

Project Insights Report

Pathways and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) for internationally trained and non-traditional applied health professionals



PARTNERS

The Michener Institute
of Education at UHN



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



INVESTMENT

\$151,500



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Executive Summary

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) allows individuals to identify, document, be assessed and gain recognition for their prior learning – be it formal, informal or experiential. PLAR processes can be undertaken for self-knowledge, credit or advanced standing at an academic institution, for employment, licensure, career planning or recruitment. However, it has promising use in the process of certifying and licensing.

This project sought a better understanding of how PLAR is used, or can be used, to effectively accelerate learners through programs in the applied health sciences. The project identified impediments to successful implementation of these best practices in the Canadian post-secondary environment.

The project resulted in the identification of practices that help accelerate the graduation of students in applied health science programs and speed up the transition from education to jobs. Specifically, the results will assist the Michener Institute of Education to develop and operationalize PLAR processes that will help efficiently move students in a number of health care programs from the classroom to the labour force.

The research paper provides a set of recommendations for how PLAR may be established with lessons for institutions looking to accelerate students with relevant prior experience through programs.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Experiential knowledge acquired in the workplace is more amenable to PLAR, especially where workplaces are very important sites of knowledge production such as the creative industries, technology or service sectors.
- 2 PLAR candidates benefit most from a personalized approach to guidance and assessment from PLAR practitioners with substantive and specialized content expertise.
- 3 An efficient PLAR system requires coordination across educational and training institutions.

The Issue

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is one strategy that could help reduce labour shortages in a number of fields, while responding to the need to eliminate the duplication of learning among newcomers to Canada, or those with partially completed credentials. It does so by allowing individuals to identify, document, be assessed and gain recognition for their prior learning – be it formal, informal or experiential.

PLAR is undertaken for self-knowledge, credit or advanced standing at an academic institution, employment, licensure, career planning or recruitment. Multiple jurisdictions across Canada have supported demonstration, research and evaluation projects on PLAR specifically to ease the entry of internationally trained professionals into a number of regulated professions, and to upskill those with skills needed by the emerging demands of the labour market.

The Michener Institute of Education at University Health Network was seeing a range of students who would benefit from PLAR to access and accelerate progress through the diplomas it offered. These included:

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



What We Investigated

This project was a collaboration between the Diversity Institute and the Michener Institute of Education at the University Health Network. It responded to an expressed need to provide PLAR opportunities in relation to a new program, Fundamentals of Healthcare – a two-year undergraduate diploma to facilitate entry into the workforce and further study.

The project conducted a literature review and web research of the current pathways for non-traditional learners including internationally trained professionals to certification and entry-to-practice in regulated programs in Canada. This review included looking at the specific components of credit transfer, recognition and articulation agreements, prior learning assessments, bridging programs, examination and work placements or internships with specific focus on the role of PLAR. The project identified best practices in use of PLAR in Canada and internationally to accelerate learners through academic and training programs.

The paper also analyzed the impediments and challenges that may be mounted by the regulatory colleges to a greater use of PLAR in accredited programs and how these concerns can be mitigated.

What We're Learning

The comprehensive literature review identified key considerations that should inform decision-making related to PLAR design and implementation. Highlights included:

No one-size-fits-all approach to PLAR exists – context matters, although general guidelines are a useful starting point

The review of the literature identified the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment's nine principles to guide quality PLAR practice: accessible, consistent, fair, respectful, valid, flexible, rigorous, transparent and professionally supported.

The way that knowledge is structured in different disciplines matters

Experiential knowledge acquired in the workplace is more amenable to PLAR, especially where workplaces are very important sites of knowledge production, such as the creative industries, technology, service sector, etc. However, interdisciplinary programs, and those focusing on science and math offer targeted opportunities for PLAR as well. Currently, highly regulated sectors such as health care offer fewer opportunities for PLAR. Regulatory and professional colleges can play an enabling role or make PLAR very difficult.

PLAR can reproduce systemic bias

Underlying beliefs about how knowledge is acquired, and the status of certain professions is embedded in if and how PLAR is implemented. These underlying beliefs about whose knowledge is relevant can lead to under-representation of particular groups as certain types of knowledge and experience are given priority.

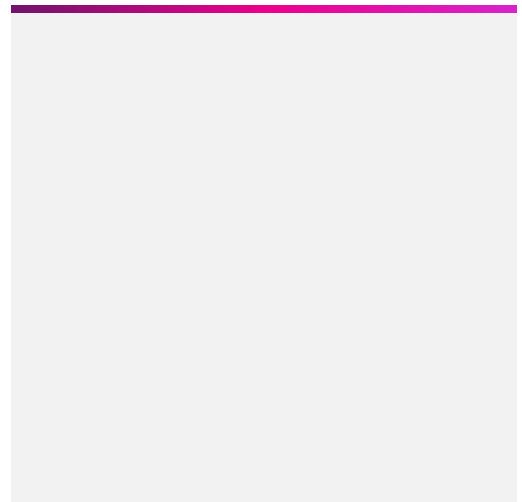
Personal guidance and assessment are necessary to help learners navigate PLAR

PLAR candidates benefit most from a personalized approach to guidance and assessment from PLAR practitioners with substantive and specialized content expertise. To be successful at offering this personalized guidance and assessment, PLAR practitioners require a deep knowledge of adult education or experiential learning; understanding knowledge, curricula, pedagogy in higher education so as to deploy specialized pedagogy when required; and communication skills to advocate for PLAR. PLAR practitioners require an investment in their initial training, as well as ongoing professional development.

Implementing PLAR requires coordination across multiple departments and operational functions to identify candidates, collect and validate documentation, conduct assessments and award certification. This may include multiple faculties, learner engagement teams, marketing, IT, finance and fees, and training and professional development.

Why It Matters

Canada is increasingly suffering from a shortage of doctors, nurses and health professionals, impacting the level and quality of services that provincial health care systems can deliver. Internationally trained health-care professionals are one group who could contribute to ending this shortage, but face barriers to having their credentials recognized.



PLAR is widely believed to be one effective strategy to address labour shortages in particular sectors and can help reduce duplication of learning, and therefore, costs – to individual learners, institutions and governments. In addition to internationally trained health-care professionals, PLAR holds promise for those who have had long absences from the labour market and require upskilling, and those shifting careers.

When employed Canadian adults were directly told about having their past learning experience recognized, more than 60 per cent expressed an interest in pursuing further education. However, few adults are aware of the availability of PLAR and the number of students availing themselves of PLAR remains lower than anticipated.



State of Skills: Leveraging the Skills of Newcomers

The quality and intensity of employer engagement is critical to the overall success of interventions to support newcomers.

Read Thematic Report

This project provides a comprehensive review of underlying theory and promising practice related to PLAR to maximize its potential impact. It also provides institutions with a roadmap on how to use the synthesized evidence to inform decision making on designing and implementing a PLAR system themselves. Other educational and training institutions, especially colleges and universities, can use the results of this project to inform their planning and process.

A broader use of PLAR would help to fill gaps in the workforce and promote inclusivity in the labour market by maximizing the talents and skills of all Canadians.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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