected. (See Box 5 below.)

Box 5. Transcript review and transfer credit -- International

Transcript review and evaluation

Transcript review typically requires a student to present a transcript, course descriptions and syllabi, or additional documentation re: courses taken at other academic institutions. If the objectives appear comparable to the objectives of the course at the university, then certain requirements can be waived. There are often limits on the amount of transfer credit.

For example, at the Northern College of Acupuncture (NCA) in the U.K. the review and evaluation processes involve students providing the NCA with transcripts of marks/grades for modules completed elsewhere, together with module and course guides that provide information on level, learning outcomes, content, credit rating and study hours. NCA faculty help the student to construct a table comparing the level, learning outcomes, content, and credits/study hours of NCA modules against features of the modules the student has completed. This mapping is used to identify both commonalities and differences between the two courses. Where there is a good degree of commonality, measures to correct for differences are identified and documented (for example, provision of additional home study with one-to-one tutorial input). Where there is less commonality, the transfer student may be required to undertake one or more examinations or other assessments from the modules proposed for exemption, to confirm ability to achieve pass standard at the appropriate level. These additional assessments are marked by the faculty members who would normally mark such assessments.

The assessment of prior learning via transcript review is a straightforward administrative process and takes little faculty time. However, it is sometimes difficult to gauge whether the course taken previously is a good match to an in-house course or module, and care needs to be taken to avoid giving credit twice for same learning.²⁹

Considerations for Decision Making and Model Building

- Proactive marketing and information will be required using a variety of media, including easily accessed and easily used information on MIE’s website.
- Marketing should be tailored to target groups for the diploma.

²⁹ <https://nca.ac.uk/the-college/college-policies/rpl-policy>

- Even though the content of the above examples may not be directly relevant to the MIE diploma, they are illustrative of support that can be developed and made available to PLAR candidates (over time).
- MIE will need to build in a substantial amount of advice and guidance if it is to fulfil its aim of offering a ‘self-paced, flexible, and fully customizable program’.
- Candidates need to develop an educational, career, or employment plan which will then guide them through the next stages of the PLAR process.
- MIE to decide whether and/or how much PLAR should take place before formal registration and how much *after* acceptance of a place or after enrolment/registration, with fewer institutions permitting applications to be made earlier.³⁰
- Specific resources will need to be acquired or developed e.g., diagnostic and readiness tests.
- The exemplars we have showcased could form part of institutional capacity building and professional development for PLAR. It should be clear by now that PLAR touches many areas of institutional life over and above faculty members e.g., technical/website support teams, admissions staff, careers guidance, and more. As noted earlier, it is not a bolt-on process.
- Transcript evaluation needs to be done before PLAR potential can be assessed, which should nevertheless be done as soon as possible after transcript review.
- It may become clear that PLAR is not suitable and/or that a candidate needs or prefers to follow a formal route.
- MIE needs to determine the locus of responsibility for PLAR advising, and whether it will be best served by PLAR advising specialists, faculty members, or via some other institutional arrangement.
- MIE should recognize that the PLAR Advisor role is substantive and specialized and requires investment in initial and continuing professional development.

Documentation

In the Documentation phase, the PLAR applicant must gather evidence to support learning claims. The type of evidence needed will depend on the type of assessment (discussed further under Assessment below) that is appropriate in the situation.

Challenge exam

In challenge exam situations, the applicant may only need to provide enough evidence to justify the attempt. This evidence could be as simple as an academic record from an internationally obtained credential showing non-transcribed credit in a relevant course or courses. It could be evidence of having lived abroad and acquired a second language or of having been educated in a language other than English.

External training program review

In the PLAR world, credit is often awarded based on evaluating training or education taken outside the formal education system. If a candidate has taken continuing education or workplace training courses and wishes to obtain PLAR credit for them without direct

³⁰ There is a case for PLAR to happen before registration for candidates who do not meet the admissions criteria.

assessment of his/her learning, the candidate will need to provide course outlines, descriptions of assessment, and certification of completion. Credit may thus be awarded based on the quality of the training. (If the quality of the documentation is not sufficient to merit credit award, the option remains of assessing the applicant's learning using one of the other PLAR methods.)

Literature on standards of evaluation for this type of PLAR is scanty. For example, Van Kleef et al. (2007) in discussing quality assurance in PLAR only briefly refer to this form of PLAR. The American Council on Education has, however, been offering the Learning Evaluation service for over 40 years and the recommendations in the [ACE National Guide](#) are widely accepted in US postsecondary institutions. The ACE process for reviewing non-formal training can therefore serve to guide MIE in how to implement this type of PLAR.

The ACE website provides some minimal information on the [applicable standards](#). TRU-OL was able to adopt the ACE process in creation of the [TRU-OL Credit Bank](#) only after the then Director attended a workshop for organizations preparing to have their training courses/programs ACE-evaluated. Based on the ACE process, the Credit Bank manual can be provided for MIE's internal use, courtesy of the Director, TRU-OL. The Credit Bank contains several examples of health-related non-credit training that TRU-OL has evaluated and accepted for pre-approved PLAR credit such as continuing education courses for the Canadian Association of Medical Radiation Technologists. Note that the Credit Bank contains many examples of health profession diplomas from private training colleges not covered by the BC Commission on Articulation and Transfer Credit, such as the Canadian College of Massage and Hydrotherapy.

Thomas Edison State College also conducts this type of program review for PLAR purposes. The [TESC website](#) offers a manual for use by educational providers seeking to have their offerings recognized. This document provides an outline of seven 'compliance criteria': student identity verification, admission criteria, course/program outcomes, assessment methodology, instructor and course development credentials, delivery methods, and syllabi.

PLAR portfolio

A portfolio has historically been the overarching device for presenting direct and indirect³¹ evidence of prior learning. Although institutions offer a range of support and resources to help portfolio development, for example, self-help downloadable guides, bookable online sessions, and workshops, portfolios remain liked and disliked in about equal measure:

- One of the positive aspects of portfolio development is that candidates are encouraged to engage in reflective thinking and writing which helps them to appreciate their experiences and learning. Moreover, reflective practices are useful because they mirror what is required on many if not most professional programs, including CPD (Continuing Professional Development).
- However, reflective learning does not suit all candidates and many less-traditional learners have difficulty identifying their own skills and competencies, let alone participating in dialogue about them. This may be the case especially in health care professions where reflection *in* action rather than reflection *on* action is the norm.

³¹ Direct evidence refers to observations and performance tests; indirect refers to testimonials and the like.

- Further critiques of portfolios revolve around their reliance on culturally specific ways of presenting the self - highly individualized ways. As an example, Skorstad and Karlsson (2017) argue that a close connection exists between industry workers' work identities and their membership in a workplace-level 'worker collectivity'. Equality and unity are central norms to such communities and breaching them – for instance through participation in individual competence/portfolio development – could lead to negative repercussions, maybe even expulsion. Cooper (1998) makes similar observations in relation to attempts to integrate workers' education into the National Qualifications Framework in South Africa – the title of the article says it all: 'From "Rolling Mass Action" to "RPL": The changing discourse of experience and learning in the South African labour movement.'
- The discourse of program/module/course and associated learning outcomes/standards, and/or statements is mystifying for many less-traditional students and aligning prior learning to them creates enormous problems (especially in the absence of specialized pedagogy). Education scholars from the University of Sheffield in the U.K (Pountney & Grasmeyer, 2018) claim that the alignment process (with or without specialized pedagogic support) requires candidates to develop a whole new educational (somewhat managerial) language, which may or not be useful later.
- The heavy reliance on a highly specific writing and organization skills may disadvantage some groups of students even with Advisor support.

Documenting learning acquired outside the formal education system can be onerous. Books on PLAR portfolio development -- how-to manuals aimed at PLAR applicants (cf Michelson and Mandell, 2004 or [Lawley, 2020](#)) -- contain lists and descriptions of the documents required to support learning claims put forward in portfolios. Lawley's open-source book contains a two-page list of possible documents to include in a portfolio (pp 107-08). A similar, although shorter, list is provided on TESC's website:

- Samples of your work
- Documentation of job skills, including evaluations.
- Letters of Recommendation from employers or others who have firsthand knowledge of your abilities or skills
- Descriptions of requirements for obtaining licenses and/or certificates
- Scanned licenses or certificates
- Video clips or streaming video showing a skill, ability, or item produced
- Audio recordings demonstrating an ability or skill
- Thank You notes and emails from clients, students, co- workers, etc.
- Website links
- Certificates of attendance at conferences or trainings.

As discussed in the Assessment phase (below), this documentation will need to meet assessor's expectations about its relevance, currency, sufficiency, and authenticity (Van Kleef et al., 2007).

Increasingly, e-portfolios and templates are used to structure and organise the presentation of evidence, and to streamline the process. These help to make portfolio development less onerous. For example, Hame University of Applied Sciences in Finland has developed a

structured e-portfolio which uses a student desktop called 'PAKKI'. Students complete the application online using an electronic template after initial consultation with a PLAR Advisor, attaching job descriptions, CVs and other evidence when prompted in the template, and providing written statements about alignment with required degree learning outcomes. Increasingly, Learning Management Systems have built in e-portfolios that allow for the upload of podcasts, vlogs, video presentations, sound clips, naturally occurring evidence and so forth. In the Philippines, online videos or live demonstrations supplement documentary evidence using video conferencing platforms like Zoom or Skype. Posters, storyboards, and audio video recordings are becoming more popular portfolio ingredients.

A useful resource from the National Health Service (NHS) in the U.K. is the Clinical Leadership Competency Framework. Although not designed for PLAR, it is a very user-friendly template for self-assessment (aligned to an agreed career framework) including clinically based examples and learning scenarios that could be customized to any field of health care.³²

Even when resources, templates and exemplars are provided, the PLAR Advisor still plays a crucial role as an 'interpreter' of academic language and requirements and in supporting the learners' transition from non-formal and informal learning contexts [specialized pedagogy in action].

Dedicated PLAR courses

Although individual PLAR processes are the most common, dedicated courses (often credit bearing) are also used. SUNY ESC has a long history of such provision. In one of their early publications, the main faculty concerned (Mandell & Michelson, 1990, p.v) present the following rationale:

Adults' educational goals and career development choices may well be most helpfully approached through a process which *integrates* [our emphasis] an inventory of their prior learning, clarifications of their life aspirations, and a sound exploration for themselves of their academic skills.

This integrative process takes the form of credit-bearing Portfolio Development Courses framed by a topic of contextual relevance such as 'academic skills', 'college orientation', 'the experience of work', 'careers', 'introduction to a field'. As an extended and organized process, these topic-based courses go some way to addressing the 'looking both ways' pedagogic challenge mentioned above.

SUNY ESC is not the only institution that operates in this way. [Thomas Edison State College](#) offers two online courses to help students prepare for PLAR. The University of the Western Cape in South Africa runs a five-month PLAR program for undergraduate access which includes portfolio development and specialized pedagogy.

Some professional programs design-in an 'open' learning contract module with no pre-specified learning outcomes. Suitable for both individuals and groups of students, such a

³² <https://www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/NHSLeadership-Framework-CLCFSelfAssessmentTool.pdf>

module provides total flexibility, and ‘avoids multiple application for PLAR across similar modules’ (MacLeod and Lyon, 2007). It requires the same amount of study time as a taught module and is extremely relevant to workplace learning for employed PLAR candidates, including in health care.

Birkbeck College, University of London, U.K. uses negotiated learning agreements to provide credit for workplace learning. An agreement structures a work-based research project into an individually designed learning project. The learner works with an academic advisor to plan learning activities to be undertaken in the workplace. (See Walsh 2007 for detail). Middlesex University³³ is one of the largest higher education institutions in the U.K. with a strong focus on professional education. PLAR forms part of negotiated programs of work-based learning in Business and Management with four key stages:

1. Review of the knowledge/skills the individual brings to the programme using generic criteria (this can lead to formal accreditation via RPL).
2. Planning a customized work-based degree program for the individual that builds on the above to meet the academic requirements of the University and to be of value to an employer or client.
3. The University equips the work-based learner with research and development skills to undertake real-life projects that are focused on knowledge creation and use.
4. The work-based projects are the focal point of the employment-led program with the potential to impact back upon the workplace.

Used in this way, PLAR becomes the starting point for developing programs customised to the needs of the individual and their organisation thus shifting the criteria for recognition of learning achievement from matching a prescribed existing university course to learning of value to the individual and their organisation. (See Garnett and Cavaye, 2015.) A significant and not uncontroversial shift.

Considerations for Decision Making and Model Building

- A structured documentation model would increase access to the PLAR portfolio process
- Would MIE consider a dedicated credit-bearing PLAR course? The ‘Introduction to Health Care’ course could become such a space. Or a SUNY ESC-style additional course along the lines of ‘Modern Day Health Care’ or ‘Orientation to Health Care’ or ‘Careers in Health Care’?
- If the Fundamentals of Health Care diploma is going to be a self-paced, flexible, and fully customizable program, could a credit-bearing course be dedicated to ‘My Diploma Design’?
- Could the Health Care Observership be a space where workplace learning is recognised?
- Could a ‘learning contract’ module be developed as an employment-based program with employer-MIE collaboration and agreement?
- MIE needs to develop processes for receiving, validating, and recording candidates’ documentation.

³³ <https://www.mdx.ac.uk/study-with-us/ways-to-study>

The complexities of documentation, regardless of the type of PLAR under consideration, illustrates that the role of the PLAR Advisor is highly specialized, involving:

- Providing guidance on pathways open to the candidate;
- Assisting candidates with the development of educational plans;
- Advising and supporting candidates with portfolio development or other methods;
- Working in close liaison with the personnel of respective programs (subject specialists). (See below.)

These roles require:

- A deep knowledge of adult education/experiential learning
- Understanding knowledge, curricula, pedagogy in higher education so as to deploy specialized pedagogy when required
- Communication skills to advocate for PLAR.

Assessment

Whichever configuration of the strategies, approaches, and activities discussed above is adopted, PLAR culminates in assessment by subject specialists involved in teaching and/or managing at faculty, department, or school level. At points during the preceding stages there will have been opportunities for the Advisor and subject specialist (who we term PLAR Assessor) to negotiate, most particularly because the former will need the expertise of the latter to help candidates align their prior learning appropriately and provide the required evidence.

PLAR assessors

Quality assurance guidelines and standards in PLAR (CAEL, 2023; CAPLA, 2015; CEDFOP, 2015; UNESCO, 2012; Van Kleef et al., 2007) address the role of the PLAR Assessor in detail. As Travers and Harris (2014, p. 240) elaborate:

...the assessor needs to understand RPL [...] This means being conversant with occupational standards, qualification standards, learning outcomes, assessment criteria and quality criteria; knowing what the standards mean and how they relate to the learning being reviewed; and understanding different approaches to and methods of assessment – their uses, strengths and weaknesses. Assessors need the ability to adopt, adapt, combine and apply assessment methods to render them fit for the purpose of assessing non-formal and informal learning...

The importance of proper assessment process and qualified assessors is stressed in formal policies. For example, the University of Newcastle U.K. *Policy on Credit Transfer and the Recognition of Prior Learning* states: 'Once a student has submitted an initial application for RPL, the [...] Degree Programme Director should establish what form of assessment will be appropriate to determine that the appropriate learning outcomes have been met.' And 'ensure that assessment for RPL (including by portfolio) follows normal assessment protocol, including receipt of submission, security of assessment, moderation, return of feedback, and retention.' The policy is footnoted below and is a comprehensive example that covers institutional protocol across transfer credit, amounts of credit permissible, and regulatory

body requirements (in Medicine).³⁴ Also footnoted is a very user-friendly and equally comprehensive policy from the University of Bradford, U.K.³⁵

In the post-secondary context in Canada, PLAR Assessors are most commonly faculty members. Wong (1999, 2011), who was charged with introducing PLAR at the University of Saskatchewan, outlined the likelihood and some of the causes of faculty resistance to PLAR and stressed the need to engage them early in the process of implementation of a PLAR process. Rusk and Smith (2014), reporting on system-wide implementation of PLAR in Wisconsin, observed that faculty perceptions of PLAR affect their willingness to engage with the practice.

[F]aculty are often more receptive to Prior Learning Assessment practices if they are aware of existing PLA principles and practices; can recognize how the assessment practices are developed within their institution and how to apply the practices to assessment of learning outcomes for their academic program; and are confident that tools accurately and reliably measure the appropriate set of learning competencies so as to set the student up for success in the next sequence of course work. (Rusk and Smith, 2014, np)

In Wisconsin, successful implementation required a carefully planned communication strategy to dispel faculty ‘myths’ (Rusk & Smith, 2014, np) about PLAR, combined with a training program for faculty assessors. A key component of this was to help faculty members see how PLAR aligns with assessment practices in classroom learning and to understand the quality principles involved in PLAR. Another important element was stressing that PLAR does not negatively impact classroom enrolment; rather, it significantly impacts student persistence towards degree completion and is correlated with an increased number of courses taken post-PLAR.³⁶ These effects benefit faculty members directly, while also positively affecting students and the institution. Our research in Canada and South Africa strongly shows that being able to address knowledge arguments with faculty is a great advantage, as then PLAR is not seen as undermining formal education.

Faculty PLAR Assessors at Thompson Rivers University (Ives, Purvey & Pollock, 2013) described how participation as a PLAR Assessor had benefited them as educators. They reported gaining realizations that learning outcomes can be achieved in many ways, that learning rather than teaching is the important consideration and that neither experience nor teaching necessarily leads to learning. Their teaching practices were impacted by a better understanding of outcomes-based learning which improved their curriculum design. They began to include a greater variety of assignments and assessments, with more formative assessment and were more willing to be flexible in allowing student to use alternative ways to demonstrate learning. They started to use ‘reflection on learning’, a key element of PLAR portfolio development, as a teaching tool.

Since faculty members are educators, their role in PLAR can create dilemmas (Travers & Harris, 2014). Faculty members act as advisors (particularly when PLAR is structured as

³⁴ <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/mediav8/study-with-us/general-documents/applications-amp-offers/prior-learning-policy.pdf> point 23

³⁵ <https://www.bradford.ac.uk/teaching-quality/prior-learning/Guide-To-The-Recognition-Of-Prior-Learning-2020-quickedit.pdf> p.12

³⁶ The Wisconsin report drew from CAEL’s 2010 large-scale survey (Klein-Collins, 2010) but similar findings are also reflected in the more recent 2020 CAEL research (Klein-Collins et al., 2020).

specialized pedagogy) and/or as judges of that learning. These functions may require faculty to recognize knowledge beyond normal disciplinary criteria (see section on Matching or Equivalence below).

At best, PLAR can be a potent vehicle for growth and development and many students gain high levels of empowerment and understanding of their own learning as a result of the process. At worst, PLAR can be ontologically destabilizing. Drawing on social philosopher Axel Honneth, Hamer (2012, in Klindt, 2021, p.94) argues that genuine ‘recognition’ is a reciprocal process that affects all parties to the relationship; not easily achieved through an institutionalised one-way acknowledgement of skills and competencies by an unrecognized assessor against unfamiliar norms. Rather an intersubjective engagement is required, one that attends the ‘who’ of both the candidate and advisors and assessors. Echoes of specialized pedagogy here again, especially concerning less-traditional students. This is borne out by another PLAR specialist from Sweden who states ‘it is not only the competence that gains recognition. There is also a *subject* of recognition, the individual who could win recognition for her/his competence [our emphasis] (Andersson, 2021, p.22).

Given these complexities, professional development for PLAR Assessors (and indeed for all involved in PLAR in any capacity) is vital. Various resources exist. CAEL offers a three-week online workshop on [Assessing Prior Learning](#) for faculty members. From Europe, the VINCE project (Validation for Inclusion of New Citizens of Europe) produced a generic structure for a CPD course, which highlights mentoring by experienced assessors for new assessors (Royo, Uras, Hatle-Larssen & Kablan, 2018). The Scottish Qualification Framework project (QAAS, 2022) on PLAR provides a variety of [on-line workshops](#).³⁶

The ILO has developed a free MOOC to support the development of PLAR practitioners. We highly recommend this.³⁷ In addition the ILO RPL Policy (2015, p. 17) identifies a few countries that have developed formal qualifications, training programs and capacity building for PLAR practitioners:

- Australia has a learning resource for assessors, ‘Informal learning: Learning from experience’, which includes assessment tools and case studies. An RPL guide for assessors has also been developed by the New South Wales Government.
- Norway organises annual courses and seminars for assessors and mentoring for inexperienced assessors.
- In Slovenia, the National Assessment Centre trains RPL assessors, with funding from participants’ registration fees.
- In South Africa, assessors are required to be trained and registered as meeting the minimum qualification authority criteria in particular sectors. RPL practitioners are also trained by public universities.
- The EU has developed a comprehensive training programme for trainers, assessors, guidance counsellors, and VNFIL experts.³⁸

³⁶ Examples from the SCQF: <https://scqf.org.uk/workshops/categories/rpl-workshops/>

³⁷ <https://www.itcilo.org/courses/mooc-recognition-prior-learning>

³⁸ https://profi-vnfil.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/IO3_PROFIL_VNFIL_TRAINING_PROGRAMM_Trainers_PRACTITIONERS_VNFIL_FINAL.pdf

A final point stressed in the literature regarding PLAR practitioners is the need to consider fair remuneration for work as advisors and/or assessors. In a 2020 US study of 4000 members of a Texas college teaching association, Reynolds found that PLAR administrative issues have overtaken concerns about academic integrity among faculty members. These concerns included the question of individual faculty compensation and the question of funding to the department. Echoing Wong's (1999) concern about the remuneration issue, Harrison's study of Ontario community colleges (2018, p. 18) found 'no consensus regarding best practice for managing faculty workload and remuneration...' At some institutions PLAR is reflected in the Standard Workload Formula. At others, faculty assessors are contracted individually for PLAR assessments. PLAR forms part of the service component of the faculty role at some universities. What is clear, however, that buy-in from faculty members is essential to implementation of a successful PLAR program, and the cost of that buy-in includes satisfactory remuneration arrangements (Wihak, 2007) and a departmental funding formula that supports the use PLAR (Harrison, 2018).

Assessment criteria

In most PLAR practice, the conventional assessment criteria of breadth, depth, currency, sufficiency, and authenticity of evidence inform and guide assessment, and are applied according to context. Meeting these criteria assumes that the reference point for assessment must be clearly stated in the form of learning outcomes or competencies. Some PLAR scholars, however, argue that classic statistically-based concepts of reliability and validity need to be modified in the PLAR context to reflect 'trustworthiness' rather than psychometric rigour (Jooseten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel & Jochems, 2008; Stenlund, 2013) – a rigour that is rarely applied to assessment of classroom learning.

Oskar Negt (in Salling-Olesen, 2007, pp. 25-26) takes a step back from the conventional PLAR assessment criteria by foregrounding a preliminary question: 'What do people need to know and master [...] to orient themselves in the world today?' Arguing that the discussion of prior learning assessment has generally been conducted as if it referred only to working life and to the exchange between the labour market and formal education, an alternative underlying set of competences and associated criteria are required that embrace 'the whole person and competencies in all areas of life, not least competence for democratic participation'. He expresses these as:

... a balanced approach to technology, a sense of justice, equality and inequality a caring approach to people, nature and the world around us, understanding that there are different forms of economics, and finally a memory and utopia ability that makes it possible to imagine something else.

There is certainly in our view a need for broad value-based criteria as suggested. Equally, criteria that assess the use of creative thinking to envision better ways of accomplishing professional or other goals, thus preparing students for an unknown future generally and in terms of professional practice. Admissions officers at the University of Oxford (admittedly not known for PLAR!!) look for how students *approach questions* in their chosen field of study and how they think critically about the answers: 'With exceptions for some practical questions in science and medical subjects, the interviewers are not always looking for a

straightforward answer. Some questions, such as moral or philosophical questions, don't have an answer.³⁹

Assessment depends on the outcomes or competencies at the centre of the PLAR process and the level. Based on our analysis above, we would say that choice also depends on knowledge structure, curricula content, and the other variables discussed in section two⁴⁰. Natural science-based programs will likely require formal assessment against specific criteria. The weaker the knowledge structure and boundaries, the more likelihood of less formal assessment. Indeed, there could be space for PLAR assessment criteria to embrace intercultural learning and cultural diversity, and assessment opportunities developed such as candidates being invited to join team discussions to contribute their cultural perspectives on illness, diagnosis, and treatment. Not only would this benefit the PLAR candidate, but also the PLAR Assessor.

In some instances, as mentioned, prior learning can be assessed against generic or transferable competencies such as course- or program-level outcomes or qualification framework level descriptors which are not specific to academic subjects which therefore afford greater opportunity for PLAR.⁴¹ In a similar vein, it could be very relevant to explore interprofessional competencies for PLAR (communication with patients, personal behaviours, safe and effective practice, teamwork, and leadership). We located a global overview of such competencies in Australia covering five health professions (Chiropractic, Naturopathy, Osteopathy, Physiotherapy, and Podiatry), the aim of which was to examine health educators' interpretations of such competencies. (Grace, 2015) There may be other such examples.

We also noted some international profession-specific standards that could be useful for PLAR. Stupans et al. (2016) present an analysis of the end-of-degree expectations, expressed as learning outcomes, for pharmacy graduates from Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and the United States. The authors map the requirements to the International Pharmaceutical Federation Global Competency Framework⁴². The standards could perhaps be useful as a basis for designing down to programs at pre-degree levels and for the development of PLAR assessment. An academic analysis of the standards for accreditation for dieticians in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, U.K., and USA found that these are similar and could be used to support global mobility of dieticians (and PLAR?).⁴³

Matching or equivalence?

Learning outcomes, predicated on a formal learning process, can be a barrier rather than an enabler of PLAR if an exact comparison with the outcomes of non-formal or informal learning is demanded at the point of assessment (QAAS, 2022, p.21). Our analysis has raised

³⁹ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/tips-answering-oxford-interview-questions>

⁴⁰ The role of professional bodies (restrictive or more flexible), changes in professional regulation such as to graduate entry, the nature of the labour market, institutional policy and practice, curriculum design, pedagogic agency, and the locus of knowledge production (academy, research institute, or industry)

⁴¹ Level descriptors are a feature of qualifications frameworks

⁴² The development of this framework involved the analysis of eight different (from different countries) pharmacy practitioner development competency frameworks and synthesis of core elements which were further categorized into the domains of Pharmaceutical Public Health, Pharmaceutical Care, Organisation and Management, and Professional/Personal.

⁴³ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36321425/>

contexts and conditions in which highly specific criteria may of necessity be applied to PLAR. However, we do recommend scrutiny in favour of some flexibility and avoidance of over-assessment. A light/right touch approach may be appropriate in relation to some outcomes with equivalency coming to the fore as opposed to matching.

Assessment methods

Authorities on PLAR Assessment (c.f. CEDEFOP, 2015; Van Kleef et al., 2007) stress that sound assessment practices are critical for PLAR credibility.

Although portfolios are often considered to be synonymous with PLAR, many of the assessment methods used in formal education are also used for PLAR, particularly within a post-secondary context. Van Kleef et al. (2007) provide a list of these, together with comments on the advantages and disadvantages of each one. She divides the list into written examinations, oral examinations, performance assessments, and product assessments.

Because MIE expressed specific interest in assessment methods acceptable to health profession regulatory bodies, we investigated PLAR in health fields. As gatekeepers for entry into certain professions and/or respected providers of advice and guidance on professions, regulatory and professional bodies are an essential link in the chain to recognise learning that may be less formal than traditional qualifications. And, as discussed above in relation to our own research findings, regulatory bodies may shape curriculum requirements in such a way as to act as a barrier to the use of PLAR (Harris & Wihak, 2017; Moss, 2014).

[Health Canada](#) (2017) identified several health professions that have been active in promoting the integration of IEHPs into practice in Canada. These professions comprise nursing, midwifery, physiotherapy, medical radiation technologists, medical laboratory technologists and licensed practical nurses. Some of these professions are also represented in the Canadian research literature on PLAR in the health professions. Much of this research is, however, more than a decade old and reported on innovative pilot projects that have since evolved (Moss, 2014; see also, for example, Santa Mina, Eifert, Ireland, Fine, Micevski, Wojtiuk, Valderrama and Wilson, [2011]) for a report of a nursing pilot; Austin, Galli and Diamntouros (2003) for a pharmacy pilot). Klages and Mustafa (2022) focussed a recent comprehensive literature review on addressing PLAR for immigrants and found only two dated articles set in the higher education context. Thirty-two of 39 articles concerned labour market entry, and only three of those involved a health profession, specifically nursing.

Since the research literature yielded few current examples, we instead drew on our web research on PLAR processes in Ontario health profession regulatory colleges, which we have integrated into appropriate sections of this report. (See Appendix A for a summary of our web research findings organized by college.) As part of our search of international literature, we also came across examples of PLAR and international regulatory bodies in health fields. Because MIE explicitly stated that this research was not of interest, we did not pursue it but have nevertheless included our few findings in Appendix B.

Written examinations

Standardized commercially available exams are available particularly in the USA but also further afield. These are frequently competency-based exams, developed by organizations or

associations that are widely recognized by and acceptable to stakeholders. A major advantage is that they are very convenient. Disadvantages include the likelihood that they will not exactly match specific course or program criteria, may not be fully checked for cultural bias, and invariably assume that adult learners can readily engage with formal examinations, when they may be the very things that prevented academic success in the first place.

Candidates may require preparation, support, and feedback in relation to exams and tests. Physical and human resources will be needed for this e.g., practice tests, adaptations of teach-test-teach activities, exam preparation courses, and so on.

Given the widespread use of standardized, written exams for entry to practise in health care professions, we can assume this form of PLAR assessment would be acceptable to health care regulators. Much of the literature on PLAR in health care professions is concerned with using PLAR methods for 'entry to practise' where IEHPs must demonstrate that they have acquired substantially equivalent knowledge from education and experience as recent graduates of Canadian health education programs and hence will be allowed to write entry to practise exams. That is, some regulated professions essentially use a PLAR process to assess whether applicants have met *program level outcomes* of Canadian degrees or diplomas in health-related fields before allowing them write entry to practise exams on the same basis as graduates from Canadian programs. (Note that we found no instances of PLAR processes being used to exempt IEHPs from entry to practise exams.)

Regarding PLAR in regulated professions (Appendix A), after foreign credential evaluation performed by the relevant regulatory colleges, written exams are the first component of the PLAR process in Dietetics, Physiotherapy, Nursing, and Optometry. Touchstone Institute has developed and administers these exams for the Colleges of Dietetics, Nursing and Optometry. Wihak (2020) reported on PLAR methods used in the nursing profession in British Columbia and Nova Scotia to allow IEHPs to write the national nursing exam. Although both provinces use multi-method assessment processes, the first hurdle in each instance is a written, multiple-choice exam.

The College of Midwives of Ontario is currently piloting a PLAR process that includes an on-line written component. Unlike the other colleges where the written PLAR exams are offered only at specific times and dates, the Midwives modules allow the candidates three months to complete online modules by working independently. Each module is assessed through a two-hour multiple-choice exam administered online, with a pass grade of 70%. Candidates are allowed a second opportunity to take each exam.

A small literature on challenge exams used in Pharmacy in the USA exists. Developed by faculty and tailored to match the objectives of specific courses, the claim is that the tests, once designed, can easily be updated and revised, and can be administered frequently to accommodate students' needs. However, in practice, many institutions noted that although they had policies and procedures for PLAR via challenge tests, they had not developed any exams. A disadvantage of this method is the reliability and validity of the test may be difficult to assess due to low numbers of test takers (Fjortoft & Zgarrick, 2001).

In the US, standardized written exams are widely accepted as a PLAR method. A study of 72 institutions conducted for CAEL (Klein-Collins et al., [2020]) reported that all participating colleges accepted exam results from the [College's Board CLEP](#) (College Level Examination Program). The CLEP website indicates that these exams are accepted at 2900 US colleges.

Some of these exams may be relevant for MIE in general, such as exams in psychology, maths, and sciences. CLEP, however, does not offer exams in subject areas directly relevant to the Fundamentals of Health Care Diploma.

In addition to these standardized exams, 82% of institutions in the CAEL study reported using in-house challenge exams as a PLAR assessment method. Although information on the use of written exams for PLAR in US health care programs specifically is lacking, the widespread acceptance of exams suggests it would be an easily defensible form of PLAR assessment.

Oral examinations

As Van Kleef et al. (2007) point out, oral exams are usually combined with other forms of PLAR assessment, rather than as a stand-alone method. Oral exams may take the form of a structured test with pre-set questions, a one-to-one interview with questions flowing from the dialogue between the assessor and the candidate, or a panel interview. Research on oral exams is lacking in both the Canadian and US literature. Nevertheless, from our investigation of Ontario regulatory colleges PLAR practice, we found several examples of oral exams being used.

In Dietetics, structured case oral exams are an element of the [Performance-Based Assessment \(PBA\)](#) which is the second component of the profession's entry to practise PLAR process. The College of Naturopaths of Ontario uses a structured interview with three assessors as the second step of the PLAR process, following two written exams. The College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario, working with the profession's national body, require IEHPs to undertake a 6.5-hour competency assessment, of which a structured behaviour-based interview is one part. The College of Physiotherapists also uses a structured oral exam, the [Ontario Clinical Exam](#), following success with a written exam. The exam is a structured interview with two examiners presenting different clinical scenarios. Similarly, the College of Respiratory Therapist process for IEHPs includes a structured interview with a team of two respiratory therapists designed to compare knowledge, skills, and experience against required competencies.

Performance assessments

Simulations such as OSCEs (Objective Structured Clinical Examination) require PLAR candidates to perform in simulated real-life situations, while trained observers use clear criteria to rate the quality of the performance. These simulations allow for reliable and valid testing of complex, integrated skills.

Research reports on the use of OSCEs in PLAR are lacking. Stanhope-Goodman and Nordstrom (2012) described the use of this assessment tool as one part of the multi-day Substantially Equivalent Assessment for IEHPs at Mount Royal University School of Nursing. Currently, the College of Registered Nurses Alberta (CRNA) has partnered with Touchstone Institute to have assessments conducted. The two-part examination process includes a written exam and an OSCE. Depending on scores, the IEHP may be allowed to write the national nursing exam or be referred to one of three bridging programs offered by Alberta universities. (Note that CRNA also accepts [bridging programs](#) offered in other provinces.)

In Ontario, our research on the websites of regulatory colleges showed that several professions use OSCEs as part of the PLAR process for entry to practise. These include College of Naturopaths, College of Nurses (like Alberta partnered with Touchstone Institute for a two-part assessment process that includes an OSCE), and the College of Optometrists (partnered with Touchstone). The [College of Respiratory Therapists](#) also uses simulated clinical scenarios as part of the PLAR process for entry-to-practice, although the term OSCE is not specifically used.

Product assessments

Van Kleef (2007) considers a PLAR portfolio to fall in the category of product assessment in that it presents a collection of materials, usually a written narrative with supporting evidence, that verifies skills and knowledge acquired outside the formal education system. This section should therefore be read in relation to the section on portfolios above. As already discussed, even though there are criticisms, PLAR portfolios remain a widely used form of assessment, and have generated a substantial literature. Interestingly, we could find few examples in health professions that use a portfolio approach: none of the regulatory colleges in Ontario describe their PLAR processes as including portfolios.

The First Nations Health Managers Association, an Ontario-based organization, does use a portfolio process for [Certification](#). Open to candidates with more than seven years of First Nations health management, the portfolio must conform to the format specified in the [Information Guide](#).

At Thompson Rivers University – Open Learning, Bachelor of Health Sciences students use a [Competency-based PLAR portfolio](#) to petition for blocks of unspecified elective credits.⁴⁵ The competencies in question are not specifically health-related but rather reflect general employability skills (communication, teamwork and leadership, information gathering/organization, numeracy, problem-solving and decision-making, creative and critical thinking, independent learning and intellectual maturity, applied knowledge and skills). Multi-disciplinary teams of two assessors review the written portfolio against established criteria for each competency. Texas State University also uses a generic competency-based approach for post-traditional (adult or non-traditional) students in their Department of Occupational, Workforce & Leadership Studies (Sherron, Cherrstrom, Boden & Lindsay, 2019).

In the US, the Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics permits dietetic internship programs to grant internship hours based on ‘Prior Assessed Learning’ (PAL). While the assessment process is not specified, some organizations have adopted a portfolio approach. For example, [Wellness Workday](#) is a dietetic internship offering organization whose website includes [instructions for compiling a portfolio](#). Of note is the two-week timeline to compile the portfolio. No support is offered other than the instructions. [Centracare St. Cloud Hospital](#) in St. Cloud, Minnesota offers PAL for internships in food service management and community nutrition. The institution’s [PAL Policy](#) indicates a portfolio

⁴⁵ The *TRU-OL Competency-Based Handbook* can be forwarded as a separate document for MIE’s internal use. Degree programs, as compared to diploma, generally have more opportunities for elective credits that can be earned through PLAR.

approach but does not provide any specific information about what the portfolio should contain.

Internationally, the U.K. Association for Nutrition requires information about PLAR as part of its general accreditation guidance for universities⁴⁶ - as follows:

Advanced Standing

- State whether you have formal procedures for admitting applicants with advanced standing.
- State the maximum number of credit points that may be imported and state the percentage of the total course credit points that these represent.
- State the highest level/year/part of the programme to which you admit students by advanced standing.
- Provide and reference the document/s that describe your procedures for quality control of admissions with advanced standing (e.g., the relevant section from your university's regulations or procedures).

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)

- State whether you have procedures in place for the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL or APEL) as a basis for admission.
- Please state the total number of credits a student can import, and briefly outline your procedures for quality control of APL (e.g., you can attach the relevant section from your university's regulations or procedures, to explain how you assess APL claims for admission).

Considerations for Decision Making and Model Building

- Assessment requires subject specialists with adequate skills in assessment – PLAR Assessors. Who will these be? Traditional academics will need support to do their assessment in a different way.
- What process will MIE use to engage faculty members with PLAR implementation?
- What workload and/or remuneration model will MIE use for individual assessors?
- How will MIE handle PLAR-related activities within departmental funding formulas?
- What PLAR training will MIE provide to assessors?
- Does MIE already have challenge exams in use for other programs? Can they be customized for the new program?
- Do any articulation arrangements for recognition of non-formal training programs (i.e., originating outside the formal education system) already exist?
- Knowledge structures make different courses in the diploma amenable to different assessment methods. How will MIE determine which methods or combination of methods will be used for each course? Will these decisions be made in advance or left to the individual assessor?

⁴⁶ <https://www.associationfornutrition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Accreditation-Application-Guidance-Notes-September-2019v3.pdf>

- Will MIE create structured interview protocols to use as stand-alone PLAR assessments or in combination with other methods?
- Will PLAR assessors have access to observation labs and equipment in use to assess classroom learning?
- What software platform will MIE use to support portfolio submission and assessment?

Certification

The final step in a PLAR process is the awarding of credits towards completion of a credential. The EU Guidelines (CEDFOP, 2015) stress the importance of maintaining the credibility of the awarding body (relating to our idea of ‘optimal inclusion’). Following the quality assurance practices outlined in Van Kleef et al. (2007) or CAPLA (2015) will help to ensure that institutional credibility is preserved.

In her study of PLAR in Ontario community colleges, Harrison (2018) found that none of institutions surveyed had reached a ‘perfect alignment’ with CAPLA’s recommended practices. Using CAPLA’s six quality assurance steps to categorize, she found those colleges identified as ‘mature’ showed the following features:

- Explaining PLAR
 - Benefits of PLAR for the institution are clear
 - Both a designated office and a designated position exists for PLAR
 - Articulation agreements based on PLAR exist
 - PLAR is included in the strategic mandate
 - PLAR data is routinely collected and analyzed
 - A PLAR policy exists with a review date within the last decade
 - Resources to promote and explain processes to students exist
- Provide information on expected requirements
 - Course learning outcomes
 - Self-assessment resources for potential applicants
- Explain assessment processes, methods and criteria
 - Resources available to assist candidates in preparing for assessment (e.g., portfolio guidelines)
 - Provision of different formats for PLAR (e.g., course-based and program-based)
 - Tools used to evaluate (e.g., rubrics) are provided to candidate
- Conduct assessment
 - Accommodations for candidates with disabilities
 - Assessor resources including training are provided
- Provide assessment results
 - Assessors may use discretion in requesting additional information from candidate before determining success
- Grades earned through PLAR are transcribed appropriately
- Candidates know who to contact with questions following an assessment
- Candidates have the right to appeal PLAR outcomes.

Proportion of allowable PLAR credits

North America

No Canadian or US published research exists that is concerned explicitly with the number of credits a student can earn through PLAR. The two most PLAR-active universities in Canada (Conrad, 2014), Athabasca University and Thompson Rivers University both offer a Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) degree. At Athabasca, the BGS has no residency requirements⁴⁷, and hence, a degree could be acquired completely through transfer credit and PLAR. At TRU – Open Learning, the BGS has a residency requirement of 15 credits but under the current PLAR policy, credits earned through PLAR count towards residency for Open Learning programs. Again, a degree could be acquired through a combination of transfer credit and PLAR or entirely through PLAR. Athabasca’s post-diploma Bachelor of Science, Human Science Major has a residency requirement of 30 credits, which cannot be earned through PLAR⁴⁸. TRU – Open Learning also offers a post-diploma Bachelor of Health Sciences, with a minimum of 15 credits earned through TRU; PLAR credits can satisfy this requirement.

The [BC Prior Learning Action Network](#) (BC PLAN) conducted research on PLAR provisions at BC universities and colleges in 2019. Since the work was done for the BC Commission on Admissions and Credit Transfer, it has not been published. It is, however, available to BC PLAN members on the organization’s website. A perusal of this information indicates a wide range of allowable PLAR credit. Some variation is also apparent in whether PLAR and transfer credits are considered separately or together in determining the proportion of allowable non-residential credits. A brief perusal on Ontario Community College PLAR pages showed that Fanshawe College, Cambrian College, Centennial College, Durham College, Lambton College, Mohawk College, and Niagara College specify that up to 75% of a program to be completed through PLAR⁴⁹.

The CAEL study (Klein-Collins et al. 2020) commented: ‘The extent to which institutions had limits on the number of PLA credits that can be applied to degrees was highly variable among the participating institutions.’ (p. 12). Sixty percent of associate degree granting institutions allowed 51% or more PLAR credits towards degree requirements. SUNY ESC, for example, allows up to 40 credits of 64 credits for an Associate of Arts or Associate of Science program. Students at the CAEL study (2020) institutions earned 14.8 credits on average through PLAR, with a range from 2.7 to 41.4 credits.

International

As in North America, the minimum and maximum amounts of permissible credit vary. The already-mentioned University of Bradford serves as an illustrative example. The minimum volume of academic credit a student/applicant may claim through PLAR is one module of the relevant programme. The maximum is ‘50% of the balance of the named award for which the student wishes to be registered.’ A student must study at least 60 academic credits at the

⁴⁷ In the on-line context of TRU – Open Learning and Athabasca, ‘residency’ indicates that a course is taken from the institution, rather than on-campus attendance.

⁴⁸ See knowledge arguments made earlier.

⁴⁹ This consistency may stem from the government-initiated introduction of PLAR system-wide to Ontario Community Colleges in the 1990s.

University to be eligible for a Bachelor award with Honours or a Masters. This is for the University to be sure it can make a reasoned judgement on which to base its award.

Permissible volumes of credit may vary between transcript and credit transfer and prior experiential learning and between levels as the extract below from physiotherapy programs at the University of East Anglia in the U.K. shows. Most decisions are made a school or department level.

PLAR Fees

CAEL’s Ten Standards for Assessing Learning draw attention to the question of PLAR fees: ‘Fees charged for assessment are based on the services performed in the process rather than the credit awarded.’ Harrison (2018) in her report on PLAR in Ontario community colleges pointed out that some institutions require the students to pay the course tuition plus a PLAR fee. Further, doing courses through PLAR may affect student’s eligibility for the Ontario Student Assistance Plan.

In the US, the CAEL study found that some institutions charged a flat PLAR fee while at others a percentage of tuition is charged. Some institutions use a combination of flat fees and incremental fees based on the number of PLAR credits. (Note: TRU- Open Learning uses this later method for course-based portfolios)

APCL⁵⁰/APEL/credit transfer permitted in Physiotherapy

	Bachelors and Integrated Masters courses	Postgraduate taught courses
Amount of APCL/ Credit Transfer permitted	For APCL and credit transfer for undergraduate Honours degree courses and Integrated master’s degrees, a candidate must normally attain the final 240 credits at UEA (or the final 360 credits in the case of degree courses comprising 480 credits). Under exceptional circumstances, a concession may be granted for a candidate to be admitted to Year 3/the final year of a degree course.	Candidates may be granted APCL or credit transfer of up to 50% of the total number of credit points for an award. It will not be granted for the dissertation part of a course.
When combined with APEL	The maximum combination of credit transfer, APCL and APEL) that may be granted is 33% of the total number of credit points required for an award.	The maximum combination of credit transfer, APCL and APEL that may be granted is 50% of the total number of credit points required for an award.

⁵⁰ Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning

Considerations for Decision Making and Model Building

- To maintain academic credibility, MIE must take account of the quality assurance practices with relation to PLAR, such as those recommended by CAPLA (2015). Ideally, over time, MIE should aim for the practices that Harrison (2018) identified as ‘mature’.
- MIE needs to develop an institutional PLAR policy incrementally to address issues such as:
 - PLAR fee;
 - PLAR and residency for MIE programs;
 - Institutional and/or department determination of allowable proportion of PLAR credits within a program;
 - How credits earned through PLAR are shown on a transcript⁵¹;
 - Appeals of PLAR decisions;

⁵¹ Students also need to be advised that credits identified as earned through PLAR on a transcript may not count towards GPA calculation and may not be accepted by other institutions for transfer credit and/or admission purposes.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

PLAR is a complex and often contradictory set of practices that can serve many social purposes. Although it may be tacit or unarticulated, theory about knowledge, curricula, teaching and learning, and assessment is active in PLAR. PLAR is not a quick fix, neutral ‘universal good’. PLAR can be a learning process as well as an assessment event. No one-size-fits-all approach to PLAR exists - context matters, although general guidelines are a useful starting point.

Knowledge structure in different disciplines is an important consideration but is not the only determinant of the feasibility of PLAR. The distinction between traditional and new professions and associated curricula also play a significant role. Inter-disciplinary programs offer opportunities for PLAR. Labour markets that are highly regulated offer fewer opportunities for PLAR. Regulatory and professional colleges can make PLAR very difficult in programs that might otherwise lend themselves to it (for a range of reasons – public safety, conservatism etc.) or conversely, may play an enabling role. Even where curricular conditions are largely unfavourable to PLAR, there may be niches of feasibility. Pedagogic agency (and the converse) plays a role in facilitating PLAR.

The feasibility of PLAR is enhanced when industry-related experiential knowledge is highly prized in the formal education context. Some workplaces are very important sites of knowledge production e.g., the creative industries, technology.

Institutional mission can encourage or discourage PLAR. Indeed, institutional barriers may be expressed as epistemological when in fact they are political. PLAR practices must strike a careful balance between offering flexibility and maximum accessibility for PLAR candidates on the one hand and retaining the academic rigor, gestalt, and status of the knowledge/profession/program on the other. This balancing act we term ‘optimal inclusion.’ (Harris, 2000).

Some PLAR candidates can progress based on specialized assessment only; others need specialized pedagogy. Specialized pedagogy is not a single practice; its efficacy rests on the expertise of PLAR practitioners (Advisors and Assessors) to ‘know the borders and cross the lines’ (Harris 2004). Specialized pedagogy aims to work beyond the taken-for-granted epistemological and pedagogic assumptions that underpin PLAR, to render it more accessible to less-traditional students.

MIE has an ideal opportunity to integrate PLAR into the design of a flexible program which addresses selection and sequencing. Creative tensions will likely occur in terms of ensuring that the diploma can ‘look both ways’ i.e., towards work in health care settings or enrolment in further health education. This will involve careful consideration of ways to select and sequence within the diploma curriculum for ‘optimal inclusion’ via PLAR.

Flexible curricula (even outside of PLAR) signal the need for staffing models based on support and mentorship for individual students as they enter and navigate the program. A flexible program means that PLAR will be an ongoing feature of the diploma (a process not an event) to monitor individual progression and maximize opportunities for prior learning to

count throughout e.g., students may work with a mentor and keep a learning logbook to ensure they remain aware of their learning process progress towards their goals.

Proactive marketing and information will be required using a variety of media, including easily accessed and easily used information on MIE's website. Marketing should be tailored to target groups for the diploma. MIE will need to build in a substantial amount of advice and guidance if it is to fulfil its aim of offering a 'self-paced, flexible, and fully customizable program'. Specific resources will need to be acquired or developed e.g., diagnostic and readiness tests. PLAR touches many areas of institutional life e.g., technical/website support teams, admissions staff, careers guidance, and more. The exemplars we have showcased could form part of institutional capacity building and professional development for PLAR.

PLAR is not a bolt-on process. MIE needs to determine the locus of responsibility for PLAR advising, and whether it will be best served by PLAR specialists, faculty members, or some other institutional arrangement. Candidates need to develop an educational, career, or employment plan which will then guide them through the PLAR process and the diploma. It may become clear that PLAR is not suitable and/or that a candidate needs or prefers to follow a formal route.

MIE may have opportunities to build program planning and/or PLAR into the diploma curriculum itself. MIE could consider a dedicated credit-bearing PLAR course. The 'Introduction to Health Care' course could become such a space. Or a SUNY ESC-style additional course along the lines of 'Modern Day Health Care' or 'Orientation to Health Care' or 'Careers in Health Care'. If the Fundamentals of Health Care diploma is going to be a self-paced, flexible, and fully customizable program, a credit-bearing course could be dedicated to 'My Diploma Design'. The Health Care Observership be a space where workplace learning is recognised. Possibly, a 'learning contract' module could be developed as an employment-based program with employer-MIE collaboration and agreement.

MIE will have to develop processes for receiving, validating, and recording PLAR candidates' documentation. A structured documentation model would increase access to the PLAR portfolio process for students who do not possess that style of writing. The complexities of documentation, regardless of the type of PLAR under consideration, underscores the fact that the roles of PLAR Advisor and PLAR Assessor are highly specialized.

As MIE consider how to begin PLAR implementation, careful attention is required to training and support for Advisors and Assessors, who are most likely to be MIE faculty members. The PLAR implementation process will need to engage faculty from the outset. Concerns about workload and/or remuneration model for individual practitioners will need to be addressed as will the question of how MIE will handle PLAR-related activities within departmental funding formulas. The provision of PLAR training to MIE faculty will also be a key issue.

On a more practical level, MIE may have existing resources that can be used to support PLAR assessments. MIE may already have challenge exams in use for other programs. Could they be customized for the new program? MIE may already have articulation arrangements for recognition of non-formal training programs (i.e., originating outside the formal education system) or existing processes for inter-institutional transfer credit could be adapted for application to recognition of non-formal training programs for PLAR credit.

Knowledge structures make different courses in the diploma amenable to different assessment methods. MIE can support teams of assessors to determine which methods or combination of methods will be used for each course. Such decisions could be made in advance, rather than left to the individual assessors. MIE could create structured interview protocols to use as stand-alone PLAR assessments or in combination with other methods. PLAR assessors could be given access to observation labs and equipment in use to assess classroom learning. An important consideration will be whether MIE's online course management system can be used to support portfolio submission and assessment.

Finally, to maintain academic credibility, MIE must develop and implement quality assurance practices such as those recommended by CAPLA (2015). Ideally, MIE should aim for the practices identified that Harrison (2018) identified as 'mature'. As an initial step, MIE can begin by developing elements of an institutional PLAR policy that addresses issues such as PLAR fees, PLAR and Residency for MIE programs, institutional and/or department determination of allowable proportion of PLAR credits within a program, how credits earned through PLAR are shown on a transcript and appeals of PLAR decisions.

MIE administrators and faculty should familiarize themselves with existing resources to support PLAR implementation in post-secondary contexts.

Recommendations

- MIE administrators leading the PLAR initiative identify two or more PLAR champions within the institution.
- MIE administrators form a PLAR committee to begin building institution-wide engagement and capacity. Key stakeholders include faculty members, registrarial staff, marketing staff, IT staff and students. Committee members would be offered initial training in PLAR drawing from this report as a key resource.
- Task the PLAR committee with:
 - Identifying the most suitable location for PLAR advising to occur within the MIE context;
 - Identifying resourcing implications of PLAR;
 - Discussing support needs with marketing and IT departments;
 - Addressing remuneration and fee issues;
 - Developing a strategy to foster faculty and staff engagement with PLAR implementation;
 - Identifying and planning how to meet training needs for faculty members and other MIE personnel involved in PLAR implementation.
- If anticipated number of students seeking PLAR is low, MIE could consider outsourcing PLAR to a post-secondary institution with an established PLAR program such as Humber College, TRU – Open Learning or Athabasca University.
- Implement a PLAR pilot for the Fundamentals of Health Care program, with the involvement a PLAR committee, before going MIE-wide.
- Gather data (or establish KPIs) during the pilot, including benchmark data, for evaluation purposes and to inform further PLAR policy development and implementation at MIE.

Towards Implementation

Over and above the content of this report, other resources exist to support MIE in planning how to implement a PLAR pilot.

- CAEL offers an on-line course [From the Ground Up](#) intended to support development of an action plan to implement PLAR on campus.
- The on-line journal [PLAIO Prior Learning Inside Out](#) contains case studies of PLAR implementation in post-secondary institutions.
- The Scottish RPL Framework (QAAS, 2022, pp. 9-10) provide useful templates for initial considerations regarding implementation at MIE. Detailed extracts are provided in Appendix C for MIE's convenience.

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Appendices

Appendix A Summary of PLAR processes in Ontario Regulated Health Professions

Appendix B International Regulatory Bodies and PLAR

Appendix C Extracts re: Implementation from Scottish RPL Framework

Appendix A Summary of PLAR processes in Ontario Regulated Health Professions

Internationally Educated Health Professionals (IEHPs) wishing to register to practice in a Canadian province or territory must pass a national or provincial territorial exam. Before being granted permission to write the exam, the IEPs engage with a process that may offer opportunities to have their prior learning assessed. Although this is termed ‘entry to practise’ in some professions, it is termed PLAR in others.

Assessment of Academic Credentials The usual first step is to have foreign credentials recognized or assessed for recognition. This step essentially resembles a transfer credit evaluation done by a post-secondary admissions office. Typically, regulatory colleges have mutual recognition agreements or accept credentials from a small number of countries. For example, the College of Dietitians of Ontario accept credentials only from Australia and the USA. For IEPs from non-recognized countries, their academic credentials are assessed individually.

Colleges approach assessments of academic credentials in different ways:

- The provincial regulatory body registration committee reviews transcripts, course descriptions, and information about the structure and learning objectives of training against provincial or national standards for professional education in the field (e.g., Dietitians)
- A national body assesses academic credentials against national standards for professional education in the field and then advises a provincial regulatory body if the education is comparable, somewhat comparable, or not comparable (e.g., National Nursing Assessment Service, Dental Hygienists, Federation of Optometric Regulatory Authorities of Canada). Note that the Canadian Alliance of Canadian Physiotherapists website provides a very comprehensive schematic of top source countries identifying the similarity of IE credentials to Canada and the success rate of applicants from that country on the Physiotherapy Competency Exam (written and practical).
- The provincial regulatory body requires applicants to have academic credentials assessed by a member of the Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada (e.g., Colleges of Audiology, Kinesiology, Occupational Therapists, Respiratory Therapists of Ontario)

Prior Learning Assessment

If the assessment of academic credentials reveals formal education and training that is only somewhat comparable to Canadian educational standards for the profession, some regulatory colleges refer IEPs to a Prior Learning Assessment process. These PLAR processes differ from college to college and from province to province. Some colleges refer applicants to bridging programs before or after the PLAR process. These processes provide excellent insight into what is acceptable PLAR practice within a health profession context. Dr. Joy Van Kleef, author of *Quality Assurance in Prior Learning Assessment* (2007), developed PLAR processes for several regulatory colleges in Ontario, including Physiotherapists, Optometry, ensuring that quality standards were met.

Here are Ontario examples of regulatory colleges using some type of PLAR process. All use one or more assessment methods recognized as valid and reliable in the PLAR world (exams, interviews, structured observations, documentation of learning).

College of Dietitians of Ontario (CDO)

For international graduates with a degree reasonably related to dietetics, nutrition or food and who have completed practical training that enabled them to practice in their home country, CDO offers a [PLAR process](#) that includes completing the IEPN bridging program offered by [Toronto Metropolitan University](#) for candidates who do not score highly enough on the [Knowledge and Competencies Assessment Tool \(KCAT\)](#). CDO recognizes successful completion of this certificate as equivalent to KCAT Level I result, and successful completion of the practicum year as equivalent to successful completion of the [Performance-Based Assessment \(PBA\)](#).

Steps in the PLAR process include:

- Assessment of education and practical training
- Completion of Knowledge and Competency Assessment Tool (KCAT) (available annually in February); three possible outcomes (level of knowledge)
- KCAT Level I – move to Performance Based Assessment (PBA) and completion of accredited practicum or TMU IEPN practicum program; KCAT Level II – complete full

Temporary registration status available to those waiting to write the CDRE or waiting for results. May work as a dietitian.

College of Midwives of Ontario (CMO)

The College is launching a new [Orientation and Assessment Pilot](#) program in March 2023, a new 3-step competency assessment process based on Canadian Competencies for Midwives. It will be the route by which IEMs, through a combination of international experience and Ontario orientation, can apply for registration. The IEM who successfully completes this assessment program will be deemed to have equivalency to the qualifications of an Ontario Midwifery Education Program graduate and be eligible to write the CMRE.

There are five eligibility requirements an IEM must meet to enrol in the program. (Those deemed ineligible are directed to complete a midwifery education program in Ontario.)

- Canadian citizen, permanent resident, etc.
- Completed a formal, structured midwifery education program and provide a WES Program assessment report as proof
- Completed IELTS with a score of 7.0 in each component
- Practiced as a midwife providing clinical care in the previous 6 years
- Attended a minimum of 100 births as the midwife in charge (maximum of 60 of these births can have taken place during midwifery education; a minimum of 40 must have occurred during experience as a practising midwife after completion of education.

The program includes three online assessment modules and a 14-day in-person comprehensive assessment intensive.

College of Naturopaths of Ontario (CONO)

Protected titles in Ontario are “ND”, “naturopathic doctor” and “naturopath”.

CNO offers [PLAR](#) for Internationally educated applicants that have graduated from a non-accredited programs. The initial step is submission of a PLAR application (DEE), proof of English Language Proficiency and credential assessment. Each submission is reviewed by the PLAR Assessor and outcomes by the PLAR Committee. Outcome of the review can be:

- Approved
- Partially Approved – gaps must be address before being granted PLAR approval
- Not equivalent

Once approved the PLAR applicant then must successfully complete:

- two PLAR exams (Biomedical, Clinical)
- demonstration based assessment (a structured interview by 3 assessors)
- if substantially competent, completes a second demonstration-based assessment involving interaction with 3 standardized patients
- if deemed substantially equivalent by the PLAR committee completes the College clinical (practical) exams and Jurisprudence exam

The College provides a [schematic of which exams](#) are required (accredited program grad versus PLAR candidate) for full registration (see the second page). (Note: from the chart it appears that the 2 PLAR exams ((Biomedical, Clinical) are the same ones as for a graduate from an accredited program).

Registrants who have completed the Canadian Therapeutics and Prescribing online (offered through UBC) course are eligible to register for the [Ontario Prescribing and Therapeutics exam](#).

College of Medical Laboratory Technologists of Ontario (MLTO)

The College of Medical Laboratory Technologists of Ontario works with the national body to assess IEPs formal education, training and work experience as part of a comprehensive [PLAR process](#). Applicants are required first to complete an On-line Self-Assessment to evaluate whether they have required competencies to proceed with a full PLAR evaluation, which is expensive and time-consuming. After that, in addition to documents concerning formal education, applicants are required to submit formal documentation of their work experience, professional certifications and continuing professional education. A PLAR assessor reviews all of this information to determine eligibility to write the national exam. If deficiencies are found, the assessor provides a PLA Learning Plan that the applicant must complete within two years. A Learning Plan may include recommendations for [refresher courses](#) in one or more subject areas or more comprehensive education. Applicants are referred to bridging courses for IEPS such as that offered at MIE.

College of Medical Radiation and Imaging Technologists in Ontario (CMRITO)

The College of Medical Radiation and Imaging Technologists combines an assessment of non-Canadian academic credentials with an assessment of documented clinical competence based on work experience. No other PLAR process is offered. Note that bridging programs to help with preparation for the national exam are only available to candidates whose combination of education and work experience are deemed equivalent to Canadian educational/training standards in the field.

College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO)

After receiving an Advisory report from NASS, the national nurse assessment body, the College assesses the credentials of all internationally educated applicants to determine if their nursing program, additional education and/or nursing practice (if any) is equivalent to the education of [an approved Canadian university baccalaureate degree nursing program](#). Applicants whose nursing education and practice do not meet the College's [nursing education requirement](#) will be asked to take the [International Education Nurses Competency Assessment Program](#) (IENCAP). The IENCAP, offered through the Touchstone Institute, evaluates nursing knowledge, skill and judgment using a multiple-choice exam, interviews, and an OSCE that takes place in a setting similar to real-life clinical situations in Ontario. The IENCAP can also identify gaps in applicants' nursing competencies, which will have to be addressed with additional education. Touchstone-approved Preparation courses for the IENCAP are available through:

- [HealthForceOntario](#)
- [CARE Centre for Internationally Educated Nurses \(CARE 4 Nurses\)](#)

College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario (COTO)

The College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario works with the national Association of Canadian Occupational Therapy Regulatory Organizations to perform Substantial Equivalency Assessments for IEPs. After formal education credentials have been reviewed, the applicant is scheduled for a 6.5 hour Competency Assessment. This interview-style assessment involves three sections: Behaviour-based interview, Assessment Case and Treatment Case. The applicant is assessed against defined Essential Competencies. If Substantial Equivalency is granted, the applicant is allowed to write the registration exam. If SE is not granted, the Candidate receives a report detailing gaps and requirements for gap filling.

College of Opticians of Ontario (COO)

The opportunity for [PLAR](#) is available to graduates of optician education programs that have not been accredited by COO. An IEO may be eligible if they have the necessary skills and knowledge, [acquired from work experience](#), to pass the national examinations. The IEO completes the [PLAR application form](#) and the College Registration Committee is responsible for the assessment. Other required documentation includes a credential assessment report by WES and the [Verification of Dispensing Experience Form](#). Proof of [English Proficiency](#) is required of those for whose education was not conducted in English or French (IELTS 7.0).

An additional assessment may be required If the Registration Committee requires more information.

Possible decision outcomes are:

- Apply as an intern optician and challenge the NACOR exams (both)
- Complete courses to bridge the gap in knowledge
- Apply as a student optician to complete an accredited Opticianry program.
- College of Optometrists of Ontario

Pre-registration for IEOs is through the national FORAC credential assessment process including successfully challenging the [Internationally Graduated Optometrists Evaluating Exam](#) (IGOEE) administered by the Touchstone Institute and providing eligibility to write the Canadian board exam. Applicants must successfully complete a the [Advanced Standing Optometry Preparatory program](#) (ASOPP) at the University of Waterloo, School of Optometry and Vision Science professional program. Eligible applicants apply to ASOPP through the Ontario University Application Center and complete a Computer-Based Assessment for Sampling Personal Characteristics (CASPer). Applicants deemed eligible for bridging will receive a link to take the CASPer assessment online. Admissions decisions are based on IGOEE scores and results of a CASPer assessment. Those students who successfully complete all aspects of ASOPP and years 3 and 4 of the Doctor of Optometry program will be awarded a Doctor of Optometry degree from the University of Waterloo.

The College then administers an entry-to-practice exam and a practice assessment/evaluation if more than 3 years have lapsed since the applicant successfully completed the entry-to-practice exam. In some cases, both processes may be applied to ensure the applicant is competent to practise optometry in Ontario in accordance with the College standards of practice.

As a cost is incurred for both the College recommends the IEO opt for a practice evaluation at the onset. If deficiencies are noted the College Registration committee makes recommendations for upgrading so the applicant meets the standards of practice in Ontario.

College of Physiotherapists of Ontario (CPO)

An IEP who practiced physiotherapy outside of Ontario or Canada needs to submit a Regulatory History Form to the College from each jurisdiction where they have been registered. These forms must be dated within 6 months of applying to the College. Applicants for registration must first have their credentials assessed through the national body (above) and pass the [Ontario Clinical Exam \(OCE\)](#), a two-part exam that assesses the applicant's knowledge, skills and abilities and how these are applied in practice. The OCE uses a structured interview format with 2 college-approved examiners assessing each candidate and provides scenarios that require applicants to draw on their own knowledge. IEPs needing to fill gaps in formal education may also apply to the [Ontario Internationally Educated Physical Therapy Bridging \(OIEPB\) Program](#) at the University of Toronto (English).

The OCE is currently conducted in-person using a hybrid format. Candidates are on site in Toronto at the Touchstone Institute while examiners interact with candidates remotely through a virtual exam delivery platform. The OCE is only available in English. French speaking candidates have the option of registering for the Universite de Sherbrooke [Final Comprehensive Exam](#), in April 2023. A fully virtual OCE will be available in 2023.

College of Respiratory Therapists of Ontario (CRTO)

The College of Respiratory Therapists of Ontario has embedded a PLAR process in the Entry to Practice Assessment for IEPs. After assessment of educational credentials, a team of two Respiratory Therapists conduct a structured interview to compare knowledge, skills and experience against required competencies. Candidates receive feedback on the results of the educational credentials review and interview before choosing to proceed with a costly [Clinical Skills Assessment](#), that involves demonstration of clinical skills in a simulated

environment. Trained assessors evaluate performance during a series of scenarios, using standardized evaluation rubrics.

Appendix B International Regulatory Bodies and PLAR

Optometry and Osteopathy in Australia use a ‘Peak Professional Body’ (PPD) for IEHP recognition. A PPD is a leading body nationally accepted as a legitimate ‘voice’ or representative of a profession or industry. These bodies carry out all the assessments of overseas trained professionals¹⁸

Overseas nurses are offered the option of a six-month course taught by nurse educators who are also academic literacy experts. As well as academic literacy, the option addresses complex technical language, and the use of colloquialisms, shortened quick speech etc. (See Ramjam et al., 2018)

The Netherlands is an interesting case because its national infrastructure for the recognition of foreign educational and professional qualifications in the health care sector is well-developed (See Muller et al., 2017). In the past two decades, policies in this area have been geared towards the development and evaluation of supporting measures alongside formal recognition, with much more emphasis on PLAR since the launch of the Dutch Knowledge Centre APL (p.684). The system brings professional *experience* into the frame. More could be achieved if account were taken of the added value of cultural diversity in organisations where many highly skilled health professionals are employed, such as hospitals. For example, if assessment criteria for PLAR included intercultural learning and cultural diversity, then assessment opportunities could be developed such as candidates being invited to join team discussions to contribute their perspective on illness, diagnosis, and treatment. Not only would this benefit the PLAR candidate, but also the PLAR Assessor.

In New Zealand, some professional bodies have requirements stipulating learning that cannot be credited or setting a limit on the number of credits that can be awarded toward a particular programme leading to the professional qualification i.e., including learning certified via RPL.¹⁹

In Scotland, the QAAS undertook a survey to explore awareness about PLAR with members of their Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) Forum. Although awareness varied, ‘most respondents agreed that non-traditional learning such as continuing professional development or on-the-job training should be recognised as an RPL route to membership of professional bodies.’ (QAAS, 2022, p. 27). It is acknowledged that there is still work to be done, and it is recommended that PSRBs identify an RPL champion – someone in HRD – to stimulate discussion and development.²⁰

Several Scottish PSRBs do already have their own PLAR policies:

- Chartered Banker Institute www.charteredbanker.com/our-qualifications/recognition-of-prior-learning.html

¹⁸ The Australian Osteopathic Accreditation Council carries out assessments of the skills and qualifications held by overseas trained osteopaths on behalf of the Osteopathy Board of Australia. <https://osteopathiccouncil.org.au> And optometry <https://www.oanz.org/examination/migration/overseas-optometrist/>

¹⁹ <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/qualifications-and-standards/CRT-RPL-guidelines-Oct-20.pdf>

²⁰ The report is available here (towards the bottom of the webpage) <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/flexible-and-accessible-learning/valuing-and-recognising-prior-learning-and-experience>

- Chartered Management Institute (CMI) www.managers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Recognition-of-Prior-Learning-Guidance.pdf
- Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) www.sssc.uk.com/knowledgebase/article/KA-01646/en-us
- The Institution of Engineering and Technology www.theiet.org/media/8826/guidance-notes-on-uku-for-applicants-september-2021.pdf
- The Institute of Mechanical Engineers [Guidance on how experience can count in lieu of qualifications](#)

Appendix C Extracts re: Implementation from Scottish RPL Framework

Starting point questions for RPL

1. Are you clear about your institution's rationale for implementing RPL?
2. Is there an agreed definition of RPL that you will use in all processes, documentation, and marketing within your institution?
3. Are there any [...] 'enablers' already in place in your institution?
 - a. Policies and processes that mainstream and integrate RPL within admissions, learning, teaching and assessment strategies and quality assurance mechanisms.
 - b. Curriculum design that explicitly addresses flexible modes of entry, progression, and delivery, linked to a wider understanding and recognition of RPL across the institution including quality assurance.
 - c. Clear points of contact for RPL for potential applicants, existing students, and staff.
 - d. [Opportunities for] Building staff capacity and capability (academic and support staff) in terms of providing effective forms of RPL support and appropriate forms of assessment, which is linked to initial and CPD opportunities and the increased visibility of RPL across the institution and in staff workload.
 - e. Greater use of technology enhanced RPL provision through virtual learning environments and e-portfolios as part of a blended learning approach to support and assessment.
 - f. [Opportunities for the] Integration of RPL processes within related developments such as personal development planning (PDP), employability, work-based learning, and distance learning; employer engagement strategies, widening participation and college-university articulation strategies.
 - g. Data gathering and analysis that ensures effective monitoring, tracking and evaluation as part of a process of reviewing and enhancing RPL practice.
4. Which model of RPL is the institution planning to support [...]?
5. What is the maximum number of credits toward an award that your institution will award for RPL?
6. How will RPL be used?
 - a. RPL for admission to a programme of study.
 - b. RPL for entry with advanced standing.
 - c. RPL that leads to an award.
 - d. RPL as a formative experience to help students gain confidence and develop academic skills.

Guidance for developing flexible curricula for RPL

- Flexible entry routes and alternative routes to credit, whether through RPL, credit transfer, articulation, or work-based learning, should be addressed at the point of programme design rather than programme delivery. This requires learning outcomes that facilitate a range of different routes for their achievement which link into delivery and assessment methods.
- Alternative assessment frameworks for RPL should be considered to simplify the process for students and staff, and to develop assessment processes which are appropriate to the nature and outcomes of informal learning, while still ensuring integrity of the process and outcome. This might include, for example, the use of

programme level outcomes or SCQF level descriptors rather than module level learning outcomes to enable an easier comparison between the outcomes the curriculum seeks to achieve at that level in terms of capacity and competence and those demonstrated through personal or professional experiences (Whittaker and Brown, 2013).

- Programme design should enable students to build on the range of competencies and knowledge gained through work-based and other experience which learners bring to the curriculum.
- RPL should also be integrated within work-based learning programmes, forming an intrinsic part of the planning and evidence-gathering process, rather than viewed as a discrete activity before the programme commences.
- As part of regional and national workforce development agendas, there is clearly potential for HEIs to explore opportunities to strengthen the use of RPL with employees in the workplace and to support more flexible, part-time provision.
- There is also scope to make the links between RPL and educational or personal and professional development planning and the development of employability skills and graduate attributes more explicit.

Follow up questions for ‘making it happen’ include the following extracts:

- The roles and responsibilities of the learner, adviser/mentor, assessor, and other relevant roles/units/committees in the RPL process are clarified.
- The key phases and elements of the support and assessment process should be outlined, allowing for a flexibility of approaches to support [and] evidence gathering to meet the needs of the learner and the demands of the programme.
- The need for support and professional development for staff involved in support and assessment should be addressed.
- The processes and mechanisms for monitoring, reviewing, and revising RPL processes as appropriate should also be made explicit.
- Consistent practices or terms of quality assurance
- Joined up working between and across academic schools and faculties and central services, such as admissions and student support services
- An explicit recognition of RPL activity in staff workload
- CPD opportunities for staff engaged in RPL support and assessment
- effective institutional data capture and analysis to enable monitoring and evaluation to enhance practice and the student experience.

Preparation of resources and support/CPD of staff

- In addition, the need to design assessment mechanisms appropriate to informal learning and the workplace, and design curricula that facilitate flexible entry and delivery, requires greater staff awareness, understanding and professional development.
- This need for RPL guidance, support and assessment activity will need to be built into staff workload models.
- Other issues to take into consideration when developing RPL guidance and materials:
 - advertising and marketing materials should integrate accurate information and identify named sources for information/guidance
 - school/faculty/department policy and guidance material for RPL should align with overarching HEI policy and guidance

Development of assessment systems and processes for RPL

- While the predominant form of assessment for RPL is via a portfolio, the need to develop more effective, simplified assessment mechanisms is recognised. This is linked to the need to enhance the understanding of the nature and process of informal learning to develop appropriate forms of assessment.
- Module learning outcomes, predicated on a formal learning process, can be a barrier rather than an enabler of RPL if an exact comparison with the outcomes of informal learning is demanded. Alternative approaches include:
 - mapping against programme level outcomes or level descriptors for large amounts of credit rather than against programme modules
 - greater use of level descriptors to enable the articulation of prior informal learning in learning outcomes that are more relevant to this type of learning
 - greater use of e-portfolios to enable a more structured, iterative approach to building evidence
 - more use of structured interviewing as a single evidence source
 - greater use of videoconferencing
 - greater use of workplace-derived artefacts
 - greater use of existing workplace learning practices in evaluation and assessment, particularly as part of work-based learning programmes.
- The increasing use of mapping learner-defined statements of learning or workplace-derived skills and knowledge against SCQF level descriptors to demonstrate the transferable competencies and capacities required for successful progression within. A programme indicates this growing understanding of the nature of informal learning as well as a greater parity of esteem between different types of learning.
 - While templates and exemplars can be provided to support the evidence gathering and assessment process, the advisor or mentor plays a crucial role as an 'interpreter' of academic language and requirements and in supporting the learners' transition from informal and non-formal learning contexts.
 - In terms of the quality assurance of the RPL assessment process, in most cases this mirrors the normal quality assurance processes for programme assessment, again indicative of the principle of establishing RPL as a 'normal' route to entry and credit.

Monitoring and evaluating RPL processes at institutional level

- Monitoring the use and impact of the RPL process can include:
 - monitoring the success rate of RPL claims and recording the number of learners undertaking RPL
 - tracking the progression of learners who have undertaken RPL
 - monitoring the actual student experience of this group.
- Institutions should address the issue of improved data capture and analysis within the context of integrated student management information systems. This may form part of wider institutional agendas to improve the evidence base in terms of recruitment, progression, retention, and completion to inform planning and evaluation. Virtual learning environments and e-portfolios can also support the tracking of RPL claimants and monitoring of their progress throughout their claim. Feedback on the student experience can be undertaken through feedback forms, focus groups and personal interviews.
- Embedding the processes for recording, data capture and analysis within mainstream developments in this area and as part of the normal quality assurance processes for programmes.